

### Chapter 1051 Novel Arrangemen

With the peace talks going apace, the relations between the Brighter and Vesian attaché improved markedly. While their easygoing conversations didn't lead to any cross-border collaborations or business deals, they nonetheless added to the tentatively optimistic mood in Kester Hills.

"The peace talks are proceeding very productively, Ves." Professor Ventag said as he paid another rare visit to Ves. His expertise as a Senior Mech Designer took up most of his free time due to all the mech-related clauses being negotiated upon. "Normally, the treaties between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are relatively barebones, but this time is different. With other concerns looming on the horizon, we desperately need to find some common ground and pool our strengths together."

That sounded practically alien to Ves. He frowned. Why did the professor bring this topic up with him of all people? "What kind of common ground are we talking about, professor?"

"The terms are still being discussed, so take it with a grain of salt, but I have received permission to fill you in on what we are working. First, let's take a step back. Previously, we talked about the impending transition to the next mech generation. Are you still aiming to hit the ground running in the next generation?"

Ves nodded. "I am."

"Do you know how expensive that can get?"

"I know that the cheapest new component licenses are worth tens of billions of credits at least. As for the good stuff..."

"You can forget about licensing the good stuff." Ventag shook his head. "It is plainly unaffordable for you to acquire the rights to make use of the latest

components that the MTA has prepared. In fact, even NORA Consolidated will have some issues if they pay full price for a complete set of component licenses."

"What does the treaty have to do with the new licenses?"

"I was getting to that. You see, the MTA maintains multiple layers of licensing systems. There is one for individual companies, one for states and government entities, and one for alliances and collectives. What the delegations are working on right now is a way to pool the financial resources of our states together to form the third kind."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "Are you saying the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are actually agreeing to work together on something? And it's with component licenses of all things? No offense, but how can they possibly tolerate such a cooperative venture?"

"Your view on humanity is very cynical, Ves. Although the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom will forever remain adversaries and rivals, that is only in the context of our little pool water. As the little fish, it's fine if we compete against each other. However, what happens if a shark enters the pool? It would be stupid of us to keep fighting against each other. While an outright military alliance is a bridge too far for us, more modest means of cooperation is not out of the question."

"I see." Ves said. "Pooling the resources of our states together to give our mech designers a leg up makes sense."

"The alliance that is created when the peace treaty comes into effect is founded for the express purpose of acquiring a collection of expanded licenses from the MTA when the new mech generation commences. These expanded licenses grants the alliance organization the right to sublicense the

component designs they acquired to every company and organization that takes part under strict conditions."

"Sublicensing is a thing with designs?"

"Of course! Mech and component are very expensive, Ves. Do you think that every mech company pays the full fees upfront all the time? The MTA allows for certain accommodations to ease a mech designer's access for licenses, within stringent limits. For example, the expanded licenses vary their fees depending on how many times it can be sublicensed. The majority of the funding provided to the alliance are provided directly by our two states. They are essentially subsidizing the future development of their mech industries."

What a novel arrangement! Ves couldn't help but be astounded by the ambition of setting up such a powerful alliance. This had the fingerprints of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester all over it! In fact, he strongly suspected it might be the brainchild of Camden Tovar himself. It was the kind of diplomatic solution that a consummate diplomatic like himself would come up with to achieve some limited form of cooperation between the two rivalling states.

Ves picked up something very crucial. "You mention that expanded licenses can only be sublicenses for a certain amount of times. So it effectively amounts to a quota?"

"That is a good way to look at it." The professor nodded with a pleased smile.

"Right now, we are contemplating on making the alliance acquire expanded licenses with the right to sublicense them for a total quota of five-hundred, or two-hundred-and-fifty per state. In case of the Bright Republic, it is a given that around a hundred of these sublicenses will be extended to the mech companies founded by our Seniors. Around fifty more will be sublicensed to various government, academic and nonprofit institutions."

"That leaves only a hundred for the rest." Ves already had an inkling of what Professor Ventag had in mind. "Are you saying that the LMC is eligible for the remaining quota?"

"I expect that there will be a lot of competition for the quota. When the Bright Republic's mech industry hears about it, every mech designer will go crazy. However, with Senator Tovar and my support, you can skip this entire hurdle and be directly eligible for a coveted quota. I cannot emphasize the value of this quota. Good use of the new licenses may see your new mech designs be propelled beyond this star sector! Any Journeymen not automatically eligible will fight like sharks in a tank for a quota, but you get to enjoy a free pass if all goes well. We intend this to be a reward for all the services you have rendered and a favor for your continued dedication and service to us and the Bright Republic. Do you understand the value you are receiving?"

"I am very clear about the favor." Ves uttered with an astonished breath. "I am inordinately grateful to the senator and you for bestowing me this opportunity!"

How could he not be shocked by the depth of favor being bestowed upon him? This was practically giving him access to hundreds of billions or even trillion credits worth of new component licenses! Ves always knew that Senator Tovar never skimmed on his rewards. This was just the latest example of the benefits he could accrue by remaining in his favor.

Of course, there were two sides to a coin. The professor explicitly said that the value of a quota to the sublicenses issued by the alliance exceeded his merits so far. Saving Senator Tovar from getting kidnapped and preventing Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald's heads from being absconded gave him a huge amount of kudos, but it seemed as if it didn't completely cover this humongous favor.

In other words, Ves became more intricately tied to Senator Tovar and Professor Ventag's camps. Ves only received this quota by virtue of his

connections to both of these eminent individuals. As long as he remained on their good side, he would continue to benefit from the sublicenses.

If he somehow pissed them off or cut ties with them, then Ves believed those sublicenses could easily be taken away from him without any warning.

After all, it was the alliance that managed the sublicenses, not the MTA itself. This alliance organization would come under the administration of the governments both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, which effectively meant that their senior statesmen called all the shots.

"There is one important point to keep in mind. Do not presume this is a free service." The professor added. "Expanded licenses are extremely expensive, and the only reason the two states are even capable of acquiring them is because the MTA allows them to offset the costs with certain favors and allows them to repay their huge debts over a larger span of time instead of all at once. The ultimate goal of the alliance is to break even."

"So it is essentially a loan rather than a gift?"

"An enormous loan, yes. If the LMC receives a quota, it essentially gains the right to make use of the new generation's component designs immediately while deferring the associated fees at a later date under generous conditions. This is a valuable service in itself because as long as you take advantage of the reduced competition and increased market demand for new generation designs, you will stand to make an incredible amount of profit."

"How will the LMC pay back the money owed?"

"Through a flat per-unit licensing fee. No upfront costs. Depending on how many sublicensed component designs you include in your new design, you'll have to pay the alliance a million credits to tens of millions of credits for each new generation mech sold. This is standard business practice."

Ves smiled thinly. "If everything goes well, the alliance will be able to do more than break even. They'll be able to run a profit."

Ves was familiar with the tradeoffs between licensing a design by paying a single lump sum at the start, by paying a small fee for each use of the license, or a combination of both.

The latter was most common in the mech industry, but not the most ideal.

In situations where a mech designer had complete faith in the success of their design, it was much more advantageous to pay a couple of billion credits for a good license upfront and be rid of any further obligations to pay more fees. When their mech models that made use of those licenses sold for thousands or tens of thousands of copies, the huge upfront licensing costs could quickly be earned back within a year or two.

Every mech sold after this period were no longer burdened with repaying the debt. They therefore offered higher product margins, which in turn entailed higher profits for the company.

On the other hand, if a mech designer was designing something risky or lacked confidence in their own products, then it was much more advantageous to license a design with a pay-per-use payment scheme.

For example, each mech sold meant the mech company paid 250,000 credits or something to the licensor.

The lack of upfront cost made life much easier for the smaller and struggling mech companies. They lacked the capital to produce mechs at scale and wouldn't be able to afford expensive standard licenses.

However, this convenience came at the cost of lower product margins and therefore lower profits. It also made products burdened by on-going pay-per-use fees rather uncompetitive in the long-term.

When market conditions worsened, the first products to become uncompetitive and unprofitable would always be designs that made use of pay-per-use licenses.

Naturally, the licensor, which in this case would be the alliance, stood to rake in massive sums of continuous sublicensing fees with this payment scheme. It took advantage of the enormous financial strength bestowed by two states and turned it into a way to milk the best mech designers of their states of some of their earning power!

As a businessman, Ves understood the mercantile intentions of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester very well. For the alliance to pay back the enormous investment the states put into it, they needed to hand over the quotas to the most successful and most business-savvy mech designers.

It was therefore already a given that the Senior Mech Designers of the two states would all be granted a quota. As for the remainder, leaving aside the governments and universities and such, the Journeymen would all be forced to fight over the scraps that remained.

In this, an important condition emerged. The professor adopted a serious expression. "While the Senator and I can give your mech company a backdoor into the alliance, your eligibility is not assured right now. Whether your mech company is granted a quota is highly dependent on whether you can advance to Journeyman by the time the new generation commences. As much as we can bend the rules for you, there is no possible justification that we can use to grant a quota to an Apprentice. I'm sorry for that, Ves."

Ves understood this message very well. Little kids should play in the sandbox while the adults did all the real work. He never felt more motivated to advance to Journeyman right now, and hopefully his upcoming design would give him the impetus to take that much-desired step!

"I will definitely advance to Journeyman within a year. You can count on it, professor."

### Chapter 1052 Junior Winner

The revelation of an alliance to administer sublicenses of new generation component designs excited Ves to no end. After the professor returned to his own duties, Ves stewed over the implications of this ambitious scheme.

"Professor Ventag never mentioned the cost incurred by the states, but it must be extremely hefty." Ves murmured to himself. "The alliance is in effect licensing a whole set of component designs five-hundred times under special conditions. Even if they are able to obtain a bulk bargain from the MTA, the discount won't be disproportionately large or else everyone else would have already made use of sublicensing schemes."

Another issue with regards to expanded licenses was that the MTA clearly didn't hand them over willy-nilly. Ventag already remarked off-handedly that the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom acquired them in exchange for various non-monetary favors to partially offset the huge sums involved.

Ves guessed that these favors came in the form of increased MTA intervention in the mech industry, the right to set up more military bases in their territories and perhaps a crackdown on behavior that the MTA frowned upon.

In the perspective of galactic geopolitics, this essentially meant the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom aligned themselves closer to the MTA. Of the four most powerful trans-galactic influences, the Big Two and the first-rate superstates all vied for influence throughout the rest of the galaxy.

It was generally a good idea for distant, unimportant states to balance their relations with all four of these powerful entities. In this case, however, the decision of the two states implied that they inched closer to the MTA at the cost of distancing themselves a bit from the other three influences.

"The CFA won't be pleased their main rival managed to worm their way further into the two states." Ves predicted.

None of this concerned Ves. Instead, he would rather much think about the implications to his medium-term business plans.

Once the war ended, he always intended to find a way to earn huge sums of money to afford some of the cheaper new generation component licenses. He was always aware of their pricey licensing fees, so he never aimed to acquire a full set. It was much more realistic for him to license a couple of core component designs to form the nucleus of his new designs.

"This opportunity is even better. Instead of picking and choosing among the cheapest and poorest new generation component designs, I'll be able to gain the rights to make use of the full set without going bankrupt!"

The terms offered by the alliance sounded generous to him. Even though his mech company, which would be the legal entity which sublicensed the component designs from the alliance, owed a continuous flow of fees while selling mechs based off the sublicenses, it was a win-win arrangement for everyone involved.

He knew that only a handful of entities possessed the muscle to refuse the temptation offered by the alliance.

"Perhaps the biggest companies led by the most successful Seniors can skip the alliance and use their own financial muscle to gain more favorable component licenses. As for every other company, it just makes more sense to forgo the massive upfront fees and ease their entry in the new generation by spreading out the costs of sublicensing the new component designs."

Ves did not envision making use of the new generation licenses forever. Usually, a decade into the new generation was enough to allow other

component designers and developers to catch up and offer better alternatives at cheaper prices.

However, by then, the first entrants into the market for new generation mechs already captured large swathes of market share and earned a killing. As long as those first entrants didn't publish too many flops, they would certainly be able to hold onto the advantage they gained at the start of the new generation!

"The important point is that mech designers have to hit the ground running. Use the new generation component designs to design amazing mechs. Use the earnings from selling those fantastic new mechs to license evolved versions of those component designs. Rinse and repeat."

Like a snowball rolling down a mountain, the scale of earnings grew larger and larger as long as each design was a solid success. However, just climbing up the snowy mountain took a lot of effort in itself. It was unreasonable for most mech designers to be able to make it all the way up to the top, and even Ves doubted he could go beyond halfway.

The alliance was like a shuttle that picked him up from the base of the mountain and flew him all the way up the top without putting in his own effort.

Naturally, he needed to pay the alliance back for the shuttle ride in other ways, but it beat climbing the enormous mountain with his own two legs.

"This solution solves one of the biggest problems facing my company in the next ten to twenty years." Ves sighed.

All he could say that Professor Ventag knew his condition and the condition of his company extremely well to offer this kind of opportunity to him. While it was predicated upon his advancement to Journeyman, both Ves and the Senior knew very well that this wasn't a difficult hurdle to overcome in this case.

A more concerning implication was that Ves needed to continue to cosy up with his current backers in the Bright Republic. With Senator Tovar as the principal backer from the government and Professor Ventag as his backer from the mech industry, Ves would be assured of a quota despite being one of the youngest and least-experienced Journeyman Mech Designers eligible for this opportunity.

Flashlight might also throw in their support from behind the scenes. They would love it if a mech company under their sphere of influence became a part of the exclusive club of quota owners.

On the flipside, Ves also predicted that he would draw the attention of a lot of jealous Journeymen. He could not ignore the political implications of making use of a backdoor into this new sublicensing system.

"This is a direct shot across the bow to all of the Ansel mech designers."

A quota to Ves, who appeared to be connected to Rittersberg, the Tovar Family and the DCTI was one quota less to a promising and talented Ansel mech designer. In fact, considering the recent KNG Affair, Kadar and Neyvis might miss out on a quota despite their robust design skills and abundant experience!

"It's not really fair, is it? Yet that's life."

The main concern that Ves had to keep in mind that all of this political support did not come for free. Nothing ever came for free. Aside from the financial obligations built into the sublicensing agreements, Ves also needed to continue to maintain relations with his current backers.

While Ves was rather leery of being taken advantage of, especially in light of the depth of Senator Tovar's schemes, it wasn't as if he took advantage of the situation as well. Both of them won in this arrangement. It was just that Senator Tovar won enjoyed the last laugh.

Perhaps one day, Ves would be able to lean back in his comfy chair befitting his status as an overlord and laugh as he occupied the lion's share of any win-win agreements he brokered. That day was very far away at the moment.

It was enough for him to be the junior partner of such an arrangement.

As for the whiners? Who cared. Ves shouldn't have to pay attention to the criticism that accused him of occupying a quota that a better Journeyman Mech Designer deserved more!

"I'll make the critics shut up with the quality of my upcoming designs. I can be just as good as those older Journeymen with decades of experience under their belt." He grinned.

Ves strongly felt that all of the hardships he suffered so far recently had been worth it. You just couldn't buy this sort of leg up. If Ves spent his entire time during the war locked inside some research base performing unimportant work, then he would have never been eligible for such a magnanimous reward.

He was well aware that Senator Tovar and Professor Ventag wanted him to feel grateful and appreciative of this opportunity. The expectation was that Ves would continue to serve on their behalf. For now, that was fine. All of the caveats did not detract from his good mood at all.

As the negotiations progressed, the professor came back again to inform him that the structure of the new cooperative venture had been fixed. If all went well and both states ratified the peace treaty, they would collectively start up the BV Alliance for the sole purpose of administering the expanded licenses obtained from the MTA.

Ves didn't need to guess what the letters B and V stood for. In fact, he found it surprising that Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester dared to be bold enough

to allude to the names of the two states with the word 'alliance'. Was this some kind of hint of what the future had in store?

"Impossible." He shook his head. "It's probably a sick joke of theirs. There's no way our two states will agree to join hands in a military alliance."

Portend of the future or not, the BV Alliance seemed to be set in stone according to the Senior. That only left the ratification of the treaty in order to insure the BV Alliance came into being. Ves still felt uncertain whether the two states would actually do that despite the strong animus of support it enjoyed right now from the two delegations.

On his end, Ves needed to hurry up and advance to Journeyman in order to truly secure a quota. Nepotism only went so far, and the influence of the Tovar Family alone was not enough to dictate the entirety of the Bright Republic.

When Ves went back to his fourth original mech design, he refined his mech concept into maturity with the occasional help from Professor Ventag.

Although the man was awfully busy, even a few minutes worth of advice was sufficient for him to realize some improvements over his sketches for a super-medium space knight.

Ves held off on working on the images that would support the design's X-Factor for now. He already had his hands full trying to make the design feasible and effective from a technical standpoint.

As he worked on refining his vision for hours at a time, the only image he really needed was Qilanxo. Thinking about the Sacred God and her amazing feats guided his design work towards a certain direction.

In its current form, the vision for his upcoming mech entailed a heavy reliance on its polarization ability.

"It's bigger and more massive than an ordinary medium space knight, but the drop in mobility does not quite make up for its increase in protective power. It will have to make up for that shortfall with clever use of well-placed polarization fields."

This added to the burden of piloting the mech. Ves knew it could get very intensive trying to calculate the optimal placement and size of the fields during pitched battles. This was an advanced mech design aimed squarely at advanced pilots and specialized space knight pilots.

As a cherry on top of the cake, Ves added another gimmick to his design as well. Inspired by the god crystals embedded throughout the surface of bodies, he planned to reuse the alien crystal technology that he previously used in the design of the Crystal Lord.

By embedding various amounts of small crystals throughout the exterior of his space knight design, it became even more resilient against energy damage. Extremely skilled mech pilots would be able to take advantage of their positioning to absorb a limited amount of incoming laser fire and fire off a weak light beam in return when they accumulated enough energy.

Naturally, their offensive power wouldn't be as exaggerated as the large crystal embedded into the chest of the Crystal Lord, but every little bit helped even if it seemed like a marginally pointless gimmick.

"This is probably going to be one of the most complex space knight designs that is ever published onto the local mech markets in recent times." He surmised.

If he wanted to stand out with his design, he would be sure to accomplish that. His fourth original mech design was anything but generic!

The only concern that worried him right now was whether there would be enough mech pilots who could make use of the added possibilities of his design.

### Chapter 1053 For the Archives

Complexity in a mech design came with many implications. Often, both mech designers and the market believed that more complex mechs possessed a higher potential to perform better than 'simpler' mechs.

This was generally the case. However, this rule was a lot more muddier in practice because of the difficulty of maximizing the potential of a mech.

Many mech pilots, particularly those with below-average genetic aptitudes, often struggle to make full use of standard mechs. Some even never improved beyond the basics when piloting a frontline mech which heavily automated many features such as its targeting system and its locomotion system.

If basic knight or rifleman mechs were already too complex for ordinary mech pilots to fathom, what about advanced mechs?

Each feature or gimmick added to the functionality of a mech design increased the number of variables that mech pilots needed to take into account. They already needed to pay attention to hundreds of variables, such as their energy reserves, their armor condition, their damage states, the local air pressure, the environmental temperature, the heat levels of different mech components and much, much more.

Adding additional features on top might very well overwhelm these mech pilots and cause them to either mentally shut down or force them to pick up the bad habit of outright ignoring some variables.

All was not lost, however. While most mechs came with a substantial learning curve, mech pilots who persisted in training with the complicated mechs would increasingly become more proficient in drawing out their strengths.

It just took a lot of time and effort. The more complex the mech, the higher the learning curve.

One thing was for sure. The design Ves had in mind came with a rather steep learning curve despite being based off one of the most simplistic mech types. Knight mechs and their spaceborn cousins were known as one of the most easiest mechs to pilot.

That wasn't the case this time. The super-medium space knight envisioned by Ves brought a lot of new options to the table.

"Will it be a hit in the market?"

Without performing extensive market research, he truly didn't know. Yet his experience so far told him that it occupied a strong if narrow niche in the mech market. Considering how necessary space knights played a role in many spaceborn mech forces, the actual market demand might surprise him. His design offered very compelling possibilities to discerning mech buyers not afraid to deviate from standard mech doctrines.

As Ves contemplated on the increasing complexity of his mech concept while he finalized it, time continued to pass until the negotiators finally settled all of the terms of the peace treaty.

Everyone had been invited to attend the closing ceremony of the peace talks. Secretary Lowe forced him to be garbed in a full dress uniform, which was the fanciest and most formal version of his military uniforms. All of his medals were on full display and shone or glowed in eye-catching ways.

The secretary smiled at him. "Recordings will be made of the closing ceremony. All the news portals will run them when the peace treaty is finally being made public. Remember that this is an event for the history books. Maintain your composure and act like you belong. Your impressive array of medals will look good in the historical archives.

"So I'm basically there as a medal stand in order to make the footage more impressive." Ves smiled ruefully.

"Don't say as if you don't benefit. As a young man in a sea of old people, you'll attract a lot of attention. Just the fact that you are a part of Senator Tovar's delegation is enough to enhance your reputation."

"Am I entitled to more medals? I recently earned a lot of merit. That should count for something, right?"

Secretary Lowe shook his head. "Unfortunately, Senator Tovar has exhausted his connections to the higher ups of the Mech Corps. It will be difficult for him to arrange additional awards to you when you already earned several major distinctions very recently. Some generals and officials might accuse him of padding your accomplishments for political aims rather than genuine merit."

"My merit should not be in question!"

"I'm not arguing with you, but the generals won't see it that way. From what I have gathered, Senator Tovar will make sure the Mech Corps will grant you some form of recognition after we return to the Bright Republic. It is very difficult for him to make his case while we are many lightyears away from New Foundation V."

While Secretary Lowe made it sound like Senator Tovar fought hard for the awards that Ves deserved, the truth was probably less glamorous than it sounded.

Ves figured that Senator Tovar was too busy trying to shape the peace treaty and arranging the political turmoil that resulted from the botched attacks on his person and the peace talks to divert any attention to anything else.

He tried hard not to feel bad about the stalled opportunity to pad his row of medals. Ves did not consider himself a gloryhound who chased after awards and recognition from the military like his uncles and aunts once described.

While he felt honored that he received all of those awards, many regular servicemen performed their utmost and never received anything more than a pat on their back each day.

A decoration conferred honor and recognition, but when it came down to it, a medal was merely a piece of metal tied to a ribbon. The social value ascribed to these pieces of metal tied to ribbons was considerate, but was it essential to Ves?

Not really.

Therefore, Ves dropped the topic and allowed Secretary Lowe to adjust the fitting of his full dress uniform. When he looked at his appearance in the mirror projection, he did admit he looked rather dashing. If not for his green-tinged mech designer uniform, he might be mistaken for a mech pilot instead!

"Alright Mr. Larkinson, you are ready for the show. Go out and make the Republic proud by appearing as your best!"

Once everyone dressed to the nines, they filed into the conference chamber, which the Reinaldians rapidly repaired and reinforced after the previous attack, and stood to the sides while Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester stepped forward in unison.

They approach an exaggeratingly large data pad and signed the electronic document contained within with their own names.

"Senator Camden Tovar and Prince Colchester of the Royal House of Vesia, on behalf of their respective states, have finalized the terms of the peace treaty!" Someone announced in a loud and formal tone. "The peace treaty is ready to be ratified by the administrations of the respective states!"

Everyone applauded politely, mindful of how they would appear in later footage. Absolutely no one acted outside of their station. Even if Ves wanted

to scratch his ear due to an itch, he resisted the urge to perform such an undignified action in public.

For the principal representatives of the two states to sign their names on the agreements did not mean it went into effect. In fact, the battle had only just begun.

Ves knew that the next step after finalizing the terms of the peace treaty was to take them back to their respective states and have their governments ratify the entire treaty.

The confusing mess of Vesian politics aside, the Bright Republic's process for ratifying a treaty was relatively straightforward. In theory, the Bright Senate were allowed to consult the peace treaty and consent to ratification. Once they did that, the bright president went on to sign the treaty, formally ratifying it on behalf of the state.

Before the attack on Kester Hills, Ves always doubted whether the Bright Senate would give their consent at all. The political factions that made up the Bright Senate all held varying positions about the war, but most were generally supportive of it. How could they ever be persuaded to give up their opposition to the peace treaty?

Apparently, Senator Tovar had them by the balls. By turning concrete evidence of foul play back to his critics, he possessed the leverage to shut them up lest he air their foul laundry.

Ves had to admit that was a pretty good way to stifle opposition to the peace treaty. Even so, the Bright Senate did not speak for the rest of the Republic. Would the average citizens be able to stomach an early peace with the Vesians?

Probably. The Bright Republic was always the more disadvantaged side of the wars.

Ves worried more about how the Vesians managed to convince their own subjects to swallow the peace treaty. They were much more fervent about the war and would therefore likely resist a premature peace the most.

Prince Colchester had his work cut out for him. It must be much more difficult for the prince of a weak Royal House to get every ducal house to come to a consensus on the peace treaty.

After signing their names on the virtual document, the two statesmen slowly departed after posing for the recording devices. They were far too old to mingle with the crowd of rabble, after all.

In their place, both Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald retook their places as the lead representatives of their respective patrons. Their heads were firmly reattached to their bodies again, and Ves hardly noticed anything out of place, though that didn't necessarily mean they made a full recovery.

Surprisingly, Colonel Xelven directly approached Ves with a smile. "Mr. Larkinson! I never got to thank you for saving me! I apologise for not expressing my gratitude earlier. The operations I went through are not for the faint of heart, you see."

Ves chuckled. "I understand. Not everyone gets to experience what you went through."

"I believe you had help when you saved me, is that right?"

"The presence of Venerable Foster did indeed prove useful in thwarting the intruders." Ves replied, though he did not add that he mainly used her as a meat shield to deter the traitors from shooting at him. He needed to remain diplomatic, if only for posterity. "I think this is a rare instance where a Brighter and a Vesian managed to accomplish something when they worked together."

That sounded good, right? Ves mentally padded himself on his back for coming up with something so positive.

However, Colonel Xelven smiled wider for some reason. "Ah, perhaps we should reunite you with your Vesian partner. I'm sure she will be thrilled to meet her comrade-in-arms for one last time. Come with me!"

The colonel abruptly grabbed onto Ves' arm and practically dragged him over to a small gathering which included Count Reginald and Venerable Foster.

"Ah, it seems our honored Brighter guests have taken the initiative to approach." The Vesian count said with a pleased expression. "Mr. Larkinson, thank you for saving this poor old man's life."

"I was merely doing my duty." Ves replied with a stiff smile. He tried hard not to look at Venerable Foster who stood next to the old count. "Peace is too precious to allow some malcontents to spoil the party."

"Well said!" Count Reginald complimented before he gently pushed Venerable Foster forward. The expert pilot could have easily resisted the push or even knock the noble out cold, but she knew better than that. "Venerable Foster, why not stand next to Mr. Larkinson? The two of you are both heroes. The both of you will look lovely in the recordings."

Venerable Foster looked as stiff at Ves at the suggestion. "That might not be appropriate. We serve in opposing militaries."

"This is no longer a time of war. As far as we are concerned, a new time is dawning. The time where Brighters and Vesians are forced to take up arms when they encounter each other is over. How better to symbolize our efforts than to have the two of you stand in front of the peace treaty?"

"What a splendid idea! Let us immediately make the arrangements!" Colonel Xelven enthusiastically added. "This is a peace treaty that is intended to secure the future of our younger generation! While the previous captures of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester will look good for the archives, I'm sure

the news portals would love it if they can display an image of the peace treaty alongside a pair of young heroes!"

Under the haranging of Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald, Ves and Venerable Foster proceeded to undertake one of the most awkward impromptu recording sessions they had ever gone through.

When Ves attempted to draw his arm towards Foster's back to look a bit more friendly, she growled under her breath.

"Touch me and you'll die."

#### **Chapter 1054 Imaginary Trademark**

The closing ceremony and all the recordings made there signified the end of the peace talks. No one expected it to pan out so smoothly as the negotiators found common ground a lot easier than they should. It was as if the irreconcilable hatred between the two states never even existed!

"It's probably a function of the real threat looming over our heads." Ves surmised as he boarded the Lormant Carnival. Their stay on Harkensen II had ended and now everyone was on their way back. "As long as you're rational enough, it just makes too much sense to put down the fighting between us to a halt."

Preparations for ratifying the recently-finalized peace treaty were already underway in the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. Despite the collusion of several highly-placed officials and statesmen in both states, getting everyone else to play along took a lot of wheeling and dealing.

The political machinations behind getting domestic support for the peace treaty went way above Ves' head. He was not a politician nor a bureaucrat, so he left that domain to those who reveled in it such as Senator Tovar and his allies.

One welcome surprise that reassured Ves and the others was that the need to maintain secrecy decreased by a lot. The escort fleet received additional ships and mechs from the Spiral Shockers as reinforcements.

The best part of this development was that the reinforcements stopped bothering with any camouflage and brought their military-grade equipment! The elite Spiral Shockers that arrived to usher the Tovar Peace Delegation back home were able to display their full combat strength!

"Not that anyone has any reason now to attack us besides kidnapping Senator Tovar."

Even then, with the reinforcements from the elite mech regiment, the cost of attempting an attack was too ruinous to attempt.

"Besides, the negotiations proceeded without a hitch and the peace treaty has already been finalized. Even though we're bringing back the data pad with the formal copy of the text, the contents have already been sent back to the Republic through the galactic net."

It wasn't worth it to throw a mech regiment onto the bulked-up escort fleet just so they could destroy a fancy single data pad that only held some historical value at best.

To the opponents of the peace initiative, the rice had been cooked. Right now, the political battlefield concerning their attempts to continue the war moved on to the Bright Senate instead of wherever Senator Tovar could be found.

In short, it meant that Ves could finally put down his guard somewhat and retract some of his paranoia.

The long ride from the Reinald Republic to the Bright Republic took several weeks. During this time, Ves quickly finalized his vision for his mech after receiving occasional input from Professor Ventag.

He couldn't have crafted such an intricate and well-put vision without the experience and depth of knowledge of a genuine Senior. As he finished his presentation of his super-medium space knight, the professor looked somewhat pensive if intrigued.

"It is not a space knight for the average mech pilot." He declared. "The additional options help compensate for the weaknesses brought by your design's unusual weight class, but it is up to the mech pilot to make the most of it. A great mech pilot can achieve fifty percent more value out of your mech compared to a regular space knight, but how many of those are around? Most will squander your super-medium space knight's potential."

This wasn't anything new to Ves, who made peace with his design choices. "If that is the price I have to pay to design a unique mech, then so be it. This is a mech worth designing in my eyes. It's more expensive than regular space knights and it will very likely fall into the premium price category, so amateurs have no place in piloting such an expensive machine."

"Even if your upcoming design flops in the market, it's fine. For a young mech designer like you, it's the experience that counts. In any case, NORA Consolidated takes up most of the burden of producing and maintaining your upcoming mech model, so you'll only have to be concerned with a loss of reputation."

The LMC would still be able to rely on the success of its existing mech catalog to keep it aloft. However, Ves truly did need to add a third product to his meager catalog because the impending transition to the next generation already depressed sales and forced margins lower.

A niche product like the one he intended to design might not have much mass market appeal, but the high product margins allowed it to be an enduring source of cash flow just when the profits of his first two mech models failed to cover his company's ongoing expenses and debt obligations.

The professor just wanted to make sure that Ves would be prepared for the consequences if he proceeded to continue onto this path.

"The internal architecture of my design will probably be above me." Ves admitted. "Since this falls under your specialty, I will rely on you to shore up my shortcomings in that area. I'll instead focus most of my design efforts on the exterior and mechanical layout of my design."

"That is for the best. This is mainly your design, after all, so try not to rely on me more than you have to. From my evaluation of your design skills, your fundamentals are all robust, so it is not a problem for you to independently design the exterior features."

Now that both mech designers came to an agreement on the overall concept of his super-medium space knight, Ves returned to his quarters and proceeded to flesh out his vision into a formal draft design.

Ves had been thinking about how to employ his Triple Division technique. At this stage of the design process, it would help him out a lot to finalize the image intended to shape the X-Factor of his upcoming design.

He already thought over it for many times. Similar to the Crystal Lord, this time Ves introduced an incredibly strong spiritual entity in the form of Qilanxo.

As Ves held her in his thoughts all the time, he felt as if he managed to connect to her, if only nebulously.

He even had a feeling that she was still alive somehow. The imagine of Qilanxo in his mind was just too rich and vibrant, though it was only a pale copy in comparison to her actual spirit.

"Is this what it is like to use a living entity as a basis?" He wondered.

Why didn't he think of this earlier? While it sounded outlandish, basing his images off actual living entities might produce dramatic results!

In any case, Ves expected much from Qilanxo's image. As a Sacred God, her image already fulfilled the role of totem animal.

That meant he needed to accompany it with images for the base model and the human myth. One to adjust Qilanxo to the circumstances of a space knight, and the other to adjust the mindset of the mech pilot to the complexities of piloting his mech.

He first constructed the image for the base model. It took on the shape of the super-medium space knight with the addition of the two gimmicks that Ves had mind. It would take a lot of proficiency on the part of the mech pilot to master the use of the polarizing module and the embedded light crystals, and the image of the base model would help them be more comfortable with their operation.

That was the easiest part so far. Since his mech is so complex, the strong animal instincts provided by Qilanxo demanded strong direction. The human myth should be nearly as strong as a totem animal, or else the balance would be tilted too heavily against the kind of advanced decision-making such a complex space knight asked of their mech pilots.

Ordinarily, Ves would conjure up an image of a mythical human being from his imagination, but he wondered if that was all he should do. What if he repeated what he did for Qilanxo and drew upon an existing human figure to base his human myth out of? It would be even better if the role model for his human myth was still alive!

The moment he entertained this notion, he was almost scared to push through. What were the consequences of using someone else as the basis for the human myth? Did some imaginary trademark police exist in the imaginary realm that would retaliate against Ves if they found out that he ripped off an existing person's likeness for his own ends?

Ves felt as if he engaged in piracy for some reason. He was no different than those pirate designers who merrily borrowed published designs without paying the fees for their use. The only difference was that the other mech designers stole concrete design specifications, while Ves only stole something imaginary.

That didn't detract from the sense of wrongness he felt if he actually went through with this course of action. He already felt somewhat uneasy when he borrowed Qilanxo's likeness, but she was technically an exobeast, so she didn't enjoy as much rights as an actual human.

"Even so, I feel as if I am standing at a crossroads. The decision I make here might have major implications for the future."

His intuition faintly hinted at him that the decision to draw upon a living human being, particularly a mech pilot, might result in something drastic. It was absolutely not as simple as inventing a fictional character in a fictional setting as the basis of his human myth!

"Should I go through with this course of action or should I let sleeping dogs lie?"

Was that even a real question to Ves? He had always been bold with certain decisions, and wasn't his super-medium space knight pretty much a test bed for his various innovations? Since he already deviated from convention a number of times, what was the harm in attempting one more divergence from the norm?

The only problem right now was that Ves lacked a solid source of inspiration for his human myth. He pretty much decided early on that he would base his image on an expert pilot.

After all, why settle for something mediocre for the human myth when he could easily draw upon the likeness of the best?

Ves did have some concerns about drawing upon the likeness of an existing person. He actually did it once for the Blackbeak in the case of using the likeness of a mech athlete called Jackknife Jake.

Yet that person already died, and however remarkable he performed in the water-filled arenas of Moira's Paradise, he was not too exceptional as a mech pilot.

"There's a huge difference between an ordinary mech pilot and an expert pilot."

He didn't have to settle for expert pilots. What about ace pilots or god pilots? Since he was already doubling down on his experiments, why not go all the way?

Somehow, Ves did not think it would be so easy to rip off the likeness of those that people referred to as gods in human form. A shudder ran through his spine when he tried to estimate the strength of their spirituality. He faintly suspected that they might very well crush him in that area alone.

What he intended to do would take place in the imaginary realm where spirituality reigned supreme. Perhaps Ves could easily toy with the likeness of a regular mech pilot with a weak and completely intangible spirit, but what about those with actual spiritual strength?

Considering that his Spirituality was strong enough to resist Venerable Foster's force of will, he predicted that any backlash that he incurred from this action wouldn't crush his mind and turn him into a vegetative state.

"Now I'll just have to decide who to pick."

Unfortunately, no expert pilots came to mind to him right now. Expert pilots specialized in piloting space knights were very rare, and while the Bright Republic did in fact employ several of them, he wasn't fully up to date with their records.

Ves activated his military-issued comm and tried to access the galactic net or an internal database, only to get denied.

"Perhaps I should just ask."

### Chapter 1055 Humanizing Mechs

The escort fleet made brisk progress in returning to the Bright Republic. It took more direct routes while enjoying heightened protection from the Spiral Shockers.

The highly-alert mech pilots of the elite mech regiment took their previous failures very hard. In order to make up for their abject performance, they intensified their security measures and proactively scared away any ships or mechs that strayed close.

Most of the attachés began to mingle together on the Lormant Carnival. Each of them maintained connections with the Tovar Family, so all of them belonged to the same side.

Ves didn't really quite fit into their circles due to his youth and perceived lack of value. In their eyes, he was Senator Tovar and Professor Ventag's pet. Even owning a multibillion credit business like the LMC failed to qualify him as an equal among their esteemed ranks.

"Well, I'll reach those heights in time." He shook his head.

He was still young and had a long and fruitful life ahead of him with the help of his genetic optimizations.

Still, he missed the company of Lord Javier. As part of some under-the-table dealings, the Bright Republic finally surrendered custody over the Vesian noble. Lord Javier was now a free man once again and would be returning to the Imodris Duchy under Prince Colchester's protection.

He did not miss Venerable Foster. That acrimonious expert pilot never hid her intense dislike for Ves. She used to hate him because he was a Brighter, but lately she began to develop a personal vendetta against Ves for some reason.

"That woman needs to learn how to relax. She's way too intense for an expert pilot."

Most of the Larkinson expert pilots were much more well-adjusted. However, none of them quite ever measured up to Venerable Foster's rapid growth and future potential. Ves had a notion that Foster's single-mindedness was the source of much of her strength.

"The purer the mind, the more coherent the spirit."

Of course, it wasn't all good. There were downsides associated with developing in this direction. Most notably, Venerable Foster's personality exhibited some extreme traits that reminded Ves of the Skull Architect. They possessed a similar kind dedication towards their own pursuits, to the detriment of everything else.

"It's too bad she's isn't specialized in piloting space knights. She would have been an interesting test subject to use." Ves idly chuckled. "Then again, her strong affection for the Hafner Duchy and the Vesia Kingdom might lead to adverse effects."

This was also why Ves limited his search for a suitable human myth to Brighter expert pilots. He did not wish to introduce a strong discomfort to his domestic customers by saddling them up with lingering animosity towards their own state!

"I'm not that stupid."

At this point, Ves felt less like a mech designer and more like a wizard. He found it remarkable how he incorporated a spiritual component to what others purely regarded as a technical and artistic profession. The increasing

involvement of metaphysical elements in his design philosophy led to a design style that placed more importance on the spirit behind a design than its performance parameters.

It was fine if his mech did not perform at its best on paper. A mech was not a machine that worked in isolation. Instead, it achieved its full potential when paired with a mech pilot.

Properly speaking, his main specialty concerned the combination of man and machine rather than the machine by itself. When he designed a mech, he wasn't only making design choices with regards to the technical specifications of his mech, but also attempted to influence the performance of the mech pilot!

The former required technical design skills, while the latter demanded more ephemeral intervention on a spiritual level.

It all sounded a bit tenuous to Ves. If not for believing in his own design philosophy and for all of the empirical proof he observed, he would have dismissed all of the hocus-pocus as pseudoscience.

"The more I excel in this area, the more noticeable the effect. At some point, some very observant industry insiders are going to ask some uncomfortable questions."

Ves didn't know yet how he would handle the inquiries when they came. He couldn't lie when it came to his design philosophy, because it was the central belief that underpinned his entire work!

As much as he became increasingly more apprehensive at what the hell he was actually doing, he had already decided upon this direction. There was no turning back unless he wanted to break his design philosophy, which at this point would negate everything he worked towards.

"I'm almost a Journeyman. It's too late for second thoughts."

Right now, Ves wanted to access the records of expert pilots specialized in piloting space knights. He only knew a couple of them who occasionally popped up in the news, but there might be more of them in the Mech Corps who emerged recently during the war.

Ves visited Professor Ventag's stateroom and approached the Senior with his unusual request.

"The records of our expert pilots are extremely sensitive and strictly guarded." Ventag frowned. "You are asking for a lot. Worse, you haven't provided me with a good reason for me to give you access. Why do you need to study their records?"

"My upcoming super-medium space knight design is a mech that is suitable for highly-skilled mech pilots specialized in piloting space knights." Ves replied as he came up with an excuse. "I want to study the best and see what they have in common and how they employ their space knights to their full potential."

"Even so, I can grant you access to plenty of records and archival footage of advanced pilots. They are the actual target audience for your design, and you should tailor your space knight to them. Expert pilots operate on an entirely different paradigm and it is a bad idea to copy the traits of expert mechs onto more conventional mechs."

"I'm not looking to copy an expert mech. I merely want to see how far an expert space knight pilot can push this mech type to its limits."

The professor shook his head. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't grant you permission on the spot. There are rules and procedures in place to protect our expert pilots."

"I see. My request does sound rather presumptuous." Ves looked disappointed.

After conveying his request, they moved on to other topics. One of the more important events concerned what happened next now that the peace treaty was on track of being ratified.

"As far as I'm aware of, while the rest of the Bright Republic is still kept in the dark about the peace treaty, the higher annals of power are already wrangling over whether to accept the treaty. I am not sure how long it will take for them to come to an agreement, but it might happen shortly after we return to the Bright Republic."

"What will happen to me when the war has ended?" Ves asked.

"The Mech Corps will slowly pull back its war footing and begin to take stock of the damage. They'll also start releasing their conscripts from their obligations by batches. The reason why they don't release you all at once is because they're afraid the Vesians might be faking their own demobilization. In any case, you don't need to be concerned about remaining shackled to the Mech Corps for long. Our influence is enough to arrange for you to be discharged ahead of most of the pack."

"Thank you for that." Ves said with relief. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to return to my company soon enough."

"Even though the war hasn't been as lengthy and destructive as everyone initially expected, the Bright Republic's economy has still entered a downturn. Be sure to get your company in order when you take charge."

They discussed some other matters, of which the most important one was making use of certain raw material suppliers. Part of the benefits of moving into the camp of the Tovar Family was that Ves gained the right to enter into favorable supply contracts with some of the family's connected industries as long as he met some conditions.

"Scale is very important when you enter into business with some of these suppliers." The professor mentioned to Ves. "The more you buy, the cheaper the rates. What the suppliers love the most is a stable, high-volume business relationship."

In other words, the more successful his mech products, the higher his product margins. The combination of high sales and decreased costs due to scale resulted in an insane level of profits.

However, this was easier said than done! Ves knew that he wouldn't be able to take advantage of this opportunity at this point in time. Both the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord were premium mechs that only achieved a moderate volume of sales so far. Even if their value depreciated to midrange mechs in the future, they still didn't possess the mass appeal of many of NORA Consolidated's popular mech model.

It was even worse when it came to the expensive boondoggle that was his fourth original mech design. His yet-as-unnamed super-medium space knight was on track of becoming an extremely niche product.

Even with the considerable support of Professor Ventag and NORA Consolidated behind the new mech model, Ves pessimistically predicted that it would only sell a couple of hundred copies a year at most.

It would be truly too difficult to break through an annual sales figure of more than a thousand copies due to the offbeat design of his space knight!

That reminded Ves that he should try and figure out a more convenient way to refer to his design. Just calling it the super-medium space knight in his mind all the time started to become tedious.

"Do you have any suggestions on how to name my mech?" Ves asked out of courtesy.

Professor Ventag idly waved his hand. "A name is very personal to a mech designer. Since you are the lead designer of our joint design project, it falls to you to decide upon its name."

To be honest, Ves already toyed with names such as the Bulwark or the Barrier. However, naming his mechs with such generic terms would only drag down its prestige. His new design should have an ostentatious name that made it stand out from the rest.

"I'll think about it." Ves murmured. "Right now, I'm still deliberating on this matter."

"Don't wrack your head over it. A name is just a name. You don't need to be too poetic about the label you are attaching to your design. Some mech designers forgo names entirely and refer to their designs exclusively with code numbers."

Ves smiled but shook his head. He rejected such an approach that dehumanized the mechs. If he ever wanted mech pilots to treat his mechs with affection, then giving them a unique name was an important component in the humanization process.

"There is one more thing you should know. Since you are close to advancing to Journeyman, I don't see the harm in informing you of what will happen at that point. First, you'll have to visit the Mech Trade Association's sector headquarters in the middle of the Komodo Star Sector. It's situated at a star system that sits right at the border of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony."

"Why must I go there?" Ves frowned.

Such a trip sounded like it would take months, even if he took the most direct route.

"You don't have to depart immediately. However, you'll only spit in their faces if you take your sweet time to pay a visit to their headquarters. I suggest you make plans and depart immediately. There are several reasons why the MTA demands newly-advanced Journeymen to visit their headquarters. I am restricted from saying them, but know that it isn't detrimental to your career prospects. Journeymen are valued no matter where you find in the galaxy."

The professor's reassurances hardly gave Ves some relief. While he was afraid of entering the belly of one of the biggest beasts in the Komodo Star Sector, it didn't sound like he had a lot of choice in the matter.

What would happen if they demanded extremely stringent identity verification, the kind where they drew his blood? It was impossible for Ves to refuse to hand over his blood.

Hopefully, the headquarters didn't possess any means to find the obscure markers that connected him to the Five Scrolls Compact...

#### **Chapter 1056 Influence Network**

The obligation to pay a visit to the MTA's headquarters in the star sector once Ves advanced to Journeyman unsettled him after his meeting with Professor Ventag.

Unless he wanted to cut ties and run off into the frontier to become a fugitive pirate designer like the Skull Architect, he had little choice but to pay tribute to the MTA in this way.

It was yet another concern that Ves had little choice but to comply if he wanted to maintain his elevating status within civilized space. As the professor already mentioned, advancing to Journeyman would permanently mark him as an individual of note in the galaxy.

No longer would he be considered a forgettable individual in the uncounted masses of the rest of humanity. A Journeyman Mech Designer stood on the

same footing as an expert pilot such as Venerable Foster, Venerable Xie and Venerable O'Callahan in terms of social status.

Ves huffed. "In practice, expert pilots enjoy all the glory and adoration of the public."

Most mech designers were fine with that. Their profession didn't lend them too well to public spectacles. Compared to a straightforward mech duel between mech pilots, a design duel between mech designers was an absolute bore to watch to most laymen.

The increasingly vain part of Ves hated the popularity disparity between the two professions, but the rational part of him cautioned him that there was little use obsessing over this matter. For better or worse, expert pilots enjoyed all the limelight in the Bright Republic.

Perhaps as compensation for their relative lack of attention, Journeyman Mech Designers usually grew insanely wealthy. Practically every Journeyman who entered the private sector became a billionaire within a couple of years.

Even the Journeymen who opted to work for the public sector or the military received a lot of benefits in the form of access to exclusive knowledge or other accommodations.

"Journeyman Mech Designers have it good." Ves remarked with hungry eyes. He couldn't wait to become one himself! "I'll finally get rid of my pitiful Apprentice status and become a real adult in the mech industry!"

Naturally, the increased power and ability of Journeyman Mech Designers also meant he received new commitments. They couldn't just run off and do whatever they wanted.

With power came responsibility, that was one of the messages that Professor Ventag tried to convey to Ves earlier. As the main galactic regulatory organization for mechs, mech pilots and mech designers, the MTA would

make sure that Ves wielded his power responsibly instead of going astray that caused the Skull Architect to flee from the Friday Coalition.

His advancement to Journeyman also led to another major change. His relationship with Master Olson changed substantially as well at that moment. He would finally become a mech designer worthy of her notice.

"She did tell me that she expects me to assist her organization in some way." Ves remembered.

Every Master Mech Designer led a vast organization and influence network of subordinate mech designers and associated companies. As a young and relatively recently-advanced Master, Carmin Olson's influence network was not as large or mature as the influence network of the older and more established Masters.

To Master Olson, the assistance of every mech designer counted, particularly one who she invested in early like Ves. Even if their relationship was mostly transactional, Ves was fine with associating himself to a Master in this way.

Just like his recent association with Senator Tovar, he already benefited from staying under Master Olson's umbrella. Occasionally working on her behalf would allow him to enjoy greater protection and access to exclusive goodies.

"One day, I'll be in Master Olson's position, and many mech designers will compete for my favor." Ves daydreamed with a silly smile.

Even before his advancement to Journeyman, his return to civilian life also gave him the opportunity to reconnect to the System. His reunion to the mystical incarnation of the Metal Scroll was long overdue. Despite its contentious origins, right now Ves highly desired to make use of it to increase his chances of designing a successful super-medium space knight.

"Some of the suggestions made by Professor Ventag is rather hard to follow. It would be good for me if I am actually able to understand the essence of those difficult principles."

A few days quietly passed by as the escort fleet made its way back to the Bright Republic. Surprisingly, Professor Ventag paid him a visit in his quarters and deposited a data pad on his desk.

"Do you remember your earlier request? Ordinarily, Apprentice Mech Designers aren't allowed to access the records of our esteemed expert pilots. However, I've pulled some strings and traded some favors to fulfill your wish. Through a lot of effort, I managed to receive permission to share a redacted record of a single space knight expert pilot from a friendly mech regiment. This is the best I can do for you. Is that enough for your needs?"

Ves picked up the data pad with a careful grip. He felt very grateful for Professor Ventag's efforts on his behalf. "Thank you for fulfilling my request. I'm sure I can do a lot of good with this even if it contains only a single record. It must have been difficult to pry it loose from the Mech Corps."

"You have no idea." The professor chuckled. "Remember, I'm only doing this favor for you because of our friendship and to repay what you've done for us so far. Continue the good work."

Message received. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind in the future."

"By the way, don't take that data pad out or try to copy its contents elsewhere. You only have six hours to study Venerable Fontain's record before the data pad automatically wipes its contents. The guards stationed outside your quarters will come and pick it up after you're done with your perusals."

Ves hardly twitched when he heard that guards had been stationed just outside the hatch. "Got it. I'll be sure to make the most of my time."

When Professor Ventag left, Ves eagerly turned on the data pad. He studied the contents and saw that it contained a number of documents and recordings. The highly secured data pad contained a random collection of descriptive documents, training footage, after-action reports, actual combat footage and even a brief exposition of the individual expert mechs piloted by the expert pilot in question!

"So it's Venerable Rota Fontain!"

Most citizens of the Bright Republic could recite the names of at least fifty expert pilots at the top of their heads. The more well-educated among them could even repeat more than a hundred names.

Venerable Rota Fontain was not the foremost expert pilots in the service of the Mech Corps. However, as one of the few expert pilots who specialized in piloting space knights, he was not an obscure individual either.

The main reason why Ves recalled Venerable Fontain served with the 8th Spiral Shockers of the 3rd New Foundation Mech Division! He even heard rumors that Venerable Fontain was actually part of the reinforcements sent to accompany the triumphant Tovar Peace Delegation back to the Bright Republic!

"It would make sense that Professor Ventag has the most success in persuading the Spiral Shockers to make an exception to the rules."

Familiarity and good connections made everything easier. Ves did not enjoy a close relationship with the Spiral Shockers, but he was pretty familiar with the elite mech regiment. They were pretty stuck-up and didn't make friends very easily. Only a Senior Mech Designer connected to the Tovar Family like Professor Ventag commanded enough respect from them to loosen up their shoulders.

Ves figured this was the way the upper echelons routinely got things done. It was fine if they didn't possess a direct connection to the party they tried to gain favor from. They just needed to issue their request to a friend of the party in question who would do the heavy lifting.

The effectiveness of this method depended on the influence of his connections. In this perspective, getting close to the Tovar Family made a lot of sense as they were one of the most influential organizations in the Bright Republic!

Ves shook his head as he tried to rid himself of distractions. "Well, let's get back to Venerable Fontain. The contents of this data pad won't last forever."

He first browsed his heavily-redacted profile. The man was fifty-five years old and survived the previous war. In fact, he advanced to expert pilot shortly after enduring the ravages of that harrowing conflict.

Sadly, that was too late for Venerable Rota Fontain to contribute to the previous generation's war effort, but he made up for that in training intensely for the current war.

In fact, even if the majority of the Spiral Shockers were put on standby in the New Foundation System, small detachments were occasionally sent to perform special operations in occupied space. The majority of the redacted records were in fact related to these sensitive missions that Ves had no business knowing.

That unfortunately left him with little up-to-date combat footage.

"What a shame. I was looking forward to that."

The more Ves knew about venerable Fontain, the more substantial his image of the expert pilot in his mind became. Studying actual combat footage would help him a lot in visualizing how this space knight expert made use of the traits of his expert mechs.

When Ves browsed through the records even further, he came to the part where they described Venerable Fontain's three expert mechs.

All of them were closely based on standard medium space knights, especially the earlier iterations. Apparently, Venerable Fontain mostly stuck to the basics when he just advanced to become an expert pilot, but evolved his piloting style to incorporate new methods only accessible to mech pilots of his caliber.

It quickly became clear that Venerable Fontain prioritized balance between the mobility and defensive capabilities of his expert mechs.

"Neither too defensive or offensive in use. Due to the quality of their materials and the exquisiteness of their designs, Venerable Fontain's expert mechs are capable of fulfilling both roles at the same time!"

As long as someone invested enough money in a design, their traditional weaknesses didn't apply anymore. It was the same with Venerable Foster's hugely expensive Beliasius. While it was an offense-orient hero mech, all of the Rorach's Bone used in its construction turned it into one of the toughest and most resilient mechs that Ves had ever witnessed!

Many knight mechs would feel ashamed when they compared their defensive prowess to the defensive might of the Belisarius!

"It's a good thing that Venerable Foster lost that disgustingly extravagant mech." Ves smirked.

The succession of expert mechs led to a gradual evolution into facilitating a fighting style unique to Venerable Fontain.

Overall, his mechs fulfilled two separate roles. The first was to be a defensive bulwark against overwhelming opposition. Some of the special operations the Spiral Shockers engaged in called for a certain amount of discretion. They were limited in the amount of mechs and ships they could bring into enemy territory.

This unfortunately led to occasions where they found themselves trapped and vastly outnumbered by the enemy. In these cases, the role the Phovon, Venerable Fontain's current expert mech, provided was critical in facilitating their disengagement!

However, the second role the Phovon adopted was that of an unstoppable juggernaut. Its heavy mass and relatively powerful flight system enabled the Phovon to mimic a cavalry and accumulate a devastating amount of momentum!

When the Phovon unleashed all of that momentum in a single titanic impact with its shield held in front, practically nothing that stood in its way could survive intact!

Reading about the Phovon's offensive uses reminded Ves of a battering ram or a siege engine. Due to the low agility of the Phovon, Venerable Fontain mainly used this mode of attack to batter space stations of starships. Anything that was large and relatively deficient in agility became a prime target to Fontain's unstoppable charges!

Ves became inspired by the descriptions. "Is it possible to incorporate this kind of attack to my own space knight design?"

#### **Chapter 1057 Pale Copy**

As much as Ves wanted to incorporate some offensive capabilities to his defensive mech, it looked unfeasible. What Venerable Fontain of the Spiral Shockers achieved with the Phovon was beyond mortal reach.

"The mech will certainly undergo a huge amount of stress from such substantial collisions." Ves murmured as he continued to study the contents of the secure data pad. "The design can only come so far in mitigating the incredible forces resulting from these destructive charges. The materials need to be strong enough as well."

It didn't look hopeful for his super-medium space knight design. While it could take a beating, it fared best against energy weapons. The polarizing fields worked fantastic against lasers, but did not do enough to block the damage from ballistic or kinetic rounds.

This was a deliberate design choice to Ves. Everyone knew that laser technology would be undergoing a significant jump in power in the next mech generation, so designing his mech to cope with laser weapons only made more sense, especially in space where laser weapons were ubiquitous.

Taking a direction against energy weapons left his design with some shortcomings against physical weapon. Its complicated internal architecture did not lend itself too well against sustaining severe shocks to its frame.

While Ves found it regretful to leave such a weakness in his design, he could only take a single direction at a time. Besides, a space knight design was already fairly robust, so it was no slouch when it came to absorbing physical damage.

"Mobility is another area where my space knight falters."

A regular space knight actually possessed quite a decent amount of mobility. Their uncomplicated design and lack of weapon systems allowed them to dedicate more of their internal volume to powering a stronger flight system.

While this added capability didn't allow a space knight to keep up with a light skirmisher, it was sufficient to provide them with some offensive options.

Not so for his space knight. It was just too big and with all the extra bells and whistles, it didn't leave enough room to fit a flight system that could keep up with the increase in mass.

In short, regardless of what Ves attempted to do, he couldn't escape the fact that he was essentially designing an obese medium mech when looking at its external appearance.

"My fatty mech's acceleration won't be able to keep up with all the other mechs in play. It takes too much effort to lug around its fat here and there."

That relegated his fatty mech to a purely defensive role.

It was a shame to Ves that he couldn't make use of the offensive aspect of Venerable Fontain's kit, but he couldn't have everything.

A couple of hours went by as Ves delved in deeper into Venerable Fontain's record. The favor provided by Professor Ventag substantially enriched his knowledge with regards to space knights.

He did not particularly lie when he said that it would be useful for him to know what space knights could do when taken to their limits. The Phovon, Venerable Fontain's current expert mech, was a masterpiece in design.

Even though the redacted records were relatively sparse in its details, Ves ascertained that multiple Senior Mech Designers put a lot of effort in pooling their respective specialties together in developing such an exquisitely balanced space knight.

The Phovon's existence showcased the extensive involvement of the Bright Republic's Seniors into the design of its military mechs. Expert mechs did not come about randomly, and their designs simply couldn't be bought from the galactic mech market. They were too rare and tailored to individual expert pilots to be able to work well with others.

To be able to design an expert mech for an expert pilot was an immense privilege and a great opportunity. It allowed mech designers to showcase their design ability in a project with much higher budgets and much fewer practical limitations on the use of expensive materials and components.

Yet Ves could only admire them from afar for the foreseeable time. While it wasn't unheard of for Journeymen to design expert mechs, in practice the

Mech Corps would rather turn to the best rather than the second-best to design their strategically important expert mechs.

At the end of the six-hour reading period, the data pad fizzled out. The guards stepped into his quarters without warning and silently took the useless pad out of his grasp even though Ves could do nothing to restore its contents.

When the guards departed, Ves sighed and leaned back against his chair. "Expert pilots are such amazing figures."

He witnessed the power and majesty of expert pilots first-hand on several occasions. It was a shame that those glimpses were too infrequent. Venerable O'Callahan piloting the Parallax Star against the Frosty Meteors made the most striking impression to Ves. That man dared to charge his expert lancer mech straight into the bow of a starship!

"If he wasn't so senile and close to death, he would have been able to showcase his power more often."

Venerable O'Callahan's tragic case showcased the downside to pursuing a mech piloting career. The mutated brain structure that enabled mech pilots to interface with their mechs through the man-machine connection made it difficult for them to extend their lives. Just the first round of life-prolonging treatments geared specifically towards mech pilots was already far out of reach to most expert pilots.

It was different when it came to Journeyman Mech Designers. As long as they worked hard enough and didn't fool around all day, they would eventually be able to scrounge up the money to undergo the first round of life-prolonging treatments. It helped that they didn't have to pay as much as expert pilots because of their 'simpler' brain structures.

"To be an expert pilot is to earn glory and immortality through deeds. Most don't grow older than a hundred-and-thirty years old, but what a fulfilling life

they've led!" Ves said in admiration. "To be a Journeyman Mech Designer is to slave away more than half of your extended life just so you can advance and gain enough earning power to purchase another century of lifespan."

Venerable Fontain was already middle aged and after a decade of service, old age would eventually catch up with him, deteriorating his mental agility to a point where it was best to throw in the towel.

Cases like Venerable O'Callahan who clung to any opportunity to pilot an expert mech was in fact very rare. Most expert pilots already earned so much glory that they were content to retire on a high note.

Additionally, expert pilots weren't immune to loss and injury. Each time they entered the battlefield, they risked coming back in pieces or not at all. The Bright Republic fielded many expert pilots, but the Vesians were no slouch in this department either. The main role of an expert pilot was to contain an enemy expert pilot!

"In any case, I know enough now about Venerable Fontain to start with the next phase."

This was the fateful moment. He constructed an image around Venerable Fontain and felt no resistance. The details he learned and the battles he witnessed allowed Ves to construct an imaginary facsimile of the expert pilot in his mind.

Ves took it slow. He wanted to incorporate almost every detail about his piloting style except for his offensive tendencies. In the best case, some of the skills of the expert pilot might just bleed through to the mech pilots of his fatty mechs through the X-Factor.

For some reason, forming the image did not feel very burdensome to Ves. In fact, when he previously constructed the image of Qilanxo, he only felt a light burden as he bumped up against something unusual in the imaginary realm.

The lack of consequences despite drawing upon a living expert pilot as his inspiration caused Ves to halt before he combined the three images. The lack of weight with regards to his current actions sparked some suspicions to Ves. Was he actually using his technique to its full potential?

His intuition suggested no.

Ves frowned. "What am I missing?"

He experimentally poked around the totem animal and human myth in his mind. They fell short of his expectations. They were hardly different from the images invented from nothing out of his own imagination!

What was the point of drawing upon existing entities when Ves could conveniently design an artificial image from the ground up?

There had to be more. Ves could feel it. He just needed to employ the right technique. Something which was hard to do since a convenient manual didn't exist. As a pioneer in this domain of mech design, he needed to figure out everything by himself!

Ves halted his current spiritual actions and left the images separated in different corners of his mind while he tried to parse the logic of his current actions.

First, mechs and mech designs possessed a spiritual component that influenced the man-machine connection. Ves called it the X-Factor.

Second, the X-Factor resulted from an alignment in spirit between the mech, mech pilot and mech designer. As long as all three of them were of similar minds, the X-Factor exerted its maximum effect.

Third, Ves could consciously shape the X-Factor of his mech design by imbuing them with a spiritual imprint that he called images for convenience. These images were ordinary imaginary creations from his mind, but due to the

effects of his Spirituality he was able to breathe life into the images, making them more tangible and living.

Fourth, Ves did not have to base these images out of nothing. He could draw upon existing entities, whether alive or dead. The strongest proof of this assertion was when he made use of the spiritual fragment of a long-dead miniature crystal builder leader to form the principal part of the X-Factor for his Crystal Lord design.

He recalled the time he first came in touch with that spiritual fragment. He came across some ruins and through some shenanigans, he obtained some objects including the corpse of the crystal builder leader that held the spiritual fragment.

Ves lit up his eyes. "This is the key!"

Back then, his ghostly mother drew upon the spiritual fragment with ease. He remembered that she also taught him how to do it himself.

He was still upset that she stole the crystal leader's corpse and appropriated it for her own use, but he largely got over it. As much as he tried to deny it in his mind, his heart already came around to the possibility that she was truly his mother rather than some alien ghost that adopted her identity.

Ves believed she was not who she seemed back when she was alive. Both his mother and the System's origins appeared to be tied to the secretive but unimaginably powerful Five Scrolls Compact.

Even if he advanced to Journeyman, he was in no position to touch upon these topics. Ves left this matter aside and turned his attention back to the advice his mother once imparted to him in their last meeting.

"Resonate with their desires."

In essence, Ves needed to commune with the inspiration of his images. It was not enough to construct a facsimile of his impression of them in his mind. A copy would always be a copy. In order to make them true to life, Ves needed to take another step!

He developed a bold notion. Why settle for copies when he could turn them into an offshoot of the originals? If he could figure out how to apply his mother's resonance technique, he'd be able to borrow some of the spiritual essence of the originals and use it for his own ends!

What a brilliant method!

Yet... would it really be so easy to infringe upon the spiritual territory of a living expert pilot?

What about a more formidable entity like Qilanxo? Not only was she a lot stronger in the spirituality department, she was also incredibly far away.

While Ves believed that physical distance did not play a large role in the imaginary realm, he still needed to put this assumption to the test.

He breathed deeply and centered his mind while he made himself comfortable in his seat. "There's only one way to find out."

#### **Chapter 1058 New Technique**

Ves developed an explanation of what he was missing with his current images. He also remembered a possible solution to the problem.

All good, right?

"Not exactly." He frowned.

He felt a bit apprehensive about his actions. Would it really be fine to knock upon the door of someone else's spiritual territory and ask them if they mind if Ves borrowed a piece of their spirituality?

Spirituality was not limitless, nor could it be supplemented so easily when lost. Ves faintly thought back of when Captain Orfan first interfaced with Qilanxo's vast and ancient mind. A lot of strange metaphysical interactions took place at that time that was difficult to explain. Personally, Ves believed that Qilanxo bestowed Captain Orfan with a portion of her mighty spirituality, thereby propelling the mech pilot straight into an expert candidate!

When Ves studied Qilanxo's spirituality after this phenomenon, he noticed that her spirituality weakened substantially. This essentially told him that spirituality was a scarce and finite resource that was difficult to replenish and needed to be treated as such!

Perhaps the other party wouldn't be aware of the infringement. Yet Ves could not help but sweat if he somehow tipped them off and made them become aware of what they just lost!

He held off on performing the supposed Spiritual Resonance technique on Venerable Fontain. The escort fleet adhered to a standard day-night cycle and it was currently too early for most servicemen to go to bed.

If Ves wanted to maximize his chances, he preferred to perform the technique on Venerable Fontain when he was asleep.

He instead turned his attention to Qilanxo. Despite her greater strength, Ves felt a bit more hopeful about his chances due to his familiarity and friendly relations with the exobeast. If she was still alive, then Ves might be able to ask politely. If she was dead, then most of his concerns didn't apply.

Ves had no idea whether Qilanxo was awake or asleep now, so there was no point for him to wait. He needed to pull the trigger.

"Here goes nothing."

He pretended to enter a seance and closed his eyes. His heartbeat slowed down as he concentrated his mind towards Qilanxo. This time, he didn't just

think about her. In order to resonate with Qilanxo, he needed to do more than that. He needed to empathize and understand her motivations in order to establish a true connection with the Sacred God!

Ves thought about her history. Her long reign in the ancient city of Samar. Her fateful participation in the attack of the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces. Her subsequent captivity and docile manner towards her captors. Her new bonds with two different mech pilots. Her abrupt escape from the collapsing Starlight Megalodon as Ves slapped a vehicle teleporter onto her hide.

Recalling Qilanxo's history enabled him to fixate upon the right spiritual entity. Yet to forge a connection with her required him to resonate with her desires, as described by his mother.

What did Qilanxo desire?

It was difficult for him to imagine the motivations of a Sacred God. They were beasts that developed sentient, human-like minds. Their acquired rationality reined in their beastly instincts, but did not completely wipe them out.

So what did a Sacred God really live for? Perhaps one striking aspect about Qilanxo and the other Sacred Gods was that they craved worship for some reason. The ancient cities of Aeon Corona VII seemed to be under the complete control of the Sacred Gods who demanded their genetically-engineered blessed people to worship the exobeasts as gods descended from the vault of the gods.

There must be a reason why at least two different ancient cities adopted such practices.

Ves recalled that back when Qilanxo fell into captivity, the Vandals stripped away her godly facade and laid bare many of her secrets. Her instinctual desire to be worshipped was not being fulfilled as the Brighter servicemen had

never been brought up to believe in gods. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Qilanxo always behaved a bit listlessly while in captivity.

In any case, perhaps Ves could use this trait to forge a spiritual connection with Qilanxo. While Ves was not a religious type, he believed in the existence of spirituality, which should be a good enough substitute.

In the next half-hour, he tried various methods to worship Qilanxo. It was difficult, and most of the time Ves did not feel anything close to resonance in his attempts.

Eventually, he achieved some results when he prostrated himself on the deck of his quarters and expressed his sincere admiration and respect for Qilanxo's might. God or not, it was indisputable that her spirituality was on par with that of an ace pilot!

As various thoughts ran through his mind, Ves eventually felt he had reached a point where he delved deeper into the imaginary realm than ever before. He no longer strayed along the shallows of that wondrously intangible realm but dove into its depths where his spiritual senses started to become increasingly fuzzy.

He did not know where his mind was being propelled, but at some point he came across a glowing light in the foggy greyish mist that obscured his spiritual senses. As his mind touched upon this massive glowing spiritual light, a strong consciousness suddenly brushed against his own!

"Qilanxo!" Ves uttered with pain as a huge amount of strain suddenly befell his mind!

A lot of different things went on at that moment!

The first thought that came into his mind was that Ves believed that he succeeded in connecting to Qilanxo's spirit! The tenuous connection that

abruptly formed between them made it clear that they were separated by an unimaginable distance!

The second thought that came into his mind was that he felt that Qilanxo was definitely alive and well. The spiritual consciousness that he connected to did not feel like a fragment but instead a complete whole that was more vigorous and stronger than ever!

Unfortunately, the huge distance and his unfamiliarity with the Spiritual Resonance technique did not allow for any communication of thoughts. At best, Ves gained a vague impression of Qilanxo's vast emotions.

Worse yet, the strain upon his mind was incredibly burdensome, and only grew worse in a matter of seconds!

His head was overheating and his Spirituality was rapidly wearing out! Ves suspected that he wouldn't be able to maintain this tenuous connection for long!

He needed to make use of his narrow window of time to achieve the objective he set out for! It would be a waste if he worked so hard to establish this connection only to return empty-handed!

Deep within the imaginary realm, Ves tried to convey his request. He wasn't sure if he conveyed the message correctly over this spiritual connection, but he thought he could feel puzzlement and hesitation on Qilanxo's part.

That only lasted for an instant, as Ves felt a sense of gratitude from her consciousness. She still remembered how he saved her when Sigrund woke up and started a rampage on the Starlight Megalodon!

Though it was partially his fault and the fault of the Flagrant Swordmaidens that she became exposed to various dangers in the first place, Qilanxo did not hold that against her. Instead, her last encounter with Ves left a strong impression on her mind which prompted her to attempt what he asked!

As Ves was only able to maintain the connection for a couple more seconds, Ves suddenly felt that something potent was being shoved through the imaginary channel.

Qilanxo carved out a minute portion of her vast spirituality and propelled it through the channel towards Ves! Due to the vague concept of distance that applied to the imaginary realm, this living spiritual fragment arrived at Ves' consciousness within an instant!

"Ahh!"

Ves cried out in pain and sprawled upon the deck as his head ached with pain! It felt as if a kinetic round bore right into his skull! The spiritual fragment bestowed by Qilanxo was so hot, potent and active that Ves continued to feel a burden upon his mind!

"This is bad!"

Ves was already mentally worn out after performing the Spiritual Resonance technique. Now that he hosted the strongest and most active spiritual fragment that he ever had the privilege of hosting, it would take days for him to recover his spiritual strength.

"Hahahahaha!"

Even so, Ves laughed triumphantly as he believed he succeeded in what he set out to do! His mother was right! Resonating with a spiritual entity's desires allowed him to establish a connection with them in the imaginary realm! That it worked with a powerful living entity like Qilanxo who was man light-years away from Ves confirmed many theories he held towards this field of metaphysics.

He made a lot of progress in his understanding of spirituality! He could practically feel the design philosophy hibernating deep within his mind

beginning to seethe with excitement as well. He would definitely be able to enrich his mech designs in light of this development!

His jubilation helped push away some of his exhaustion, but there was no doubt that his mental fatigue left him in no state to proceed any further in his experimentation.

"Damn. It feels like I'm hosting a power reactor in my mind." Ves muttered as he rubbed the side of his head.

He wearily picked himself off the deck before the monitoring system decided that he was having a stroke or something and assigned some guards to check upon him. As he swayed on his feet, Ves lumbered over to his bed and slumped into the soft pillows and sheets.

He instantly fell asleep.

The next day, Ves woke up to a wrinkled uniform and an incessant strain in his mind. He recalled what he did before he lost consciousness and smiled to himself.

"I did it. I succeeded!"

As he concentrated his barely-recovered mind inwards, he detected the small but incredibly powerful fragment residing within his mental space. Ves never came across something so powerful despite taking up a tiny mental footprint.

There was no comparison between this powerful flame and the spiritual fragment of a long-dead crystal builder leader!

Back when Ves hosted the latter, he felt as if the spiritual fragment had been refined of much of its strength and identity, leaving behind a core that held only the most defining traits of the alien entity.

It couldn't really be called alive at that stage. Too much had been lost due to the ravages of time as the spiritual fragment withstood too much external

impacts to retain its former liveliness. Ves recalled that he was forced to supplement the gaps in its existence with his artificial images.

For some reason, Ves believed that this would not be an issue with Qilanxo's spiritual fragment. Although it was only a tiny part of a vast whole, it was just as fresh and alive as the real thing. It not only carried all of Qilanxo's beliefs and desires, it also possessed its own internal reserves of spirituality which was completely separate from his own pool of spiritual energy.

This was also why Ves felt as if he stuffed an elephant inside his head. Qilanxo's spirituality was simply too strong for his mind to host. The only reason why his head didn't explode was because the spiritual fragment voluntarily repressed its reactions and kept itself still.

If not for Qilanxo's thoughtfulness on this matter, Ves might not have been able to wake up after he fell asleep!

Ves nervously wiped his brow of cold sweat. "I treated this exercise too lightly."

Establishing a mental connection with a spiritual entity was exceedingly dangerous! His earlier experiment confirmed that it would be an incredibly bad idea for Ves to forge a connection to ace pilots and stronger.

Expert pilots were weaker and more comparable to his current level of Spirituality. Even so, Ves predicted that he wouldn't be able to avoid the repercussions of connecting with them, especially the stronger ones.

Ves did not look forward to repeating this experiment with Venerable Fontain as his target. Yet in order to take the X-Factor of his upcoming design to a greater height, he felt he owed it to his work to put in his best effort.

"First, I'll have to recover. Then, I'll have to figure out when he sleeps. There's no way I'll touch upon him when he's fully aware."

## Chapter 1059 Decoy Image

Ves put down his work and took a long and relaxing break in order to recover his mental strength. His Spirituality recovered far slower than usual due to the continued presence of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment in his mental and spiritual space.

He described the sensation as hosting a power reactor in his home. While the fragment did its best to keep itself contained, the residual energy leaking out from was incredibly hot and corrosive to his mind. Its spiritual quality and quantity was far above what Ves could muster on his own.

His mind simply wasn't acclimated to this degree of spiritual strength!

Therefore, ever since he woke up after that fateful experiment, he felt as if his mind was constantly being strained. While this burden debilitated him enormously at first, he slowly acclimated himself to the effects.

Ves inadvertently recalled the time he developed the mental resilience training program. By forcing captive dwarf warriors to use their invasive abilities upon the mind-machine connection of a mech pilot with a training mech, the latter experienced a heavy burden on their minds.

The mental pain resulting from this procedure brought a lot of pain to the mech pilots undergoing the training sessions, but they also gained an opportunity to discipline their minds. As they continued to partake in the training sessions, their minds became increasingly more resistant against adverse mental influences.

As the lead developer of this training program, Ves recognized much of the same symptoms within himself. He his mind was already starting to adjust to the ongoing mental and spiritual torture he put himself through when he continued to host a potent foreign spiritual fragment!

The only difference here besides the source of the burden was that Ves possessed a much more robust Spirituality. Even though Qilanxo's spiritual fragment likely put a much greater burden on his mind than the random thoughts of a savage dwarf, his mental strength was just enough to cope with its corrosive outbursts.

"The only problem is that this training session is continuous. I can't turn it off." Ves smiled ruefully to himself. "I guess this is what I get after forcing so many mech pilots to endure their own form of torture."

Whenever Ves emerged from his quarters, he drew several stares due to his slow movements and his strained expressions. Some even suggested to him that he should pay a visit to the Lormant Carnival's medical bay.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired, that's all. My comm will alarm me if I am sick."

Even as he said that, he felt as if the insides of his head was constantly on fire. The pain sometimes made it unbearable for him to maintain a proper conversation with someone else. He ignored everyone else aboard the light carrier and spent his time away from others, including Professor Ventag.

When the professor showed some concern, Ves managed to fob him off with an excuse that he was having difficulties with realizing his vision for his mech design.

It helped that it was the truth. Many mech designers procrastinate over their designs and held second thoughts. With all the controversy his fatty mech design would draw from the public, it only made sense if Ves began to harbor doubts.

The misdirection succeeded in fooling Professor Ventag into giving Ves some much needed space.

While being able to polish his mentality sounded nice, Ves absolutely did not enjoy the pain that came with it. He couldn't wait until his mind grew strong and resilient enough to cope with the burden.

In the meantime, he began to consider his approach to the next step in his master plan to perform the most powerful iteration of his Triple Division technique yet. With two out of three of the images based upon actual spiritual fragments instead of pale, intangible images, he expected much out of their eventual combination!

The main issue that concerned Ves at the moment was that he was afraid that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment was simply too strong to be combined with the other two images. The totem animal component of his Triple Division technique overemphasized instinctive reactions without much thought.

It would be very bad for his slow and sluggish fatty mech to make the wrong moves at the wrong time. Its lack of mobility at abysmal reaction time meant that the mech pilot needed to commit to the right decision after a lot of conscious and rational considerations.

Ves did not harbor much hopes for the image of the base model. It was a completely imaginary image that was only included in the Triple Division technique to fit the images better to his eventual mech design.

"Perhaps I can apply my new technique to the base model as well one day."

For now, Ves already had his hands full with all of the innovations he introduced. He didn't feel certain about his speculations concerning how he could empower the base model, so he set it aside and planned to go back to it later after he tallied the results of his current experiments.

"Let's get back to my approach."

Having found out how dangerous and burdensome it was to obtain and host a spiritual fragment of a powerful living entity, Ves knew he needed to be more circumspect in his next attempt.

Back when he first attempted the Spiritual Resonance technique, Ves believed he succeeded in finding her spiritual existence within the vast imaginary realm because he knew her intimately.

It would be a lot harder to find the spiritual existence of Venerable Fontain. Even though he was stationed aboard another ship of the escort fleet and thus not too far away, Ves never met the expert pilot personally so he didn't possess a grip on Venerable Fontain's spirituality at all. How could he hone in on his target's spirituality within the vast and sometimes stormy fog that suffused the imaginary realm?

"I'll just have to rely on the details I've learned from the data pad."

Ves read up on Venerable Fontain's history. He witnessed the expert pilot in battle several times through the provided battle footage.

As long as the information provided by Professor Ventag was accurate, Ves believed he stood a decent chance at finding Venerable Fontain's spiritual existence within the imaginary realm.

Then what?

"Obviously, I can't knock on the door of a stranger and ask for a favor." Ves shook his head.

He had no idea how he would be able to pry a spiritual fragment from Venerable Fontain's spiritual existence, but it wouldn't be as straightforward as last time.

In case Ves encountered difficulties which forced him to resort to unsavory methods, he did not wish to bring an angry expert pilot knocking on the hatch to his quarters screaming bloody murder!

If he wanted to commit a crime and get away with it, the first rule should be to hide his identity. As long as Venerable Fontain didn't know it was Ves who rudely stole a part of his spirituality, then he had no recourse to get it back!

Naturally, Ves only reluctantly dared to do so because he believed he could handle the strength of an expert pilot. While Venerable Foster was no representative of veteran expert pilots, she was already considerably strong due to her talent.

Even if Venerable Fontain possessed a substantially stronger spirituality, the key to Ves' approach that he intended to move when the expert was asleep!

"No one can stay awake forever. For all the talk about comparing expert pilots to demigods, even they need to sleep every once in a while."

The records on the expert pilot already stated that Venerable Fontain was a baseline human. Aside from some light genetic treatments, he was as human as the average person that Ves could find on the streets of Bentheim.

That was good. Baseline humans needed to sleep. They often developed a regular sleeping cycle as well.

As Ves slowly got used to the burden in his mind and recovered his spiritual strength, he tried to develop a way to obscure his actual identity. After all, there was much about spirituality that Ves did not know. He couldn't assume that they became dormant when the person it was tied to fell asleep.

In case Venerable Fontain's slumbering spirituality was lucid enough to capture an impression of the intruder, Ves at least wanted to fool it with a fake appearance!

Ves came up with a simple solution. At least in concept. "Since already so good and practiced at forming images in my mind, why not construct a decoy?"

If Ves developed an image of a pink unicorn and put it in front of his consciousness, perhaps he might be able to fool Venerable Fontain into thinking it was just his mind going astray.

"Why a pink unicorn? Why not something else?"

Perhaps.. he could even cast the blame on someone else! Ves suddenly grinned as a devious thought occurred to him. Why not construct an image of Venerable Foster and pretend to be her when he invaded Venerable Fontain's mind?

What could Fontain do if he became aware of what occurred? He would be obsessing over Venerable Foster, putting her into his crosshairs even as he struggled to comprehend what just happened.

Yet he wouldn't be able to do anything to Venerable Foster without reigniting the war. The mech pilot would be forced to rage impotently as he felt he lost something precious while blaming the wrong target!

"Hehehe." Ves chuckled in an unseemly manner. "I finally get to pay you back for all the things you've done."

He constructed a reasonably accurate image of Venerable Foster in his mind. It wasn't the most accurate impression, but it resembled her closely enough. It helped that he was somewhat familiar with her and interacted with her for hours at a time during the peace talks, even if he did most of the talking during those awkward conversations.

The best part about the image that Ves accurately reproduced Venerable Foster's force of will. Venerable Foster subjected her ire to Ves so many times

that he still possessed a strong impression of being at the receiving end of her single-minded spirituality!

Perhaps someone even more familiar with Venerable Foster would be able to spot the flaws in his impression of her spirituality, but Ves ruled that out in this instance. Venerable Foster only recently advanced to expert pilot and she hadn't tested herself in battle against other expert pilots.

Ves was pretty certain that the two expert pilots never met in person!

"Venerable Fontain shouldn't be familiar with Venerable Foster at all."

This gave Ves confidence that his dirty trick would work in deflecting the blame for his upcoming actions.

He took a day to refine his image of Venerable Foster. He defined as much details as he could recall in order to make the misdirection as convincing as possible.

At some point in time, night cycle was well underway across the escort fleet. At least a third of the crew was asleep right now, and Ves bet that Venerable Fontain was one of them. The chances that he wasn't part of the main shift was small, but not nonexistent.

If Venerable Fontain turned out to be awake and fully aware, then Ves might enter into a very dangerous moment of his own making! Intruding upon someone else's spirituality was deeply unsettling!

Yet Ves did not have much choice. Venerable Fontain was a good target for his human myth, and this would be as close as they could get before the escort fleet returned to the New Foundation System.

Ves wasn't entirely sure whether physical distance affected his chances of success. He didn't know whether he knew enough about Venerable Fontain to

find him in the imaginary realm, but he needed to move quickly if physical proximity in fact made it easier to pin down his location.

He sat himself on his bunk with crossed legs and pretended to enter a seance again. "Here goes nothing."

### Chapter 1060 Imaginary Excursion

Throughout his journey throughout the Komodo Star Sector and the frontier, Ves witnessed many applications of spirituality.

He defined spirituality as the metaphysical phenomena associated with mental strength, a certain kind of spiritual energy and imagination.

He learned or heavily suspected that spirituality was the defining factor in determining whether mech pilots advanced to expert pilots and Apprentice Mech Designers to Journeyman Mech Designers.

His mishap in an asteroid field in a quiet star system in the Bright Republic showed him that spirituality could be used to turn intangible and untouchable.

He witnessed the Church of Haatumak, a hidden hand of the Five Scrolls Compact, wield spirituality in novel ways, including being able to detect it by the use of a very weird clone.

His understanding of spirituality advanced quite significantly during the Aeon Corona Mission. His exposure to the might of Qilanxo and witnessing the effects of a bond between a Sacred God and a pair of mech pilots opened his eyes to the preciousness of spirituality.

Spirituality already existed in the galaxy even before Ves first dabbled in this field! What was more, many different people and organizations developed their own understanding of this phenomenon!

Each developed their own applications for spirituality.

Mech pilots for example seemed to develop a force of will that allowed them to exert mental pressure externally. This strong force of will also allowed them to resonate with compatible resonating materials incorporated into their expert mechs to achieve powerful results.

In contrast, mech designers applied their spirituality internally. Through forming their design philosophies and realizing them step by step, they were able to provide a strong direction for their design style and at the same time implement very abstruse concepts into their work that empowered them beyond what normal people could accomplish.

Lucky and his ghostly mother both acquired the ability to turn intangible. In fact, Ves experienced a pseudo effect of this from the creepy worshippers of Haatumak, who became undetectable to everyone without spiritual senses!

Other applications of spirituality doubtlessly existed. Ves regarded spirituality as a type of energy that was difficult to observe, grasp and master. In fact, one of the major reasons why spirituality hadn't become a well-developed scientific field in the galaxy was because no one had found a way to measure or observe it directly! The most they could do was to gather some clues from the applications of this elusive phenomenon!

Everyone excelled in certain applications of spirituality, and Ves possessed a unique one as far as he was concerned. For some reason, he was very perceptive to its existence.

This changed everything as far as he was concerned. Being able to sense spirituality meant he could interact with it directly while having a clear direction of its use. The techniques he developed were all related to his imagination and the imaginary realm. He used his perception and his developing Spirituality Attribute to his own advantage in empowering his mech designs and mechs with a spiritual quality!

Frankly speaking, Ves considered his derivative ability to create images and breathe life into them by imbuing them with his Spirituality to be his specialty in this field. Mech pilots may be able to resonate with their own equipment while Lucky possessed the ability to turn intangible at will, but Ves did not feel jealous because his own specialty suited him the most!

"However, that is not the extent of my abilities."

Influencing the X-Factor of a mech was only one of several possible applications. Now that he developed a Spiritual Resonance technique, he somehow gained the ability to connect his spirit to someone else's spirit regardless of distance!

Ves could already see the many possible uses for such an unheard-of ability that resembled long-ranged telepathy.

His new application of spirituality was not as amazing as it sounded, however. It was hard to hone in on the right spiritual imprint that someone left in the vast and directionless imaginary realm.

Only expert pilots or entities of similar spiritual strength occupied enough weight in the imaginary realm for Ves to find. Even then, he needed to know them well enough to be drawn to their existence. His mental compass grew more reliable the more he knew about his target.

In this case, Ves learned enough about Venerable Fontain to be able to stumble upon his presence in the imaginary realm after fifteen minutes, though his sense of time in the imaginary realm might not be very reliable anymore.

When Ves cast his spirit in the imaginary realm, he never thought about his own presence. The imprints of spiritually strong entities residing in the imaginary realm didn't seem to be very aware.

Perhaps Ves might have some scruples if some native spiritual entities resided in this metaphysical plane, but he never encountered anything of the sort. They wouldn't be able to exist for long without a source of spirituality holding their existences together.

How did he know that?

It was because his image of Venerable Foster was starting to degrade when he put it out of his mind and shoved it within the imaginary realm!

There was some sort of corrosive aspect to the windy fog that kept eating away at the insubstantial image. Other hazards might exist as well that prevented idle thoughts from polluting the imaginary realm with nonsensical thoughts.

"This place is very eerie now that I think about it." Ves thought to himself while trying to hide and obscure his own presence in the imaginary realm.

He constantly pumped his spirituality into the image of Venerable Foster, empowering it so that it radiated a vibe that resembled her force of will.

This image formed the key to his harebrained scheme of trying to obtain a spiritual fragment from Venerable Fontain of the Spiral Shockers.

Ves knew that his next act might substantially harm Venerable Fontain and impact his ability to pilot his expert mech. Yet he figured that with the war about to end, the loyal Brighter expert pilot wouldn't need to be in tiptop shape anyway.

Ves did not think any further about the potential consequences of messing with someone's spirituality in order to stop second-guessing himself.

He couldn't afford to let his guilty conscience get in the way of progressing his ability to design mechs!

He needed to go through with his plan so that his upcoming fatty mech design would feature the strongest iteration of the X-Factor yet! The potential gains attracted him like a moth to a flame, and at this point he was so hungry for improvement that he would do anything to advance his specialty!

No wonder Senior Mech Designers could be so maniacal about their own research sometimes!

"Even if I'm eager, I should make sure to be careful as well."

Ves drew his own spiritual presence further away from Venerable Fontain's spiritual presence. He then began to puppet the image of Venerable Foster and controlled it like a mech pilot controlled a mech.

Foster approached the boundary of Venerable Fontain's spiritual presence. To Ves, it appeared like a giant egg-shaped wall. It was a rock-solid barrier that protected the core of Fontain's spirituality against the corrosive fog of the imaginary realm.

When Foster's image brushed up against it, a painful feedback transmitted back to Ves. He immediately got an impression of Fontain's will!

Where Venerable Foster's force of will contained an aggressive and domineering edge, Venerable Fontain's will instead carried an unyielding and indomitable quality.

The contrast was striking. Fontain was less aggressive and that reflected in his force of will. Above all else, Ves learned more about the expert pilot in that single touch than spending six hours reading through his record!

Venerable Fontain didn't appear to be a space knight specialist that clung to any notions of knighthood and chivalry. Ves got the sense that he used to be a normal mech pilot who somehow lucked out in the spirituality department and succeeded in advancing to expert pilot.

In any case, Fontain's force of will mattered a lot because his spiritual presence within the imaginary realm was like an all-encompassing space fortress!

The image of Venerable Foster rotated around Fontain's fortress but found not a single opening or gate for it to break through.

"Damnit. This guy is so obsessed with being unbreakable that he doesn't have any weak points in his spiritual presence!" Ves mentally cursed.

Ves did not let this hindrance stop him. If he couldn't worm his way through the cracks, he would just have to make an opening himself.

"There's no other way to crack into this shell except to apply brute force."

He contemplated on how he should go about it. He entertained trying to conjure up a railgun or even a fully-featured mech into existence, but all of those options sounded far too convoluted and time consuming.

The corrosive fog constantly wore down his Spirituality while he delayed! In fact, right now the fog wore him down twice as fast because it affected his invisible presence as well as the image of Venerable Foster at the same time!

The more complicated the image, the longer it took for Ves to form it into existence. He couldn't wait that long and run out of steam just as he was ready to breach Venerable Fontain's shell.

He split his concentration yet again and formed a simple lance and reinforced it as best he could. In fact, Ves derived the design and material composition of his latest image to the main weapon of the Parallax Star. He only changed its external appearance a bit in order to avoid having the weapon traced back to himself.

When he figured he pumped enough of his Spirituality into the lance, he moved it over to the image of Venerable Foster. Ves felt an increased strain in

his mind as he multitasked his excursion into the imaginary realm. The more images he tried to maintain, the greater the strain on his mind.

Fortunately, his high Intelligence Attribute allowed him to keep track of several things at once. Ves made use of his enhanced cognitive functions to run several activities at once.

Even so, he wouldn't be able to keep this up for long, especially since his mind already carried the ongoing burden of hosting Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

"I need to hurry up."

The armed image of Venerable Foster brandished its new lance before backing up a fair distance. After honing in on her target, it uttered a scream and charged forth!

The impact happened in an instant! Ves felt a sharp spike of pain in his mind as the violent contact directly put his Spirituality at odds with Venerable Fontain's force of will!

The lance gained the advantage! While the best part about Fontain's mental fortress was that it exposed no weaknesses, it wasn't particularly resilient against a concentrated attack either! Venerable Fontain was forced to spread his force of will over the entire surface area of his mental fortification, thereby diluting the potency of his spiritual strength!

"If Venerable Fontain was awake and on guard, it would have been a lot harder to pierce through this shell."

Right now, the hole the lance managed to form in the shell exposed a bright and psychedelic gaseous substance inside! Some of it had already started to leak through the hole but most remained within the shell.

Ves mentally lit up at the sight! This couldn't be anything else except Venerable Fontain spiritual energy!

The image of Venerable Foster laughed deviously as it extended its hands and scooped up handfuls of hot and glowing gas. After some thought, Ves commanded the image to press the balls of gas against each other, compacting it into a more solid form.

This put another strain on his mind but Ves increased the pressure because he did not think he would be able to work with a bunch of spiritual gas. The spiritual fragment needed to be more solid and self-contained in order to prevent it from dissipating!

As Ves applied more pressure through the image of Venerable Foster, he had the notion that he was metaphorically butting heads with Venerable Fontain. Some of the expert pilot's confused thoughts began to filter into his mind.

Ves began to realize that Venerable Fontain was starting to regain his consciousness!

"I have to hurry up! I don't think I'll be able to steal from him once he's fully awake!"

The undignified image of Venerable Foster kept poking its hand into the hole in the fortification and drew back a ball of gas. The image then pressed the ball into the growing chunk of compressed spirituality that increasingly resembled a self-contained spiritual fragment!

Just when Ves thought he stole enough spiritual energy to work with, Venerable Fontain's fortification began to shudder!

WHO DARES! A VESIAN?!

Spikes suddenly emerged out of its smooth surface, one of them impaling the image of Venerable Foster directly!

The attack transmitted a huge spike of pain into Ves' mind, throwing him directly out of the imaginary realm!

Just as he was removed from this realm, he made sure to drag along his loot from this excursion as well!