

Chapter 1071 Specialized Machines

Ves reserved the rest of the day to cope with all of the new Skills and Sub-Skills injected into his mind.

More expensive Skills generally corresponded with more knowledge being dumped into his mind.

While his expanded Intelligence allowed him to cope with the huge influx of knowledge, the sheer magnitude of it still burdened him quite a bit. It didn't help that Ves already bore an existing burden in the form of Qilanxo's augmented spiritual fragment!

Despite the unpleasanties, Ves endured the strain and tried to process the influx of knowledge as best he could. Countless theories and formulas related to propulsion and flight systems poured into his mind and settled in as a core part of his repertoire.

Knowledge on polarizing technology came next. Ves learned the principles behind the tech. The polarizing module first shown by Professor Ventag no longer mystified him! He now possessed enough of a foundation to modify its base design!

Many ideas bloomed into his mind, and he already planned to adjust many aspects of his draft design for his super-medium space knight. In light of his newly-gained knowledge, the amount of flaws he introduced in the draft design was frankly embarrassing!

"Spending all of that DP is already worth it for this alone!"

Ves was very impressed with the comprehensive amount of understanding the expensive Skills and Sub-Skills provided to him. He no longer felt as if he was a newcomer in the field of designing spaceborn mechs! Those who

participated in the design of spaceborn mechs for decades might not even be able to match the depth of knowledge he gained within a couple of hours!

Nonetheless, all of these mundane Skills played second fiddle to what he regarded as the crown jewel of his list purchases.

Purchasing any Mastery from the System's Skill Tree was never as simple as injecting him with a bunch of knowledge. No, the System wasn't content with that at all. Instead, the System would take his mind and travel back into the past and possibly into an alternate timeline and force him to hitchhike inside the mind of a mech pilot in the past!

Whether the System engaged in an elaborate simulation or performed actual time-travel, Ves had to admit it was an extremely effective learning experience for him. Not even the smallest details escaped him when he had access to all of the conscious and unconscious thought processes of mech pilots!

Still, Ves hesitated in undergoing his Mastery at this time. He only returned to his company less than a day and could not afford to keep his company rudderless for long.

It didn't help that it seemed to be completely up to chance how much time it took for a Mastery journey to complete. The amount of time he spent in the past corresponded with how much time he spent out cold in his current time.

If the System screwed him over by keeping him stuck in his Mastery journey for days, his company and his confidants might begin to wonder where he disappeared off to. Even with Lucky keeping guard over him, they might decide to barge into his lab anyway.

"I'll have to schedule my absence properly and only after I've taken care of some critical business."

Now that he returned to the company, he couldn't let it coast along its current trajectory. Ves planned to leave his Mastery for later and decided to take care of other matters first.

"Come on, Lucky. Let's go visit the vault first before heading to the manufacturing floor."

Ves went to the bottom-most floor of the manufacturing complex and entered the large but mostly empty vault. He sought out the portion of the vault which held his shield generator. After unlocking the lockbox which held this powerful piece of equipment, he studied the belt-like object in his hands.

"It's so small, light and thin."

He used to consider his shield generator as a product of magic rather than science. Compared to his existing understanding of science and engineering, there was no way he could pack so much protection ability into such a light and thin device!

Yet now that he came back to his shield generator after three years of separation, he realized that his shield generator no longer mystified himself as much. His understanding of polarizing technology gave him a basic framework on how its more advanced version worked. The incredible amount of power required to sustain the shielding effect also became explainable.

"Of course, even if I can guess at its working principles, it's way too soon to design and build a shield generator myself." He scoffed.

Studying the shield generator made him appreciate its value even further. It was a supremely expensive application of high technology. Ves didn't even dare to ask how much it cost Master Olson to gift him with one.

Along the way, he also picked up his Vulcaneye multiscanner even though he didn't expect to make use of it immediately. He attached it to his largely empty toolbelt.

"I should get around to filling up my toolbelt with gadgets just like last time."

That also reminded him of another reward he gained from the same mission from the System that rewarded him with ten golden lottery tickets.

Ves swept his mind into his intangible Inventory and studied the only other object inside besides the Amastendira.

[Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine)]

This voucher can be applied to any object that fits the definition 'machine' and will comprehensively upgrade them to a higher rank. The smaller the machine, the more extensive the upgrade. This voucher is less effective on advanced and complex machines.

To be honest, Ves forgot about this Special Upgrade Voucher because he could never find a good opportunity to use it. The description sounded like a trap, which was typical of the System.

If he used the voucher on something highly advanced like the Amastendira or even Lucky, the improvements would be so marginal that nothing actually changed.

If he used it on something crappy, then even if he got something good out of it, he could have obtained something similar through more conventional means.

"There's no pressing need for me to apply this voucher on anything at this time."

Aside from that, he also kept a virtual bronze invitation card for the Angel's Wing Foundation. Even though he got it from the loathsome Church of Haatumak, it didn't detract from its value.

Although the Five Scrolls Compact definitely supported the Angel's Wing Foundation behind the scenes, it might be his only source of rare biological and genetic enhancements in the galactic rim.

Ves didn't forget about the Archimedes Rubal brain implant either. It offered enormous benefits to his cognitive functions, especially with regards to memorization. The only problem was Ves didn't trust it in its current shape. He needed to hire a reliable specialist to check over its bioprogramming and made sure it didn't contain any backdoors.

"I have so many things to do." He sighed.

It felt bad for him to leave these goodies behind, but he could not figure out a good opportunity to make use of them right now.

After he finished getting what he wanted from the vault, he took the secure elevators up to the manufacturing floor.

The last time he visited the floor where all of the LMC's production took space, most of it was empty and hollow.

Not anymore. With one Dortmund production line, five Benson production lines and eleven Hanover production lines, the manufacturing floor looked as busy and organized as the manufacturing facilities operated by the Kadar-Neyvis Group!

Hundreds of mech technicians operating in shifts worked on this floor. Ves saw to his satisfaction that they appeared to be motivated, diligent and brisk in their work.

Various guards bearing the uniform of Sanyal-Ablin Security Services patrolled the different halls which hosted a number of production lines. Ves frowned a bit at the sight.

He knew that it was difficult to expect the Avatars of Myth to match the capabilities of a professional security company from the Friday Coalition. It took a lot of time and effort to train specialized security guards. It took even more effort to set up a reliable virtual security arrangement.

Despite these constraints, Ves felt a bit leery about giving a foreign company so much access to the heart of his mech company. He hoped he wouldn't have to rely on an external security company forever, especially once he and his company grew into greater prominence.

At some point, his existence would attract attention from the Friday Coalition. SASS originated from the Konsu Clan, which was one of the many partners that made up the Coalition.

The structure of the Friday Coalition reminded him of the fractured duchies of the Vesia Kingdom. The only difference was that the Friday Coalition were so disagreeable to each other that they never elevated someone to rule above their heads.

Rather than treat them as a single coherent second-rate state, it was more appropriate to view them as a permanent alliance of squabbling powers.

It was yet another topic of discussion when Ves intended to announce his upcoming plan to shakeup the company.

Under the guidance of a SASS guard, Ves found Chief Technician Cyril Hockett supervising the maintenance process of one of the company's new Hanover production lines.

"It's a beauty, ain't it?" Chief Cyril said after welcoming him back to the fold. "Even though the price is high, the Hanover is worth every penny in my regard."

"It's certainly a machine that is geared towards speed."

Ves could see that immediately from how big it was and how many specialized machines it contained. The Hanover production line did not depend on its 3D printer to fabricate all of the parts of a mech but instead split some specialized processes to more dedicated machines that worked a lot more efficiently.

The main advantage of doing this was that the production line could fabricate several different parts in parallel, thereby saving a significant amount of time. The specialized production machines dedicated to fabricating armor plating, structural supports, delicate components, processor chips and more all did a much better job because they only needed to be good in one area.

Compared to the Dortmund or the Benson production lines, the 3D printers that served as the starting point of those production lines needed to fabricate so many different parts that it could never be tweaked to excel in one specific area. Their versatile nature was both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness.

Of course, it was a lot cheaper to acquire a single machine that did everything decently enough than to acquire a handful of machines that split responsibility. Even if a single machine was still cheaper than a fully-fledged 3D printer, the sheer amount of them that made up the Hanover production line still turned it into a hugely expensive investment!

As Chief Cyril began to explain some of the ins and outs of the Hanover production lines, Ves gained a bit more appreciation for them. As much as he resented the decision to go into debt to fund this investment, the high rate of production they delivered in return more than made up for it! As long as orders kept coming in, the machines would be able to earn back their value sooner or later!

Still, Ves was no longer a stranger to mech technicians and running a manufacturing operation. His time with the Vandals as well as the KNG gave him a lot of insights that he couldn't wait to apply in his own company.

He first addressed his most important concern. "I've heard that the average quality of our silver label mechs have gone down. What do you have to say for yourself, chief?"

Chief Cyril shrugged. "We're trying the best we can, but it's difficult to insure quality when we are working on this scale."

"That's not good enough, chief." Ves firmed up and crossed his arms. "Please explain to me why quality has fallen."

The chief looked a bit askance at his boss, as if he was afraid to engage in this topic. Yet Ves' calm but strong demeanor left no means of escape.

Either the chief answered the question, or Ves would beat the answer out of him with his fists if he had to! Unlike with the System, Ves did not plan to let his subordinates weasel their way out!

Now that he returned, Ves wanted to teach his entire company that he was firmly in charge!

Chapter 1072 The Candyman

"Frankly, I'm disappointed." Ves said as he crossed his arms.

Chief Cyril brought him to his office to discuss the matter of product quality as it was a sensitive topic.

The situation facing the LMC for a long time sounded very simple. As the company's profit margin narrowed due to a combination of inflation and rising cost of raw materials, they came under pressure to cut costs wherever they could.

The manufacturing floor became the focal point of the LMC's attempts at cutting costs. If they could manage to streamline the production processes and cut the total cost of producing a mech by one percent, then that would have quickly resulted in a ten percent increase of the mech's meager profit!

Chief Cyril remained unapologetic for that reason. "Pursuing quality above efficiency is fine when times were good and when we only had access to a single production line. Yet now we've ballooned to the point where we are working with seventeen production lines at once and shipping out hundreds of mechs a month. Every cost-saving measure we can squeeze out of our current processes directly helps with keeping the company afloat during the hard times."

"The LMC's reputation has declined. Is that worth the cost?"

"Reputation can be regained. It's not as if we're the only mech company that's been cutting corners during these times. Besides, I think you're overstating the quality issue. With all the tests we've been carrying out at our testing ground, none of our finished mechs are shipped with defects. The complaints mainly come from repeat customers who ordered one of our earlier products. Only then is the difference in quality noticeable, but it's only some minor issues that they really complain about."

"Repeat customers are our most loyal and valued customers." Ves stated.

"Mech buyers who keep coming back to us for more need to be rewarded for their dedication to our products."

"We didn't have the luxury to think that far ahead while we were flailing in the water trying to keep the company afloat."

As much as Ves didn't wish to admit it, Chief Cyril made the correct decision in helping the Production Department streamline their operations. The fat profit margins the company enjoyed before the war granted them the luxury to

pursue excellence. Now that the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord models only earned a ten percent profit margin on average, the company needed to tighten its belt as much as possible.

Ves reflected on the malaise affecting the company. If he wanted to turn the LMC's fortunes around, he needed to address several points.

First, he needed to work away some of the huge pile of debt the LMC had incurred.

If Ves wanted to increase the company's production capacity, then he might have taken the opposite decision and borrow even more money to purchase more Hanover production lines.

However, he did not plan to invest more money into expanding the operations of his company for the foreseeable time. Operating seventeen production lines at once was more than sufficient to meet the current market demand for their existing mechs.

Ves believed he possessed enough means to earn enough money within a year to work away most of the debt. His personal fortune, which mostly consisted of various royalties and dividends he earned, could be used to lighten the burden enormously, but he didn't intend to touch that fortune.

Instead, he already had a plan in mind to earn a quick infusion of cash.

Although it was a bit of a harebrained scheme of his, he nonetheless believed he stood a good chance at earning a couple of billions of credit in quick order.

He'd have to send some feelers to the Clifford Society.

Still, the main source of revenue would have to come from the core business of the LMC, which was selling mechs. The Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord models may be enduring successes to the company, but it was obvious that they couldn't be relied upon to shoulder the burden forever.

The company needed to release a new mech model.

For the next couple of months, Ves planned to work on the joint design project with Professor Ventag. NORA Consolidated would take over most of the production once they published their new design. The LMC would not be burdened with meeting market demand other than to supply the occasional gold label mechs handcrafted by himself to showcase the full potential of his new design.

Second, he needed to change the structure of the LMC as a whole. The company grew from nothing into a respectable major mech manufacturer with sector-wide sales. Yet this growth came so quickly that the company hadn't entirely followed the best plan to operate at this scale.

The company would likely resume its growth now that Ves returned to take the lead. If the company ballooned in size while retaining its current structure, he couldn't rule out the possibility of dysfunction and waste.

In order to smooth the way for the LMC's rise, Ves wanted to shake the company up and prepare it for a new era.

Ves also recalled that this would be the time where the influence of the Ministry of Economic Development on his company would be replaced by Flashlight. The murky intelligence agency may not be the most reliable partner to work with, but he didn't think they would mistreat him now that he earned a measure of their trust. The transition could happen at any day now that the war had formally ended.

Ves had other items on the agenda besides these two major ventures, but he didn't think he should bite more than he could chew. He still had an obligation to work on the joint design project, after all, so he couldn't be babysitting the company all day.

He turned his attention back to Chief Cyril. "For now, I'd like you to write a report that summarizes the current state of our manufacturing processes from your own perspective. Depending on your feedback and my own judgement, I might decide to introduce some changes."

"That's fair. It's your company to do what you will. However, the new shareholder won't be pleased if they think you are detracting from the company's profitability."

Ves smirked. "We'll see."

He spent a couple of hours touring the new production lines, paying close attention to the new Hanover production lines. He called up their parameters and memorized the key points so that he knew exactly what they brought to the company.

Since they cost 8 billion credits each, Ves wanted to be sure he got his money's worth out of them all!

Once he spent enough time inspecting the company's manufacturing efforts, Ves decided it was time to check up on Ketis before she felt neglected.

"Since I brought her on in an attempt to groom her into an asset to the LMC, she needs to become more useful first."

Ves already made some preparations in that area. He sought her out and found her at the testing ground distance away from the Mech Nursery.

The testing ground the LMC initially set up had expanded in scope and size. Each mech required several days of testing. The LMC employed a lot of test pilots to adequately gauge all of the new mechs coming out of the Mech Nursery.

Ves had a brief talk with the managers of the facility, but he quickly sought out Ketis.

She had been spending her time watching mechs go through various obstacle courses to test their mobility.

"Your designs are really impressive, Ves." She said. "Their quality is amazing. If the Swordmaidens had a full company of Blackbeaks, then we wouldn't have much to fear on land."

He couldn't help but boast a little. "These mech designs are years old. They don't reflect my current capabilities anymore."

"So you came to me now. It's about time. What do you have for me now that you're back?"

"Right now? Nothing much. The design project I'm engaged in is in a very early stage. It's not time yet for you to contribute. Instead, I want you to hit the books and learn more theory in preparation for your upcoming tasks."

Ketis adopted an annoyed expression. "Learning learning learning. You keep pushing me to learn. When will it ever be enough for you?! I want to design a mech damnit, isn't that what mech designers are supposed to do, Ves?!"

"I understand your frustration, but mech design is all about applying knowledge in creative ways. The more you know, the more options you have at your disposal. At your current state, you won't be of much help at all to a design project of this caliber. You need to shore up your fundamentals and delve further into your specialty. That means you need to master the contents of tons of textbooks."

"Forget about reading a ton of them. I won't be able to finish even one of them! It's so boring to study by myself!"

"I've already anticipated that problem. Tell me, do you like candy?"

"Uhh.. sure." Ketis looked befuddled at the seemingly random question.

"Here. Take this."

Ves placed a candy in her hand. She popped it into her mouth without a second glance.

"Wow!" Ketis said as she felt a rush going through her mind. "This is some candy! It's tasty as well!"

"Here. Have another candy."

Ves felt as if he was treating little girl to some treats. This time, Ketis experienced an even stronger rush! It took an entire minute for her to get over her high!

"Man, Ves, this candy is even better than the stimulants I used to use back when I was with the Swordmaidens!"

Ves fed her a couple more Intelligence and Concentration Candies. Even though he forked out 30,000 DP in total for all of those Attribute Candies, he considered it to be a worthwhile investment.

Out of every mech designer he knew, Ketis was the most appropriate candidate to bring into his design team. Not only did they spend a lot of time together and became familiar with each other, they also trusted each other to cover their backs.

Back when Ves first reunited with her at his penthouse office, he surreptitiously inspected her with the vision granted by the System in order to find out her mental attributes.

[Ketis]

Intelligence: 1.3

Creativity: 0.9

Concentration: 0.6

Ves always knew that her intelligence was above average. She had to be in order to become a fully-fledged Novice Mech Designer in the frontier. Yet her godawful concentration meant she was continually plagued with the attention span of a hyperactive teenager.

Since Ketis didn't have anywhere else to go except for the Swordmaidens, Ves had faith that Ketis would not betray or leave him anytime soon. He decided to go big and experiment with upgrading her two most important mental attributes all the way up to the human limit!

Unlike with Carlos, Ves didn't feel the need to hold back with Ketis. She was completely unknown in civilized space. It wouldn't be too outlandish for Ves to 'discover' an amazingly talented mech designer from nowhere, especially since no one in the Komodo Star Sector was familiar with her old capabilities.

It was just like Master Olson uncovering a freakishly intelligent young boy in some quiet star system of the Friday Coalition. Mech designers were constantly keeping their eyes peeled for people with limitless potential that they could shape into their perfect assistants.

After eating twenty candies in a single instant, Ketis was so high with the constant mental explosions in her mind that Ves had to order some guards to bring her back to her apartment at the Mech Nursery.

"Hehehe.. candy.. gimme more candy..." She drooled.

It might have been a bit reckless of Ves to force Ketis to eat so many candies at once, but he already knew it was safe to consume them in succession. At worst, Ketis would be out of it for a couple of days.

Ves looked forward to see how the new Ketis fared once she came off her psychedelic trip. She would probably require a lot of time to adjust to her new mental state, but once she did, she would certainly become an asset to the company!

Chapter 1073 Without Direction

A day after Ves fed Ketis with a bunch of candy, he seated himself in his penthouse office and summoned the chief operating officer of the LMC.

Jake Altern looked a little more aged than last time when he entered the office. The older man started out as a retainer of the family and ran some of the businesses owned by the Larkinson Estate. Putting him in charge of all of the actual operations of the company was a big responsibility to fulfill, but from all accounts he did a decent job in keeping the LMC's administration in order.

"Jake. Long time no see."

"You've grown, Ves." Jake nodded amiably at Ves as he crossed the distance and took a seat in front of the desk. "You have different air about you. I like it. You're just like the other Larkinsons now. Projecting strength is an essential trait in leadership."

Ves rapped his fingers against the surface of his desk. "I didn't call you here to compliment me. There's business to be done. First, what do you think of the current state of the LMC?"

"The Living Mech Corporation has become a respectable mech manufacturer." Jake said with pride. "It's my child as well as yours. I'm glad to see it rise in its current splendor and turn into a huge asset for the Larkinson Family. While we've gone through some hard times, I always believed you would return and drag us out of our slump."

"I'm glad you have so much faith in me, but please describe our strengths and weaknesses."

"Well, despite only offering two mech models in our product catalog, they are still profitable, which is quite a rare luxury these days for comparable mech companies. All the recent publicity has helped boost our sales, which in turn help us ease the pressure off our bottom line."

"What other strengths does the company have?"

"I always felt a little dubious about basing the LMC in Cloudy Curtain as it is a large hassle to ship goods and mechs back and forth, but now I see the merits in it. We've been isolated of much of the unrest that has currently gripped Bentheim. Our company has grown to dominate half of the planet. We employ so many well-paid people that our existence has begun to have a ripple effect over Freslin."

"What role does Freslin play to the LMC?"

"It's the closest major city to the Mech Nursery and is where most of our employees live and spend their time at when they are off-duty. While Orinoco still functions as a bastion for the old guard, the city of Freslin is experiencing a renaissance. Under the influence of the LMC, it has become the planet's main hub for all mech-related activities. The social responsibility initiatives that we've undertaken, such as sponsoring the local mech academy, has earned us a lot of support from the locals."

"Sponsorship?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What is this about sponsorship?"

"Didn't Calsie already tell you? She allocated a couple of hundred million credits a year on boosting the LMC's influence in Cloudy Curtain. Back before the economy worsened, she even drafted an ambitious plan to set up a small advanced mech academy on the planet! It would have accepted every local mech pilot who graduated from the basic mech academy."

"I take it those plans didn't go through?"

"It's too expensive to start up a mech academy." Jake shook his head. "Not only do we need to invest at least a billion credits into acquiring a wide variety of training mechs, they also need a lot of servicing. The problem with starting a mech academy in Cloudy Curtain is that new institutions don't have the

reputation to attract a lot of students. Cloudy Curtain itself isn't big enough to supply enough prospective mech pilots to run a profit."

The people who lived on this rural planet also weren't affluent enough to pay high tuition fees. Frankly, it made little business sense to start an advanced academy on this little planet when Bentheim was right next door. This scheme basically benefited the planet at the expense of the LMC, which only gained a bit of reputation and goodwill in return.

Ves activated his terminal and called up how much money the company spent on corporate social responsibility. He grew grim as he saw that Calsie spent at least two billion credits over the last three years on various infrastructure initiatives such as new roads and hospitals.

He thought he made it clear that the LMC shouldn't waste its money on these feel-good projects.

"Why didn't you stop Calsie

Jake shrugged. "Although it looks bad in hindsight, it helped us out a lot in securing local support. With all the events that happened recently on Cloudy Curtain, we need to have a majority of the local population on our side. Right now, our relationship with the Pioneers have never been better. With our backing, they've taken over the Planetary Assembly from the White Doves and the Greens!"

This was a significant development. Now that Ves had come into touch with the higher annals of power, he was not as ignorant as before when it came to politics.

It became clear now that the two main farming consortiums based on this planet possessed their own backing. No matter how many setbacks they suffered recently, their enduring resilience signified that they were here to stay.

"What kind of benefits have we received with the Pioneers in charge?"

"They've made life a lot easier for the LMC. Not only did they exempt any transports and cargo ships from stopping by at Orinoco's spaceport, they also reduced many taxes and fees which helped us remain afloat."

Ves nodded in understanding. The Pioneers had a vested interest in the LMC as well.

"Okay, I can see how our earlier initiatives has improved the local conditions. However, I don't want to keep funding expensive boondoggles. Our reputation among many of the locals is already high enough that I hardly see the benefit in investing more in this aspect."

"Understood. I will develop a plan to slowly draw down our expenditures on this front." Jake said.

While Ves basically wanted to end the practice entirely, he decided to be more tactful instead. By issuing an order for a gradual pushback, he wouldn't be signalling to the locals that he was leaving them to dry. He also wanted to avoid openly contradicting Calsie's decisions.

They moved on to the real reason why Ves called the COO to his office.

"The LMC is due for a shakeup."

"That's a big word, Ves. Changing the company extensively is a difficult endeavor and can backfire on us if we handle it badly." Jake said gravely.

"Do you believe the LMC is fine as it is? That it doesn't need any changes?"

The COO furrowed his brows. "Now that you mention it, lately I've felt as if the company was too used to running on autopilot. Our workforce has grown a little stagnant and they're used to doing the same work over and over again. That's fine for the moment, but I'm afraid the LMC isn't flexible enough to adjust to changing circumstances in the mech industry and mech market."

In other words, the company had become too complacent. The current status quo would not last forever. At the very least, the upcoming arrival of the new mech generation would shake up the entire mech industry in its entirety!

The last thing Ves wanted to see was the LMC failing to keep up with the rapid changes!

"Alright, what do you think we need to change?" Ves asked. "You know our company the best. What is the most pressing issue we need to address?"

"While there are various issues that I can think of that we need to change, there is one overarching aspect about the company that definitely needs to be reformed. Our company culture lacked too much direction during your absence. Our employees don't possess a strong kinship with each other and we don't even know what the company supposedly values."

That was squarely on Ves. As Jake described his concerns about the corporate culture, he painted a picture of employees clocking in day by day without even caring too much about their impact on other people's lives.

"Since you're so aware of the problem, why didn't you address it sooner?"

"I can't." Jake shrugged. "I'm not a charismatic leader and none of our top management has managed to change the overall direction of the company. It takes a true visionary in order to shape the LMC's internal culture. We've all been waiting for you to return in order to set a strong example."

Ves understood his point. Good leaders were hard to come by, and the LMC did not have the leverage to hire the best of the best. Most of the top management consisted of Larkinson retainers or former free agents who previously held positions in other mech companies.

Fortunately, Ves believed he could fulfill the gap in their capabilities with regards to fostering a shared set of values among his workforce. He already

witnessed good and bad examples from the various mech regiments and outfits he witnessed first-hand.

The Flagrant Vandals, Walter's Whalers and Lydia's Swordmaidens each exhibited a strong sense of camaraderie and loyalty. They were proud to be a part of their forces.

The distinct leadership style of Major Verle made a very strong impression on Ves. The mech major shouldered a huge responsibility in carrying the Flagrant Vandals through an arduous mission, but most of the Vandals never gave up even when they were pushed to the brink.

While it was true that the crew of the Finmoth Regal mutinied, that did not detract from Major Verle's overall success in shepherding his forces in and out of the deep frontier.

Ves always admired the esprit de corps exhibited by the Vandals and the aforementioned outfits. While they all exhibited various flaws, the members of those forces did not let that hold them back.

If Ves wanted to foster the same kind of spirit among his subordinates, then he needed to take the lead in setting forth a strong set of principles.

"It's best to begin with a simple motto. We can use that to serve as the heart of our core principles." Jake advised. "Something that's too long and contains too many concepts or buzzwords will lack meaning to most of our workforce because it comes across as muddled."

"Haven't I already set the company's mission statement?" Ves recalled. "I thought I set forth an aspiration that the LMC should endeavor to meet the needs of customers who are looking for a mech that feels alive to them. Our mechs aren't commodities. They are valuable partners who can complement their mech pilots better than any other mech. That is what we are working to achieve!"

Jake sighed. "That sounds good and all, but it's a very vague mission statement, you know. None of us can really figure out what the name of our company actually stands for. While all of us feel that our mechs are a little different than the other mechs on the market, it's difficult to communicate that to our customers, let alone our own workforce."

"In short, most people don't have a clue what the LMC really stands for, is that right?"

"Not everyone is as smart as you, Ves. You're a unique mech designer, but some of the ideas you spout are rather eccentric. In fact, some of us think it's better if we change the name of our company to introduce more clarity to our corporate identity. We can't just keep operating on the belief that we are just a generic mech company led by mech designer with some very weird ideas."

All of these faults made it clear that Ves failed to propagate his beliefs to the rest of the company. It wasn't that obvious at first since he provided a strong direction when he was present, but his absence increasingly made this deficiency more apparent.

"Alright. Let's discuss on how we can reform our principles." He said with a renewed sense of purpose. "I want the Living Mech Corporation to be more than just a vehicle to make money. Our company stands for something greater than that, and it's time that our subordinates and our customers learn our ethos."

Chapter 1074 Core Principles

Mech companies occupied a unique position within human society.

Technically, they were arms manufacturers.

Some arms manufacturers sold infantry weapons. Other arms manufacturers sold turret installations.

Yet even though mech companies sold mechs, they were treated differently from other arms manufacturers.

This was because the designers and developers of those armaments were mostly anonymous faces. It didn't really matter to the vast majority of the market which person designed a specific weapon model. The company brand stood for the entire company rather than a couple of notable weapon designers.

Due to the prominence of mechs in the Age of Mechs, mech companies enjoyed a very different situation. Mech designers enjoyed a lot of attention and publicity to the point where their personal fame often overpowered the brand of the company where they worked at! A mech company was just a hollow shell without a notable mech designer taking the lead!

This unique condition along with the custom of mech designers founding and leading their own mech companies in person came with vast implications.

The most important one was that mech companies served as an extension of the lead designer's design philosophies. When it came to core principles, nothing was more important to a mech designer than the principles espoused by their deeply personal design philosophies.

Since the good ones often started their own businesses or took over existing ones, it made sense if they shaped the identities of their companies to accommodate their own beliefs.

The equation was slightly different when it came to mech companies that employed multiple mech designers. Even so, there would always be a small number of lead designers who took charge of the overall direction of the mech company.

The example of the KNG came to mind, though Ves admitted it was not the most stellar example of how a company should be run.

The Living Mech Corporation centered around Ves Larkinson, the mech designer. By that, he meant that the company should strongly be aligned to his own design philosophy. Even though no one but Ves himself could realize his design philosophy to its full potential, that didn't mean that his subordinates should just do their own thing!

A mech corporation that did not follow through with their lead designer's design philosophy would only hamper both in the future.

The mech designer wouldn't be able to progress as much as the mechs being produced and sold by their companies failed to fully realize their mech designs.

The mech company therefore suffered as well as their lead designer's stalling progress meant that it didn't enjoy as much success as it ought to have.

Each were dependent on each other. This was why Ves put his full attention on this issue. If his own company did not match him in lockstep, then he could forget about spreading the influence of his design philosophy across the galaxy!

"It starts with a motto." Ves muttered.

No one else could help him set a motto for his company. As the lead designer of the LMC, only he could shape its principles. Even the System couldn't help him solve this important hurdle.

Right now, Ves stared out of the high windows of his penthouse office, overlooking the darkening cloudy skies as evening set in. Most of the office workers as well as the day shift of mech technicians ended their work for the day and returned to their homes.

Thousands of workers filed out of the headquarters or the underground portion of the Mech Nursery. Company-provided transit shuttles and aircars waited at the vastly-expanded landing zone at the far end of the company

premises. His workers entered them in an orderly fashion and took them all the way back to Freslin or one of its many suburbs.

"These people all rely on me to lead the company to prosperity."

It was a daunting thought. The wrong decision could not only ruin his own career, but also destroy the livelihoods of many of his workers.

Right now, he felt like he was leading his own miniature state. It was an apt analogy of the power he wielded and the responsibility that came with it. He no longer worked on his own but instead received the assistance of thousands of employees, all of whom shared in his fortune and misfortune.

"Meow."

Lucky idly floated down on his lap and demanded to be petted. Ves interrupted his reverie in order to lavish some attention to his pet.

As he looked at Lucky's mechanical form and sensed the spark of spirituality deep inside, Ves couldn't help but think if more machines could be like his cat.

What would a mech look like that possessed Lucky's breath of life and spirit?

"It wouldn't be a mech anymore." He muttered and shook his head. "A mech that has gained full autonomy is not really a mech anymore. It would be an entirely new sentient machine race."

A mech was a large war machine that operated along the direction of a mech pilot. Ves needed to remind himself to stick with this definition. While Ves wanted to make his mech more alive in a spiritual sense, he did not intend to go the full mile and make an entire race of Sigrund-like sentient AIs inhabiting mech-like bodies!

"The living mechs that I aim to design are not alive in a literal sense. It's sufficient for them to be alive in spirit."

Mechs should remain inanimate when no one actively piloted them. Whatever Ves might aspire for mechs, he wasn't extreme enough to think that they should be controlled by anything other than humans.

"Even if I believe that mechs should have more value and be more appreciated, it remains a fact that they are also tools who are meant to be used in the purpose they were designed for. In this case, mechs are designed to wage war."

It was very dangerous for humans to outsource the capacity to wage war on to easily exploitable AIs or other vulnerable entities. Humanity long learned that they needed to take charge of their own endeavors and Ves did not intend to upset that principle.

However, that did not mean his design philosophy was impossible to fulfill.

"It depends on my definition of living mech." He muttered as he stroked Lucky's back. "How can I define this term so that it recognizes the value I bring to mechs without sowing more confusion?"

Some mech designers adhered to very direct design philosophies. They wanted to design the most resilient mechs or the most enduring mechs. Anyone could easily explain their main design focus in a couple of seconds.

For example, under his guidance, Ketis managed to formulate her own design philosophy, which was to design swordsman mechs who wielded the sharpest swords.

"It's a simple ambition, but it fits her very well."

Her design philosophy came from her heart. The groundwork for it had slowly took on its shape after many years of running with the Swordmaidens.

As it was a sincere design philosophy that truly fit Ketis well, Ves did not stop her from adopting her greatest ambition as her design philosophy.

Sadly, Ves adopted a much more abstract design philosophy. This expanded his options but also raised the difficulty of fulfilling the aspirations of his design philosophy.

His main problem which hampered his ability to communicate his principles effectively was that he was burdened by the need to keep his advantages secret.

If he ever exposed what he learned about the X-Factor to the mech industry and the wider galaxy, he would not only lose his greatest competitive advantage, but also painted a huge target on his back!

The MTA, CFA and Five Scrolls Compact would fight to take him into their custody. Ves already possessed one reason for them to covet him, as he ostensibly held the identity of a Holy Son of the Five Scrolls Compact.

He did not feel like compounding his own value to these powerful trans-galactic organizations.

"I have to define living mechs in a way that isn't too direct but isn't too vague either."

How could he possibly straddle the line? With the handicap of not being able to reference spirituality or the X-Factor directly, Ves could not come up with an easy answer to this problem.

"Maybe I should start from the perspective of mech pilots."

As the principal users of his products, mech pilots served as the focal point of every mech company. While those with money and those with the power to decide which mechs they should purchase were not always mech pilots, their opinions still exerted a huge influence in the purchasing decisions.

A mech pilot's fit with a certain mech model was vitally important to the functioning of a mech force.

Did Ves aim to please every mech pilot?

"No." He shook his head. "I can't possibly design a mech that can satisfy everyone. That's just an impossibility."

Ves did not even dream of selling the most mechs or capturing a huge share of the mech market. Instead, he cared more about accommodating the needs of mech pilots who stood to benefit most from his products.

"My mechs are more than commodities."

Ves repeated this specific phrase for a reason. It encapsulated what he thought was wrong with the current mech market. The vast majority of mech designers and mech pilots did not treat their mechs with sufficient respect.

He detested this careless attitude towards mechs. It encouraged neglect and sloppiness. Even if mechs were tools to be used in war, many lives depended on how well they were treated.

"My mechs are designed to meet the needs of those who care about their mechs. I want to reward good behavior by having the mech repay the care and attention it received."

In other words, he wanted to portray his living mechs as loyal partners to their mech pilots.

Inspiration suddenly struck Ves. He spontaneously muttered a short phrase that neatly encapsulated his design philosophy.

"Living mechs. Partners for life."

It sounded like how a motto ought to sound like. Even though it was just a couple of words strung together, their combination expressed a very clear and distinct set of meaning.

The only problem with this motto was that it still possessed a very abstract quality that made it difficult to imagine what a living mech actually looked like.

While the strong X-Factors of his mechs helped convey the unique quality of his mechs to his customers, it was difficult to recognize it as a concrete asset when nobody except Ves could fully explain their uniqueness!

Still, Ves liked the motto he came up with. He didn't feel the need to come up with another motto that strayed away from his design philosophy in the name of dumbing down its abstract nature.

The motto served as a starting point to the principles that the LMC should abide by, but it wasn't enough. Just these words alone would never be able to align his entire workforce due to how wide it could be interpreted.

How could Ves describe the motto succinctly?

"Living mechs are mechs that are responsive to their mech pilots. We describe them as partners for life because all of our mechs are designed to accompany their mech pilots in as many battles as possible for as long as they can. Our mechs are partners for life because are designed to adapt to their owners!"

Perhaps it was a bit of an exaggeration to describe his mechs as partners for life. A typical mech career piloted mechs until they reached old age where their mental agility no longer kept up with their mechs. From start to finish, this typically took fifty to sixty years.

That was enough time for mech pilots to use at least three different mechs. As older mechs aged and became obsolete, they came under stronger pressure to change to a newer mech model.

Under those practical circumstances, it was unheard of for mech pilots to stick with a single mech for the entirety of their careers.

Yet Ves did not intend to change his motto despite this inaccuracy. Who knew if conditions changed in the future and the rate of advancement slowed to a

point where mechs remained relevant for sixty years instead of wearing out within just ten years.

Chapter 1075 Sibilant Asset Management

The next day, Ves convened his confidants and invited a couple of other top executives such as Jake Altern, the chief operating officer, and the Primrose Mackarie, the chief financial officer.

All of them knew the company well. If Ves couldn't make them understand the principles he espoused, then no one could.

"Living Mechs. Partners for Life." Gavin rolled the phrase off his tongue. As a marketing specialist, Ves awaited his opinion most eagerly. "I like it. It possesses a good cadence. Hearing it conjures up the image that our mechs are enduring partners for our customers."

Not everyone agreed. Jake for example did not approve. "That's all well and good, but it still comes with the flaw that no one immediately has an idea what our mechs excel at. What does it mean that our mechs are partners for life?"

"It means that our mechs are companions rather than products." Ves espoused. "The LMC's products that can be relied upon to treat mech pilots well when they care for their mechs in return. From a technical standpoint, mechs that qualify as partners for life should be high quality products that are built to last and can endure the rigors of combat again and again even under moderate use. However, that is only the value that we bring from the surface."

"What else is there?"

"Our mechs are mechs with a heart. I'm sure you all heard from our customers that our mechs are slightly more comfortable and accommodating to mech pilots than the competition. This is my true area of expertise. My mechs are not just lifeless tools to be used and abused until they break. Treat them well, and they will grow with the mech pilot."

Some of the people present furrowed their brows or looked confused. Ves failed to convey his principles clear enough.

"I think Ves is referring to the high customer satisfaction of the mech pilots that use our mechs." Gavin added. "I've been studying the reports for a long time, and a lot of the feedback we've received from our customers express a very high satisfaction, particularly to picky mech pilots. While our main products are priced beyond the reach of most of our market, those that have been forking good money for our mechs almost never regretted their purchase. I believe our repeat business potential is very high. The only reason why we haven't noticed this on a wider scale is due to our limited mech catalog."

When oriented towards customer feedback, the motto seemed more meaningful. As they worked for the company for several years now, they all knew what their most loyal customers felt about the LMC's mechs.

We have a good reputation on that front, but it's not a sufficiently compelling reason to purchase our mechs over another." Calsie said, sobering everyone up. "Our repeat business is high but our market share remains miniscule. The biggest problem we face is that even if our mechs are well-liked, most mech purchases just want the most bang for their buck, and that means prioritizing performance over comfort. When these critical buyers hear our motto, they probably think it's a weak excuse to make our mechs sound more impressive than they really are. The Blackbeak suffers a lot from this problem."

The Crystal Lord at least incorporated the alien crystal technology as a defining gimmick. Sales of the Crystal Lord had long outpaced the sales of the more plainer and less distinguishing Blackbeak.

"I think our main weakness is that our mech catalog has not caught up with the growth of our company." Ves stated. "With only two current mech models on offer, our impact on the mech market is too little. I know my motto sounds a

bit too abstract and wishy-washy, but the good feedback from the few thousand customers we have shows that it actually has a kernel of truth. As long as I resume publishing new designs, the motto will gain more strength."

He possessed the confidence to predict such an occurrence. Not only would he and his company gain more prominence once he advanced to Journeyman, but his ability to design mechs with a B-grade X-Factor meant that each of his newer products would never fail to impress those who caught sight of his mechs!

The most important consequence of his high X-Factor was that the mech pilots that used a Blackbeak or Crystal Lord always exhibited more of their potential. As long as their mentality aligned somewhat with the X-Factor of their mechs, the resulting combination always led to a small but substantial improvement in performance.

The more his mechs proliferated in the market, the more obvious this effect became! At that point, his motto would become a defining phrase that no other mech company could ever match as well as the LMC could under his leadership and direction!

Eventually, Ves decided to adopt the motto for his company. They all drew plans to include it in various documentation and even have it appear on their product pages and in the company halls.

"Coming up with a motto is just the first step." He said. "The LMC has done well so far, but the status quo won't last forever. I want to change the company from the ground up in order to prepare it for future growth."

"What do you want to focus on?" Calsie asked. "It sounds like you already have some goals in mind."

"You may have heard this, but I used to serve as a liaison to the former Kadar-Neyvis Group a few months ago. Although I haven't been there long

enough to study all of their operations, what I've learned from my experience showed me that the LMC has a lot to go before they can match the KNG."

"Our company is already running fairly efficiently."

Ves nodded. "That is all to your credit. However, we need a clearer organizational structure in order to take future expansion into account. What if we set up a branch office in the Ylvain Protectorate or the Reinald Republic someday? What if we set up a new manufacturing complex in a different star sector a decade from now on? While it sounds somewhat premature to be thinking of expanding our footprint, it's better to make our preparations now when we are at our current scale."

His argument took hold.

Primrose, their chief accountant, added in her own opinion. "If you are about to shakeup the LMC, then I would also suggest addressing our inconsistent licensing structure. Some of the licenses are registered in your personal name, which locks the company out of the royalties and fees that they earn."

"Fair point." Ves nodded. He wasn't unaware of the problem. His personal bank accounts were so flush with money that it was practically obscene.

"Have the Accounting Department and the Legal Department arrange the necessary details. All licenses will be put under company ownership. This includes both real and virtual licenses, component designs and mech designs, and licenses that we own and licenses we've acquired from other entities."

This made things much simpler and put all the licenses that he and his company owned under a single name. Ves detached himself from personal ownership of all the licenses including the much-prized Trailblazer engine and the Veltrex armor system because he no longer obsessed over them. As a versatile mech designer, even if his company shuttered all of a sudden and

Ves lost access to all of his licenses, he would still be able to pick himself up somehow by virtue of his ability.

Only regular Novices and Apprentices clung to licenses obsessively. They didn't possess the earning power to acquire new licenses at will, so they treasured every license they obtained.

They continued to talk about the transition and discussed what needed to change. Ves nonetheless reiterated the main priority of this initiative.

"Our goal here goes beyond changes in operations. What I truly want is to transform the LMC into a company our workers are proud to be a part of. They need to feel more belonging to our company and they have to believe in our mission. Each employee should understand our motto and conform their work to our values no matter if they are mech technicians, sales representatives or managers. Basically, I want to introduce a strong company culture and identity to the LMC."

In order to change the LMC to a form that Ves wanted to achieve, they needed to form an extensive and detailed plan to achieve the transformation. The LMC version 2.0 that they envisioned would not only be able to keep up with future growth without straining any of its existing processes, but it would also be made up of enthusiastic employees who all shared the same beliefs.

Now that Ves set his overall goals, his confidants and his managers could do take it from here. They already came up with useful suggestions.

For example, Jake and Primrose already talked about getting consultants on board to help them guide their company's transformation. The LMC wasn't the only mech company in the Bright Republic that wanted to reinvent itself. Obtaining value external expertise in an area which they held little experience in wouldn't hurt.

Calsie issued a warning, however. "If you want to rearrange large parts of the LMC, you will need the approval of the board as well."

"Oh that." Ves smiled when he heard that. "Don't worry about the board."

A few days after Ves announced his intentions to introduce strategic changes to the way they ran the company, Flashlight finally fulfilled its prior commitment. After several months of preparation, the TNC Holding Group no longer owned a twenty-four percent stake in the company!

Ves derived a lot of pleasure in informing the board of directors when they convened in the first meeting since he returned to the company.

"Your services won't be needed anymore." He said to the handful of directors appointed by TNC. "As of yesterday, the TNC Holding Group has formally transferred its shares to Sibilant Asset Management!"

The two directors representing the Ministry of Economic Development appeared blindsided by the news.

"You can't do this! The Ministry would never relinquish their stake on your company!"

"They can because they already did." Two new projections appeared in the semi-virtual boardroom. One of them boldly shooed the toadies from MinEcDev away. "As of now, the TNC Holding Group will no longer be involved in shaping the Living Mech Corporation's strategy."

Before the representatives of the TNC could bark back a reply, Ves pressed a command on his comm which forcefully cut their projection feeds off. Since they were no longer directors of the company, it was within his right to kick them out of the boardroom!

Ves addressed the other directors. Aside from his grandfather Benjamin and Marcella Bollinger, the other two directors were relatively independent if well-connected, which made them advisors more than decision makers.

While the TNC Holding Group still held sway, the independent directors strongly leaned on their side because they were stand-ins for the powerful Ministry of Economic Development.

This time, Sibilant Asset Management displaced the role of the TNC Holding Group. Officially, they represented the interests of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"We hope to have a fruitful cooperation with you all." A slick, middle-aged man said as he introduced himself to the board. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sees a lot of potential in the LMC as a means to extend our influence throughout the star sector. Where commerce flows, new connections are forged. Our main priority at the board is to make sure that the LMC will be able to expand its reach without forgetting its roots."

Everyone at the board was still shocked by the sudden change in ownership. Even his grandfather Benjamin seemed taken aback that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs butted into the business of the Ministry of Economic Development.

No one seemed to realize that Sibilant Asset Management did not actually represent the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but rather Flashlight!

Ves clapped his hands. "Now that we cleared out the trash, let us begin with the first item on the agenda. Our company is due for some extensive changes. We've developed some preliminary plans on what we want to change and we could benefit from your input."

Chapter 1076 Metamorphosis

Ves, the directors and the top management of the company all helped with the planning of the upcoming widespread organizational changes to the LMC.

Implementing all of these changes all at once was difficult to pull off successfully. No matter what, they needed support from all levels of their workforce in order to succeed in their shakeup.

For that reason, the representatives from Sibilant Asset Management introduced some consultants from a renowned Brighter consultancy firm to help with the changes.

After a week of setting goals, defining their new corporate identity and issuing various directives to guide the changes, Ves delegated his remaining responsibilities to his subordinates.

"I still have lots of design work ahead of me, so I can't babysit the company forever." Ves said as he patted Calsie's shoulder. "I'm putting you in charge of keeping an eye on the proceedings. Don't hesitate to warn me if you think the changes that are being planned are detrimental to my interests."

The young woman nodded. "Although I can't say I'm an expert in these matters, I'll be sure to keep an eye out for any shenanigans."

While Ves wanted to stay involved with the upcoming transition, he couldn't neglect his design obligations. The sooner he finished designing his Super-medium space knight, the faster the LMC's fortunes truly improved.

"It's about time for me to go on a trip to the past." He muttered.

Before he did so, he addressed some other matters that remained first. After a week of recovery, Ketis finally came out of the mind bending psychedelic experience that saw her intelligence and concentration attributes expand to transhuman levels!

When Ves entered the infirmary room where she had been resting all this while, he noticed that the spark in her eyes had grown strangely brighter.

Considering the sensitive nature of their upcoming discussion, Ves preemptively activated his Privacy Shield.

"How are you feeling, Ketis? Have you recovered from your high now?"

"I'm still getting used to the weird mess my mind is in right now. What did you drug me with last week?" Ketis eyed him with suspicion. "Your so-called 'candy' isn't really candy nor is it some kind of stimulant. You did something to me. My mind is so clear and focused now that it's unreal! Do you know how long it will take me to adjust to these changes?! Sometimes I feel like I'm not really Ketis anymore!"

"You're still you, but better. The candies that I fed you are special and a very deep secret of mine. Don't ask where I got them or how they work. Just know that it has done a lot of good for you. Have you noticed that you became smarter lately?"

She nodded. "It's a lot easier for me to recall the theories when I reviewed some textbooks in the last few days. Is that the candy at work?"

"Yup. Let's put your newly expanded cognitive functions to the test. I have a pile of homework for you to test your improvements."

Ves transferred a pile of documents and assignments to her comm. Each of them specifically tested her knowledge and application in different fields such as mechanics and electrical engineering. That would keep her busy for a month at the very least as she was required to study many different textbooks in the company's internal library.

While Ketis frowned a bit at the sheer amount of textbooks she needed to study, she didn't appear as resistant as before.

It was kind of eerie to Ves to witness the changes in Ketis. The vast increase to her concentration seemed to have changed her in a way that Ves recognized a lot in himself!

Perhaps he went a little overboard in raising her attributes to their human limits. How much of the original Ketis was still left?

It was too late to do anything about it now that she already ingested so much candy. For better or worse, Ketis 2.0 was here to stay. Ves doubted that he could obtain some kind of attribute reduction candy from the System that downgraded her back into her absent-minded self.

"The aid that I've given you is very precious. Don't squander it and don't tell anyone else." Ves reiterated. He couldn't stress this point enough. "In time, you will realize the full effects of your improvements. While you can revel in your new capabilities, don't lose sight of your dreams and aspirations. The Swordmaidens and Mayra would want you to succeed as a mech designer."

"You're right, Ves. What am I complaining about? If the candy is as amazing as you make it sound like, then I can surely catch up to you!" Ketis glowed, already thinking about what heights she could reach if she became a learning monster.

In order to keep Ketis on the right track, Ves prepared some incentives for her. "Some of the homework I've issued you is very difficult. They're the kind of tests that the Skull Architect once posed to me, but easier in difficulty. As long as you can come up with some good solutions to the holes in the designs I've presented to you, I'll give you another treat."

Ves pulled out a small container from his pocket and threw it up and down with his hand.

"Is.. there another candy inside?" Ketis asked as her eyes honed in on the tiny box.

"Yup. This one doesn't improve your mind. Instead, it improves your strength. Sounds good, right?"

"I'll definitely do my homework!"

Even though she became a much more capable mech designer, Ketis still hadn't forgotten her Swordmaiden roots. Now that she experienced the amazing effects of candy once, she had already developed a desire to consume more, especially if it improved her already formidable genetically modified body! As long as Ves dangled a candy in front of her face every now and then, he was assured that she would do exactly what he wanted.

Of course, a time would come when candies would stop having an effect on Ketis. By that time, Ves hoped that he earned enough of her loyalty that she would remain dedicated to him without any special compensation.

As Ves turned off his Privacy Shield left the company's infirmary, he reflected on the changes he put into motion.

Ketis 2.0. The Living Mech Corporation 2.0. The Avatars of Myth 2.0. Everyone and everything around him was undergoing some form of metamorphosis. While it would take a lot of time and effort for some of the transition to take place, once they finished Ves would have more power and influence at his disposal than ever before!

Naturally, Ves cared the most about the improvements to his genetic makeup and his Attributes and Skills. He retained very little of his old baseline human self prior to receiving the System. He was much further ahead in his personal evolution.

"If Ketis has only upgraded to version 2.0 of herself, I'm probably all the way up to version 3.5 or something." Ves chuckled. "She still has a lot to go before she boast about catching up to my progress."

As Ves returned to his penthouse office, he spotted Gavin waiting outside the tall double doors that led inside.

"Ves! There's an emergency! We've got a huge problem on our hands!"

"Calm down Gavin. What's the problem?" Ves frowned.

"We just received word from the local MTA branch office that an esteemed guest has arrived on Cloudy Curtain on an unmarked corvette! They say that we're about to be visited by an official from the CFA!"

"What?!"

His good mood instantly evaporated. Worry instantly crept up Ves' back as he realized the import of this visit. What could possibly compel the CFA to send one of their people to a backwater like Cloudy Curtain of all places?

"I guess a reckoning is due." Ves said grimly. "Do you know when the CFA arrives at the Mech Nursery?"

"I'm told they're almost here! The corvette directly dispatched a shuttle from orbit to our headquarters a short time ago!"

CFA shuttles were the best in the galaxy! It took very little time for them to arrive on land. Just a few minutes later, Ves and Gavin both hurried all the way up to the roof of the headquarters building and came up to a special landing pad reserved for Ves and special guests.

A swift and sleek-looking shuttle whose design different remarkably from the outdated shuttles of the Starlight Megalodon descended from the air and plopped onto the landing pad without any noticeable impact.

The hatch instantly slid open, revealing a single confident-looking lieutenant in CFA uniform.

After several hundred years, the style of the uniform had changed in several different ways compared to the ones that Ves wore himself as a fake officer of the CFA. Even so, the insignia still remained the same.

Ves instantly read a lot of details about the newcomer's identity from his uniform markings alone.

First, he was a commissioned lieutenant junior grade of the CFA. While the rank didn't sound very impressive, that was enough for him to command authority on the entire planet! No one dared to defy the CFA in their face!

Second, the lieutenant was an inspector of the CFA's Komodo Naval Fleet based in the star sector. Inspectors wielded a lot of authority when it came to investigating what they regarded as the local space peasants of the star sector. If this lieutenant wanted to have him killed, he merely needed to say the word and the entire Bright Republic would be out for Ves' blood!

Ves tried hard not to gulp. "Welcome to the headquarters of the Living Mech Corporation, esteemed guest from the Common Fleet Alliance. I apologise for not preparing an adequate reception for your arrival. Your visit caught us by surprise."

"Please spare the pleasantries, Mr. Larkinson." The lieutenant replied imperiously, not even paying any special attention to Ves. "I am Lieutenant Renze Stimmons. The Office of the Naval Inspector General of this star sector has dispatched me to this dirtball of a planet to investigate your involvement in an incident related to one of our long-lost battleships in the frontier."

"Ehm, very well. Let's take this discussion in my office."

Ves waved Gavin away and led Lieutenant Stimmons to his office. Its imposing decor might have intimidated regular people, but it had no effect at all to a lieutenant from the CFA.

After they took their seats, the lieutenant let Ves stew for a moment.

"What do you want to know from me, lieutenant?" Ves asked, breaking the unsettling silence between the two.

The lieutenant activated a signal jammer attached to his belt. Only until the field took effect did he speak openly.

"I have come here for two purposes. First, we are interviewing every notable individual involved with the matter related to the Starlight Megalodon. Second, we are here to retrieve the stolen property in your possession."

Ves cursed inside his mind. This inspector came too quickly and without warning on purpose! If word got out beforehand that someone from the CFA came to Cloudy Curtain, then Ves would have been able to smuggle the goods he looted from the Starlight Megalodon out of the Mech Nursery's vault and hide them elsewhere!

"Am I.. in trouble, lieutenant?"

"That remains to be seen. The Bright Republic has already provided a satisfactory explanation to the CFA. As long as you cooperate to the fullest extent, we have no cause to direct any further attention to you, Mr. Larkinson. You should thank your patrons for taking responsibility for your actions."

Ves smiled in relief. It sounded like he wouldn't be dragged away from his company by the CFA. His connection to the Tovar Family already paid off by getting the CFA to relent.

He didn't even want to know what would have happened if the Tovar Family or the Bright Republic failed to cover his back! Even though he only participated on this mission on behalf of the Republic, the CFA might not see it that way!

Still, the thought of losing all of his precious gains from the Aeon Corona Mission made him despair!

Chapter 1077 Innocent Ac

Ves spent an hour answering the questions posed by Lieutenant Stimmons. They related to what he witnessed on the surface of Aeon Corona VII, how he wormed his way into the Starlight Megalodon, what he did with his supposed rank in the CFA and more.

From the knowledge that the lieutenant exhibited, Ves knew that much of it probably came from when his CFA-issued officer comm inadvertently connected to the CFA's fleet network. Much of the rest probably came from questioning the other survivors of the Aeon Corona Mission such as Captain Orfan.

However, the lieutenant also possessed obvious gaps in knowledge that Ves made sure to keep as unfulfilled as possible.

While Ves could never blatantly lie to an inspector of the CFA, he could still resort to lies by omission. No matter what, Ves could never reveal any details about Sigrund or his Holy Son status!

"Please list each research project on the Starlight Megalodon that you've accessed or participated in. Be as complete as possible."

"Describe every virtual AI you've met on the ship."

"Explain to me what you believe to be the cause of the abrupt halt to the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives. Why did the long-dormant sandman mothership entangled with the battleship suddenly freed itself from its stasis?"

"What did you encounter when you entered the lab of Project Icarus?"

Ves put every part of his persuasive ability to use in weaving a tale of omissions and minor misdirections to the lieutenant. For his part, Stimmons listened to his answers with a bored expression, as if he felt it was beneath him to be dispatched to Cloudy Curtain in the first place.

Taking a gamble, Ves tried to reinforce the impression that he was a nobody and that Stimmons should be spending his time elsewhere by using his underdeveloped Spirituality to use!

While it was a huge risk to employ his Spirituality directly in front of someone from the CFA, Ves was reasonably certain that Stimmons was just a norm. Sure, he probably received the best genetic optimization treatments afforded to someone of his rank, but he was just an inspector.

Ves maintained his facade as a cooperative witness while he concentrated his mind. He shaped his Spirituality in a form akin to a mech pilot's force of will. While he was very clumsy in this regard, he nonetheless succeeded in forming a spiritual field around him that emphasized his innocence and cluelessness!

Above all else, Ves wanted to give the impression that he was just a random mech designer who got involved in the Starlight Megalodon by coincidence! There was nothing special about him at all beside his coincidental presence on the battleship!

Whether it worked or not, Ves couldn't tell, because Lieutenant Stimmons appeared disinterested in the entire proceedings from the start.

Still, all Ves cared about was that he managed to give nothing away about his most critical secrets.

Perhaps it worked, because Lieutenant Stimmons never asked once about Sigrund or anything related to the monstrous mainframe in Project Icarus' lab!

Ves already agreed on a cover story with Calabast if he ever faced scrutiny from the CFA. The line of nonsense he fed to the inspector would completely match Calabast's own story if the CFA ever came to corroborate his words.

Such preparation allowed him to survive the tense questioning session without exposing any information that he didn't want the CFA to know.

After a while, Stimmons ended the session and stood up. "Very well. I have heard enough. Now bring me to the assets you've appropriated from the Starlight Megalodon so I can arrange for them to be taken back. Now, before you pull any tricks, know that every piece of CFA gear can be detected by us even if you bury it right into the center of this planet."

"I wouldn't dare to hide the salvage I've brought back from the Aeon Corona System." Ves smiled and laughed awkwardly.

There was no way that Ves could avoid this. He reluctantly led Lieutenant Stimmons to a set of elevators that successively brought them all the way down to the vault floor.

As Ves slowly unlocked the stringent security measures of the vault door and stepped inside, he went to the portion of the vault that stored his spoils from the CFA. As the pair entered the vault room in question, they came across a stack of crates.

Ves blinked a bit. Shouldn't there be an entire CFA shuttle stored inside? Where was his Squalon field engineer light combat armor? Where was his advanced CFA officer-grade comm?

Despite the inexplicable absence, Ves he quickly recovered. "Ahem. This is the sum total of my spoils from the Starlight Megalodon."

"What is the meaning of this?" Stimmons said with a dangerous edge in his tone. "This should not be the extent of the assets that you've stolen from the CFA."

"This is all of it, sir!" Ves said while maintaining an innocent act. "You can look wherever you want, but I haven't kept anything from the CFA other than these crates!"

The lieutenant walked up to the stack of crates and opened one of them to reveal a pile of vintage nutrient packs. The man fished out one of the packs

from the crate and studied it before throwing it aside. He fished out a dozen more packs, but all he found was more of the same!

"Nutrient packs! Of all the goods that you have possibly taken from the Starlight Megalodon, you only brought back some worthless nutrient packs! Are you out of your mind?! Where is our shuttle? Where is our XV-99 Squalon?"

"We don't have them, sir. I only dared to retain some nutrient packs as a souvenir. I would never dare to back take something of actual value to the CFA." Ves innocently shrugged from the side.

This was a very precarious moment to Ves right now. Even though he also wondered where most of his CFA stuff had disappeared to, he decided to put his faith in this welcome turn events!

In the background, Ves kept emanating a spiritual field that reinforced his act. Ves was just a clueless bystander! He never made off with expensive CFA gear! There was nothing special to see here!

Lieutenant Stimmons furrowed his brows. He eventually raised his hand and activated his modern CFA comm.

A strong pulse came from above and instantly encompassed the entire Mech Nursery down to the underground vault and below!

Ves widened his eyes. The small corvette that Stimmons had traveled upon possessed the most powerful scanners that he had ever experienced. He felt as if nothing could be hidden from the scan that just passed through his body!

As Ves surreptitiously tried to see what Stimmons was doing with his comm, he noticed that the inspector was performing a number of broad, wide-area scans over the entirety of Cloudy Curtain!

The lieutenant wasn't lying when he claimed that he possessed the ability to track down CFA gear!

Unfortunately for him, the only result the corvette in orbit spat back was the crates of vintage nutrient packs stored in this very vault! Aside from the crates, the planet contained nothing else from the CFA!

"WORTHLESS!" Stimmons yelled out in frustration as he lurched his arm and threw the open crate onto the ground, causing it to spill its contents of ancient nutrient packs. "Explain! Where are the rest of our assets!"

"I don't know, sir!"

"Did you smuggle them out?!"

"No!"

"Did you sell them or trade them away?!"

"I did not! You are free to audit my company and my finances. You'll find nothing amiss, I'm sure of it, sir!"

After some fruitless questioning, Lieutenant Stimmons growled in frustration while staring daggers at Ves. This visit did not proceed the way he envisioned!

For a moment, Ves felt as if he had entered a dangerous moment. Stimmons might take him into custody in order to account for the missing gear. However, the subtle aura of innocence and cluelessness around him made it seem as if there was no point in paying any further interest in Ves.

Eventually, the lieutenant decided against such drastic action. He stormed off towards the exit. "Get out of this underground hole, you filthy space peasant! I will investigate the whereabouts of our missing assets further. If I find out that you have hidden them away, then not even the Tovars can save you from our wrath!"

Ves stared at the pile of spilled nutrient packs with a pain in his heart before turning around to help Stimmons return to his shuttle parked on the roof of the LMC's headquarters.

Once the lieutenant to perform a follow-up investigation or something, Ves gently sighed as the shuttle whipped into orbit with amazing speed.

Aware that the CFA might have left some bugs behind, Ves refrained from dropping his act. He tried to look as hapless as possible as he slowly departed from the roof and made his way back down to the vault.

He also called for Calsie to meet him at the entrance of the vault. Back when he transferred his CFA comm, his CFA shuttle and his CFA combat armor to the Barracuda, Calsie was responsible for storing them there once the ship arrived at Cloudy Curtain.

If anyone knew where the rest of his CFA spoils aside from his nutrient packs disappeared to, it should be Calsie.

Some time later, both Ves and Calsie arrived at the vault. Lucky seemed to have returned from wherever he disappeared to and clung on Calsie's shoulder while being petted by the woman.

Ves first looked to Lucky. "Are there any spy bugs here?"

"Meow." Lucky shook his head while it was being scratched by Calsie's fingers.

Even though he trusted Lucky's judgement, Ves activated his Privacy Shield to be sure. Only then did he turn to Calsie.

"If you haven't heard already, we just received a visit from an inspector of the CFA. Not only did he question me about certain matters, but he also came to retrieve the CFA assets that I've shipped back to the company. You wouldn't happen to know where they are right now, do you?"

Calsie looked pensive all of a sudden. "Uhhh.."

"Before you ask, it's safe to talk within this interference field. Neither the CFA nor anyone else will be able to eavesdrop on us, Calsie."

"That's not what I was hesitating about." She said as her discomfort deepened. She clung a bit tighter to Lucky. "The truth is that... the shuttle, the suit of armor and the comm is... gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone?"

"They're gone. They no longer exist."

"Did you sell them or something to help keep the company afloat?"

"No, nothing like that. The LMC wasn't that desperate."

"Did someone else like the MTA or the Bright Republic come and confiscate the stuff?"

Calsie shook her head again. "No."

"Then what happened?!"

"Lucky ate it all! He munched on all of your stuff until it's all gone! Your comm, your combat armor and your shuttle has all been digested by your cat!"

What.

Ves almost couldn't believe what he heard. His astonished eyes on in Lucky who immediately noticed the attention directed against him. Lucky stopped squinting his eyes in pleasure and innocently met his owner's increasingly angry gaze.

"Lucky? Tell me. Is Calsie telling the truth? Did you eat all of my gear?"

"Meow."

Ves knew better than to parse the meaning out of that meaningless meow. Instead, he focused his gaze and quietly activated his System sight.

[Pet Status]

Name: Lucky

Owner: Ves Larkinson

Rank: Exceptional [Exclusive]

Level: 5

Skills

[Gem Excretion V]

[Communications III]

[Energy Claws III]

[ECM IV]

[Gravity Manipulation IV]

[Regeneration I]

[Sharp Senses III]

[Spirituality I]

Level five?! And what were all of these skills?!

Ves doubted no further. There was no way that Ves could have leveled up twice and acquired all of these new skills so easily! The only explanation on hand that made sense was that Lucky really ate all of his valuable and expensive CFA gear! The expensive exotics and valuable materials that made them so valuable must have been an irresistible temptation to his gluttonous cat!

"LUCKY! Get over here!" Ves made a grab at Lucky, who yowled in surprise and instantly turned intangible! "Spit out my Squalon! That's the best armor that I've ever laid my hands upon, but now it's gone because you couldn't control your appetite! Pay me back!"

"Meow!"

Lucky wasn't stupid enough to remain within the vault. The cat took advantage of his intangible state and instantly phased through the floor and fled deeper underground!

Chapter 1078 Phase 2

Ves stared at the crates of nutrient packs in dismay. Aside from them, he retained nothing else from the Aeon Corona Mission!

He lost his CFA shuttle with its amazing ECM systems. He lost his XV-99 Squalon field engineer armor with integrated minifab system. He also lost his CFA officer-grade comm!

His heart ached with the losses. Even though Lieutenant Stimmons would have likely taken them away anyway, he still felt awful that Lucky got to be the final beneficiary.

"Tell me, Calsie, how can you let Lucky get away with eating my stuff?"

"We didn't know. I think Lucky was too hungry for valuable exotics." Calsie looked apologetic. "Back when times were good, we followed your instructions and fed him a steady diet of ores. However, when we needed to cut back on expenses, every million credits counted, so we reduced the value of ores we supplied to Lucky. He must have been frustrated at the years of deprivation, so he sought alternatives."

"So he went straight to the vault?"

"You know as well as I do that no barrier can stop him. This vault is surrounded by meters armor plating! Nothing ought to be able to burrow

inside! I transferred your CFA equipment in the vault with the reassurance that no one would be able to breach it without setting off an alarm. Somehow, Lucky avoided getting detected while he snuck inside. At that point, he held free reign to do whatever he wanted! It wasn't until months later when I needed to retrieve something else from the vault that I came upon the remnants of the shuttle. The bite marks instantly made it obvious who was responsible."

"Lucky.." Ves grumbled resentfully.

His willful cat became more and more unbridled. His ability to turn intangible not only made every physical barrier a joke in his eyes, but now his ability to sneak became much stronger due to the ECM abilities he somehow assimilated from his meals!

Lucky's Communications, ECM, Gravity Manipulation and Sharp Senses all seemed to stem from the shuttle, armor and his comm. Even his Gem Excretion had been upgraded to the fifth tier, perhaps by incorporating aspects of the minifab system.

And while the System sight did not list out how much more resilient Lucky's exterior shell became, it must have received a substantial boost as well.

"This was supposed to be my gear when I chose to go on an excursion in the frontier." He lamented. "I would have been assured of my safety if I could make use of them. Now, I no longer have the confidence to enter the frontier anytime soon."

As much as he pined over his losses, Ves slowly recovered. That Lucky ultimately benefited at the CFA's expense was not a major misdeed. A more capable Lucky would be able to substitute for the role his CFA gear played in a much more inconspicuous package.

For example, he wouldn't be able to bring his CFA shuttle with all of its features everywhere, particularly indoors. However, he could bring along Lucky wherever he went. He could even develop a purposeful habit of doing so whenever he visited somewhere. Once people got used to seeing him with his cat, they would just mentally shrug it off as a quirk.

Plenty of mech designers possessed unusual habits, so Ves wouldn't be any different for bringing his mechanical cat along.

"Please leave." Ves stated to Calsie after a short moment of contemplation. "Just leave me with my nutrient packs."

"Okay, sir... if that's what you want."

He didn't blame Calsie for her oversight in this matter. Who knew that Lucky would pull off something like this? The gluttonous cat ate almost everything made of metal and composite materials, leaving only the nutrient packs alone due to their organic content.

Ves walked up to the strewn crate that had spilled a bunch of nutrient packs on the floor. He bent down, picked up the crate, and carefully stuffed the spilled nutrient packs back into the crate.

"Worthless, huh?" Ves smiled sardonically. "To me, they're treasures."

After stuffing all of the packs back into the crate, he put it down and moved towards the other crates. He lifted the top crates and put it aside. He repeated the process until he came to the bottom-most crate.

After opening it, he reached down his arm through the pile of nutrient packs and searched for something buried in the middle. After his fingers touched upon a small box, he grasped it and took it out.

"Hahaha. At least I still have this!" He laughed as he opened the small box, revealing the Archimedes Rubal organic brain implant held in perpetual stasis. "It's surprising how many people look right past a bunch of nutrient packs."

When Ves witnessed Lieutenant Stimmons calling down some penetrating, wide-area scans from the corvette up in orbit, he made a prediction.

He guessed that as powerful as the wide-area scans appeared, they didn't offer much detail! It would be too exaggerated if a small corvette, even of CFA make, could scan an entire terrestrial planet and expose every dirty little secret down to the nanometer!

A modern CFA battleship might possess the capacity to do so, but Ves refused to believe that the CFA would invest so much resources in outfitting a mere corvette with such a powerful scanning system!

While the Archimedes Rubal was of indeterminate value right now, Ves held high hopes for it once he found a means to double-check its biological programming.

"It's always better to improve my own core capabilities than to outfit myself with gear."

Ves was a mech designer, so anything that directly improved his ability to design mechs took precedence over anything else.

After he became reassured that he still retained the Archimedes Rubal, he returned it to the crate and put everything back in order. Right now wasn't the time to make use of what remained in the vault.

A couple of days went by as Ves tried to get over his losses. He supervised the planning around the upcoming transformation of the LMC.

In order to make it clear to the workforce that the company would be undergoing a major transition, the planners came up with a name for it: Phase 2.

Phase 2 signified that the LMC at its current state was only the first step in its evolution. The LMC at Phase 1 only served as a starting point for the company in its first years of existence.

"The LMC is only five years old." Ves muttered. "It is remarkable how much it has grown. From operating a single second-hand 3D printer and assembly system to operating seventeen entire production lines at once, hardly any starting mech designer in the Bright Republic can compare to my growth."

He stated this with confidence because he knew it was true. Aside from some aberrant mech designers such as Patricia Schneider and Edwin McKinney, hardly any mech designer under thirty stood a chance at advancing to Journeyman before their thirties.

Phase 2 revolved around the assumption that Ves would succeed in advancing when he was still young in the eyes of the mech industry. The boost that he and his company received from his new status as a truly capable mech designer would definitely lead to a rapid growth in brand recognition and reputation! These factors in turn resulted in vastly higher sales for any mech designs he published as a Journeyman!

Naturally, no one knew for sure if Ves would be able to advance to Journeyman or remain stuck at the bottleneck that stifled the vast majority of Apprentices. Even though Ves knew for sure that he would be able to pass this barrier with his abundant Spirituality, no one else possessed this information, so many people reserved their judgement.

"That's fine. I'll show the mech industry soon enough that my growth is limitless."

Phase 2 aimed to transform two different aspects about the company. The first and most technical one would be to streamline its operations and to rearrange its governance and corporate structure to better cope with the growth.

Different departments and divisions of the LMC gained more autonomy and clearer instructions on what they should work on. The hierarchy became clearer and everyone knew where they stood within the company.

Of particular note to Ves that he personally pushed to overhaul the entire Production Department. As the department responsible for operating the production lines, its importance to the company was pivotal, yet there weren't enough checks to prevent abuse and waste in his opinion.

Having learned a thing or two from the KNG, Ves pushed for added controls. Though this came at the expense of chief technicians, Ves simply found it far too risky to make them have the final say on certain matters.

"As long as several people keep an eye on each other, they won't be able to pull off anything shady without the company's say-so."

There were good chief technicians and bad chief technicians. The problem he encountered at the KNG that he also spotted at the LMC was that too many people put their faith in the integrity of the chief technicians. Just because they were older and possessed more qualifications didn't mean that they could do an incalculable amount of damage if they went rogue.

Even though the chief technicians howled and some of the managers expressed concerns, Ves still pushed through with these specific reforms.

Ves was way too paranoid to allow a nefarious organization like the Bentheim Liberation Movement to repeat the same tricks on his own company!

Aside from these necessary organizational changes, Ves also paid close attention to the effort to instill the LMC with a clear corporate identity.

With the help of various experts from within and without, the LMC gradually began to indoctrinate the workforce with the principles of the company.

The new company motto appeared everywhere. From the front of the headquarters to the letterhead of official documents, the LMC constantly reinforced that they were more than just a mech company!

"We are creating partners that our customers can depend upon."

Even if the majority of the LMC's workforce lacked the capability to understand the profundity of the company's motto, all the mandatory indoctrination sessions they went through at least put them on the same page. All they needed to know was that the LMC revolved around designing and selling mechs that enabled mech pilots to exhibit their full potential!

"Our products may not be the flashiest, most cost-efficient or the most high-performing mechs on the market, but they are the most dependable partners to our mech pilots. Our customers recognize the effort and care we put into our mechs, from the start of their design all the way to production. We should take pride in working for a company that produces mechs that truly come alive when partnered with mech pilots!"

Each employee witnessed the reactions from their most enthusiastic customers. There were already a handful of Blackbeak and Crystal Lord mech pilots who came to love their mechs. Showing off their appreciation to the people that made it possible for these mechs to be produced and sold to these mech pilots always managed to lift everyone's spirit!

Their work had meaning!

Naturally, it would take a lot more effort than company-wide indoctrination sessions to fully align the workforce to the principles derived from Ves' design philosophy.

Nonetheless, with the top of the company largely onboard with this initiative, Ves became assured that the company was on the right track of implementing the most important changes.

With nothing urgent on the agenda anymore, Ves wanted to resume working on his design. In order to do that, he still needed to upgrade one more aspect about himself.

"It's time."

After making sure he delegated everything that needed to be addressed for the foreseeable week, Ves retreated back to his private lab and prepared to go on another time-bending trip into the past.

However, before he did so, he encountered a meek and apologetic Lucky.

Ves stared flatly at Lucky floating in front of him. "It's rather late of you to beg for forgiveness."

"Meow."

"Don't you meow at me. You ate my stuff! It's one thing to snack on the company's inventory of exotics. It's an entirely different thing when you ate an entire CFA shuttle down to its FTL drive!?"

"Meow!"

Chapter 1079 Spoils of Gluttony

If Lucky thought that Ves would forgive him after meowing a few times, then the cat had another thing coming.

"Do you know how much all of that CFA gear is worth? Even if they're three-hundred years out of date, the materials I could have gained from recycling them would have been enough to repay the LMC's debt at least a hundred times over! All of that is gone now, digested in your belly to satisfy your gluttony!"

Even though Lucky often took liberties with what he was permitted to do, this time he truly went beyond the pale. Ves felt as if he was an exasperated parent trying to rein his hyperactive son. He knew he needed to stay firm in setting boundaries.

This time, Lucky's cuteness wouldn't be able to save him from Ves' ire!

"Meow!"

Lucky turned intangible and phased through the wall of the lab. The cat returned shortly afterwards with a very shiny red gem between its teeth. Lucky turned tangible just long enough to drop the gem in his mouth.

It was bigger than any of Lucky's gems that Ves had ever seen. It even shined on its own.

"How can that be?!"

Curious, studied it with his System sight after making sure his Privacy Shield was still active.

[Furnace of Regret]

The anguish of a forgotten terror is encapsulated in this gem. Increases the efficiency of the power reactor of a mech by 30 percent.

"What? Thirty percent?"

Ves rubbed his eyes, but the same figure remained within his sight. Thirty percent! What concept was that?! All the other gems that Lucky's excreted before never managed to achieve such a major boost on a core function of a mech!

"Forget about thirty percent, even a three percent increase in efficiency is enough to propel a well-crafted mech into a masterpiece!"

A thirty percent increase meant that any mech that carried the so-called Furnace of Regret gained a massive boost in endurance! Not only would it be able to remain deployed for longer stretches of time, it was also able to sustain itself in intensive battles for longer without compromising its energy reserves!

"This is the perfect gem for an energy-intensive mech such as a Crystal Lord!"

A gem that boosted a core parameter of a mech so drastically could never be exposed. If Ves guessed correctly, this little red gem could be applied to any machine that fell under the definition of mech!

"No matter if it's a cheap third-class bargain bin mech or a priceless first-class cutting-edge mech developed by the best mech designers in the galactic center, the power of the Furnace of Regret probably works equally well on both!"

What if a gem like this got attached to Ghanso Larkinson's expert mech?

"If I recall, Ghanso specializes in piloting spaceborn rifleman mechs."

With the Furnace of Regret, his cousin would definitely be able to dominate in space now that his mech became thirty percent more capable of persisting in battle! Ghanso would have less scruples about conserving his energy and allow him to last longer in duels against other expert pilots!

This was where Ves saw the true value in this gem and any gems comparable in power. Rather than empowering other people's mechs for a profit, Ves would rather reserve them for the Avatars of Myth, giving them an undeniable edge in battle!

Ves turned his attention back to his willful pet. "Do you have more gems like this, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

Lucky darted through the wall and returned with a small sack of gems. When Lucky opened the sack and studied the handful of gems, he became increasingly impressed by their boosts! They were unlike any gems that Lucky had ever produced before!

[Horned Devil's Visage]

The echo of an extinct alien race is captured within this gem. Increases the sensor range of a mech by 40 percent.

[Remnant Supernova]

The remnants of a supernova that wiped out an entire alien race is contained within this gem. Increases the damage inflicted by directed energy weapons by 25 percent.

[Fist of the Faithful]

The memory of a punch that changed the course of the galaxy resides in this gem. Increases the impact damage inflicted by a mech by 30 percent.

[Sin of Altruism]

The valor of a great sacrifice by an alien warrior is housed within this gem. Increases the damage resistance of external armor plating by 20 percent.

[Ardent Wish]

The determination of a great human mech pilot is caught within this gem. Increased the spiritual feedback of a mech by 40 percent.

"What is it with these descriptions?!"

Although the System designated Lucky as a gem cat, Ves never paid too much attention to the gem aspect. Small boosts in performance such as a 5 percent higher heat capacity was so marginal that no one would actually

notice any difference. Their only use so far to Ves was to implant them into his gold label mechs to partially justify their exorbitant price premium.

Yet to jump straight from five percent to thirty percent was so huge that Ves puzzled why Lucky's Gem Excretion V differed so massively from Gem Excretion III. Did his cat acquire the ability to drop these amazing gems after gorging himself with high-grade exotics and assimilating the Squalon's minifab system?

"Are you able to produce more gems like this, Lucky?"

"Me-ow." Lucky partially shook his head.

"So you're only able to do so when you consume high-grade exotics."

"Meow!"

"Oh."

Ves expected something like this. Nothing came for free. These supernatural gems might come with fantastic effects, but that performance emerged after Lucky ate a whole bunch of priceless materials!

Even so, as long as Ves fed Lucky with something mildly valuable, he guessed that the high-ranked ability would still be able to pump out gems of significant strength such as increasing a major parameter by fifteen percent.

The gift of the gems and the possibility of obtaining more treasures like this assuaged Ves' ire towards his pet. To be frank, the potential of his gem cat's primary function vastly outweighed the benefits of retaining his old CFA gear.

The former directly improved the capabilities of some of his mechs. The latter only helped him out a bit during crises and expeditions.

Ves knew quite well which one he should appreciate the most!

"These five gems alone can empower the personal mechs of Melkor, Chette, Jannzi and Rhode to new heights!"

The most remarkable curiosity about the new gems was that despite the melodramatic descriptions provided by the System, Ves did not feel any spirituality around them. Did the gems actually capture the souls or spiritual remnants of long-dead entities in a form that Ves couldn't perceive, or was the System talking out of its butt in order to hype up their value?

Ves pursed his lips. "Just because I can't sense anything doesn't mean it's absent. Perhaps the gems are so good at containment that none of their potency is allowed to leak out!"

Right now, Ves didn't have the means to decipher the secrets of Lucky's gems. All he really cared about at the moment was taking advantage of his gem cat's massive improvement in this area.

He turned his attention back to Lucky, who waited for his reaction. "Alright, Lucky. You know me too well. You succeeded in bribing me. As long as you keep pumping out gems that are at least close to the quality of these gifts, you'll remain in my good books. I'll be sure to arrange a shipment of exotics for you to munch on sometime later."

"Meow!"

Only until now did Lucky feel reassured enough to turn tangible and land down on Ves' shoulder.

For his part, Ves stroked Lucky's back. He needed to treat this treasure-generating machine well! That he came in the form of a cute artificial cat was just an added bonus!

"Hehe, keep up the good work Lucky." He said as he stuffed the small sack of gems into the pocket of his business attire.

Now that the two made up, Ves locked himself inside the isolated chamber within the lab without any further concerns. He regained the reassurance that Lucky would look out for his safety while the System dragged his mind back to the past.

As Ves was about to embark on his third Mastery experience, he centered his mind in order to enter his peak condition.

"This time will be different." He stated, more to himself than to Lucky floating above his head.

The previous times, the System just randomly threw his consciousness into the mind of someone who piloted a specific type of mech. The situation the mech pilots fell in was always dangerous and precarious. The pressure subjected to the mech pilot also affected Ves as well, giving him very little opportunity to do anything else but observe and guide his host.

Now that Ves thought back on his previous two Mastery experiences, he regretted that he hadn't been able to test whether he could leave his own mark behind. What if he was able to exert more control over the mech pilot?

"My Spirituality is stronger than ever. I shouldn't be at the mercy of the mech pilot this time if I apply my strength."

At the heart of it, the Mastery experience was about experiencing the perspective of a mech pilot first-hand! It didn't say anything about baring their souls to each other. The two minds didn't even need to treat each other fairly in the first place, as demonstrated by his second Mastery experience.

"If the first tier of Mastery puts me in the mind of a regular mech pilot, then their mental and spiritual strength will always pale compared to my own. Let's see how I can make use of this difference."

After setting a plan, Ves activated his comm and entered the System's Skill Tree. He sought out the relevant Mastery and paused for a moment.

[Space Knight Mastery I]: 40,000 DP

Compared to many other Skills and Sub-Skills, 40,000 DP sounded like an exorbitant price. Yet that was only on the surface. The benefits gained from this experience remained relevant for the rest of his career.

To be honest, he actually found the price of the first tier of Mastery to be rather cheap for all the improvements it brought to his design perspective.

Not that Ves would ever tell the System that!

"Here goes nothing."

Ves pressed the option to redeem the Mastery for a whopping 40,000 DP. Just as Ves already started to feel the pain at spending so much DP in one go, the System abruptly hooked his consciousness with an invisible hook and forcefully pulled it out of his body and entered an invisible tunnel it conjured out of nowhere!

An indeterminate amount of time passed as Ves failed to maintain his lucidity throughout the mental transit. The System's grip on his consciousness was tighter than ever.

Ves faintly believed that if he tried to influence the System with his Spirituality, he would absolutely get crushed by the crushing strength at the System's disposal!

Before he knew it, Ves regained wits when the trip abruptly ended.

The first thing he did was to minimize his presence! He did not wish to repeat his second Mastery experience where his host mistook Ves for a devil and actively resisted his help!

Only until Ves became assured that he hadn't made an impact on the mind of his host did Ves slowly extend his mental feelers.

He carefully traced the mind of the mech pilot until he found a way to patch into the senses of his host.

Vision came to Ves at first. He studied the view of the mech pilot and saw that his host sat in the middle of a grungy conference room that looked as if cleaning bots hadn't visited it for at least fifty years.

A mech company's worth of mercenaries sat in the conference room, each directing their attention to the mercenary commander presenting some sort of plan to the audience.

Ves' host happened to be one of the mech pilots sitting at the front.

"Alright, boys and girls. I know it's been a tough time this last decade while we've been trapped in this pocket of space." The grizzled mercenary commander said as he gestured at the projection of a local plot in space.

"While we still don't know what the Silent Nomad and the Pure Wheel Star Sectors are fighting over in this spatial anomaly, we finally found a way out!"

"Uhm, commander?" Ves' host raised her arm. He found to his alarm that he occupied the mind of a female mech pilot this time! "How in the hell did you manage to do that?"

The mercenary commander grinned. "It's due to the new friends we found along the way! Let me introduce you to a very special guest. Please welcome Moren Drenad of the Angel's Wing Foundation!"

Chapter 1080 Dark Sphere

The Angel's Wing Foundation!

Ves never expected to encounter them in this Mastery experience! Perhaps he could gain some insights on them before he made use of his bronze invitation card.

Upon the mercenary commander's introduction, a thin man entered the conference room and reached the front. The newcomer paused and gazed at the mech pilots present with oddly serpentine eyes.

"As mentioned by your leader, my name is Moren Drenad. I am here on behalf of the remnants of an outfit that has suffered a worse fate than your mercenary corps. Over the last ten years, many fleets have all stumbled upon the Dark Sphere and became trapped inside this pocket space. As one of the earlier victims, I admire your ability to persist and survive under these arduous circumstances."

Everyone straightened their backs in pride, including Ves' host. The Insurmountable Drakes prided themselves on their perseverance!

"Unfortunately, as all of us have learned in time, the Dark Sphere possesses a valuable resource that has sent the ruling powers of the nearby star sectors crazy. While the main forces of the war have dedicated most of their efforts on fighting against each other, neither side wishes independent outfits such as your Insurmountable Drakes to make it out alive where you are in a position to expose the existence of the Dark Sphere."

Everyone knew this very well. Both the Silent Nomad and the Pure Wheel Star Sectors did everything in their power to eliminate any forces not belonging to their own. They especially did not wish for any third parties to make it out with a stash of the unique resource that could be found in the Dark Sphere!

"The indigenous astral life forms found within the heart of the Dark Sphere are extraordinary in many ways. The tissue taken from defeated Alpha Starspawn has several remarkable properties that I don't need to mention to you. It is this vital resource that has encouraged both star sectors to maintain a stranglehold on the only known exits of the Dark Sphere."

Not only that, but the spaceborn forces of both star sectors also scoured the Dark Sphere for any inadvertent stragglers in order to hunt them down to extinction. It didn't even matter if the Insurmountable Drakes hailed from the Silent Nomad Star Sector themselves. Just due to the fact that they stumbled upon the Dark Sphere was enough of a reason to silence them permanently with extreme prejudice!

The Insurmountable Drakes used to number more than just a mech company worth of mechs. Years of battle, hiding, flight and scavenging left this once respectable mercenary corps into a beggar-like remnant fleet that only managed to field a full mech company because of the friendly stragglers they picked up along the way.

"How can we get out then if the star sector rulers don't want us to escape?" Eloise Pelican asked.

"Good question. Let me explain."

As Ves discreetly drew upon the memories of his host, he learned her name and some of the details about her life. Eloise Pelican served as a mech lieutenant of the Insurmountable Drakes. Before the mercenary corps became trapped within the Dark Sphere, she was just a regular mech pilot.

Yet years of trying to survive in the Dark Sphere had constantly gotten other mech officers killed. Eloise Pelican matured rapidly during the conflict and became increasingly more proficient in piloting her old and battered space knight!

As the briefing went on, Moren Drenad began to outline their escape opportunity. They would be joining forces with several remnant outfits that were also trapped within the Dark Sphere and make a concerted effort to assault one of the only known exits of this bizarre pocket space!

"This exit is guarded by strong garrison from the Silent Nomad Star Sector. After months of analysis and preparation. We believe we stand the best chance of breaking out of the Dark Sphere by assaulting this guarded exit!" Moren said.

Eloise frowned. "There are thousands of mechs and hundreds of turrets on guard at that fortified exit. We know because we scouted it out before. How many mechs do we have on our side?"

"Merely a couple of hundred, the Insurmountable Drakes included." The odd man readily admitted. "While it is not possible for us to break through the space fortifications the Silent Nomad Star Sector has built around the exit through brute force, we are prepared to employ a stratagem to even the odds."

"What are you planning to do?"

"We are keeping that under wraps. Only your commander is allowed to know some of the details."

The commander of the Insurmountable Drakes intervened at this moment. "It's fine, Eloise. Mr. Drenad has come up with a workable plan."

The man from the Angel's Wing Foundation smiled. "Aside from our main stratagem, we also intend to provide you with some aid in order to tip the balance in our favor. We are prepared to issue each mech pilot with a special performance-enhancement stimulant that can substantially raise your performance for a short time."

"What are the side effects of your stimulant?" Another mech pilot asked.

"Oh, you will be out of it for at least a day, but the crash won't happen until a couple of hours has passed. Hopefully that should be enough time for us to fight our way through the Silent Nomad defenses and slip out of the Dark Sphere!"

More questions poured in, and Moren patiently answered them all, though whether he gave a complete answer or not was up for grabs.

Ves eyed the proceedings critically. This was by far the strangest Mastery experience so far. The previous two times he engaged in a Mastery, his consciousness entered the mind of a mech pilots involved in a conventional war.

This time was very different. It echoed his mission from the frontier because the Dark Sphere seemed to have isolated the forces trapped inside from the rest of the galaxy.

The Insurmountable Drakes had been stuck in the Dark Sphere for a decade and they never came close to escaping this peculiar space until now!

After answering a bunch of questions with vague non-answers, Moren Drenad departed from the conference room. The mercenary commander addressed a few more topics before ending the briefing.

Lieutenant Eloise Pelican sighed. While most of the other mech pilots wearily stepped out of the conference room in order to prepare for their daily patrols or to remain on standby, she approached the commander for a personal talk.

"Commander Pritchard." She said. "Are you sure this Mr. Drenad can be trusted?"

"Whether he's trustworthy or not, Mr. Drenad wants to get out of here as much as we do." The commander replied with a gruff voice. "I reckon that we can rely on that at the very least. Would you rather decline this opportunity to band together and make a concerted effort in breaking through?"

Pritchard led the Insurmountable Drakes during all this time without ever buckling completely. Even so, the pain of losing so many subordinates left their mark on the commander's psyche.

"Commander.. we all went to get out of the Dark Sphere." Eloise said softly. A strong emotional pain emanated from the depths of her heart, almost flooding Ves with sympathy. Eloise was a mother who left a young son behind! "As long as you say so, we'll go along with the plan and fight to get out. We trust in your leadership."

"Thank you, lieutenant." The man nonetheless sighed. "Sometimes, I feel unworthy of all of the faith you've put into me. The Insurmountable Drakes still lives, but we no longer have the numbers we have before. Half of our ranks weren't even part of us before we entered the Dark Sphere. Too many old friends have died and too many strangers have taken up their places."

"We do what we must to survive."

"That is why I have decided to go along with Mr. Drenad's plan. I've heard whispers about the Angel's Wing Foundation. They're a very powerful black market influence. While it's always dangerous to get involved with the black market, the people who make a living there value their credibility. That should mean something here."

Perhaps unconsciously influenced by Ves' own skeptical attitude, Eloise remained doubtful that the plan would pan out the way the Insurmountable Drakes wanted to. Yet she also knew that they were at the end of their ropes. With the abominable lack of supplies and the deteriorating state of their carriers and mechs, it was doubtful whether the Drakes could persist for another year!

After a terse discussion, Eloise finally separated from Commander Pritchard and returned to her own quarters on the Stained Salamander. The old ship was one of the only two mech carriers that the Drakes still managed to retain after these harrowing years.

"My son." Eloise sighed as she conjured up a projection of a smiling baby from her comm. "I will return to you someday. No matter if the entire Silent Nomad Star Sector stands in my way, I will break the entire star sector if that is what it takes for me to reunite with you!"

The strong, roiling emotions inside Eloise's mind made Ves feel as if he was riding a shuttle that decided to take a joyride through space while deactivating its inertial dampeners!

The strong maternal love that Ves became exposed to practically sent him into a tizzy! It took all of his concentration to avoid getting swept in Eloise's strong desire to reunite with her son!

Above all else, Ves needed to remain calm and remain in control of his own emotions! Only by maintaining a clear mind would he be able to influence Eloise without alerting the mech pilot of his presence in her mind!

Mentally, he cursed the System for dragging his consciousness to the mind of such a sentimental female mech pilot. Couldn't it have paid more attention to his gender and put him into the mind of a simple, male mech pilot?

In any case, after pining over her son for a time, Eloise shut the projection and left her quarters. She took the elevator down the lower decks of the Stained Salamander.

Grime, burn marks and inconsistently-repaired deck and bulkhead plating showed that the Salamander suffered heavy damage over the years. While the ramshackle jury-rigged repairs appeared sloppy, Ves admired the way the crew of the ship managed to keep the Salamander afloat with a dire lack of supplies!

Once Eloise entered one of the mech hangar bays, she approached one of the imposing mechs being readied for deployment.

She piloted a space knight. Ves already knew that. Seeing it through Eloise's eyes, he couldn't help but be taken in a little by her affection for her mech.

This was the mech she fought with for all those years! No matter how bad a battle had gotten, the incredible resilience of her space knight always saw her through even as several of her colleagues had fallen!

As Eloise began to climb into the cockpit of her mech while Ves studied it in greater detail.

It started off as a rather generic medium space knight of the Valiant Warden model. However, its role as a defensive mech forced it to take frequent heavy beatings. Somehow, Eloise managed to survive the battles while bringing most of her mech back intact, but not entirely.

Practically none of the Valiant Warden's original armor plating remained. The mech's left arm and leg looked out of place from the rest of the model because they had been salvaged off the battlefield from another wreck and been grafted onto the Valiant Warden to replace the original limbs!

Ves felt for this mech. Whoever was in charge of repairing the mechs around here really knew their business. Even though the current incarnation of the Valiant Warden was pretty much a frankenstein mech, it nonetheless retained its ability to perform its main function!

This was a mech that naturally embodied some of the traits that Ves worked so hard to instill in his own mech designs!