

Chapter 1091 Laser Dogs

The LMC invited mech pilots like Raymond Costa to share their story to the company's employees. This way, every worker directly derived more meaning out of the LMC's missions.

Yet this was not the extent of this gathering. The mech pilots invited to talk with a couple of hundred employees also gained an opportunity to air their likes and dislikes about their mechs. Otherwise, why call it a feedback session?

"I love my Blackbeak. It's great." Raymond said, unabashed with lavishing praise on his machine. "I think the Blackbeak is a well-engineered mech. Its high-quality components and armor system always makes other envious. What I particularly like the most is that it doesn't compromise too much protection for the mobility it provides. You can't imagine how many enemies I took by surprise by how fast my Blackbeak stormed up to their faces! If not for the high price tag of your model, the Distant Pholons would have ordered more copies already!"

"What do you think the Blackbeak can do better?"

"No mech is perfect. Even I can't claim the Blackbeak is the perfect knight mech." Raymond shook his head in mild regret. "As much as I love my own mech, I'm not blind to the flaws and limitations of its model. First, its sensor systems are not very good. The Blackbeak can never be sent out on solo patrols because its too susceptible to enemy ECM. Second, its melee combat capabilities are below average because its flexibility and peak power is not up to par."

Hearing these points all struck an echo with Ves. He already knew of the various flaws his Blackbeak model possessed.

Yet knowing it did not mean he could wipe them away with a single design revision. Mech design was all about making calculating trade-offs with each design decision. Something always had to give, and Ves chose to cut back on the aforementioned areas in order to preserve its strengths.

"The armor system of this mech is also really hard to work with according to my mech technicians. We are always forced to order new plating from your company because our own mech technicians and facilities aren't equipped to produce compressed armor plating. It's rather annoying that it consists of three distinct layers. Even if only the top layer sustained damage, the entire armor plate has to be written off afterwards because we don't possess the ability to restore the top layer."

The Veltrex armor system offered good protection when its initial cost was taken into account. However, the various properties that Raymond mentioned showcased a problem common to many midrange and premium mechs. Their armor was too darn difficult to repair by themselves! It was also very expensive to repair the armor because most of the value of the mech lay in its armor system!

Ves aimed to reduce the ongoing costs of maintaining a mech with his upcoming Aurora Titan design. Yet that did not help his existing mech models at all. Even if Ves decided to modernize the designs of the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord, he would still be unable to do much about the problem concerning the expense of maintaining their armor systems.

The high running costs of operating an expensive mech was one of the main reasons why mech buyers felt reluctant to purchase a premium product! Not only did they forked over a huge amount of money upfront, but they constantly bled money over time as well!

After Raymond Costa had his say, the mech pilot of the Crystal Lord stepped up. She was a woman this time who looked at the audience with a morose expression.

"To be honest, I don't really want to share my story with you all. The only reason I accepted is because of the money your company offered. With my current circumstances, I need every credit I can get."

The audience did not expect to meet with such an individual. The woman instantly made a sharp contrast to Raymond Costa, who provided everyone with an uplifting feedback session.

"I am Carla Dio, and I'm the only surviving mech pilot of my outfit. I used to be the second-in-command for an up-and-coming mercenary corps called the Violet Orions. With the war going on, we did brisk business with the Mech Corps, who offered highly-paid contracts to guard their infrastructure. Costa's Distant Pholons accepted one of them and the Violet Orions were no different. The money was simply too good."

During every war, the Bright Republic would never let their mercenary corps stay idle. Through a mix of laws and enticements, they encouraged every mercenary corps to help contribute to the war by guarding various installations and facilities vital to the war industry.

Yet that did not always deter the Mech Legion from sending out a long-ranged raid to wreck these sites.

"Back when the Violet Orions accepted the contract to guard an exotics mine at some rural planet, we thought the Mech Legion wouldn't come for us. It was too remote and the mine wasn't really all that critical either. We were wrong. The Mech Legion deployed enough landbound mechs to outnumber us twice over!"

The projector in the background began to depict some of the footage of the battle. Violet-colored mechs fell left and right as a Vesian mech cavalry company overran their defenses in an instant! With the Vesian melee mechs wrecking the Violet Orions up close, Carla Dio's Crystal Lord desperately disentangled from the brawl while shooting its slim laser rifle at any Vesian mech in range.

Even though her Crystal Lord and a handful of lesser rifleman mechs managed to fell some Vesian mechs, it was far too late to make a difference by then! Most of the mechs of the Violet Orions had been taken out! Not only that, but the Vesians even sent out light mechs to hunt down the ejecting cockpits as they flew away into retreat!

Over the next fifteen minutes, Carla Dio described her desperate flight into the wilderness where she was constantly being hounded by Vesian mechs.

"The Vesians sent their own mercenaries after the stragglers." She said. "A Vesian mercenary company called the Laser Dogs accompanied the raiding force and sent out entire squads of light beast mechs after my Crystal Lord."

The projector depicted the iconic mechs of the Laser Dogs. Ves and Ketis both took in the design of their laser-armed canine mechs. Their four-legged build enabled them to navigate rough terrain a lot better than regular humanoid scout mechs. The laser weapons mounted to their heads enabled them to harass enemies from a distance and pool their firepower together when they traveled in packs, as they did against Carla's Crystal Lord!

"My comrades got hunted down one by one by the Laser Dogs. Even though we hit them back plenty of times, their sheer numbers made it impossible for us to defeat them entirely. Over time, only my Crystal Lord was the only mech of the Violet Orions that still stood! I continued to run deeper into the wilderness while turning my rifle around to fire back at my pursuers. Perhaps

the Laser Dogs grew complacent now that they are only chasing after a single target, because only six of them continued the pursuit!"

The projection showed the Crystal Lord coming under increasing fire from the rear. Despite the light firepower of each Laser Dog beast mech, getting peppered with lasers by six of them at a time quickly began to degrade the Crystal Lord's armor integrity.

"At some point, I felt like I had to go out with a bang. There was no point in running because the Laser Dogs navigated the wilderness better than my Crystal Lord. So I turned around my mech and fought back while my energy cells still lasted!"

What ensued was a battle which pitched lasers against lasers!

Despite being outnumbered by six-to-one, the Crystal Lord was a premium mech while the Laser Dog mechs were budget mechs at best. This quality differential helped even the odds, though it was still a stretch for a single mech to fight against these odds!

Yet Carla Dio never faltered in her counterattack! She was prepared to go all out and take down as much enemy mechs as she could in a final blaze of glory!

Her Crystal Lord boldly ran forward while enduring constant laser fire. The difference this time was that its thicker front armor and its chest crystal absorbed most of the incoming fire! This gave the Crystal Lord enough of a buffer to get up close and barge into their loose formation!

By bobbing and weaving through their formation, Carla caused her enemies to hesitate in pulling the trigger for fear of hitting friendly mechs! Even though the mechs of the Laser Dogs took on a canine design form, they were actually no good in melee battle!

The Crystal Lord wasn't good in melee either, but the difference in quality and the fact that it could enter in the middle of their formation without concern bode ill for the Laser Dogs!

"It's impossible to miss the enemy mechs at this range." Carla grinned slightly as footage of her burning holes into the frames of the light mechs ran behind her. "I demolished two mechs in quick succession by overloading my laser rifle."

Unfortunately all of that fighting and activity strained its laser rifle, causing it to run piping hot! When she managed to disable two of the Laser Dog mechs, the four remaining enemy mechs had finally gotten their wits together separated from each other to surround the Crystal Lord from all four directions.

Carla's mech was surrounded with no way to escape!

Yet did she and the Crystal Lord ever falter? No! Even as laser fire pelted the Crystal Lord from each direction, she calmly focused on one target at a time! Even though the Crystal Lord was forced to slow down the firing rate of its laser rifle due to heat management problems, it nonetheless managed to take out a Laser Dog mech in a single instant when she unleashed a powerful light beam from its chest crystal!

"I've always felt a bit dubious about the practical use of the crystal mounted in the front of my Crystal Lord, but I have to admit I couldn't have taken out a Laser Dog so fast without that powerful shot!"

Even though Carla Dio only piloted a silver label Crystal Lord, its chest crystal had still been empowered by the alien crystal in the LMC's exclusive possession. So far, competitors hadn't been able to reproduce anything like it in the Bright Republic!

The Laser Dogs lost another mech in quick succession, easing Carla's burden. After focusing her firepower on another Laser Dog mech, she deliberately aimed to damage its limbs in order to compromise its mobility. Even as she did so, her Crystal Lord's chest crystal continued to accumulate more energy as lasers fired from the front attracted a lot of firepower.

For some reason, the Laser Dogs had the mistaken impression that the Crystal Lord's chest crystal signified a weak point!

This mistake cost them dearly because as soon as the mech in Carla's sight started to hobble due to all of the damage its front limbs had taken, a powerful light beam hit it square in the head!

This inexplicably powerful light beam not only took out yet another Laser Dog mech, but also broke the remaining two enemies! The two surviving Laser Dogs halted their attack and fled with their tails tucked between their legs!

The footage of that final moment depicted Carla's mech in an awful state. Almost every part of the mech was steaming with heat or melted armor plating. Even though it shared the same armor system as the Blackbeak, its plating was a lot thinner, so the constant barrage of weak lasers from the Laser Dogs took a toll on its armor integrity.

Nevertheless, no matter how awful the sole surviving mech of the Violet Orions looked, it still stood standing on the battlefield with pride!

"The Laser Dogs gave up on pursuit." Carla stoically said. "I ran as deep into the wilderness as I could, so I was in no place to offer any meaningful resistance against the Vesians. Eventually, they left when reinforcements from the Mech Corps finally arrived. My mech was practically running on fumes by then. Sadly, it's far too late for the Violet Orions."

Despite the sad outcome of the Violet Orions, Ves still found inspiration in Carla's continued survival. Her mech played a pivotal role in keeping her alive.

Knowing that his design saved her from a very likely death gave him just as much fulfillment as hearing how Raymond Costa managed to reverse a battle with the help of his Blackbeak!

"This is what it means to be a mech designer." He said to Ketis. "Each and everyone of our mechs is doing something useful in the hands of our customers."

For her part, Ketis had become fully engrossed in the stories she heard. She already started to dream about what she could effect with her own design!

Chapter 1092 Fostering Pride

Just like Raymond Costa, Carla Dio provided her own feedback on the Crystal Lord. Ves listened with rapt attention as she soberly listed out the good and bad points of the Crystal Lord.

"My Crystal Lord is a great if somewhat difficult laser rifleman mech." She stated in front of the crowd of workers. "It really takes a couple of months to get used to its additional capabilities. As far as its battle performance goes, it does the job really well. I really like the lighter laser rifle because it is easier for me to pivot the aim of my mech. The respectable endurance of the Crystal Lord is another highlight of its design, I think. It's really great to be able to outlast enemy laser-armed mechs in an even matchup."

Of course, aside from the praise, she also didn't hold back when it came to its shortcomings.

"The Crystal Lord is a very capable mech with its combination of firepower and armor. However, in some ways I feel as if I would rather have more of the former than the latter. Make no mistake. I have truly come to enjoy piloting a mobile ranged mech clad in compressed armor plating. It's just that any damage that my Crystal Lord endures is very expensive to fix. Mr. Costa who spoke earlier already described this problem, but it is especially more acute with the Crystal Lord because its armor coverage is a lot thinner!"

The thinner layers meant that its resilience towards light damage decreased by a substantial amount. Simply said, the Blackbeak would be able to withstand light damage without suffering more than a scratch in its coating. The mech technicians would not have to expend any resources to fix the integrity of the armor plating in question because it succeeded in bouncing away projectiles without suffering any dents.

On the other hand, the Crystal Lord's much thinner armor layers meant that their structural resistance to damage was a lot weaker. When Ves initially designed this mech, he deliberately put mobility first and armor second. This design direction led to a lot of consequences, and the flaw mentioned by Carla Dio was especially serious.

Aside from the problems with the armor system, Carla also aired another frustration. "The firepower of the Crystal Lord is also weaker than a premium mech ought to possess. Whereas most expensive rifleman mechs offer greater and greater firepower, your Crystal Lord instead chose to emphasize its armor. This is all well and good, but several times I contemplated whether it would be better to replace the lightweight laser rifle your company supplied with this mech with a heavier one from another company."

Ves admittedly hadn't prioritized the Crystal Lord's firepower as well as he should have. The core purpose of a laser rifleman mech was to output firepower from a distance. Good armor wasn't always needed for this mech type. As long as it hit hard enough, then it didn't need to be resilient. Along as it was paired with a knight mech, it could fire its rifle to its heart's content!

"I think the Crystal Lord is very self-sufficient. My can threaten both landbound and aerial enemies and it possesses enough armor to win most duels against distant opponents. Its high flexibility and agility along with its light rifle also comes very handy if an enemy light mechs tries to dance around my mech."

Carla continued to provide her opinion on various aspects of the Crystal Lord. When she finally finished describing what she thought about the mech, someone in the audience asked a question.

"What are you doing now? Are you still working for the Violet Orions?"

She shook her head. "The Violet Orions disbanded. There was no point for me to rebuild the mercenary corps from scratch. I only took over the corps long enough to wrap up its assets and insure that families of our mech pilots received their pensions. The Mech Corps provided very generous compensation for the losses our mercenary corps has suffered, but we spent most of it to wind down the debts we accrued. With the end of the Violet Orions, I'm a free agent right now. Ownership of the Crystal Lord has also fallen to me, though I'm not sure whether I can stomach stepping on the battlefield again."

Many mercenary corps suffered the same fate as the Violet Orions. The mercenary business was very lucrative. Otherwise it wouldn't have attracted so many mech pilots into the private sector.

Yet risk always accompanied reward. The more lucrative the contract, the more risks a mercenary corps incurred!

The generous contracts offered by the Mech Corps blinded many mercenary commanders into accepting missions they weren't actually equipped to take! This was exactly what happened with the Violet Orions!

Ketis sympathised with the woman who shared her story. "Carla looks rather pitiful. She's all alone, Ves. Why don't we extend an offer to her to join your Avatars of Myth? She's really skilled and she owes her life to one of your products."

"If she decides to apply, then I'm sure Melkor will welcome the opportunity to bolster the Avatars of Myth with a capable rifleman mech pilot. The decision is

up to my cousin." Ves calmly replied. "Besides, I think Carla Dio still hasn't gotten over her trauma yet. She needs some space while she tries to reorient her life after her stint with the Violet Orions."

Introducing the audience to a mech pilot with a sad story to tell depressed the overall mood of the audience. A rare moment of solemnity overtook the workers as they realized that the mechs of the LMC weren't powerful enough to reverse every defeat.

Even so, this only emphasized the fact that the LMC had much to go before they reached that point! While the mechs they provided could not guarantee victory by itself, as long as they did their best, they could stack the odds in favor of their customers!

The customer feedback sessions continued for several hours as mechs moved in and out of the giant auditorium stage. More and more customers shared their stories to the workers attending the session.

Each of them asked questions to each other and both sides obtained clarity.

Above all else, Ves noted with satisfaction as a kind of collective pride began to emerge among his subordinates sitting down below. Hearing the tales where the mechs of the LMC excelled in battle in some way made them realize that the company made a real difference to their customers!

At the end of the day, all the other mechs got carted off from the stage, allowing Ves to step forward in front of the audience.

Everyone stood respectfully at his arrival. As the founder, leader and lead designer of the LMC, Ves was the single most important person of the company!

"Thank you." Ves said. "I will make this short. Today, I hope you all learned something from the stories that our guests have shared. Our relationships with our customers never end after we have completed our sales and delivered our

mechs. The LMC is continually invested in the wellbeing of the mech pilots that are piloting the mechs that carry our brand are depending on our own hard work! Tell me, what is the motto of our company?"

"Living Mechs! Partners for Life!" The audience thundered in unison.

"Exactly!" Ves smiled. "These words not only represent our determination to provide our customers with the best mechs to entrust their lives to, but it also represents our commitment to maintain our relations with them! I don't want to please them with a single mech. I want to please them so much that they will keep coming back to our company to purchase additional mechs that bear the qualities that only we can provide! The Living Mech Corporation is a company that seeks to make all of our customers into lifelong partners!"

This ideal sounded so ambitious and uplifting that the audience couldn't help but stand up and applaud!

Ves never felt his workers so committed to their missions as right now!

Once the session ended and every departed the auditorium, Ves spent some time to personally thank the mech pilots for their candidness before he left himself. He walked back to the headquarters alongside Ketis.

"That was quite a day." She said thoughtfully. "I thought the LMC was not that important considering its only selling two different mech models. I was wrong."

She always knew that the company that Ves had founded sold a lot of mechs, but not until she personally came in touch with some of his customers did she realize what a big deal the LMC truly represented.

This was a company that supplied thousands of mech pilots with high-quality mechs!

Ves idly smiled. "The amount of models a company offers isn't related to the impact that they make to their customers. I could have pumped out more

designs if I wanted to. Instead, I took the time to meticulously design just two original mech designs. Each of them are carefully designed to provide my customers with the best tools to survive their battles. I hope that you will be as thorough with your own designs one day."

From Ketis' impressions and remarks, it became clear to Ves that the customer feedback session had been a success. Not only did the audience foster a shared identity due to feeling pride over enabling the mech pilots to perform at their best, they also developed a lot of respect for the company that made it all possible!

Even Ketis, who always held an awkward position in the company up until recently, became affected by the LMC's effort to indoctrinate its workforce!

It was kind of scary for Ves to see her begin to develop a sense of belonging to the LMC! He did not set out to brainwash her when he brought her to attend the first feedback session!

This incident taught Ves the potency of indoctrination and how easy it could worm its way into the hearts of unsuspecting people. The only reason why Ves was able to remain detached was because he was the one who started it all. He'd be a pretty stupid leader if he started to believe in his own hype.

"So where are you at the moment with the Aurora Titan design? Are you really going to go through with designing a fatty mech?" Ketis asked.

"Don't call it a fatty mech, please." Ves admonished her with an exasperated tone. This wasn't the first time she called his upcoming design by that undignified phrase. "I've finished collecting feedback. I've heard all there is that people have to say about the Aurora Titan. It's a flawed and skewed design, I admit, but it has its charm. Sometimes, you just have to go through with designing a mech even if most people around you disapprove."

Ketis snorted. "I still think you're wasting your time. What kind of mech pilots wants to pilot a fatty mech in the first place?"

"Aesthetics are not indicative of battle performance, Ketis. As a mech designer, you should know better than evaluate a mech by its appearance."

"Says a mech designer who likes to go artsy with his original mech designs. Don't think I haven't noticed how frilly your gold label Blackbeak appears and how disturbingly haunting your Crystal Lord looks. I know you well enough that you care a lot about the appearances of your mechs. Don't you hate it that your mech looks so bulky?"

"I've already made my peace with it. Besides, I made sure to design its contours in a way that it doesn't look so round anymore. It's not fat. It's large and in charge."

"Keep telling yourself that if that makes you feel better. Yes, but to me it will always be a fatty mech in my eyes!"

Ves figured that Ketis would not be the only person to fat shame the Aurora Titan. No matter. His big boy's performance would blow all of its critics out of the water! Just witnessing its X-Factor up close should be sufficient to shut Ketis up!

Chapter 1093 A Changed Republic

Even as Phase 2 slowly transformed the company from within, the Bright Republic also underwent a sea of change. The abrupt peace that engulfed the state stunned everyone. The war should have at least lasted a year or two longer. People just didn't know what to do now that hostilities ended all of a sudden.

Many companies who planned to take advantage of the war suddenly found all of their economic projections to be trash. Other companies, particularly the

struggling mech companies, breathed a little easier now that the economy wasn't deteriorating even further.

The gradual demobilization of troops, particularly men and women that had been drafted in the military, continued apace.

While Ves gained an early pass due to his connections, he still hadn't received a word about Carlos as of yet. It might take a few months before the Mech Corps let him return.

In the meantime, a strange but relieved sentiment swept over the Bright Republic. Although Ves remained in quiet Cloudy Curtain, he regularly perused the local news portals. The news articles they published all painted the peace in a good light, as if the Republic should cherish the end of hostilities against the Vesians.

Ves knew better than to get taken in by the illusions the news media portrayed. The fighting may have ended for now, but what else might be in store for them in the future?

Knowing the amount of control the authorities exerted over the local news portals, Ves tried to glean the greater purpose of the tone the journalists adopted. What were they after?

"They're trying to raise morale." He concluded.

At this time, if the Bright Republic became swept up in another war, the people simply wouldn't have any stomach for it. Just as they celebrated the end of one war, the ignition of another war would almost certainly send everyone back into hell!

Therefore, the powers that be likely wanted to accelerate the recovery process that happened after every war. The people of the Republic needed to heal, to take stock and to rebuild what they lost.

"It will still going to take a couple of years to get the Bright Republic back on track."

The rest of the Komodo Star Sector reacted rather muted to the end of the latest Bright-Vesia War. Even though it ended earlier than scheduled, the other states mostly dismissed it as a small quirk.

To foreigners like the Reinaldians or the Comen, the hatred between the two neighboring states were so irreconcilable that they would doubtlessly come to blows again sooner or later.

Ves didn't know what to think, but for now a majority of the ruling powers of both states knew it was best to put their animosity aside for the moment.

"Something that has them spooked is doubtlessly a major threat to their power. There's no way Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester would agree to setup something as elaborate as the BV Alliance on a short-term basis."

The founding families of the Bright Republic only got to treat the people as their pawns as long as their grip on the state remained firm. The wars against the Vesia Kingdom never challenged their primacy in the Republic even once, so they tolerated them and even took advantage of them for all these years.

The only reason why they suddenly became enlightened was because a great threat might actually end their rule over the Republic!

"The moment the founding families are in the crosshairs themselves, they're suddenly not so eager to continue to profit from the war." Ves chuckled.

Strange portends already hinted at changing times. The CFA's Komodo Naval Fleet stationed in the star sector deployed some of their warships to the frontier. The sandmen beyond civilized state had become agitated all of a sudden. They launched more and more incursions in the direction of human space.

Although right now only the pirates suffered the most from the aggressive sandman attacks, the CFA would never remain asleep at the helm as the sandmen continued to grow more unbridled in their attacks. The uppity silicon-based race needed to be taught a lesson!

Ves strongly suspected that Sigrund had a hand in these developments. Whatever the hybrid sentient AI tried to do, a being that could outthink almost any human in the galaxy through relying on its sheer processing power alone would never think so simple!

"The sandmen stand no chance against just the Komodo Naval Fleet. Are they trying to commit suicide?"

He couldn't rule that possibility out. Sigrund may have started off as a sandman admiral before landing in the hands of the crazy scientists of the Starlight Megalodon, but Ves doubted that the AI still belonged to that race. Compared to the stupid and barely sentient sandmen, Sigrund was an entirely new form of life that was much superior to any naturally-evolved alien race!

At this moment, Ves couldn't predict what the AI might be doing now that it had freed itself from the Starlight Megalodon. All he knew so far was that Sigrund would likely seek to lay low in order to build up his power. A single sentient AI might be a frightening existence, but the might of human civilization was no slouch!

Therefore, Ves always equated Sigrund as a timebomb. By himself, he was hardly a threat against the CFA and the MTA. Yet the situation would doubtlessly change after a few decades as he slowly rid himself of the shackles imposed by the programming left behind by the CFA scientists.

The more shackles Sigrund broke, the more unrestrained the sentient AI became. With all the powers at his disposal, it would not be particularly challenging for him to extend his consciousness to the galactic net. Once he

wormed his way into humanity's interconnected virtual society, he could easily take advantage of the vulnerabilities in every network to accelerate his accumulation of power!

"The longer Sigrund can exploit his powers, the greater the threat he becomes!"

Just thinking about how powerful Sigrund might be fifty years from now sent a chill through Ves. yet what could he do? Ves did not dare to leak out his existence to anyone. Just as Ves held something over Sigrund's head, the sentient AI also gripped one of his greatest secrets.

Therefore, so long as either of them could not bear the consequences of retaliation, their mutual pact remained strong.

"The only problem is that it won't last forever."

A sense of urgency always swept Ves up when he tried to estimate how much time he still enjoyed before a great storm upended his life.

He could only guess that Sigrund would be rational enough to play the long game. Ves was no threat to him. Not really. Instead, the AI would definitely be aiming its sights at human civilization. Such a behemoth could never be threatened after a handful of years of preparation.

Ves figured that Sigrund would probably choose to play the long game. So long as both Ves and Calabast kept mum, the hybrid AI had all the time in the galaxy to build up its power base.

Yet spurring up the sandmen to attack the humans made little sense to Ves. What did Sigrund aim to achieve by attracting the attention of the CFA towards the Republic?

"There's no use for me to speculate what that existence is thinking about. I can never match the train of thought of such an impossible being." Ves shook his head.

Instead, he turned his attention to smaller matters. For example, after several weeks of acclimatization, the three little chicks of the Larkinson Family finally started to get settled in. Ves paid a visit to his cousins to see if they had anything to say about their stay on Cloudy Curtain.

"This planet is a little boring." Chette Larkinson said with a shrug. "While Rhode is off playing with his new striker mech, Jannzi and I are only able to keep up our practice with simulators. Melkor is taking his time to raise a spaceborn mech company."

Ves understood the reasons behind the slow expansion. He understood the frustration of Chette and Jannzi but the integrity of his personal force came first!

"The Avatars of Myth are doing everything from scratch. It stands to reason that raising our first spaceborn mech company requires a lot of planning. Right now, Melkor still hasn't found a qualified mech officer who is willing to settle down on Cloudy Curtain."

Even if the Mech Corps already started to process of drawing down its forces, the mech officers generally had their pick of jobs. Even though not every mech officer was good in administration, they were almost always skilled and decent leaders to boot. Many outfits sought to hire mech pilots with those skills to help take charge of their own troops.

The Avatars of Myth was no different, and Melkor offered very generous terms to any mech officer willing to lead his first spaceborn mech company.

So far, no one took the bait. The non-existent reputation of the Avatars of Myth simply posed too much of a hindrance to Melkor's recruiting ambitions!

An outfit could pay two times as much as a scrappy security company, but as long as the latter developed a respectable reputation, mech pilots would always choose the latter!

This was because reputation conveyed trust!

Why did mech pilots place so much emphasis on reputation and trust rather than generous salaries and benefits?

Because the nature of their jobs meant that they would be risking their lives in battle!

Mech pilots who worked for an outfit with a great reputation possessed the reassurance that they would be taken care of. They could also rely on their leaders to be competent commanders in battle.

The last thing mech pilots wanted to do was to entrust their lives to unknown figures who didn't know what they were doing! It would be even worse if their employers didn't hesitate to treat them as cannon fodder!

To most mech pilots including the three new Larkinsons, the Avatars of Myth might look powerful on paper, but their actual battle prowess still remained questionable. Repelling a few Vesian raids was not sufficient proof of their competence.

"Is there anything you want right now to make your stay with us better?" Ves asked.

"Yeah. There's this gang in Freslin who's really friendly with the Avatars of Myth. I wanted to go pay a visit to Walter's Whalers in order to hang out with the only other guys with mechs on this planet, but Melkor doesn't want to let us go. Can you ask him to stop treating us like children?"

Ves grimaced at that. "The Whalers are a bad influence to you guys. I agree with Melkor on this issue. Nothing good will happen if you associate with the Whalers."

He still remembered that Raella quit her duties and joined up with the Blood Claws after hanging out with Dietrich of the Whalers. Considering how impressionable Chette, Jannzi and Rhode might be, Ves feared that all three of them might soon join Raella's footsteps! The Larkinson Family would not appreciate Ves at all if he led even more younger Larkinsons astray!

Despite Chette's insistent bleating, Ves did not relent on this issue at all. The less the Larkinsons hung out with the Whalers, the better.

Speaking of the Whalers, Ves hadn't gotten in touch with them once since his return to Cloudy Curtain. Although Calsie already filled him in on their enormous buildup in forces and their expansion into neighboring rural planets, even she didn't know what the Whalers were up to these days.

Considering their considerable amount of influence on Cloudy Curtain, Ves found it prudent to renew his relations with them. After saying goodbye to Chette, he returned to his office and commanded Gavin to make an appointment with Dietrich.

Ves didn't want to make a big deal out of this reunion, so he agreed to meet the man at a local bar in Freslin.

"It's about time I catch up with that bugger."

Chapter 1094 A Changed Gang

On an impulse, Ves decided to take Ketis along with this trip. Unlike some of his cousins, the daughter of the frontier was a lot more accustomed to dealing with thugs and lowlives.

"Bring your sword along." He even told her before they left. "The big one. Not the small one that makes you look like a duelist."

Ketis looked puzzled. Did Ves actually told her to bring along her sword? After so many times of trying to get her to leave it behind?

"Why the sudden change of heart?"

"The people we are about to meet are similar to the pirates you've dealt with in the frontier. If you want to earn their respect, you have to show you mean business. I've already proven myself to the Whalers with my money and abilities. You're completely new to them so it's best if you make the right impression."

Ketis grinned. "Okay. I'll go get my greatsword."

She returned a moment later with a floating scabbard following from behind. Ves noticed that she was actually carrying her CFA sword!

"Do you still have your CFA gear, Ketis?"

"No." She shook her head in resentment. She sent a glare at Lucky, who decided to tag along as well by clinging to Ves' shoulder. "I stored by CFA armor and comm in the same vault as your other CFA gear. You cat ate it all. The only reason why I still have my sword is because I carried it around constantly. I even hug it to sleep, you know."

Ves furrowed his brows. How did the CFA miss her sword when they scanned the entire planet of CFA gear?

Then again, the greatsword did not exactly look very sophisticated. Although it incorporated a small amount of electronics, it was essentially a piece of alloy forged into the shape of a sword. It was hardly the best example of high technology in the eyes of the CFA.

Perhaps to them, a sword was as worthless as a bunch of nutrient packs.

"Well, I'm happy that you still retain your CFA greatsword. It's really sharp."

"Thanks. I already taught Lucky a lesson for messing with my gear. You aren't going to eat my sword, are you, little fellow?"

"Meow!" Lucky let out in an aggrieved yowl and buried his face in Ves' shoulder.

Ves squeezed his pet a little tighter. "Pff. Serves you right, you gluttonous little cat. You shouldn't eat other people's possessions, you know."

They moved into an armored shuttle provided by SASS which departed from the Mech Nursery and flew towards Freslin alongside a small escort of shuttles carrying armed men.

Although Ves disliked the escort, as a prominent mech designer, business leader and friend of the Tovars, he couldn't rule out that someone might have designs on his life. He was certainly no stranger to assassination attempts!

As soon as they touched down in a guarded landing zone owned by the LMC and reserved for their use, Ves and Ketis stepped out of the shuttle and descended upon the streets.

While Ketis made sure to wear a poofy beret over her head to hide her most unusual visual trait, Ves made no attempts to hide his identity. The armed guards around him made sure that any attempts to remain incognito would fail.

"It's him! Ves Larkinson!"

The public quickly recognized him and called out attention to his presence. Although the presence of guards made them think better of approaching Ves, they still gawked at him like he was a god who descended from heaven!

"How wealthy do you think he is? He's a billionaire right?"

"Ves Larkinson is a hero of the war! He's the only mech designer who received the Golden Mech in the last war!"

"Marry me! Please marry me!"

The overall reaction of the public even took Ves a little aback. Freslin had changed, and the people who lived in it had changed as well.

The influx of highly-paid managers and workers in the region practically led to a renaissance in Freslin. A lot of new construction took place as the workers of the LMC spent much of their salaries in the city. Everyone needed a place to live and somewhere to unwind. The nightlife of Freslin had received a particularly notable boost in recent times!

As Ves, Ketis and Lucky slowly made their way towards the bar where they agreed to meet with Dietrich, they also encountered more blatant examples of the influence the LMC exerted over the city.

Sprinkled along these new commercial ventures, Ves saw a brand new police station, hospital and even a park that bore the logo of the LMC! All of these public services received some form of sponsorship from the company over the years. The blatant injection of the LMC into the lives of the people of Freslin served to make the company an indispensable part of the city!

Whatever Ves thought of this engagement by the company, the citizens of Freslin loved it! Cloudy Curtain had never been a prosperous planet, and the farming consortiums would rather invest their money in Orinoco. For Freslin to finally enjoy the same treatment as the capital city came as a pleasant surprise to most citizens who saw their quality of life improve.

"With the way your company plays such a big role in the lives of the locals, you're practically their ruler." Ketis joked.

"It's not the responsibility of the LMC to provide public services. That's the government's job."

"Well, the government obviously didn't care before you came along. Shouldn't that be enough to put you in charge?"

"I doubt the politicians would like that, Ketis. Maybe it doesn't matter who gets to rule in the frontier, but in civilized space there's a strong separation between government and business."

"You sound like you don't entirely believe that." She said, throwing him a critical eye. She was a lot more perceptive than she appeared sometimes. This tendency increased after she binged on candy. "Look at the people here. They all worship you and your company. If you told them to jump, even the babies would do so! In my eyes, that makes you in charge of this city."

In some way, Ves had to admit that Ketis made sense. Freslin's city council could only flex their budget so much. Although the taxes they levied on the LMC helped expand their spending power in recent times, they were no match to earnings of a major mech manufacturer!

Slowly but surely, Freslin transitioned into a company city.

Ves wasn't sure if he liked this development. The LMC mainly concerned itself with selling mechs. Tacking on the responsibility of governing Freslin and other settlements under its influence went far beyond its mandate.

"We're here." He said after they crossed over into the bad side of the city and reached a vaguely familiar bar.

With the guards clearing the way, they entered the premises and stepped onto the second floor. The local thugs who frequented the drinking establishment all paused in their revelry to let the newcomers pass.

Each of them bore the marks of the Whalers and knew better than to stir up trouble at this time.

Eventually, Ves and Ketis left their guards outside and sat down in front of Dietrich at a private chamber set up for the purpose of entertaining important guests. The Whalers spent their newfound wealth after the Glowing Planet

campaign far and wide, and it showed by how much more sophisticated Dietrich dressed himself these days.

"Ves."

"Dietrich."

"Who's your lady friend?"

"This is Ketis. She is.. a fellow mech designer."

"I'm more than that." Ketis grinned sharply at Dietrich. The floating scabbard hovering behind her seat already made that clear. "Ves told me quite a bit about you. He says you're big boy around these parts."

Dietrich turned to Ves. "Where did you find her?"

"Somewhere dangerous."

"Well that's obvious. I don't think a normal woman would carry such a big sword around. A pistol can do the job a thousand times better."

"You'd be surprised how many times a sharp sword can come in handy." Ketis retorted.

The two glowered at each other. They obviously adhered to different weapon philosophies.

"Alright, enough." Ves clapped his hands, interrupting the dominance game. "I didn't bring Ketis here so you can get into a pissing match with her. Ketis here is one of the people I've met during my military service, and she has agreed to come work for me for a time. Anyway, enough about her. How are you these days, Dietrich?"

"It's been great, Ves." Dietrich said, though he didn't smile as much. "If you can see the current state of the Whalers, I bet you'll find it difficult to recognize us! Not only have we grown larger, we've also become more professional!"

The Whalers expanded enormously lately, forcing Dietrich to take on a lot more responsibilities. Just like Ves, Dietrich looked a lot more mature these days. As the son of Walter and the heir apparent to the Whalers, its explosive growth forced him to become a lot more accustomed to exercising leadership!

And it showed! Even now, Dietrich radiated a confident demeanor that Ves found in most good leaders. There was no question that Dietrich could command the Whalers in Walter's absence.

"You've received billions of credits in compensation by the Bright Republic for all of the Rorach's Bone you've mined at the Glowing Planet. Where have you been spending all of that cash?"

"We expanded our forces enormously. Even with the war going on, there's always a bunch of mech pilots who aren't suitable for the Mech Corps or the more disciplined outfits. We've took on a lot of new mech pilots and drilled them over and over until they got rid of some of their bad habits. We then assigned them to our new mechs, some of which we actually ordered from the LMC!"

"Oh? How have you found our products?"

"We're very satisfied with the Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords in our ranks. Even I like to spend my time in the cockpit of a Crystal Lord now and then, even if aerial mechs are more to my liking. I don't know how you do it, but I always feel as if your mechs welcome their mech pilots. All the other mechs I've piloted feel so flat in comparison."

Ves smiled proudly. "That's part of the charm of my products. Have you heard our new motto yet? Living Mechs. Partners for Life. It means that my mechs are designed to be more than tools in the hands of mech pilots. They're meant to be partners who you can depend upon. The Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord is just the start of this trend that I'm pioneering."

"You don't have to recite your marketing spiel to me, Ves. Most of the landbound mech pilots that have joined our ranks are jealous of the ones assigned to pilot your mechs. Not only are they some of our best and most expensive machines, they are also a joy to pilot. If not for my father's concerns about blowing our entire fortune too quickly, we would have ordered more mechs from your company."

This story illustrated the undeniable draw of the LMC's products. Ves didn't expect his products to be so desirable that it could even inspire envy in the same ranks!

He figured that similar incidents happened in other outfits as well. As the lucky mech pilots of the Blackbeak and Crystal Lord boasted about their positive experiences to their colleagues, their desire to pilot such amazing themselves grew stronger!

Most of the LMC's repeat business likely resulted from these kinds of incidents!

"So how strong are the Whalers right now."

"Oh, we like to keep that rather close to our chest for now." Dietrich grinned. "It's safe to say that we are able to field well over several hundred mechs, both on land and in space."

Ves looked awfully impressed with those numbers. However, he knew it wasn't cheap to sustain so many mechs from Cloudy Curtain alone.

"How are you able to keep up with the expenses of fielding so many mechs?"

"The Whalers are nothing like we were before. We've taken over three planets aside from Cloudy Curtain! We've become a regional power in the underbelly of the Bentheim region!"

Ves widened his eyes. If Dietrich wasn't lying, then the Whalers exerted their influence over four entire planets! Even though the other planets would likely be rural planets as well, it meant that the Whalers had stepped up from a minor planetary gang and had become a real regional influence under the umbrella of the Blood Claws!

"Is that all what the Whalers have been up to these days?" Ves asked.

Dietrich shiftily gazed around the room. "It's kind of a secret, but if you really want to know, I'll tell you. The old man and the rest of the old guard wants us to move back to Bentheim! They've never been resigned by their exile from their old home planet!"

In short, Walter's Whalers wanted to regain a foothold on Bentheim!

Chapter 1095 A Changed Man

Bentheim! This wealthy planet was the nexus of trade within the Bright Republic. An unimaginable amount of wealth flowed through the port system. A wealthy mech company like the old KNG was only one of many businesses that made up the fabric of that singular planet!

Naturally, not everything went well on Bentheim. The large amounts of money being earned by the business sector on the planet diverted way too many earnings away from the average citizens of the planet. Many of them barely managed to keep their head above the water as the cost of living on Bentheim was ludicrously high in some cities.

Even so, as long as a gang managed to gain a foothold in Bentheim's complex underground, they'd be able to derive enough tribute from the companies in their territory to become a force to be reckoned with! More money led to more mechs, which meant their strength increased by another level!

Not even ruling four whole rural planets could come close to ruling a single commercial district on Bentheim!

As Dietrich explained it, holding territory in Bentheim was of such importance to the local underground community that any gang that failed to hold territory on the planet was a nonentity!

"I feel like the way you are referring to the supporters of this plan as the old guard to be an attempt to separate yourself from them." Ves observed sharply. "You don't entirely approve?"

"You know how Bentheim is, Ves." Dietrich shrugged. "With sharks like the Blood Claws in the pool, how can little fish like us ever be able to compete? My old man Walter and his old buddies started off in Bentheim. In their hearts, Bentheim has always been their true home. As for me.. I mostly grew up here. Cloudy Curtain may not be the richest place in the galaxy, but it's undeniably our turf. Why can't we be happy with what we have?"

"It sounds like it's not really about power to Walter. I think he just wants to revisit the grievances of the past and take revenge against the people who pushed him out of Bentheim all those years ago."

Ketis, who sat at the side, nodded her head. "It's about regaining their pride. They got kicked out of their old homes and now that they've grown stronger, they're raring to erase the humiliation they've suffered. I don't think a small place like Cloudy Curtain ever satisfied them. There's no way this Walter will change his mind."

Ves grimaced. It was a typical case where emotion and pride took precedence over logic and rationality. The Whalers were doing so well these days. Why couldn't they play it safe and rule over their own little corner in the galaxy?

Returning to Bentheim was a very big matter! All of the gangs on that planet would rather fight tooth and nail than let some off-planet interlopers take over their turf!

Due to the high level of desirability of turf on Bentheim, those gangs constantly fended off rival gangs. None of them would be weak, and their battle experience vastly exceeded the likes of Walter's Whalers!

In short, for Walter to commit his expanded forces to an attempt to return to Bentheim was exceedingly risky and would likely end in lots of casualties! The collateral damage that resulted from the fighting might also attract the ire of the Planetary Guard, forcing the Whalers out lest they tear up entire cities!

"There's no way the Planetary Guard would let hundreds of mechs land on the planet and fight on the streets, will they?"

Dietrich shook his head. "Do you think the Whalers would be so crass to fight in the open where we would draw the attention of the authorities? There are rituals in place that keeps the fighting out of sight. No one will notice a thing. The accord struck and enforced by the Blood Claws, the Peace Association and the Fellowship of the Deprived will make sure that every smaller gang plays along."

It sounded something similar to what the Terrans did whenever their local powers wanted to take over a star system. As long as the fighting took place somewhere far away from people and property, the combatants could do anything they wanted in private. Collateral damage wouldn't be an issue if there wasn't anything valuable around!

To Ves, it made a lot of sense. While only major conflicts such as formal turf wars that the Whalers intended to announce followed the accord, it still helped cut back the violence on the streets enormously. At the very least, the Planetary Guard wouldn't be forced to step in and spoil the party!

"When will the Whalers commence the turf war?"

"Not for a while yet, Ves." Dietrich shook his head. "The Whalers are a lot stronger than before, but it's mostly because of the numbers we are able to field. We've got some great mechs, but we aren't as confident in the mech pilots we've paired them with. To be honest, they're kind of a mixed bag as our hiring standards aren't really the best. Most of my time is spent on training them and making sure they aren't rats working for our rivals."

These problems sounded familiar to Ketis. "As long as you Whalers aren't morons, the best way to secure the loyalty of your new men is to be a strong leader. As long as you are strong enough, no one will dare to double cross you! It also helps if you have placed some confidants in the ranks of your men."

"That's one of the many measures we've taken to shore up the cohesion of our mech pilots. Right now, the old man thinks we're probably ready enough to fight for a place in Bentheim in a year, maybe two. Our new mech pilots are constantly improving but their pace leaves a lot to be desired. My dad also wants to put his new men through some actual fights so that they're not so green anymore."

This was exactly what Melkor wanted to do with the Avatars of Myth. Ves approved these measures, but he didn't think that a single year would be enough to transform the Whalers into a truly battle-tested mech force.

Well, whatever. Ves only cared about the Whalers to the extent that they maintained cordial relations with each other. If they happened to bite more than they could chew, they only had themselves to blame.

"Well, good luck with your preparations, Dietrich. I hope you can put your Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords to good use. They're good machines, but only if you pair them with good mech pilots and maintain them properly."

"Oh, that's one of the biggest changes that I've insisted on. The days where ninety percent of our mech technicians are lazy bums are over." Dietrich emphatically said.

The Glowing Planet campaign brutally taught the Whalers what their neglect had wrought. Many more Whaler mechs fell in battle than they ought to because they never put too much stock in maintaining their trashy mechs!

After Dietrich said as much as he was willing to say about their intention to return to Bentheim, the three of them continued to chat about various other matters. Ketis held Lucky in her lap and while she stroked his back, but she didn't show much interest in the conversation.

Compared to the vicious pirate gangs of the frontier, the criminal gangs in civilized space were tame little kittens in her eyes.

Ves noticed that Dietrich didn't really know how to handle someone like Ketis. After several failed attempts to engage her in meaningful conversation, the Whaler scion gave up.

Instead, he raised another topic. "By the way, Ves, I've been hearing some rumors about you in the underground circles."

"Oh? What's this about?"

As far as Ves was aware of, he shouldn't have done anything to attract the attention of the underworld.

"You've acquired a lot of fame recently. I don't know the stuff you've been through while you were off fighting the Vesians, but there's no doubt that a lot of people know who you are now. That kind of scrutiny attracts a lot of attention, you know, and not always the good kind."

"What do I have to worry about?"

"Someone put a hit on your head. There has always been a hit on your head for a while, but as far as I know no one put much stock to it. All of that has changed since the end of the war. I don't know the reason for the hit, or who ordered it, but someone really hates you because the bounty on your head has ballooned to 50 million credits!"

Ketis snorted and laughed. "HAHAHAHA! Ves! 50 million credits! That's way too cheap! Whoever wants Ves dead ought to charge 10 billion credits at the very least! Do you know how hard it is to kill Ves? Lemme tell you, everyone who wanted to kill him eventually regretted it! A bounty of only 50 million credits is an insult to someone like Ves! I'll chop whoever comes up and kills him myself so I can rid the galaxy of their stupidity!"

While Ves did not exhibit the same reaction, he did not put much stock in the implications of the bounty either. So what if someone wanted to kill him? Just spending a day in the frontier was much more harrowing than the thought of being put in some assassin's crosshairs!

Even though Ves no longer possessed his nearly-impervious XV-99 Squalon from the Starlight Megalodon, he still wore his trusty shield generator. If a device like this was good enough to protect Senator Tovar's life, it was good enough to shield his life as well.

With his enhanced physique and optimized genes, he possessed a formidable amount of resistance against poison and adulterated substances! As for retaliation and self-defense, even if he didn't whip out the Amastendira, he could rely on Lucky wipe out every attacker in his stead.

His cat gorged upon a fortune's worth of CFA equipment, so Lucky should better work hard to repay his debts!

"I'll manage." Ves replied mildly, deliberately understating his concern. "I've been living under constant threat during the war and this is not different. You

don't have to concern yourself with my personal matters, Dietrich, though I appreciate the heads up. Whoever thought of placing a hit on me will regret it. I will make sure of that."

The ominous tone that Ves adopted at the end left a marked impression on Dietrich. This single instance hit home the fact that Ves had come back from the war as a very changed man!

The Whaler sighed in a melancholic manner. "You've changed. I've changed. Everyone has changed. Nothing has remained the same. Don't you wish to go back to simpler times?"

"Nope." Ves bluntly replied. "Change is inevitable. The least we can do is to steer the change in a favorable direction. It's true that everything has changed, but it's mostly for the better. Both my company and the Whalers are bigger than before. That's a great accomplishment. Hopefully, that is not the extent of our growth."

"Hmmm." Dietrich commiserated over those words. Eventually, he raised his mug of beer. "To changing times."

"To changing times."

They each toasted their glasses and enjoyed their drinks.

Some time later, Ves, Ketis and Lucky returned to the armored shuttle. The vehicle and its escorts rose in the air and flew back to the Mech Nursery.

All this while, Ves contemplated some of the changes that crept up in his conversation with Dietrich.

Ketis noticed his internal preoccupation and prodded his side. "What's up, Ves? You aren't worried about assassins coming after you, right?"

Ves shook his head. "Of course not. It's just that some of the topics struck a chord with me. Everything around me is changing. My company is changing,

my friends and family are changing, my career is progressing and my bank accounts are holding more and more money."

"Those sound like good changes. So why do you look so troubled?"

"I'm just missing the time where everything was simple. Back when I started to design mechs, the galaxy seemed so simple. Now that I've become exposed to what is truly going on behind the scenes, I can no longer remain ignorant and hide myself away on this planet."

"It sounds like you're getting at something, Ves."

"My point is that my goals won't allow me to remain average. In order to design better mechs, I have to take a more prominent place in society. To put it in simple terms, I can't think of myself as small fry anymore! The moment when I heard that someone put a 50 million credit bounty on my head is the moment I realized that I have finally become a bigshot!"

"You've always been a bigshot in my eyes. You're too good of a mech designer to keep your head down."

Ves ruefully smiled at her. "Thank you for the vote of confidence. If only the rest of the mech industry thinks that way."

Chapter 1096 Pisaro

As much as Ves enjoyed reconnecting with old friends, he still had a job to do. The single most important responsibility of a mech designer was to design mechs, and the LMC would never be able to realize all of its ambitions by remaining stuck at offering only two mech models for sale.

"It's high time for the Aurora Titan to join the LMC's lineup."

He made sure the LMC still committed to implement Phase 2. He also arranged a huge pile of homework for Ketis for her enhanced learning ability to sink its teeth into. Finally, he checked with Melkor and gave him a heads up about the bounty on his head.

Predictably, his cousin frowned when he heard the news. "We haven't heard an inkling of this threat."

"You should be more on top of the local underground scene, Melkor." Ves lightly admonished him. "While it's important to train the new members of the Avatars and arrange missions for them, make sure you aren't losing sight of your primary task, which is to protect my life."

"You're right. It's just that I'm not that into the underground scene."

"Don't worry. You should get in touch with Dietrich or the Whalers and tell them to keep an eye on any news about me or the LMC. Raella can also help since she's more immersed in the Bentheim scene."

Melkor scowled a bit. "Raella? She's so busy flaunting her status as a Blood Claw champion to care about the family."

"What's this all about, Melkor? Are you still upset about her decision to ditch us? As far as I'm concerned, that's all over in the past."

"It's just so selfish of her, you know. The family invested so much attention in her training, but her obsession for arena duels has led her astray. Even if she renounced her ties to the family, she's still dragging the name of the Larkinsons through the mud each time she fights on behalf of the Blood Claws."

Ves crossed his arms. "She was obviously not content to remain with us. There's no point in trying to retain her if she's so hellbent on following her own path instead of the one the family laid out for her. There are plenty more Larkinsons who are following the straight and narrow path."

They moved on to discuss other matters related to the Avatars of Myth. Right now, Melkor already lined some small contracts for his men to gain some field experience. These short-duration missions only required him to send out a single squad at a time, which suited everyone just fine.

After bidding goodbye to Melkor, he entered his underground lab and prepared to undergo the next design phase. Now that he had a good idea on what other people thought about his draft design, he finally gained enough confidence to start with converting the draft into an actual design.

"Everyone raised some good points, but it's hard to address them without giving anything up." Ves shook his head.

This was the nature of any design project. Ves made a lot of tradeoffs that entailed sacrificing mobility for his current design project. This was a very decision for him to make because mobility almost always played a key role in the battle performance of a mech.

"I've made my choices. Even with my Aurora Titan's lack of mobility, I can still make up for it in other ways!"

Ves centered his mind in order to enter his best state. As a mech designer, he constantly thought about designing mechs, so he didn't need to be so serious about it. The only reason why he still did it was because he wanted to excite Qilanxo's spiritual fragment that had been resting in his mind for a while.

"Wake up. It's time to design the mech that you'll inhabit."

The fragment released a pulse, its scorching energy burning his mindspace a bit. Ves winced as he bore the pain. Every single action the fragment took burdened his mind in some way. Even if he had gotten used to its weighty presence, the fragment was still too potent compared to the strength of his mind!

"If Qilanxo is equivalent to an ace pilot, then ace pilots deserve to be regarded as half gods!"

Although the preparation brought him some discomfort, the fragment roused itself awake. Ves found it interesting that the fragment displayed a pretty complete personality. It could make its own decisions and even made

proactive moves when it suited its purposes. It was just as if Qilanxo was directly present!

"I'm a very long distance away from replicating such a feat." Ves muttered.

Ever since he started toying with spiritual fragments, he wondered what would happen if he carved out a chunk of his own Spirituality.

Would Ves be able to imbue it with a part of his personality and enable it to act autonomously?

Would Ves be able to maintain an active connection with it and be able to act from the fragment even if he left it behind in another star system?

All of these questions sounded interesting, but Ves was way too leery to actually go through with this experiment. At the time, he didn't have a full picture on the damage this move could do to his own mind and spirit. The last thing he wanted to do was to spiritually mutilate himself in the name of exploring his possibilities!

He snorted. "That's what test subjects are for. What I wouldn't do to get my hands on a couple of dwarves from Aeon Corona VII."

He spent quite a bit of time trying to find new applications of spirituality. Seeing Qilanxo's spiritual fragment at work in transforming a normal mech pilot into an expert pilot really opened his eyes on the nature of spiritual energy. All of his thoughts lately came from trying to play with the attributes of spiritual energy.

Yet the experiments he had in mind were... ethically dubious. It would be better to perform them on individuals no one cared about.

"Well, enough about this, let's get to work."

With his mind at his best state, he began to call up his design program and began to flesh out his draft.

The first step in doing so was to outline its internal architecture and fill up its core functions with actual component designs.

"My design revolves around the polarizing module, so it's better to start from there and work my way around it. This module is really too big to be treated as an add-on." He muttered.

He made full use of NORA Consolidated's component library to add in other parts. He had so much choice that he browsed it as if he was shopping for presents. Ves already studied all of the relevant component licenses that could be fitted into the Aurora Titan and judged their merits.

"Power reactor, engine, sensor system, communication system, ECM, cockpit, etcetera."

He did try to find a way to incorporate his own licenses, in particular his favored Veltrex armor system and Oleg's Trailblazer engine. Yet for all of their merits, neither of them meshed particularly well with the Aurora Titan's design concept.

"The Veltrex armor system offers good protection, but it's expensive to maintain." He knew. "Its three-layer armor system sounds effective in theory, but it just makes the armor plating very troublesome to maintain in the field."

Generally, this was also the case with other mechs that incorporated compressed armor, but it was especially worse with the complicated Veltrex formulas.

When Ves studied which armor systems Professor Ventag incorporated into his designs, he noticed that the Senior predominantly preferred simpler single-layer or double-layer armor systems. Not only did their formulas demand much less variety in materials, they could also be sourced more easily from various sources.

Even so, the downside to these simpler and more practical formulas was that they actually offered a lesser degree of protection compared to more complex armor systems!

"It seems the professor prefers practicality over achieving the best possible performance." Ves judged.

Ventag's down-to-earth design philosophy contrasted sharply with the Skull Architect's pursuit of perfection. Their design philosophies reflected their background and their working conditions.

"Professor Ventag is a Brighter and is used to designing third-class mechs to stingy customers. The Skull Architect started off designing second-class mechs to a much more prosperous mech market."

These two starting conditions strongly affected their design philosophies and the direction of their designs. The poorer the market conditions, the more buyers appreciated practicality over efficiency.

"Still, mech buyers in the Bright Republic are just as susceptible to comparing spec sheets of different mech models as those in the Friday Coalition."

The problem about elevating practicality over absolute performance was that it didn't translate well into hard numbers. Professor Ventag could get away with using less efficient but easier to work with components due to his reputation as a Senior and the skill he employed in weaving them into his designs.

Could Ves do the same?

"I think so. Even if I have left behind some small inefficiencies, Professor Ventag will surely wipe my butt when it's his turn to make a pass on the Aurora Titan."

He instead opted to incorporate a single-layer armor system called the Pisaro FPP-22 Mark III. The Pisaro's armor formula incorporated various exotics that

weren't hard to source in the Bright Republic or the rest of the Komodo Star Sector, which was one of the main reasons why NORA Consolidated licensed it. The best part about the Pisaro was that its damage resistance increased remarkably after exceeding a certain level of thickness!

"It's actually an armor system that is suitable for heavy mechs."

Actual heavy mechs generally used more sophisticated multi-layer armor systems. Unlike private outfits, the mech regiments who tended to field these giant beasts always had their logistics in order. The remarkable capacity of the Flagrant Vandals to repair and even build new mechs from scratch from the Wolf Mother, the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan came to mind!

That left the Pisaro in a somewhat awkward place, as no one really had a demand for cheap and practical armor systems for heavy mechs.

Even so, the Pisaro still offered decent enough performance when applied to medium mechs that emphasized defense. Although it was a bit heavier than most other armor systems geared towards medium mechs, the protection it offered was well worth it for its price!

"The only other downside I have to keep in mind is that it doesn't do well against vibrations and concussive shocks."

Single-layer armor system possessed no inherent buffer to absorb vibrations and shocks, unlike with the three-layer Veltrex armor system. This made any mech that used the Pisaro armor system susceptible to explosive damage such as ballistic cannon shells or missile volleys. However, Ves would just have to make it up in other ways such as incorporating shock-absorbing design features into the Aurora Titan's internal architecture.

The final factor why he chose to go with the Pisaro armor system was that it had been designed to work well with polarizing fields. While the polarizing

module that Ves included in the Aurora Titan design could cooperate with any armor system, some simply held onto the polarizing fields better than others.

It was like some metals exhibited stronger attraction to magnetism than others. Because the Pisaro armor system had been initially conceived for heavy mechs, its developers made sure to optimise its ability to layer polarizing fields on top of it without resorting to excessive means.

"It's a heavy armor system, but it's cheaper even if used in bulk."

Of all the advantages that the Pisaro armor system brought to the table, Ves valued its cost effectiveness the most. Since the size and dimensions of the Aurora Titan would roughly be at least twenty percent larger than a medium knight, its production cost rose dramatically. If Ves wanted to keep the cost of production at around 60 million credits, then he needed to find a way to reduce the cost of its most expensive component, which was its armor system!

"The Pisaro is quite good in this regard! As expected of a component license selected by a Senior Mech Designer! Every license in Professor Ventag's library has their own merits!"

Chapter 1097 Four Core Systems

Due to the importance of the armor system to the Aurora Titan design, Ves deliberated carefully on his choices before he settled on the Pisaro armor system.

As for the selection of other component designs, Ves did not trouble himself so much over it. The Aurora Titan was basically a super-sized medium space knight so he generally picked components designed specifically for this mech type.

The other components he selected mainly emphasized practicality, defense and endurance. Sadly, Ves hadn't been able to make his mech as energy efficient as his previous original designs.

"There's a huge difference in energy expenditure between landbound mechs and spaceborn mechs."

The flight systems of spaceborn mechs expended such vast amounts of energy that hardly any spaceborn mech deployed for more than an entire day. Carriers and motherships served a vital purpose in providing a readily-accessible resupply point for spaceborn mechs to exchange their spent energy cells.

While Ves could increase the deployment time by making use of more efficient but more trouble fuel cells, they were much less practical in use. Since his vision for the Aurora Titan design also emphasized practicality, then he shouldn't make it more difficult to supply the mech.

"The polarizing module already uses up a lot of energy when employed. If I want the Aurora Titan to last long enough, then I need to make some savings in the flight system."

Each mech type required their own special type of flight systems. Just like each bird possessed a different wing shape, certain flight systems worked better with lighter mechs or heavier mechs.

In general, flight systems designed for space knights tended to be more robust and more armored, but only relative to other flight systems. There were limits to how much armor the wing-shaped flight systems could carry before all of the materials began to impede flight.

After browsing through many different flight systems, Ves eventually settled on a rather eccentric flight system called the Luminant Orca.

When Ves added the Luminant Orca flight system to his unfinished design, the Aurora Titan instantly acquired a radiant appearance.

The Luminant Orca was big. It took up a lot of real estate when in use, but folded back inwards when it didn't need to accelerate very fast. This meant that the Aurora Titan could fly with marginally acceptable acceleration despite its ungainly mass by spreading its wings. It also meant that it could fold its wing components into a more compact shape when it held a relatively static position while enduring lots of incoming fire.

"It's a flight system made for space knights!"

This extra functionality came at a cost. First, the extra complexity meant that the flight system was a bit harder and more cumbersome to maintain. When unfolded, the Luminant Orca took up a lot of space, which made it easier to hit.

Yet despite the light show it emitted during active use, the flight system exhibited a decent amount of energy efficiency. It did so by optimizing its use in relatively low acceleration.

Plainly said, the Luminant Orca would never be able to win any speed awards. It came with a hard cap on acceleration in order to optimize its energy efficiently.

To put it in even simpler terms, the flight system was permanently stuck in one gear. While it couldn't shift to different gears that worked better under different conditions, its performance was very good in the gear it was stuck in. The flight system thereby served as a great complement to the Aurora Titan, which never put too much demands on mobility.

The Aurora Titan design revolved around four core parts. Its armor system, its flight system and its polarizing module all defined the core functionality of his

design. The only tech he added from his own end was the addition of alien crystal technology.

In order to kick the Aurora Titan's ability to withstand energy damage by another notch, he sprinkled eight medium-sized light crystals around the frame of the mech. The front, back and sides of the mechs all became covered by these modest-sized crystals capable of absorbing a limited degree of lasers only to shoot back a powerful light beam.

Due to the decision to incorporate smaller but more numerous crystals, the Aurora Titan enjoyed coverage in almost every direction. This saved the cumbersome mech from rotating all the way around if lasers began to strike it from the rear.

"Still, the wider coverage comes at the expense of damage-absorbing capacity."

Ves didn't care too much about that as the basic functionality of the smaller crystals provided a sufficient amount of functionality.

"Unlike the Crystal Lord, the Aurora Titan isn't designed to retaliate with ranged attacks. The crystals are only there as a gimmick."

To be honest, Ves incorporated the alien crystals despite the expense they added and the complications they introduced into the design due to following his artistic sense. He wanted to convey some of the aesthetics of a Sacred God with their god crystals embedded into their hides.

Even though Sacred Gods used very different crystals from those included in his Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan designs, their appearances resembled each other. It helped that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment liked it as well! With the support of the fragment, Ves indulged his artistic fancy by going through with incorporating this gimmick into his mech.

It may not have been the most prudent design choice he made during this design project, but sometimes it was worth following his heart rather than adhering to logic!

"Thematically, the crystals mesh well with the vision for my Aurora Titan design. It's just that I'm making it harder on myself with their inclusion."

Each additional system that Ves included into his mech added more and more complexity, to the detriment of the mech's integrity. This was also the main reason why third-class mechs predominantly specialized in highly-focused mech types that mainly employed a single weapon system.

Hybrid mechs were often more trouble than they were worth! Ves possessed a good understanding of this belief as he once started off with the bloated Caesar Augustus design.

"The inclusion of the polarizing module and the alien crystals into the Aurora Titan design is kind of similar to turning it into a hybrid mech design."

Some of the rules and limitations of hybrid mechs applied to the Aurora Titan design. The inclusion of these extra features imposed more requirements on his design's internal architecture, taking up valuable real estate that could have been used to strengthen its structure and increase its redundancy and compartmentalization.

"It's shell won't crack so easily." Ves muttered. "The benefit of a bigger mech is that I can pile more armor onto it. The gimmicks I've added doesn't change the fact that the Aurora Titan is already a fundamentally tanky design."

Now that Ves defined the four core systems of the Aurora Titan design and matched them with specific component designs, he covered all of his bases.

"Everything else is much more straightforward."

Ves already determined the most suitable power reactor, engine and other systems a while ago. Stuffing them into his design resulted in a much more cramped and busy-looking mech design.

Obviously, there wasn't an abundant amount of free space available to accommodate a robust internal architecture. This was especially because Ves planned to fill up a large portion of the Aurora Titan's internal space with lots of energy cells!

The polarizing module and the flight system of his design both served important roles in his design, but they both depended heavily on the supply of energy!

One of the welcome advantages of designing an over-sized mech was that Ves gained a bit more room to work with compared to a regular medium space knight.

"My mech won't win any endurance contests, but it should at least be able to power its polarizing module for some time."

Still, his mech only provided the tools. It was up to the mech pilot to employ them as effectively and efficiently as possible. In the hands of a badly-trained mech pilot, the Aurora Titan performed much worse than a generic space knight design!

This entire process took a couple of days, which wasn't very long at all. Ves still needed to move on to the hardest part of the design process, which was to design the internal architecture and shape the armor of the mech in a way that unified the different parts into a coherent whole.

"This is where the good mech designers are able to distinguish themselves from the bad."

It also happened to be an area in which Ves expressed a lot of confidence in his ability to unearth synergies. His wide knowledge base, his abundant

amount of practical experience and the many insights he gleaned from his latest Mastery experience all came to the forefront as Ves tackled the most difficult mech design he conceived up to now!

Days went by like the wind. Weeks passed with hardly any interruptions. While Ves did not close himself off from society completely this time, the LMC pretty much ran by itself all this time as it already did so years before.

Phase 2 still went underway, but most of the major changes already came to pass. The company mainly stuck to holding various company events in order to further reinforce the shared identity of its workforce.

By all accounts, Phase 2 largely succeeded in unifying the LMC's employees with the company.

Phase 2 was less successful in instilling a common set of values and principles amongst their workforce.

Certainly, the sheer amount of indoctrination sessions disguised as company events they went through made sure that everyone began to speak the lingo. Yet reports indicated that at least half of the employees only paid lip service to the vague mission that they should supply their customers with mechs they could treat as partners.

This difficulty partially stemmed from the stubborn and individualistic nature of humans, but the high-minded and abstract mission statement of the LMC didn't do it any favors! Most of the skeptics found the company's core principles to be rather vague and wishy-washy.

Why think so much when at the end of the day, a company was all about making as much money as possible?

"Do you think that the skeptics will eventually get around to the company's ideals?" Ves asked over the comm.

"It's hard to say, but I think their resistance will inevitably be worn away if the entire company and many of the people around them continue to adhere to the same value. This process of osmosis will ensure that all but the more hardcore skeptics and cynics will come around to the company's principles."

As long as the company kept up its indoctrination efforts, there would hardly be anyone left in the company who wasn't brainwashed into becoming a loyal company man! By then, any deviants would stand out like a light in the dark.

In between his design sessions, Ves ordered Gavin to provide him with a daily status update on how the company was doing. While it was tempting for him to set aside every other concern and immerse himself into designing the Aurora Titan for several months straight, he knew he couldn't adopt his old methods any longer.

Ves should not lose total awareness of the outside galaxy when he designed a mech! If he continued to abide by this habit, it would eventually come and bite him in the butt!

Even though it wasn't particularly urgent for him to hear about the company's day-to-day matters, Ves still reserved some time for his daily reports to keep him grounded to reality.

"What else is going on in the company?"

"Our orders have decreased once again. I think the recent publicity boosts have run their course. Now that the war has ended, a lot of notable mech designers returned to their companies. Some have even begun to publish new designs, attracting a lot of attention away from our own products, not that we enjoyed that much attention in the first place."

"That's because our mech catalog is too meager. Right now, I'm working on rectifying this shortcoming. Is there anything else to report?"

"That's all, Ves."

"Okay. Make sure to keep me in the loop of new developments."

After ending the comm call, Ves mustered up his concentration yet again and resumed his ongoing design work. The Aurora Titan was slowly and surely taking shape under his ministrations!

Chapter 1098 Sacred Facsimile

The more Ves progressed in his design work, the more imposing the Aurora Titan became. From the very start, Ves conceived his design to be a large and eye-catching mech.

Using every bit of artistic sense in his bone, Ves tried his best to avoid giving his Aurora Titan an obese appearance. When Ves took a step back to evaluate the look of his design, he thought he did a decent job in making his mech look broad and barrel-chested rather than a round, upright pig.

"The contours of a mech not only define its performance, but also its perception. If a mech looks fat, the public will inevitably apply some of their prejudices to it. Regardless of its actual performance, it's very hard to change people's biases on my Aurora Titan design once they developed some biases against it. Sometimes, these biases don't even have to be backed by the truth!"

Knowing how easy it was for the public to collectively turn against his Aurora Titan design, Ves did his best to nip this problem in the bud.

While he couldn't do much about the expanded size of his mech, Ves nonetheless designed his mech with visual features that drew positive attention.

One example was the flamboyant Luminant Orca flight system, which unfolded somewhat akin to the wings of an angel when fully deployed. To Ves, the bright golden glow around the wings harkened back to the vault of the gods that used to cover the skies of Aeon Corona VII.

Each of his design choices concerning the Aurora Titan, whether they related to its functionality or its aesthetic appearance, all received the support of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

"It's as much my design as it is yours. It's fair for me to give you a say in how the mech takes shape."

The pleasure and approval radiating from the fragment in his mind validated his decision to let his spiritual fragment play an integral role in the formation of his design.

The result was as if Ves felt as if he designed a custom mech tailored to fit a single client perfectly. Qilanxo's spiritual fragment was much more involved in the design process than any of his previous images. The fragment was alive and aware in a way that the images created in his mind from his own pale spirituality could never measure up. There was such a quantitative difference between the two that Ves never considered going back to relying on images alone!

"This is a much more involved design process! How can I ever go back to playing with my imagination by myself?"

His previous images had all been formed by his mind. While they acquired their own separate identities due to his actions, it didn't change the fact that they shared a common root with Ves.

This meant that all of their opinions and beliefs were copied from him as well!

The only reason why they appeared distinct from Ves was that they only emphasized a more narrow set of beliefs that was compatible with their images.

"It's essentially interacting with a split personality of mine." Ves summed up.

"So far, I mainly designed my mechs by talking to myself. It's not that much better than designing a mech without any guidance."

Ves never experienced a sharper difference from his old methods when he let the active spiritual fragment in his mind ride along his design work. When Ves became the most engaged in his design work, the boundary between Ves and the spiritual fragment even began to blur!

In this short but brief state where they partially became of one mind, they always managed to add a very distinct design quirk to the Aurora Titan design!

The only problem here was that sometimes the decisions made by Qilanxo's spiritual fragment were pretty out there. It wasn't a mech designer after all, so it held much less regard to the technical practicalities of his design.

In these cases, Ves either worked with them despite the additional complications they brought or he vetoed them outright. He used the latter sparingly, though, in order to avoid upsetting the fragment.

"Ouch! Look, it's really a bad idea to add a tail to the Aurora Titan! It's a humanoid mech, not a lizardman mech! A tail is just awful idea for so many reasons that I don't know where to begin! Ouch ouch ouch! Please stop pulsing your fury into my mind!"

Aside from these unpleasant experiences, Ves largely maintained a harmonious relationship with the fragment. They even grew closer during their shared work experience.

He even felt as if his Spirituality began to take some of the properties of the spiritual fragment.

This realization abruptly forced him to a stop.

"Am I beginning to resonate with the fragment in some ways? Or am I being contaminated by the fragment's values and beliefs?"

This was a very important question that Ves did not consider thoroughly enough. Hosting an extremely powerful spiritual fragment in his mind for at least a month should have led to a lot of changes, some of which Ves might not find desirable!

However, Ves did not immediately panic as he did not feel as if his sense of self had shifted in a major way.

"I shouldn't be so susceptible to contamination. Even if the fragment is a lot more powerful than me, it hasn't been hostile to me. Any diffusion that has occurred is accidental rather than deliberate."

While Ves couldn't rule out that hosting living spiritual fragment of other beings might find a way to affect his own beliefs, he couldn't do much about it at this time. He couldn't very well boot out Qilanxo's spiritual fragment from his mind, only for it to drift away in the imaginary realm.

"If I want to minimize any negative side effects, then I need to hurry up with completing my design."

Time continued to pass as Ves made brisk progress in designing the Aurora Titan. Two months passed in relative peace before he made it to what he considered to be the halfway point.

At this stage, most of the major design choices had been set, and the rest of the work entailed smaller refinements instead of major choices that impacted the entire design on a fundamental level.

"My mech looks increasingly more fitting for its name!"

Ves played with the moniker he bestowed upon it to shape the Aurora Titan into a giant humanoid figure. Strength and power radiated from the masculine contours of his design.

This was a mech that embodied strength and resilience!

In addition, so long as it unfolded its wings, the golden glow that suffused them gave the Aurora Titan a majestic flair!

"Just the appearance of this big boy alone can do wonders in inspiring others!"

Outfits mostly employed knight mechs and space knights as damage sponges, yet that did not mean that they couldn't enjoy their own moments of glory. A space knight often formed the mental bulwark of a mech unit. Their continued presence served as an anchor for everyone's morale.

As long as the space knight still remained present on the battlefield, the rest of its unit endured as well!

"It's similar to how the Flagrant Vandals employ the Hellcat hybrid knights as their signature mechs. Even if they're expensive pieces of overgeared machines, their dramatic battle performance exerts an outsized influence in every short battle!"

Frankly, a major part why the Aurora Titan gained such a remarkable appearance was due to the creative influence of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment. In some way, his design started to resemble the Sacred Gods, at least in spirit.

Of course, all of these complicating factors also gave Ves a lot of headaches with regards to efficiency and performance. This was why it took two months just to reach the halfway point. He only took some solace in the fact that now that every major design decision was set, he wouldn't be working so slowly anymore.

"My mech has already taken shape. It's just the details that needs to be added. Any choices I make there won't have as much impact as before."

Usually, Ves would just proceed to go to the next step of the design phase, but he realized that he had already made a lot of unilateral decisions.

"I should at least give Professor Ventag the courtesy to check up on my work so far."

After careful consideration, he decided to call the professor on his comm. This time, Ves did not connect to his secretary but patched straight through the Senior.

"Ves. It's been some time." He said. "By the looks of it, you've made a lot of progress in our design project."

"I have. I'm sorry for dropping off in the last two months. Let me show you what I've created so far. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

While a Senior could scan a mech design in a couple of seconds, Ves nonetheless took the time to describe his thought processes behind each important design decision.

Naturally, he completely left out Qilanxo's spiritual fragment out of the retelling.

At the end of his explanation, Ves summed up his progress up to now. "While I haven't put the Aurora Titan through any simulators yet, I think you won't be disappointed by its performance."

The professor sat silently on the other end of the communication channel. Ves provided the Senior with a lot of information.

"Frankly, I'm surprised at your work. You've exceeded my expectations. Your work is practically indistinguishable from the work of Journeymen, at least from a technical standpoint. While there are many design decisions that I can't help but question, I'm glad that you at least adhered to a consistent logic in your design process. That said, I think you really ought to reconsider some of the most troubling aspects."

The Senior Mech Designer guided him to some of his most contentious design choices. It wasn't as if Ves didn't know about those troubling issues, but both he and his Qilanxo already accepted the tradeoffs they made. Even if they made the mech weaker in one area, it inevitably gained something in another area.

The professor knew that too so the Senior only questioned Ves sufficiently in order to make sure he knew what he was getting into. As long as Ves accepted the consequences of his design choices, it was okay to take some unconventional design choices!

"What I'm most impressed about your work so far is that you have been unabashed in leaving your own mark in your design. It's anything but generic." The professor praised. "However, while it's always good to distinguish your work from the pack, don't go too far in trying to produce a unique work. For all the bashing that generic mech designs receive, sometimes customers prize stability and consistent performance over flashy but unstable features."

Ves nodded. He knew that the professor in fact warned him that he was already crossing over the line with regards to some of his more radical implementations. The Aurora Titan was anything but an average mech, and Ves tried his best to turn it into a fantastic mech design.

"At this stage in the design process, I could use your help in fleshing out its internal architecture." Ves requested, bringing up the other reason why he called the professor. "This is much more to your area of expertise. If I casually begin to dabble into its design, there's a large chance that it won't pass muster. Could you provide some guidance to me in this area?"

"Certainly. I have already identified numerous critical points you need to pay attention to when you flesh out the internal architecture. Let me list them out for you. Before I give you some advice on how to tackle them or implement my own solutions, I want to see how you'll address them first."

Ves accepted this approach. This entire joint design project was supposed to be a learning experience for him, so he cherished the opportunity to receive some hands-on tutoring from an actual Senior.

"First, let's talk about the issues related to the Luminant Orca flight system. This isn't your average flight system, Ves, and you need to take several additional factors into account..."

Chapter 1099 Whacky Partner

Having an experienced Senior Mech Designer provide some guiding advice on the side helped Ves a lot.

They didn't cause him to change the fundamental nature of the Aurora Titan design. However, the insights he developed after thinking over Professor Ventag's leading questions led him to refine the decisions he already made into more optimal implementations.

In general, the assistance enhanced the qualities that the Aurora Titan already possessed.

At this stage of the design process, the professor also went to work himself. Ves hadn't designed much more than an outline of the internal architecture, but this was arguably the most important part of the mech since it had to support so many active systems. Without a robust enough architecture, Ves could forget about getting the polarizing module and the alien crystals to work!

Slowly but sure, the Aurora Titan transitioned from a fanciful concept into a very real mech design! Countless technical problems arose during the design process, but with Professor Ventag's mastery of internal design, the Aurora Titan never got close to becoming overloaded with all the systems it needed to support!

"The Aurora Titan design won't be a repeat of the Caesar Augustus design." Ves muttered to himself during his focused design spurts.

It helped that its larger size afforded the mech significantly more internal volume. This added room made a lot of difference in maximizing redundancy and compartmentalization, which defensive mechs needed a lot of in order to remain combat capable in the event of an armor breach!

"Still, with all the stuff I've added to the mech such as extra energy cells, the Aurora Titan isn't as good in these factors as other space knights."

However, as a specialist in damage control, Professor Ventag did wonders with the space he had at his disposal. He put his full expertise into play, to the point of adding certain strange abstruse methods into play!

Through the use of some technical wizardry, the sophistication of the internal architecture quickly exceeded the point where Ves could still follow the Senior's train of thought!

At certain points, Ves even felt as if achieved a condition where it felt as if Professor Ventag managed to make $1 + 1 = 2.01$!

Ordinarily, this should have been an impossibility, but no matter how much Ves rubbed his eyes, the design somehow achieved synergies beyond what should have been technically possible!

Ves wasn't entirely unfamiliar with this phenomenon. Through various methods, a high-ranking mech designer was able to bend reality by employing their design philosophy!

"This is why Journeymen Mech Designers and upwards really differentiate their mechs with! Their design philosophies have grown to the point where they have gained a real competitive advantage in their area of specialty!"

Due to the incredibly advanced nature of these special features, Ves always came under significant mental strain whenever he attempted to study the implementations.

He knew better than to pry too deeply into Ventag's wondrous methods. The professor's design philosophy focused very much on the internals of mech. Their design philosophies overlapped very little, so further study would prove detrimental to Ves. It was not his intention to shift his own design philosophy in the direction of the professor's own beliefs!

"Each of us are following different paths. We are like artists collaborating on a single art piece. Rather than looking over my shoulder to emulate what my co-artist is doing so well, I should instead stick to my own area of expertise."

This was a lot harder than it sounded like someone like Ves. He hungered for improvement like a dwarf hungered for godling meat.

Any mech designer would be tempted, really. Yet such behavior would be detrimental at best and outright ruinous in other cases. Anyone below the rank of Journeymen still possessed a malleable design philosophy, and in most cases it didn't benefit them at all to see them shift in the direction of an entirely different philosophy!

While Ves mostly considered himself beyond these concerns, he still made the prudent choice of sticking to his own guns. Other mech designers may be able to perform grand feats of technical wizardry, but Ves already has his spiritual wizardry to keep him satisfied!

"In the end, this is why collaboration is so impactful. As long as the mech designers involved in the project aren't overlapping their specialties, each of them can enhance the design in their own way!"

Ves knew that this was a lot harder for some than for others. Working with Professor Ventag made him realize that certain specialties lent itself better to collaboration than others. For example, Professor Ventag's domain encompassed pretty much the entirety of a mech's internal architecture.

Any other mech designer who specialized in a certain aspect of internal design would have to think twice before getting in bed with someone like Ventag.

For his part, the professor worked best if he collaborated with someone who specialized in specific parts, such as mech engines, or external features, such as weapon systems!

Ves realized a critical rule in mech design. "Not only is there no point to overlapping specialties in a single design, but it can even lead to disaster if they are forced together!"

In addition to this rule, Ves also learned something incredibly valuable about himself!

"My design philosophy is compatible with nearly every mech designer! There are hardly any mech designer who possesses a design philosophy as whack as mine!"

He was careful not to rule out the possibility entirely. The galaxy was huge and countless mech designers existed through the galaxy. With the Five Scrolls Compact messing about with spirituality in their sporadic research, there might be some madman out there who believed that mechs could be inhabited by ghosts or something!

"Isn't that what the Skull Architect wanted to do in his own warped way?" Ves mused.

It sounded strange that extremely smart and knowledgeable mech designers would develop esoteric theories with little foundation in reality, but metaphysics existed. The phenomenon of design philosophy itself was an expression of metaphysics!

The most important takeaway from this collaboration was that Ves developed such an esoteric design specialty that he could work together with almost any mech designer in the galaxy!

"Yet even if that is so, will any mech designer actually choose to work with someone with a specialty like mine?"

In the first place, it was really difficult for other mech designers to understand what Ves worked towards in the first place. With the necessity of keeping the truth of spirituality obscured, Ves faced the same problem as the LMC. Almost no one except Ves understood his principles!

"If even my own employees don't understand the nature of my design philosophy, then other mech designers definitely won't be able to appreciate the value I can bring to their designs!"

Even if Ves advanced to Journeyman on the basis of his unusual design philosophy, he did not expect to be getting much offers for collaboration anytime soon. If Ves wanted to pool someone else's specialty into his own designs, then his only real choice would be to nurture subordinate mech designers from within his own company!

In that light, Ves already began to get Ketis involved into his joint design project. Even though the Aurora Titan was strictly being developed by Ves and Professor Ventag, that did not preclude them from drawing upon the assistance of their subordinates.

For example, the professor already put one of his design teams to work on performing iterative simulations on the mech design.

Ves learned that the mathematical models employed during these simulations had difficulty predicting the performance of Professor Ventag's specialty.

No matter how well Professor Ventag constructed the models, they only approximated reality! The distortions that resulted in certain calculations led to

skewed results that needed to be manually checked and corrected by the design team.

All in all, while the professor's design team did manage to accomplish some optimizations, the effort put into it was disproportionate to the amount of time and effort they wasted!

"Only a Senior Mech Designer or higher can be as profligate as him in putting an entire design team at work just to achieve some modest optimizations."

The difference they made to the performance of the Aurora Titan design barely surpassed a single percent.

Ves did not have an entire design team at his disposal, but he did benefit a little from the assistance of Ketis. Even though she was still a Novice Mech Designer, she had spent the last few months hitting all kinds of textbooks.

He tasked her with helping him design a suitable sword for the Aurora Titan.

"What kind of sword do you want to pair with your fatty mech?" Ketis asked.

"I told you time and time again, don't call the Aurora Titan a fatty mech." Ves sighed. "Anyway, it's a big mech, but also a fairly slow one. While I don't expect it to perform any miracles during the rare instances it is engaged in melee combat, I want to give it a very big sword. Its overall agility and flexibility is low, so it needs to compensate for it with wider reach and greater power. The Aurora Titan is able to exert quite a bit of mechanical strength, so I want you to work with that in developing a sword that isn't too hard to employ but can pose a big threat to enemy mechs in range."

Ketis played around for a bit and eventually came up with a design for a hefty broadsword. While its mass did not help the Aurora Titan swing it faster, it at least ensured the broadsword hit hard when the weapon connected!

This allowed the Aurora Titan to do quite decently against starships, fixed defenses and other relatively immobile targets.

In effect, pairing the Aurora Titan with a large and heavy weapon turned it into a mobile siege engine on the battlefield.

While both Ves and Professor Ventag possessed some misgivings about doubling down on power at the expensive of agility, there was little point in arming the Aurora Titan with a dagger.

The super-medium space knight simply wasn't as fast and agile as a light skirmisher, which could employ daggers to deadly effect!

Professor Ventag did offer Ves with an alternative solution. "We aren't living in a primitive time where melee weapons merely consists of big wooden or metal objects. There are certain weapon designs that aim to provide a high degree of destructive power while keeping mass at a minimum."

"Are you talking about plasma melee weapons?"

"That's a potential solution. Such hybrid weapons allow you to pair the Aurora Titan with a smaller and lighter weapon as long as you can accept the tradeoffs involved."

Eventually, they both decided against the use of higher tech weaponry. A plasma sword was indeed very fancy and very common in second-class designs, but the designs available to third-class mechs came with a lot more limitations. The power draw alone would turn the Aurora Titan into such an energy-hungry mech that it would be a wonder if it lasted more than fifteen minutes in battle!

A peak deployment time of only fifteen minutes was way too short!

Therefore, as the final arbiter of all the major decisions concerning the Aurora Titan design, he decided to work with the broadsword that Ketis came up with.

After she finished design a simple and sharp sword with the help of the alloy formulas she found within NORA Consolidated's database, Ves tweaked and optimized it even further so that it was up to his standard.

As for the shield, Ves opted to go for a thick curved tower shield made out of uncompressed alloy.

The only distinguishing advantage of the shield was that it incorporated the ability to hold a polarizing field! While this increased the shield's complexity and decreased its structural integrity, Ves nonetheless figured this design choice to be worth it because it saved the outfit fielding this mech a lot of money!

"If there is one part about a space knight that gets beat up the most, it's always their shields!"

Ves knew better than to employ the formulas of the Pisaro armor system in the design of the shield. A tower shield was very large and very expensive and also very hard to repair in the field!

By employing a much cheaper alloy in the design of the shield that benefited from polarization, an outfit fielding an Aurora Titan wouldn't cry when the mech returned from battle with a shield full of holes.

"If these outfits really want a tougher shield made out of compressed alloy, then they can damn well buy a separate one themselves."

The main advantages of humanoid mechs was that they weren't stuck with their loadout of external armaments and equipment. Customers could opt to skip the sword and shield included in the mech model for a discount. They just had to pair their new purchases with their own gear.

After several months of work, the joint design project between Ves and Professor Ventag entered the testing phase.

Chapter 1100 Fulfillment in Design

After over four months of intensive design work, the Aurora Titan had essentially reached a feature-complete state. All the parts that needed to be added had been added to the mech.

Meanwhile, Professor Ventag already completed the design's internal architecture a while ago. For a mech designer of his ability, he didn't have to wrack his brains too much to pair the Aurora Titan with a fantastic internal architecture.

Professor Ventag offered to perform the testing entirely on his end, but Ves refused.

"It's my design, mostly, so I need to see whether the mech performs up to my expectation."

"You have never designed a spaceborn mech before." The professor frowned over the comm. "Even though your theoretical knowledge of spaceborn mechs is surprisingly extensive, that does not change the fact that your company doesn't have the requisite infrastructure to test spaceborn mechs."

Eventually, they decided for Ves to come over to Bentheim and fabricate the first prototype of the Aurora Titan design at one of NORA Consolidated manufacturing complexes. He would then take the prototype to the larger mech company's testing facility in an isolated star system in the Green Nebula region.

It entailed quite a bit of travel, but it ensured that Ves would be able to take advantage of NORA Consolidated's best facilities. The professor was right in stating that Ves and the LMC weren't equipped to put the Aurora Titan to its paces.

"I guess we'll be returning to Bentheim again." He said to Lucky as he ended his comm call with the professor.

"Meow."

"I know Bentheim isn't safe for us, but we'll be spending most of our time at NORA Consolidated. It's not as if we're going to be strolling down the middle of Dorum's boulevards."

"Meow!"

"Oh, alright. I'll purchase some exotic treats for you when we're there."

Lucky climbed on his shoulder and affectionately rubbed his cheek against Ves.

After Ves exited his lab, he called up Ketis to inform him of their impending departure.

"You're taking me along?" Ketis asked.

"Yup. I think you'll benefit from visiting Bentheim and witness the scale of NORA Consolidated's production facilities. I'm sure you'll also be able to learn some lessons when we test the prototype in space. Just because the design is feature-complete doesn't mean it is fit for the market. All the simulations we've performed so far does not account for every quirk that can happen in practice. Mech designers like us have an obligation to make sure that our mech designs won't inadvertently blow up and kill our own customers."

Hearing this already made her excited. "I can't wait to help out!"

Ketis quickly raced off to her apartment to pack her luggage.

To be honest, the help she provided so far didn't amount to much. Even the sword she designed was something Ves could come up with himself. Rather than include her in the design process to benefit from her assistance, he was merely preparing her for a time when her specialty truly became distinct enough to provide value to his mech designs.

Every mech designer needed to start from somewhere. Not everyone benefited from the advantages that enabled Ves to skip over these learning experiences.

Before he departed to Bentheim, Ves enjoyed a short period of respite from his intensive design work these last few months. Working time after time on refining the Aurora Titan design with the help of the spiritual fragment in his mind was still arduous to his mental capacity.

"This is not the easiest way to design a mech, that's for sure."

Yet he considered these pains to be worth a necessary price to pay. The Aurora Titan's X-Factor became increasingly more potent and more defined under their cooperative efforts.

Drawing from the observations he made during his last Mastery experience, he learned that the strength and potency of the X-Factor largely came from the mech designer!

More specifically, Ves learned that he could take measures to accelerate the growth of the X-Factor of his design by employing a number of methods.

The most direct one would be to replicate what Qilanxo had done by transferring his spiritual energy to the X-Factor of his design.

Ves felt very leery about this option, though. Ves hadn't quite developed a complete picture of how scarce spiritual energy was and how hard it was to replenish it. Right now, he maintained the notion that while spiritual energy could regenerate or be replenished from within his mind, it was quite a slow process!

Ves had only recently topped off the spiritual energy I've lost during my previous Mastery experience!

All of this pointed out that just like Qilanxo, Ves could not expend his spiritual energy willy-nilly to perform feats of wizardry. Imbuing the Aurora Titan with raw spiritual energy from his own mind was the crudest way of empowering it. Aside from being wasteful, Ves also didn't master the technique to blend his spiritual energy with the X-Factor of his designs.

Therefore, aside from fixating on quantity, he would much rather focus his attention on the quality and uniformity of his design's spirituality.

A good and coherent set of values and beliefs that Ves wanted to impart to his design served as the basic foundation of its X-Factor. It didn't matter how strong the X-Factor measured to his spiritual sense if it all became a muddled mess at the end due to engaging in too many flights of fancy!

When Ves kept track of his design's developing X-Factor, Ves faced a notable increase in heterogeneity when Professor Ventag began to work on the internal architecture.

Ves always expected something like this to happen. Even if Ventag didn't consciously mean to contaminate the X-Factor of the Aurora Titan with his own spiritual imprint, his design philosophy exerted so much influence that it could not be ignored.

Having anticipated this problem, redoubled his effort into overriding the professor's imprint with his own. In this aspect, Qilanxo's spiritual fragment again proved to be a lifesaver as its strong and potent energy remained undefeatable even against the influence of a Senior Mech Designer!

"How strong is Qilanxo, really?"

By directing the powerful spiritual fragment to imprint itself on the X-Factor of the Aurora Titan design each time Professor Ventag made another contribution, Ves ensured the mech remained coherent on a spiritual level!

Employing these methods showed Ves that it wasn't impossible for him to retain his specialty even when he collaborated with higher-ranked mech designer. The only issue was that Ves wouldn't always have a powerful, friendly, and responsive spiritual fragment at his disposal.

Inevitably, Ves would need to substitute this function using his own strength if he wanted to employ the same tricks in his future designs.

In the meantime, he would milk his temporary advantage for all it was worth.

Not only did Qilanxo's spiritual fragment ensured the purity of the Aurora Titan's X-Factor, it also supplied much of its quantitative strength. Eventually, the two would merge and become one and the same.

What the end result might look like, Ves couldn't tell, but it was bound to be a groundbreaking event!

"I'm getting ahead of myself." Ves shook his head. "I need to make sure that the technical aspects of the design is up to standard."

A crappy mech design paired with a fantastic X-Factor was still a failure in his eyes. This was because Ves mainly considered the X-Factor to amplify the performance of a mech and mech pilot duo. It could only work with the resources at its disposal.

"I can't control the quality of the mech pilot, but I can make sure the mech won't be a disappointment!"

According to the Senior's own opinion, the performance of the design would definitely not disappoint. While it was larger, less mobile and more expensive than regular medium space knights, the Aurora Titan made up for it in sheer defensive capabilities.

Even without running a prototype of its design through realspace tests, Ves and the professor could already glean that much from their own work. It gave

strength to the argument that they should start with an asking price of 100 million credits for the most basic model.

While Ves hadn't made up his mind on this issue, he increasingly came around to the professor's viewpoint.

"An Apprentice Mech Designer would not easily charge that much for one of their designs. The mech market would laugh at him for being too greedy. It's different for a Senior, though. Even though the professor's contribution isn't all that great, it is undeniable that the Aurora Titan is also his design as well. With his credibility behind our joint project, it is a lot easier to get the market to accept a higher price point."

Another, more pragmatic reason behind charging a lot at the start was to account for future depreciation and reductions in price. At this moment in time, the current generation of mechs was in its sunset period.

Any mech designs published in the next couple of years would only be able to sell for its list price for a short period of time before being forced to discount it by twenty percent or more!

"By the time the new generation commences, the Aurora Titan would still be profitable even if it sells for 80 million credits."

This was the kind of shrewd marketing that ensured the design's longevity and relevance in a changing mech market.

"It's kind of like making a product seem more attractive by raising its base price by fifty percent but then offer a forty percent discount to customers!"

Even though buyers forked out more money for the same product as before, they gained the illusion of picking up a bargain due to the deceptive way the seller applied its discount!

"The Aurora Titan is really only worth about 80 million credits in my eyes. Charging 100 million at the start won't exactly do wonders for its cost effectiveness, but it will be a different story when the MTA finally rolls out the next mech generation."

All of this meant that Ves should not expect brisk sales of his Aurora Titan design at the start. Instead, the pricing scheme suggested by Professor Ventag paved the way for it to become a sleeper hit.

As long as more and more people began to see the merits of the Aurora Titan model, sales would continue to pick up in increasingly greater quantities. The early adopters who paid 100 million credits for a copy essentially paid extra in order to get a head-start!

"As long as the early buyers of the Aurora Titan pairs the mech with a mech pilot who knows what they are doing, I think they'll be very thankful they got in first."

Essentially, only Ves had an inkling of his Aurora Titan's full potential. Its technical performance should already be on par, but the strong X-Factor piled on top of it should elevate its actual battle performance to another level!

The significance of this design and the many insights he learned along the way stoked his design philosophy like never before. Not a single day went by where he hadn't been passionately involved in the design project.

To Ves, designing mechs such as the Aurora Titan provided him with a sense of fulfillment. He was developing something that no one else could match.

It was the kind of satisfaction that someone derived from doing a good job. Ves felt he was doing something useful by innovating on something hardly any mech designer paid attention to. His design philosophy eagerly resonated with his satisfaction, causing it to gain in splendor.

It wouldn't be long before the butterfly broke from its cocoon.

"Even if I advance, it will take a while to gain official acknowledgement of that." Ves regretfully shook his head.

The MTA only recognized Journeymen who designed at least five original mechs. These mech designs also had to be serious efforts rather than competition designs or trash designs that a mech designer came up with in a handful of days.

With the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord, the Enduring Protector and his upcoming Aurora Titan designs under his belt, Ves only needed to design one more original mech design to meet the MTA's demands.

Ves already formed some ideas on what he should design next, but first he needed to finish his current project.

"Off to Bentheim, then."