

### Chapter 1101 Unsettling

It seemed that every time Ves visited Bentheim, he inevitably got shot at, had his ride hijacked, got hunted by a mech, or faced some other threat to his life.

Ves didn't treat his safety lightly this time. "Now that someone put a substantial bounty on my head, the best way for killers to go after me is by pulling something off in Bentheim."

"Meow!" Lucky bumped his paw against Ves in protest.

"Yes, I know that you've become quite deadly after all the meals you've enjoyed, but you're just a single cat. What if someone drops an artificial meteorite over my head? Can you claim to single-handedly intercept such a huge mass as it crashes down to the surface?"

"Meow-meow!"

"I know that it's far too ludicrous that someone can pull something like that off in a star system as heavily guarded as the Bentheim System. It's just an extreme example. That doesn't detract from the danger I'll face from determined assassins."

Ves was so worried about his safety that he ordered Melkor to arrange the Avatars of Myth to accompany him as his security detail.

"It will be difficult to muster enough mechs and mech pilots for your security detail." Melkor frowned. "A third of our Avatars are still deployed in various missions. The remainder are exempted from off-world missions at this time or have to guard the Mech Nursery."

"Tell it to me straight. How many mechs can you afford to send?"

"Only four. The good news is that they'll consist of two Blackbeaks and two Crystal Lords."

Ves nodded. "That will do."

He had absolute faith in his own designs. While traveling on Bentheim with landbound mech escorts was a rather slow affair compared to flying high in the skies, they at least formed a very powerful form of deterrence.

Unless the assassins employed their own mechs, they could forget about harming the armored shuttle he rode on!

For fifty million credits, it didn't make any sense to employ mechs in the assassination attempt. Cheap bargain bin mechs didn't stand a chance against the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords, but to employ an even greater force than that assuredly meant that the Planetary Guard would stomp on them even if the assassination attempt succeeded!

In effect, it simply wasn't cost-effective to kill Ves while he was surrounded by such a strong mech guard detail!

Unfortunately, Ves still had to rely on a real security company to round out his other security arrangements. So far, the Avatars of Myth didn't employ a shuttle or infantry-based guard force, which was a glaring hole in its ability to provide all round protection to their owner.

Ves placed a call to the local branch office of SASS and informed them to make the appropriate preparations at Bentheim.

While Ves would still be traveling comfortably aboard the Barracuda, the luxurious corvette would not travel alone this time. One of the two light carriers he commissioned previously would be joining them to transport the four mechs that made up his mech guard detail.

"The Greenfeather will be accompanying the Barracuda to Bentheim and back." Melkor informed him half a day later. "Before you ask, the Greenfeather is the name I've settled upon for one of your light carriers."

Ves frowned at that. "What did you call the other carrier, then?"

"The Redfeather."

What charming names. Obviously, Melkor did not excel in this aspect. His creativity must be sorely lacking.

Since Ves owned the two light carriers, he could name them however he wanted. If he wanted to change their names, it was as simple as snapping his fingers. Melkor and his subordinates would take care of the actual paperwork involved with officially changing the name of a starship.

Ves just couldn't be bothered to do so. While Melkor did a poor job in naming his light carriers, the Avatars already got used to them. Ves would be undermining Melkor's authority unnecessarily if he insisted on a name change.

With his security matters taken care of, Ves felt relieved that no one would be able to spoil his latest visit to Bentheim.

"Yep. Absolutely nothing will happen to me this time. I'm sure. Totally."

Before he left, he took stock of his company. At this time, Phase 2 had run its course. The Living Mech Corporation completed its transformation into a more cohesive corporation. While the company couldn't claim to understand his design philosophy entirely, it took on enough traits to understand the general direction where he wanted to take his mech designs.

Even if the company stopped holding company events so frequently, Ves made sure they held enough activities to keep the employees engaged. It was important to refresh the indoctrination they previously went through from time to time lest the company's influence stopped taking hold.

The changing mood affected the company from top to bottom. Not only did every employee gain a clearer awareness of the LMC's mission, they also revered Ves even more.

In fact, it disturbed him quite a bit to be seen as a figurative god among his workers. No matter where he went, he always aroused some sort of fanfare as worshipful employees gathered to gawk at him or bow respectfully in his presence.

While such attention did wonders to his ego, Ves was careful not to get swept by the sensation.

"I should finish the Aurora Titan design first before I bask in my own glory."

Without publishing a new mech design, the LMC would never be able to regain its previous growth trend. This was why his current joint project played such a pivotal role.

After finishing his brief inspection of the company, he found everything to be in order. The LMC ran a tight ship in the Mech Nursery, and Ves was glad to see that nobody tried to pull a fast one on the company.

The next day, Ves boarded the Barracuda which had landed directly in the Mech Nursery's landing zone. The corvette picked up Ves, Ketis, Lucky and their luggage before lifting off into space.

Accompanied by the Greenfeather, the two ships leisurely traveled to the nearest Lagrange point and transitioned into FTL.

Several days later, the two ships arrived in the Bentheim System. With the privileges Ves received, the security patrols quickly cleared the Barracuda and the Greenfeather for entry into the inner system.

After arriving close to Bentheim, it took a bit more time to ship the mechs of the Avatars of Myth to the surface.

Ever since the peace treaty took effect, the BLM had remained completely silent. The Bright Republic didn't hold any illusions that the BLM quietly faded away into the background. Those crazy separatists might be preparing an even more desperate attack with the forces they accumulated all this time!

With or without the Vesians, the Bentheim Liberation Movement was determined to wrest Bentheim from the grasp of the Republic!

The threat that the BLM hung over Bentheim continued to put a dampener on the recovering economy. Nobody expected the BLM to let Bentheim off.

It was in this depressing atmosphere that Ves finally landed at the spaceport in Dorum and boarded an armored shuttle prepared by SASS.

The shuttle lifted upwards, but only a little bit, and traveled slowly in order to keep up with the pace of the four imposing mechs guarding it from each direct.

The sight of the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords instantly caught the attention of bystanders in the vicinity. Even though they were merely silver label mechs, their auras were so remarkable that they never failed to stand out from the crowd.

The Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords weren't the only mechs deployed by a private force in Bentheim. Dorum was the capital of Bentheim and so hosted a high number of businessmen, government officials and other important dignitaries that needed guarding.

Fortunately, the main streets of Dorum were wide enough to accommodate entire ranks of mechs. There was more than enough space for guard details to pass each other by without bumping into each other.

When Ves activated a projection that showed him an outside view of the shuttle, he studied the mechs that made up the other guard forces. In general,

they employed more mechs but of lesser quality. Seeing twelve budget mechs surround a couple of shuttles was not an unusual sight in Dorum.

In his estimation, those budget twelve mechs costs as much as his four-mech guard detail. Ves saw the merits in relying quantity. It would be very hard for four mechs to repel a massed attack. At least with cheaper mechs they could cover more ground.

Ves turned to Ketis. "Did you visit Bentheim before?"

"No." Ketis shook her head while stroking Lucky who was treating her lap as a bed.

"Really? I would have thought you couldn't resist the urge. This is the most exciting planet in the Bright Republic, and it's right next door to Cloudy Curtain."

"From what I've learned, Bentheim is a pretty great place, but I wouldn't know where to go without you. It's kind of scary to visit such a busy planet by myself, you know."

"I'll make sure you'll see some of the sights." Ves promised.

They eventually reached a classy hotel fit for people like Ves. Even though he wanted to visit NORA Consolidated's headquarters straight away, Professor Ventag held many obligations. As a professor of the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation, he needed to spend a significant portion of his time on his teaching duties.

Right now, Professor Ventag was at the DCTI conducting some sort of exams to prospective mech designers.

As someone who studied mech design himself, he knew how serious those exams could be. Ves was not surprised that Professor Ventag needed to be present in person.

"What do you think about Bentheim so far, Ketis?"

"A lot of people live here. It's kind of intimidating if you think about it." She said. "The frontier is mostly empty. What settlements exist only house thousands of people at most. A settlement that holds more than a hundred-thousand people is a major city in our eyes. Yet here? A settlement of that size wouldn't even register to this planet!"

Ves noted that Ketis wasn't saying this out of the blue. She truly felt a bit apprehensive at the thought of walking among so many people. It was a completely different experience from the places she visited in the frontier! Sparsely populated settlements and scrappy space station simply didn't host that many people.

Perhaps more people lived on Bentheim alone than the entire human population of the Faris Star Region!

Ves leaned over and patted her back. "It's okay, Ketis. You'll get used to it. Bentheim is not even the most populated planet in the Komodo Star Sector. Perhaps someday I'll bring you to the Friday Coalition. Some of the planets there are covered with so many structures that there isn't any free space left!"

Even though Ketis hadn't lost her apprehensiveness towards the unknown, she at least got a grip on it. To a daughter of the frontier like Ketis, unknown people signified threats. The more people gathered at a single place, the greater the chance of trouble. There was no way to predict whether a pirate in the frontier would burst out into violence.

Such stupid incidents almost never took place in Bentheim. Civilized space was governed by law and order, though not always to the same extent.

Still, with all of the forces stationed on Bentheim right now, the chance of trouble popping up was very low. Ves already noticed various mech patrols from the Mech Corps and the Planetary Guard passing by their guard detail.

Even with the recent peace, the local forces maintained a high level of alertness against any shenanigans the BLM might pull off.

In fact, both the Mech Corps and the Planetary Guard appeared to be standing on a hair-trigger. Did they suspect that a threat might be imminent?

"Did I come at a bad time?"

### Chapter 1102 Agency Problem

Bentheim. This pivotal planet served as a hotbed of activity for the Bright Republic, for both good and ill.

It attracted a fair amount of money as the goods that flowed through the Bentheim System shipped to almost every star system in the surrounding regions.

The Bright Republic took advantage of the Bentheim System's propensity to attract trade by setting up numerous industries in and around the star system.

The overall idea around their trade policy was simple.

Rather than let various raw materials used in the production of mechs, starships or structures flow through its star system after taking a small cut or a minor tax, why not work with it to transform them into mechs or starships themselves?

"This is the main reason why Bentheim is as prosperous and highly populated as today." Ves explained to Ketis. "Bentheim is in itself a planet-sized manufacturing complex that takes in raw materials shipped from neighboring star systems or the frontier and converts them into finished goods which can be twice as valuable!"

"For such a wealthy planet, I don't think the people are all that happy."

Ves shrugged. "You have a point. People here lead busy lives. While Bentheim is not as tranquil as Cloudy Curtain, the quality of life is still fantastic

compared to the conditions in the frontier. Whatever you may think of the Bright Republic, Bentheim is an intricate part of its identity."

"It is also a hotbed for trouble."

As someone who lived on the edge of danger many times, Ketis couldn't help but notice the pervasive fear and uncertainty on the streets. Even though the average citizens tried their best to celebrate the recent peace and return to their old routines, the complete lack of response from the BLM was an ominous sign.

However, Ves did not wish to believe the BLM would be so irrational as to launch a wildly suicidal attack just so it could vent its fury. Having seen the way the Vesian rebels operated, Ves knew that a rebel movement thrived on local support. A heavy-handed attack that would very likely inflict massive casualties and disrupt many people's jobs and livelihoods would serve no purpose except to turn the population against them. There was no rational reason to launch an attack that no one on the planet supported.

At least, if the commanders of the BLM abided by logic. Ves could not completely rule out the idea that they would do something stupid that wasted a lot of their men and mechs just so they could have their temper tantrum.

"If the streets aren't so unsafe, I would have wanted to bring you out for a tour." Ves said.

"Oh well. I can see the sights later. It doesn't have to be now." She shrugged. "Besides, we didn't come here for a vacation, right? We're about to build the first prototype of your new design!"

Both of them looked forward to the moment the first copy of the Aurora Titan design rolled off the production line. Although the design and mech required a lot of testing before Ves would even think of publishing it, the mech would certainly be a good representation of the final product!

Ves worked on the Aurora Titan for months. The amount of work and effort he put into it exceeded that of his prior projects. Although the work on the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord designs came close, the Aurora Titan encompassed many of his latest techniques.

The Aurora Titan served as the precursor of his future designs. As long as the innovations he employed resulted in substantial gains, Ves would be able to incorporate them in his core design style.

Two days passed quietly as Ves and Ketis continued to remain in the safe confines of their hotel. After that, Ves finally gained an opportunity to visit the headquarters of NORA Consolidated at Mech Designer's Row.

Ves visited this famed street once before. A lot of important mech companies stationed their headquarters right next to each other here, each building exuding a more exotic architecture than others.

NORA Consolidated on the other hand maintained a plain facade. Ves had already noticed that Corus Ventag's design philosophy emphasized function over form. The shape and form of Ventag's mech design always tended to lean towards simplicity and utility.

This was the charm of NORA Consolidated's mechs. They didn't offer the flashiest mechs, but their mechs were very functional, quite cost-effective and dependable machines even during the most arduous battles.

The reputation the company acquired over the years won a lot of fans in the Bright Republic and did wonders for its sales. The company definitely deserved to station their headquarters on Mech Designer's Row.

After going through numerous security checks, Ves and Ketis met the professor in his main office.

"Ves. It's good to see you again. And this lady here is Ketis, right?"

"Yup! I helped design the sword for the Aurora Titan." Ketis stated proudly.

Although her contribution to the project was not as large as she thought, both Ves and the professor couldn't be bothered to burst her bubble. They moved on to business.

"My company has a lot of production sites for you to produce your prototype. The production lines and fabrication equipment are all incredibly capable. What kind of environment do you wish to produce the first test version of the Aurora Titan?"

Ves had already noticed from his time at the KNG that large mech companies maintained certain production sites for mass production and other sites for more meticulous production.

"You wouldn't have a small and preferably quiet site that is geared towards artisanal production?"

"I do. I have already expected you to make such a request. My company currently maintains a high-class workshop on the outskirts of Dorum. It is where I develop most of my custom mechs. The fabrication equipment at the workshop is some of the best I have, but they can be difficult to work with compared to an average 3D printer. Make sure to study their specifications and explore their options before you work with them. Their enhanced precision comes at the expensive for a lower tolerance for errors."

"Understood. I will make sure to keep the waste to a minimum."

Most of the costs associated with the testing phase would be borne by NORA Consolidated. The Senior's company took a seventy-five percent cut of the profits, so it stood to reason that they would also be bearing at least seventy-five percent of the costs.

"By the way, professor, can you tell me if there are any threats on Bentheim I need to be worried about? When we passed through the streets, we noticed a lot of discomfoting expressions."

The professor smiled. "The masses are too haunted by the BLM. They fear ghosts where there are none and assume that the presence of smoke always signifies the presence of fire. The so-called threat posed by the BLM is much less dire than you think. The Mech Corps has mostly maintained their wartime garrison of Bentheim, so even if the BLM wants to act out, they'll quickly be suppressed by the military or the Planetary Guard."

"That is.. Quite the confident outlook you have there, professor. Are you really sure the BLM won't pull something off anyway?"

"I know what you are thinking. The BLM have always been crazy. Who's to say they won't launch an attack despite knowing that they wouldn't have the cover of a Vesian invasion as a distraction? However, the actions of some isolated cells led by dimwits and incompetents doesn't change the fact that the heads of the BLM bear a great responsibility. They would never sacrifice the lives of so many rebels just for the satisfaction of giving the Bright Republic a bloody nose."

"The BLM has surprised us before."

"The rebels have existed for centuries. They didn't make it this far by chasing after short-term gains at the expense of their long-term viability. In fact, some of us in the Bright Republic don't entirely believe the BLM even want to liberate Bentheim."

That threw Ves into confusion. "How could they not attempt to fulfill their greatest mission?"

"It's because the BLM is an organization that enjoys a lot of grassroots support. Through the generosity of sympathisers, the BLM is able to obtain

manpower, resources, mechs and other goods far below market price. Think about it for a moment, Ves. If you are a rebel leader who directly commands all of these assets, would you want to give it up for the vain hope of liberating Bentheim from the Bright Republic?"

"Agency problem." Ves summed up the concept that Ventag alluded to. "If I was in their position, I would probably try to ensure that I can continue to enrich myself."

The people at the head of an organization generally tended to pursue their own benefits over the interests of the organization. In the case of the BLM, the status quo afforded them a lot of wealth but very little oversight. A rebel movement wasn't the most accountable organization, after all.

It wouldn't take too much trouble for the leaders to abuse their position of authority. As long as they managed to mislead the rank-and-file, they could essentially run the rebel movement like a criminal gang and reap the benefits from their shadowy chambers.

In that light, Ves had to admit that the professor's argument made a lot more sense. The BLM prepared a lot of assets in preparation for a coordinated attack with a possible invasion force. Just because the Vesians pulled out of the plan didn't mean the leaders of the BLM couldn't employ their considerable amount of war materiel in other ways.

Over the course of his career, Ves learned two important lessons.

First, people tended to make decisions that satisfied their greed.

Second, people were irrational and did not always follow the best course of action.

If Ves applied these two statements to the BLM, then a contradiction occurred. Logically speaking, the leaders of the BLM should indeed do what Professor Ventag described and hold back in order to maintain their assets.

Yet since when did the BLM shy away from making sacrifices? Even if the leaders of the BLM were more interested in lining their own pockets than fighting the good fight, the middle and lower ranks of the rebel movement might not think the same. Those fanatics might just try to pull off something on their own even if their leadership tried to rein them in. The indoctrination they went through to make them loyal fighters of the BLM could definitely backfire in this fashion!

Therefore, even as Ves and Ketis left Professor Ventag's office after a short discussion, a cloud continued to hang over their heads.

Having experienced a lot of the depravities that went on in the frontier, neither Ves or Ketis held much faith towards the idea that the BLM would show restraint.

The ordinary folk who lived in Bentheim all smelled trouble. Even though Professor Ventag regarded the masses as mindless sheep, Ves would rather put his faith in the judgement of the people who lived on the streets than in an ivory tower alongside many other towers on Mech Designer's Row.

Ves even contemplated cutting this visit short and returning to Cloudy Curtain immediately. Just because trouble might break out during his stay on Bentheim didn't mean he had to suffer through it personally. Now that he was out of the Mech Corps, he wasn't obligated to take part in the coming fight.

Unfortunately, Ves didn't think he could fabricate the best prototype of the Aurora Titan at the Mech Nursery. Although the Dortmund production line was quite good for artisanal production, the Aurora Titan deserved better.

Even though Ves was only thinking of making a single prototype, it needed to be as perfect as possible in order to prove its design concept in its future trials.

"Ketis?"

"Yes?"

"When we return to the hotel, make sure to bring out your sword and take it along wherever you go. Although I don't think something will happen during our visit, I can't rule out trouble."

"I didn't bring along any combat armor."

"Where do you think we are?" Ves grinned. "This is Bentheim! Even though this planet is famed for producing mechs, there is a lot more to it than that. Let's go visit an outfitter along the way."

Since he was already here, Ves might as well do something about his deficiency in gear. With Lucky devouring his extremely capable CFA-issued Squalon, Ves lacked a quality suit of armor.

With all the billions of credits in his bank account, Ves could afford to splurge for a bit.

### **Chapter 1103 Rennys Outfitters**

Due to his elevated status and his inordinate amount of wealth, Ves did not frequent any casual store. Bentheim featured a large amount of stores that sold weapons and armor, but most of these products were aimed towards the average consumer.

Ves was anything but an average consumer. Whereas someone might struggle over the decision whether to fork over a thousand credits for a basic laser pistol, Ves could easily purchase a million pistols in bulk!

No, as a more refined customer who was willing to spend big money, he instead decided to visit a more upscale outfitter store. Bentheim hosted a decent amount of stores geared towards millionaires or billionaires. Those with more discerning tastes expected much greater service.

After sending a message to Professor Ventag, he received a short message in return that recommended him to a particular business in downtown Dorum.

The armored shuttle touched down on a landing pad next to a range of exclusive shops catered to the rich and wealthy. The Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords escorting the shuttle could no longer proceed forward from this point. Security within this shopping street was very high, and the guests who frequented it would not feel comfortable being around mechs controlled by other people.

"You are only allowed four guards for a party of this size." A Planetary Guard lieutenant stated at the entrance to the shopping district. "Your SASS security guards are already vetted, so they are free to accompany the two of you. Please have a nice day, sir."

Retaining the services of Sanyal-Ablin proved to be quite a boon in this instance. The security company maintained a significant presence in Bentheim. Whereas unknown security guards would have been blocked from entering the high-class shopping street due to the risks they posed to everyone's security, SASS did not have to deal with this problem due to the reputation they built up over the years.

With four armored guards in tow, Ves entered the shopping district and passed by various wealthy visitors or locals on his way to his intended destination.

Due to the exclusive nature of the shopping street, only a modest amount of people were about. All of them inevitably brought along their own guard escorts, ruining the tranquil nature of their visits.

Eventually, Ves and Ketis walked up to an understated but very classy store called Renny's Outfitters. Lucky also came along, of course. The gluttonous cat was comfortably nuzzling in Ketis' arms.

"Mr. Ves Larkinson!" A store attendant called inside the foyer of the upscale, multi-leveled store. "Welcome to Renny's Outfitters. Professor Ventag has

sent us word that you might be stopping by. It is an honor for us to meet the needs of an esteemed war hero and mech designer such as yourself. You can call me Dias. I have been assigned to personally tend to your needs, so if you have any requests, feel free to voice them. Here at Renny's Outfitters, we offer a wide range of personal gear, and if we don't have something that you need, our extensive network of suppliers will be able to ship them personally to your doorstep."

Ves brushed past the marketing spiel and went straight to the point. "Well, Dias, I would like to outfit myself and Ketis here with some personal gear. To be more specific, we want to acquire high-quality weapons, armor and various handheld tools."

Dias presented him with a gleaming smile. "We offer some of the finest weapons, armor and tools in our extensive product catalog! In order to offer you the most suitable selection of products, it would help if you list out some criteria. What is your budget? Do you wish to buy locally-produced gear, or would you rather take a fancy for some of our imported products from the Friday Coalition?"

"I'm looking for products that esteemed craftsmen have made by hand." Ves stated immediately. While he did not expect to obtain something as fantastic as the original Amastendira, he wanted to obtain something better than mass produced gear. "Preferably, I'd like to obtain custom products, but I'm kind of in need of gear right now."

"Hmm. It is indeed difficult to obtain customized gear on short notice." Dias frowned. "Many craftsmen that produce the best weapons and armor have waiting lists that stretch for months or even years. Those that are more immediately available won't offer the quality that a discerning customer such as yourself will be satisfied with. However, we offer a wide range of high-

quality ready-made products that are just as good as custom pieces. Please follow me while I guide you to a showroom."

They moved up a few levels and entered a largely empty showroom. Dias activated a command on his comm which caused a table to arise from the floor. A projection appeared in front of the table which gave the user access to the product catalog of the store.

Dias then began to manipulate the interface, causing a few weapons to appear on the table from below. "We know that each piece of craftsmanship is a unique work that differs from every other product even by the same maker. Looking at a finely crafted product through a projection is as senseless as admiring jewelry from afar. Here at Renny's Outfitters, we offer you the opportunity to touch and study all of our readily-available products up close."

Ves and Ketis approached the table and studied the wide range of pistols on display. They encompassed most of the types and subtypes of pistols in use in the Bright Republic.

"Ketis, you need a new sidearm, right? Do you prefer a laser weapon or a ballistic weapon?"

"Laser. It's easier to work with when paired with a good targeting system." She replied.

Dias immediately latched on to that. "While a fair number of our laser pistols are geared towards expert marksmen who distrust targeting systems, we offer hundreds of laser pistol models that are highly compatible with all of the targeting systems integrated into our other products. Even if you pair a pistol imported from the Friday Coalition with a suit of combat armor from the Reinald Republic, our software engineers have already made sure that they will be able to work together without any of the usual incompatibility issues."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. This was indeed a legitimate concern to most people who sourced their gear from different sources, but an all-service store like Renny's Outfitters saved their customers a lot of effort.

With a few commands, the other types of pistols disappeared from the table. Instead, more laser pistols emerged in their places.

Like a kid visiting a candy store, Ketis immediately leaned forward and grabbed the shiniest pistols on offer. She weighed them in her hands and admired their exquisite craftsmanship.

As a mech designer, she possessed enough awareness to know that these were genuine expressions of craftsmanship. They were literally individual pieces of art with a useful function thrown in for good measure. These pistols were the kind of weapons that Ves could hang up on the wall of his penthouse office to impress the visitors.

Ves only found it regretful that he hadn't spotted any mastercrafted products. Even a store as renowned as Renny's Outfitters wouldn't easily display any mastercrafted gear. Such products usually came about by chance. The craftsmen who were lucky enough to produce a work of mastercraft quality would almost certainly sell them to their friends or favored customers.

If someone like Ves wanted to obtain a genuine mastercrafted piece of gear, he would have to either make friends with a craftsman or obtain one at a sky-high price in an auction.

Ves did not have the time to wait for either of those possibilities. Besides, his expectations may be high, but they were not excessive. Ves was not willing to fork out billions of credits just for a single piece of exquisite gear.

"Ves! Come take a look! I think this laser pistol is the right one for me! I have a good feel for this gun!"

To his surprise, Ketis favored a large, masculine looking laser pistol. Its visual design incorporated a brutal element that looked very macho when used by tough guys. In the hands of Ketis, however, all of her dormant pirate traits began to rouse themselves. It was as if a sleeping dragon started to wake!

After holding out his hand, Ketis passed over the hefty weapon. The weapon bore its name on its side.

"The Udor is not an elegant pistol, but what it lacks in grace, it more than makes up for it with its punch." Dias explained. "The Udor is a large laser pistol with a high capacity and offers a wide variety of firing modes. Whether you want to burn through a hatch or stop a mob of hundreds of madmen, the Udor is capable of saving you from a variety of threats with the right configuration."

Ketis practically fell in love with the Udor already. She bobbed her head so vigorously that her poofy beret threatened to fall off!

All of the capabilities mentioned by Dias sounded somewhat similar to what the Amastendira offered, though not as powerful. Perhaps that was part of the reason why she opted to go for a large pistol rather than a smaller and more concealable sidearm.

Ves recognized the Udor as a true piece of craftsmanship. Not that Renny's Outfitters would ever stoop to passing off mass-produced goods as artisanal pieces, but it helped that Ves could feel the care and attention its maker put into the gun. A weak but very present form of spirituality suffused the weapon.

There must be a story behind the Udor. Perhaps something related to pirates for its maker to incorporate so many visual motifs related to frontier pirates into the design.

"Price?"

"39 million credits. This price encompasses both the product and the services we offer. The Udor requires periodic maintenance in order to retain its peak condition, and we have many experts on hand if you desire some adjustments."

Ves already made his own evaluation of the weapon. The Udor, despite its brutish appearance, was a very high-quality pistol that incorporated a lot of expensive exotics in a very tiny package.

"We'll take it. Please inspect the Udor thoroughly."

Dias understood Ves' concerns. "We work with various independent appraisers and inspectors to make sure that the hardware and software of our products are free from defects and malicious elements. It will take a few hours for them to inspect the Udor, but you will eventually be able to receive it in a sealed state along with certificates that verify its integrity upon the moment of delivery."

With the Udor sinking back down the floor to be sent for inspections, Ves moved on to picking his own sidearm.

Since he already possessed the Amastendira, Ves sought out a weapon that inflicted physical damage. He didn't wish to buy a gun as big and excessive as the Udor. Instead, he wanted something that was much less ostentatious, yet still exuded a lot of class.

When Ves presented his criteria to Dias, the man manipulated the interface and caused every laser pistol to sink away. Moments later, dozens of ballistic pistols and a few more unusual weapon types rose up. Each of them called for his attention.

"I want a pistol with a high magazine capacity." Ves added. "It should be capable of firing rounds with decent armor-piercing capability, but I don't want the gun to run empty after firing only six or seven rounds."

If Ves ever lacked aim-assist, he would probably need more chances than that to actually hit a target at a distance!

Dias wordlessly retracted over half of the pistols, only to cause new ones to take their place.

Most of the pistols still consisted of regular ballistic pistols, but a few looked decidedly odder. Ves lacked the training to use these more advanced weapons proficiently, so he didn't study them for long.

"Let's see what I can use."

#### **Chapter 1104 Art in Death**

Sometimes, the simplicity of a ballistic weapon trumped more advanced ones such as plasma weapons or gravitic weapons.

High tech weaponry often implied more firepower or more damage dealing capabilities, but they also imposed higher demands.

To Ves, he already possessed a copy of one of the pinnacle personal weapons in human space. While his Amastendira saved his life time and time again, there would come a point where even its prodigious firepower might fail or be pushed to the limits of its heat capacity.

In those times, a second weapon might come in handy. If his opponents ever learned about his Amastendira and made a lot of preparations to negate energy damage, then possessing a weapon that dealt a surprising amount of physical damage would be able to throw them off a loop.

What Ves requested earlier shouldn't be so easy to fulfill. He wanted to pick out a ballistic pistol that possessed both a high capacity but also packed a lot of punch.

Cheaper ballistic pistols could only fulfill one or the other. In contrast, some of the products offered by Renny's Outfitters did their best to accommodate both demands.

A ballistic weapon in this day and age could be quite simple and cheap. Some were barely distinguishable from their more ancient counterparts that humanity used when they were still stuck on a single planet.

However, the use of more sophisticated materials, more potent propellants, more advanced rounds, more capable integrated software and most importantly the use of inertial dampeners to mitigate the enormous recoil of the powerful rounds allowed them to remain relevant even in an age of laser and plasma weapons!

Therefore, none of the ballistic pistols on display were negligible. Some could outright even punch through a suit medium combat armor with a single shot!

Unfortunately, those powerful weapons usually consisted of massive handcannons or revolvers that carried only six rounds at most.

After discounting the pistols with way too much power and not enough capacity, Ves studied the various weapons that met his criteria. He eventually noticed one ballistic pistol that exuded a bit more spirituality than the other handmade products.

"Ah, that is one of young Mato King's most recent works." Dias said appreciatively. "Mato King is a relatively young gunsmith, but he has already started to make a splash in the Bentheim gun community. The weapon you are holding in hands is called the Hope by Force."

Ves raised his eyebrows. Names carried a lot of significance, particularly with the regards of one-off crafted products like this one. "What's the story behind the name?"

"Mato King did not share the story behind the weapon to us. He desires its users to develop their own interpretation of its name."

When Ves brushes his senses against the Hope by Force, he felt a sense of loss, fury and above all else a desire for retribution.

It was a weapon fit for vengeance rather than self-defense. Even as Dias rattled off a number of desirable features of the Hope by Force, Ves firmly placed the weapon back onto the table.

Its X-Factor, as rudimentary as it seemed to Ves, simply did not fit with his requirements.

Instead, Ves inspected the other weapons until he finally came across an artful-looking ballistic pistol. It immediately caught his eye due its sensuous design and its intricately sculpted shape. It looked like a marble statue of an elf with its wide open mouth serving as a muzzle.

As far as the weapons on the table went, this weapon seemed to emphasize art over function.

Yet Ves felt inexplicably drawn to it for some reason. As Ves extended his spiritual senses once again, he noted that it felt like the weapon had been designed and made with great care. The X-Factor of the gun carried a touch of.. remembrance to it, as if the weapon signified the passing of someone important.

"Ah, that is the work of one Bentheim's oldest gunsmiths, Keon Aluis. Mr. Aluis is not the most renowned gunsmith on Bentheim, but he served as a mainstay in the community for many decades. The Peaceful Repose that you are holding is one of the finest expressions of his distinct design style. Mr. Aluis believes that every individual weapon that he crafted in his hands is a piece of art. He designed and crafted the Peaceful Repose in remembrance for the passing of his wife."

That explained it. This was a weapon that carried a great meaning to its gunsmith, and it showed through his spiritual senses.

While the Hope by Force exuded a stronger X-Factor, the Peaceful Repose's sense of peace, contentment, remembrance and finality spoke much strongly

to Ves. Although its artistic design went a little overboard on the visual spectacle, it nonetheless made Ves feel good when holding it. It was a classy weapon beyond compare!

"This is a weapon that makes an artform out of ending other people's lives!" Ves uttered softly.

"Is that gun even a functional weapon?" Ketis asked. "It's more of a sculpture and less of a weapon in my eyes."

"I can assure you that the Peaceful Repose can be just as deadly as your Udor." Dias said.

He went went on to state some of the ballistic pistol's specs.

Overall, the weapon featured a medium capacity, medium degree of firepower and a medium ability to pierce armor. Although it sounded as if the Peaceful Repose didn't excel at anything, the quality of the entire gun elevated all of its capabilities to a respectable level.

"The secret ingredient behind the Peaceful Repose's performance is that it only fires the Exil rounds developed by Keon Aluis. Each round is individually handmade by either Mr. Aluis himself or one of his apprentices. The rounds made by their apprentices are available in bulk, while the rounds made by Mr. Aluis himself we have on hand is not even enough to fill a single magazine."

"How much?"

"We offer the Peaceful Repose for 21 million credits. A single Exil round handmade by Mr. Aluis costs 1 million credits. The Exil rounds made by his apprentices only go for 50,000 credits per round."

Expensive. Very expensive. While the Peaceful Repose was cheaper than the Udor, it cost a lot more money to fire the weapon than the Udor!

Unlike a laser pistol which could be recharged on the cheap with any available power source, the potent Exil rounds that were so sophisticated that the gunsmith had to craft them one by one all cost an arm and a leg with each shot fired!

Most of the cost of the laser pistol came from its advanced internal parts. A ballistic pistol on the other hand exhibited a simpler construction that incorporated less advanced tech, though its costs could quickly run up with the use of more expensive exotic materials.

Nonetheless, when comparing weapons of the same tier, ballistic pistols were generally cheaper at the start.

If Ves was some kind of gun-toting bounty hunter gallivanting across the galaxy, he would never purchase the Peaceful Repose. Not only would he be spending more money than what he earned every time he got into a firefight, he would also have to return to Bentheim each time he ran out of Exil rounds!

Fortunately for him, his situation was quite different from that of a galactic wanderer.

First, Ves did not envision getting caught up in a lot of fights. As a mech designer, Ves did not belong anywhere near a battlefield.

Second, he also did not plan to travel very widely for the foreseeable future. Even if Keon Aluis designed the Peaceful Repose to only work with his own rounds, Ves could accept this limitation as long as the Exil rounds delivered what they promised.

Dias summoned up a pair of magazines from the table. They came in exquisite white boxes that shared the same aesthetics as the pistol. When the store employee opened one of them, a polished magazine rested on a pillow glistened in the reflective light of the showroom.

"This magazine holds thirty Exil rounds crafted by apprentices. Although Mr. Aluis did not craft the rounds himself, his apprentices are no slouches. Each round has gone through multiple inspections before they are determined fit for sale."

Ves picked up the magazine and loaded it into the Peaceful Repose. The addition of the magazine weighed down the weapon, but that only made the weapon firmer, as if a final piece of the puzzle returned to its rightful place.

Due to its complex X-Factor, holding the Peaceful Repose made Ves feel at peace, though only slightly.

Not even the Amastendira could affect his mood so strongly!

"I'll buy the Peaceful Repose. Please add in all the Exil rounds made by Mr. Aluis as well as four-hundred rounds made by his apprentices."

The total price amounted to 61 million credits. This was a hefty price, but Ves did not envision returning to Renny's Outfitters to pick up new rounds anytime soon.

After Ves returned the pistol and magazine to the table, which slowly disappeared so that the store could send them for inspection and certification, he moved on to the other items on his shopping list.

"That's enough for weapons. Let's move on to armor."

The process of shopping for combat armor was just as intricate as shopping for pistols. Dias led them to a different showroom that encompassed various fitting instruments to take their measurements and to assist them in trying out various suits of armor.

After an hour of trying out different armor models, Ves eventually settled upon a suit of light armor called the Sparous Vize.

Odd name aside, the Sparous Vize fit his purposes due to its ease of use and its small profile. It barely bulked him up, but the use of compressed armor plating added enough protection to withstand most infantry-grade firepower for a time.

The reason why he decided to go for this specific armor above others was that it excelled the most in the area of communications and hacking. It not only featured powerful internal and extendable antennas that could pierce through a certain level of jamming, it also incorporated a fully automated hacking module that could hack most outdated software in use in the Bright Republic.

The Sparous Vize's weak X-Factor exemplified its shifty nature. It carried the aura of a scoundrel.

Ves kind of liked it as it made him feel as if he was too slippery to catch while he wore the Sparous Vize.

Naturally, Ves paid big money for these capabilities. The total cost of the Sparous Vize, which included lifetime software updates, amounted to 80 million credits!

A single suit of armor cost as much as a very good premium mech!

"It's all in the materials." Ves said when Ketis looked googly-eyed at the mention of the skyhigh price. "If we used the same compressed armor formula used in the Sparous Vize for my mech designs, then they would cost well over several billion credits each! This armor formula is actually fit for second-class mechs!"

While the Sparous Vize would never be able to equal the level of protection of his lost XV-99 Squalon, it at least gave Ves the confidence to withstand a couple of handcannon rounds in the faceplate.

Ketis wanted to augment her battlestyle with her own selection. After browsing various models of medium combat armor, she eventually settled upon a suit of armor called the Rising Red Dragon.

This plain name evoked an immediate sense of ferocity. The Rising Red Dragon was significantly bulkier than the Sparous Vize. Not only did it offer a lot more protection than the lighter armor, it also carried a powerful set servos that enhanced the wearer's running speed.

This not only imparted the wearer of the Rising Red Dragon with a momentous charge, it also allowed the wearer to close in on the enemy quickly!

The total cost of the Rising Red Dragon amounted to 140 million credits. Such a huge amount of money was more than enough to buy two premium mechs with money to spare!

Ketis looked rather guilty as Ves approved of the purchase.

"Are you sure you want to be handing over something so expensive to me, Ves?"

"It's okay. The contributions that you'll make in the future will earn back my investment many times over. Earning a couple of hundred million credits isn't all that hard, especially if you're a Journeyman."

After ending up in precarious situations many times with hardly any gear to protect himself, it felt extraordinarily good to Ves to finally be able to spend his hard-earned money on enhancing his ability to defend himself. Even if trouble suddenly broke out on Bentheim, he would at least have the confidence that he wouldn't succumb so easily!

## Chapter 1105 Custom Products

Ves stayed at Renny's Outfitters a little longer. While the store prepared his main orders, he also browsed the other items in order to get a sense of products made by other high-end craftsmen.

The sightseeing certainly opened the eyes of both Ketis and Ves. While Ketis only appreciated the thorough effort put into crafting unique and distinct gear, Ves noted the nourishment they received from the love and attention of their makers.

Not every piece of gear received such attention, and only a handful of them stood out as works of passion.

Nonetheless, the higher quality goods generally tended to convey more meaning. They were also some of the most expensive pieces in the store.

The amount of gear held in Renny's Outfitters quite frankly surpassed Ves' expectations. Professor Ventag didn't refer him to any regular store, but one that might be offering the best and most extravagant selection of gear on Bentheim!

"You'd never find this kind of gear in the frontier." Ketis remarked as they viewed a selection of hunting rifles specifically geared towards killing exobeasts. "Even treasure hunters don't use guns like this. They'll just employ a mech that costs five times cheaper than that railgun in the center."

Ves nodded. "These are toys for the rich. No one would ever equip a regular unit with gear worth this much. It is good if you buy one or two sets, but it quickly gets unaffordable if you want to splurge on your bodyguards."

He didn't realize until now that alongside the expansive mech industry, a lot of other cottage industries existed on Bentheim. The gunsmith and armorsmith communities held significant sway.

"Mechs are kind of made in this way too, right?" Ketis asked.

"Yep. They're called custom mechs. If a specific client likes your design style a lot, they might contract you to develop a custom mech for them. This doesn't mean you'll design a mech from the ground up. You can just take one of your existing designs that your client picked out and develop it into a variant. The only issue is that the amount of time you need to invest in the development is significant. That's not a big problem to Novices or Apprentices, but higher-ranking mech designers value their time a lot more."

Apprentices and Journeymen tended to take the lion's share of the custom mech market in the Bright Republic. Their time wasn't as valuable yet so most clients would still be willing to fork out the amount of money needed to get their chosen mech designers to tailor a mech to their needs.

On the other hand, many Seniors only designed custom mechs for expert pilots. Designing an expert mech not only allowed Seniors to work with the best technologies and the best materials at a much higher budget than usual, but they could also apply their design philosophies in the best conditions possible.

Ves was still too far away from getting involved with expert mechs, but he hoped he would get the opportunity to design some custom mechs once he advanced to Journeymen.

Although he had a laundry list of mechs he needed to design in order to expand the LMC's mech catalog, Ves believed that designing custom mechs was an essential part of his design philosophy.

"Ketis, do you remember the motto of the LMC?"

"Living Mechs. Partners for Life."

"There is no better way to provide a customer with a mech that they value as a partner than to develop a custom mech." Ves said.

"Did you get any offers to design a custom mech?"

"I did. I rejected the offers. Designing the Aurora Titan and filling out my mech catalog takes precedence over working on vanity projects."

Ever since he rose to fame, some potential clients reached out to the LMC to inquire on the possibility to design a custom mech for them. Most of the people wanted to brag about owning a custom mech designed by a war hero or a famous mech designer.

However, Ves did not believe that his clients would be able to fully appreciate his work. Ever since his disastrous experience with Vincent Ricklin's codpiece mech, Ves made a rule to himself that he would stop taking offers from spoiled brats and insincere clients.

"Our new gear should almost be ready."

Some time later, Ves, Ketis and Lucky left with their purchases mounted upon a mobile lifter bot. While their new suits of armor took up a lot of space, they had both been designed to fold up into a more compact suitcase-like shape when not in use. This function only worked as long as the armor hadn't sustained major damage, of course, and it still left the two with a conspicuous burden.

Nonetheless, Ves bore with the sight of the trailing lifter bot following behind him. With the murky undercurrents running through Bentheim at the moment, he would rather have some armor ready at hand.

"You're really paranoid, huh?" Ketis teased.

"With my track record for trouble on Bentheim, I can never be too prepared."

Now that they finished their shopping, they exited the exclusive shopping street and boarded the armored shuttle that took them to the outskirts of Dorum. The four mechs of the Avatars of Myth surrounded the slow-moving shuttle, attracting quite a bit of attention to the procession.

Fortunately, no trouble occurred during the trip. They reached Professor Ventag's high-end workshop without incident. Upon arrival and after going through some security checks, they were finally allowed to enter the personal workshop of a Senior Mech Designer.

A myriad of tools, lab equipment and production equipment greeted Ves. While Master Olson's workshop had impressed him the most, the one he was in right now was not too shabby.

"I'll have to spend some time familiarizing myself with the equipment." Ves said to Ketis. "You should read the manuals as well. Even if you won't use these machines, it helps to know their uses."

Both of them spent an entire day in the workshop. While Lucky grew bored and wandered off to explore the surroundings, Ves and Ketis quietly rushed through dozens of manuals.

Once Ves grew comfortable with using each and every relevant machine, he began to fabricate the prototype in earnest. With his mind connected to Qilanxo's spiritual fragment and focused on the vision, he entered a partial state of immersion.

The Aurora Titan was by far the most complicated mech he fabricated on his own. The polarizing module incorporated a fair amount of sophisticated components, some of which Ves failed to get right the first time.

Aside from that, Ves didn't fully understand the principles behind the mech's internal architecture. This lack of understanding hindered his attempts at reproducing the exact configuration. He needed to match the parameters of the design schematics even if he sometimes questioned a couple of points.

While Ves encountered plenty of setbacks over five days of trial and error, this was only his first time. The lessons he learned this time would shorten his next attempt at fabricating the Aurora Titan by at least a day.

"The learning curve of the Aurora Titan isn't too steep. As long as a production line keeps working on the same mech, it's not impossible to lower the fabrication time to three days."

Not so surprisingly, the Pisaro armor system posed little challenges to Ves. The Pisaro only made use of one compressed alloy formula as opposed to the more complex Veltrex armor system which layered three separate alloys on top of each other.

"The Veltrex armor system is better in terms of protection, but the Pisaro wins in cost effectiveness and ease of maintenance."

There was only one downside to fabricating his mech on Bentheim. He did not have the best equipment at hand to fabricate the alien crystals and activate them with the crystal relic.

"It's a good thing I already thought about that issue."

Ves already fabricated the eight crystals beforehand and shipped them to Bentheim. It only took a single word for SASS to ship the crystals to Professor Ventag's workshop.

As he put the finishing touches on the Aurora Titan, Ketis had been watching at the side all this time. To her, watching Ves at work was like observing a wizard perform magic. She witnessed far too many feats that completely went over her head!

Even so, she did not lose heart at the disparity between Ves and herself. Whenever she thought of her recent mental augmentations, she developed a burning ambition to catch up to Ves and design a mech that could stand equal to his own designs!

Once Ves finished applying the coatings on the Aurora Titan, both of them stepped back and admired the finished product in its full splendor.

"It's big." Ketis uttered.

"It carries a lot of presence." Ves noted with satisfaction.

Its predominantly white coating mixed with various blue stripes allowed the mech to stand out in the dark of space. Its larger-than-average size and its masculine contours conveyed a sense of strength and indomitability to the mech.

Paired with its broadsword and its tower shield, the Aurora Titan looked supremely capable of fending off against even the most powerful blows!

Mingled with its imposing physical appearance, its hollow but very present X-Factor amplified the impression the Aurora Titan conveyed.

If the prototype already felt so visceral to Ves, what about when Qilanxo's spiritual fragment finally moved out of his mind and inhabited the design?

However, until that happened, the prototype would not be capable of expressing the full potential of its beastly X-Factor.

"Some presents are best enjoyed at the end."

Once Ves and Ketis got over their admiration of the prototype, they spent an extra day subjecting the mech to various scans. The scanning equipment at the workshop was capable of penetrating right through the entire mech. This enabled Ves to develop a detailed schematic of the prototype which he subsequently compared to its theoretical design.

A number of discrepancies popped up. No matter how careful Ves fabricated the prototype, he was still only human. Even if highly-tuned AIs took over the production processes, deviances would still pop up. Raw materials were almost never completely uniform and even the best fabrication equipment exhibited limitations when it came to precision and consistency.

Ketis looked disappointed. "You worked so hard on fabricating the prototype. It's a shame that it's still different from the design schematics."

"Nothing in the galaxy is perfect." Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "Only materialization technology can reproduce a mech down to the exact placement of atoms. Yet mechs produced in such a fashion are soulless copies of each other. In fact, I like it that every mech comes with small inconsistencies. Each mech is unique. The design, the time, the place, the mech designer or mech technicians involved in fabricating a mech all leave their own marks behind, giving the finished product an individual identity that isn't matched by anything in the galaxy."

"You care a lot about that stuff." She said. "It's never about the physical product to you. It's all about the touch you put on a mech."

"I'm not pursuing perfection in my mech designs. Instead, I'm trying to give each of my mechs their own identity."

"This is your design philosophy, right? It's very hard for me to understand."

"I know. You don't have to understand it entirely. I'm sure you'll be able to recognize the benefits as long as you continue working by my side."

While Professor Ventag was too occupied at the moment to pay a visit to the workshop, he did spend half an hour studying the finished prototype from remote. After viewing the mech through projections and studying the results of the deep scans, the Senior expressed a lot of satisfaction.

"I'm glad to see that you have been able to use my production equipment proficiently. I would have thought you still needed some more time to master their use. They are not exactly the most standard equipment out there."

"I have a lot of practical experience in fabricating and servicing mechs." Ves stated simply.

"Right. Well, I'm glad you finished the prototype without any major hiccups. I will arrange for it to be shipped to my space testing facility in the Green Nebula region. You can leave for my testing facility whenever is convenient."

"I'll depart immediately." Ves replied.

Who would want to stay on Bentheim while the threat of the BLM continued to hang over the planet's head?! Ves couldn't wait to leave this dreadful place and avoid getting caught up in the storm that might erupt very soon!

### Chapter 1106 Corporate Espionage

Ves, Ketis and Lucky departed from the surface of Bentheim without any major incidents.

To be honest, Ves half expected to encounter an assassination attempt or a terrorist attack along the way. Yet neither assassins or rebels showed any hide or hair in presence.

For some reason, Ves felt distinctly odd to be able to spend his time on Bentheim in peace. It was as if not getting shot at was an extremely unusual experience to him. It wasn't until he finally stepped aboard the Barracuda that he no longer felt exposed.

"Strange." Ves muttered.

The close shaves he experienced in the past still haunted his psyche in a way.

In any case, with the Aurora Titan shipped to the testing facility, the Barracuda traveled to the Green Nebula region alone. Since NORA Consolidated's space testing facility was situated in an asteroid belt in a lightly-populated star system, there was no use in bringing along the landbound mechs of the Avatars of Myth.

Therefore, Ves ordered the Greenfeather carrying the four Avatar mechs to return to Cloudy Curtain.

"In cases like these, it would have been handy to have a number of spaceborn mechs at my disposal."

Ves wasn't too worried about getting caught up in any attacks. The Barracuda was a very mobile little starship that could evade or outrun any threats. The Green Nebula region was situated in the center of the Bright Republic, so was exceptionally devoid of pirates.

The space testing facility itself hosted its own guard force. NORA Consolidated tested a wide range of finished and unfinished mech designs at the facility, so the company would never neglect its security.

After more than a week of travel, the Barracuda quietly arrived at the star system in question. The ship navigated to a certain section of an expansive asteroid belt and reached the security envelope of the space testing facility.

Since the guards already expected guests, it didn't take long before the Barracuda passed their inspection and gained permission to move on. Once the ship docked at a space station built out of an asteroid, Ves, Ketis and Lucky stepped out and greeted the station manager.

"Mr. Larkinson. It is an honor to meet you." The station manager greeted. The man was garbed in a standard vacsuit uniform. "Your ship has arrived faster than the transport bearing your prototype. It will take a number of days before the mech reaches our facility. Would you like to take a tour and familiarize with our testing methods in the meantime?"

"Sure."

When it came to testing mechs, Ves still lacked a substantial amount of experience and knowledge in this area. Even though the LMC set up its own testing ground in order to verify the performance of each finished mech, Ves had not involved himself too much in its development and expansion.

He already lacked in experience when it came to testing landbound mechs. He knew even less about testing spaceborn mechs.

Fortunately, Ves did not have to be responsible for anything except to provide some direction every now and then. The testing facility tested so many mechs that nothing confounded them anymore.

"We are used to testing some of Professor Ventag's new spaceborn designs without his input." The manager explained. "Sometimes, one of his subordinate mech designers will accompany a particularly valuable prototype to supervise the testing process, but in most cases the professor is content with leaving this responsibility in our hands."

Ves looked impressed. "He's putting a lot of trust in you. A prototype of an unfinished design is very valuable."

"We have proven our competence over many decades. If the professor still needs to hold our hand, how can we possibly earn our jobs?"

Throughout the tour, Ves noted that the testing facility possessed very stringent security measures.

The station manager described their greatest concern. "Testing mechs is in our nature. The testing process is guaranteed to go smoothly. The only variable that we can never fully account for are the actions of third parties. Corporate espionage is a very large concern for NORA Consolidated."

"That's why the company set up this testing facility in this rural star system, right?"

"Correct. Anything that goes in and out is meticulously monitored. The local population has also come under our company's influence. While I can't tell you the exact details of our security arrangements, I can freely tell you that we've caught hundreds of spies and nosy observers over the last decade."

That was a lot! "What happens to the spies once they're caught?"

"We aren't killing them, if that's what you think." The station manager smiled.

"Usually we just hand them over to the authorities and be charged with the relevant crimes."

"Do they actually get convicted?"

"Why yes, Mr. Larkinson. Why would you ever doubt that? Corporate espionage is a serious crime and the Bright Republic takes any instance of foul play very seriously. However, in our experience, every major company engages in some form of corporate espionage. Mech companies are constantly on the lookout for any new mech designs that can displace the market shares of their existing mech models."

As long as a company obtained advanced warning of the exciting new design their competitor developed, they could prepare for it in advance.

There was nothing worse to a mech designer than to publish an exciting new mech design, only for a competitor to publish a similar product the very next day!

Even worse, their competitors might even opt to publish a direct counter for the design the very next day!

As Ves chatted a bit more with the station manager, he asked why so many spies still attempted to infiltrate the testing facility when the punishment for corporate espionage was so harsh.

"Their families are always taken care of. Even if the spies don't have anyone they care about, they will still receive a fortune up to the tune of millions of credits if they keep their mouths shut throughout the trial process."

In other words, the spies could look forward to receiving a big bag of money as long as they did not point their fingers towards their employers.

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose of their punishment?" Ves asked.

The station manager smiled and shook his head. "That's the way the game is played. You can see it as an intricate dance between competing mech designers. Every company employs spies who are often put to work in keeping tabs on their most important competitors."

"There are a lot of mech companies in the Republic and even more in the galaxy. It's impossible to keep tabs on them all."

"That is true, but there are always a number of mech designers who form a more direct threat to the market shares of your products. For example, right now you are in the process of designing a super-medium space knight with the professor. What if right after you publish the design, the entire mech community immediately turns against it? You can't rule out the possibility that a competitor got wind of your design and laid the groundwork for an overwhelmingly negative reaction from the public."

Such a possibility would be ruinous for the prospects of his design. Ves widened his eyes as he started to consider if spies had somehow managed to worm their way into the LMC and caught wind of the joint design project.

While SASS did a decent job in providing allround security, Ves wasn't reassured that they were equipped to stop the most determined spies.

Hearing about the many ways in which his enemies and competitors could ruin the success of his mech design, Ves began to consider his response in the event of a coordinated action.

In times like these, Ves could sorely use a spy by his side. He recalled his plan to set up a shadow force under his control. He just needed to recruit a reliable spy to take charge, which was nearly impossible in his eyes.

To Ves, there was no such thing as a trustworthy spy!

Interacting with intelligence operatives such as Calabast or Leland made that abundantly clear. The rules they abide by was so far removed from the norm that they wouldn't hesitate to stab their mothers in the back if they could get ahead in some way!

Ves tired of talking about spies. Instead of worrying about something which he had little means to deal with other than to intensify his security arrangements, he would rather focus on his original purpose.

A few days passed by until the transport vessel bearing the prototype finally arrived at the testing facility. Ves personally supervised the inspections on the mech to make sure it hadn't incurred any damage or tampering during the transportation process.

Fortunately, aside from coming under the influence of cosmic radiation, everything appeared to be in order.

The first prototype of the Aurora Titan design was ready for testing!

The testing facility employed their own test pilots, and the one responsible for testing defensive mechs had already studied the documentation on the Aurora Titan.

Ves in fact wrote most of the documentation himself. He provided a fairly detailed instruction manual which elaborated extensively on the uses of the Aurora Titan's two gimmicks.

Even so, Ves did not expect any mech pilot to get the hang of the polarizing module and the alien crystals instantly. This was why he decided to meet the test pilot just before she was about to enter the cockpit of the mech for the very first time.

"So you're the test pilot, right?"

The short woman garbed in a piloting suit nodded. "Correct, Mr. Larkinson. I have fifteen years of experience in test piloting various space knights and striker mechs. I'm also proficient in test piloting heavy mechs."

Ves felt relieved that the test pilot already possessed an abundant amount of experience in testing different mechs.

"Do you understand the features of the Aurora Titan?"

"Somewhat. While I have never worked with a polarizing module before, I know the theory. I have already tried out mechs that makes use of a polarizing module in the simulators. I think I can get the hang of its use in a couple of days."

Ves quizzed the test pilot some more and found to his satisfaction that she was well prepared to put the prototype to its paces.

The test pilot also took the opportunity to ask her own questions.

"The documentation states that the Aurora Titan is oriented towards defense. How much does offense play a role?"

"Not that much. Don't strain the mech over its limits when you perform offensive maneuvers."

"It's my job to push the mech to its limits, sir. Even if your mech isn't designed to launch attacks, we'll be testing its offensive capabilities if only to see how bad it is at offense."

Ves did not expect good results from those tests. The Aurora Titan was way too heavy and immobile to launch any attacks on its own.

After Ves and the test pilot finished speaking to each other, the station manager invited Ves and Ketis to a monitor center.

A large row of terminals and projections greeted them as they entered the monitoring center. Various specialists and technicians manned the terminals in preparation for the latest test.

Once the test pilot settled into the brand-new cockpit of the prototype, she activated the mech for the first time. With the press of a button, the entire cockpit lit up in radiant splendor.

All the systems that came online caused a small hum to emanate from the Aurora Titan. Several lights lit up and its compacted wings already started to unfold a little.

The Aurora Titan activated successfully!

"It's a success! The prototype is online and operating according to normal parameters!"

Ves already knew that the prototype wouldn't stutter upon activation. He possessed way too much confidence in his own work to fear any setbacks.

Instead, he turned his attention to the telemetry related to the test pilot. What he wanted to know was what the test pilot experienced when she interfaced with the prototype. Had she already come under the influence of the prototype's X-Factor?

Eventually, Ves decided to patch into the communication channel and ask the pilot directly.

"What do you feel?"

"It's.. big." She uttered. "The mech is very expansive. I am feeling some urges that I have never felt when I test piloted other mechs."

That sounded interesting.

"Can you describe your urges?"

"It's faint, but... I feel as if I'm piloting the embodiment of an exobeast instead of a mech!"

### Chapter 1107 Excessive Prudence

The unusual sensations that the test pilot experienced upon activation were so odd that they immediately derailed the first testing session.

Concerned that the neural interface might have been tampered with, the test pilot quickly received orders to halt the test and shut down the mech.

Even though the test pilot only described some vague feelings, the station manager did not feel relieved to proceed with the tests.

Ves wanted to say that the test pilot wasn't in danger, but the testing facility was way too professional to gloss over any unusual observations.

Various specialists scoured the prototype from top to bottom, paying particular attention to its cockpit systems and its neural interface. Hackers and software engineers manually scoured through the programming of the neural interface in order to make sure that no one tried to slip in any nasty surprises!

"We aren't suspecting you of sabotaging your own prototype." The station manager stated to Ves. "It might be that a spy sent by one of our competitors managed to infiltrate the transport ship and upload a virus in the mech's operating system."

Ves nodded in understanding. Although he felt upset that his work was being questioned, he knew that this wouldn't be the last time his work might attract alarm. The Farund Affair made mech designers and mech companies a lot more sensitive towards mental tampering!

Predictably, even after several hours of intense inspections, the specialists found nothing wrong. While Ves implemented a lot of innovations in his mech design, even he did not dare to tweak its neural interface.

Even if he could apply some minor tricks courtesy of his experiments on Aeon Corona VII, he was no longer in the deep frontier where he could get away with anything. Now that he returned to civilized space, Ves needed to pay more than lip service to the rules and regulations of the MTA.

After the specialists had their fill of excessive precautionary measures, the test pilot boarded the prototype once again and activated it with a hint of reluctance.

She immediately encountered the same sensations yet again. "I am still subjected to various influences on my mind. I can't accurately describe them, but it still feels as if I'm piloting an exobeast in a way. It is faintly.. Disturbing."

The station manager threw a glance towards Ves before moving over to some experts who specialized in neural sciences.

Eventually, the experts determined that none of the telemetry they received signified anything that hinted at foul play.

"We can state with confidence that the prototype does not exert any permanent mental influencing on the mech pilot. Both the hardware and the software of the mech's neural interface are completely standard and have not deviated from the MTA-mandated specifications in any way."

Of course Ves didn't tweak the neural interfaces. Without the requisite permission from the MTA, Ves would be committing a major crime if he changed even a single line of programming in the standard neural interface programming provided by the same organization.

Only a small number of mech designers received permission from the MTA to work with altered neural interfaces, and Ves wasn't one of them. When he performed some experiments with neural interface designs on some dwarves, he learned that the MTA's restrictions on this matter was for a very good reason.

After all, a neural interface wasn't supposed to cause a mech pilot's head to explode!

"I think we're making a mountain out of a molehill here." Ves said in an exasperated tone. "None of the telemetry indicates anything amiss. As far as I know, none of the sensors and monitoring systems are malfunctioning either, so there's no reason to question the data. Can we just proceed with the first tests?"

"Very well, Mr. Larkinson." The station manager agreed. "Proceed with deploying the prototype!"

This was the moment of truth for Ves. As the mech walked up to the hangar bay hatch, it slowly unfolded its flight system. A radiant golden glow surrounded its wings, increasing the presence of the mech by at least twice!

"Lift off!"

The prototype of the Aurora Titan engaged its flight system to the fullest and pushed off into space, passing through the energy screen that kept the air inside the hangar bay.

The mech flew slowly. With its golden wings propelling it forward, the prototype attracted so much attention that some of the specialists took their eyes off the readings they were supposed to monitor. The Aurora Titan was simply too compelling to look away!

"Wow. Hardly any of the professor's designs look so impressive."

Ketis, who had remained quiet all this time, finally grinned. "Looks like you did it again, Ves. Out of every mech designer I know, you're the only one who always manages to wow the people who look at your mechs."

"A good product always exceeds expectations. The wow-factor is an indispensable tool in changing people's misconceptions about super-medium mechs." Ves stated.

Visiting Renny's Outfitters and browsing through its extensive catalog of high-end artisan products reaffirmed his artistic outlook. A weapon as beautiful as the Peaceful Repose would have never attracted his attention so strongly if not for its lavish appearance.

As the Aurora Titan began to accelerate harder, putting more strain on its flight systems, the mech began to take on an imposing air. The mech looked like a king advancing staunchly on the battlefield!

"Ah, damn! I knew I forgot something!" Ves palmed his face.

What did the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord incorporate that the Aurora Titan lacked?

The Festive Cloud Generator!

This frivolous module may not serve any purpose except to emit colored vapor in the air, but the visual effect it brought to his designs had practically become his calling card. As long as he succeeded in making his mechs look more impressive with the use of the Festive Cloud Generator, then it wasn't a waste to incorporate it into his designs!

Unfortunately, when Ves thought about trying to implement the Festive Cloud Generator into the Aurora Titan, he realized to his dismay that it wouldn't work in space. The module had always been designed to operate in normal atmospheric conditions. It would almost certainly glitch or fail when subjected to the vacuum of space!

"No matter. I can just find another module that is capable of emitting particles in space."

Once he got over this realization, Ves turned his attention back to the Aurora Titan in flight. He had to admit that the glowing wings did a good job in replicating the effect of the Festive Cloud Generator. The huge mech looked so majestic in flight that Ves couldn't wait to see it flex its capabilities.

A number of hours went by as the test pilot performed a series of basic maneuvers with the mech. She tested the mech's range of motion, its mass distribution, its ability to change direction in flight and how it would move with or without equipping its sword and shield.

The heavy tower shield impacted the mech's center of gravity by a noticeable amount. Due to his recent Mastery experience, Ves already accounted for this difference. The stance of the mech automatically adjusted whether it carried a shield or not, though the mech pilot would easily be able to override the settings.

Only near the end of the first testing session did the test pilot engage the polarizing module.

A faint white field came into being on the front surface of the shield. At this point, the testing process did not call for putting the mech under fire to test the effectiveness of the polarizing field.

Ves found that to be a shame because he worked so long on getting the polarizing module to work well with his design that he couldn't wait to see if it performed up to standard.

After thirty seconds of maintaining the polarizing field, the mech shut it off and instead covered its chest plating with a contained polarizing field.

The mech was able to maintain the field and keep it contained to the chest plating, which caused Ves to let out a sigh in relief. Keeping the polarizing field in a specific shape was one of the most difficult engineering challenges he faced when he designed the Aurora Titan.

Sections of its back, arms, legs and even its head lit up in white without any hiccups. The success signified that the polarizing module was able to provide complete protection to the mech, which Ves had always aimed to deliver!

"Alright, that marks the end of the first testing session." The station manager said. "Please recall the prototype and have it undergo a deep inspection."

Ves groaned when he heard that. It seemed the testing personnel still suspected some sort of foul play. A deep inspection meant that the testing facility's mech technicians would have to partially disassemble the prototype in order to access its interior and inspect the internals of the machine up close!

More than an entire standard day passed by as the mech technicians did as they were told. Ves found it painful to see the Aurora Titan being cut apart in order to root out a nonexistent problem.

Due to everyone's unfamiliarity with the design, Ves needed to be on hand to instruct the crew in the best ways to disassemble and reassemble the mech.

Naturally, nobody found anything fishy. Ves even joined in on the inspections, but found nothing that deviated from his design other than the minute inconsistencies that he had already observed before.

To all intents and purposes, this mech was the most representative copy of the unfinished Aurora Titan design as it could get!

In the next couple of days, the Aurora Titan continued to undergo a cycle of continuous tests interspersed with extensive inspections. The testing facility seemed to be obsessed with tracking the structural integrity and any wear and tear the prototype accumulated.

"One of our main roles is to watch out for any accelerated deterioration." The station manager explained to Ves and Ketis. "The Aurora Titan seems to be a very fine design, but we all know that what works in theory might not work out

in practice. It is our job to catch these potentially fatal flaws before you publish your mech design and allow your customers to suffer a catastrophic mishap."

Even if Ves didn't subject his mech design to any field tests, the MTA surely would. While not every design underwent the MTA's validation process, any mech designer who wanted to publish his mech design with an eye towards the market needed to provide the MTA with a physical copy of the mech for them to throw it around.

"Have you found anything disconcerting?" Ves asked.

"So far, no. Knowing that Professor Ventag is responsible for much of the mech's internal design, we are accustomed to encountering no major flaws at all. Perhaps some of his more complicated designs might exhibit some unusual quirks, but so far the prototype looks as if it can comfortably hold up for at least ten years."

The tests grew increasingly more burdensome to the mech and mech pilot. Ves watched on as the mech engaged in melee combat against a practice mech armed with a huge padded stick that replaced its sword.

While the Aurora Titan was able to deliver powerful blows that could crunch a light mech with a single hit, the mech predictably moved too sluggish to keep up with a light mech. It performed a bit better against medium mechs, but its overall performance wasn't very stellar.

"This mech is no good in melee duels." The test pilot remarked with a weary voice. "This mech should never be deployed on its own. Any cheap light skirmisher can easily dismantle this mech from behind."

Aside from that disappointing level of performance, the tests related to determining the prototype's defensive capabilities went a lot better!

Ves, Ketis and everyone else looked impressed as the Aurora Titan was able to fend off numerous laser beams with a polarizing field covering its shield.

The polarizing shield was so effective in blocking laser damage that the shield suffered practically no damage at all!

"This is just the start. Let's see how the polarizing field can hold up against heavier firepower."

### Chapter 1108 Realspace Deviations

The Aurora Titan prototype began to impress the specialists at the testing facility more and more as time went on. As the tests became more arduous, its performance continued to perform just as well if not better than Professor Ventag's regular designs!

Its highly efficient and damage-resistant internal architecture allowed the mech to hold up even against severe shocks. This was an essential requirement for any defensive mech and Ves became reassured that the professor's work allowed the Aurora Titan to hold up adequately against physical damage.

It helped that the test pilot became increasingly proficient in piloting the Aurora Titan. The super-medium space knight piloted differently than any other regular medium space knight, to the point where she needed to unlearn some of her old habits.

The mech simply did not exhibit the mobility required to perform various standard maneuvers! It moved much like a heavy mech in a sense, but fortunately the test pilot had also tested a few heavy mechs now and then so she only took a day to adjust.

Another change that helped the prototype excel was that the test pilot became increasingly more comfortable with the unusual sensations coming from her mech. Rather than distrust it, she achieved much better results by opening herself up to the machine.

Human and mech began to accept each other. While no one paid attention to the alignment between the test pilot and the prototype, Ves paid keen attention to this relationship.

The more the test pilot embraced the prototype, the more intuitive her reactions became. This played an especially significant role when subjected to fire from all sides. The test pilot was able to call up and redirect multiple polarization fields when needed.

"I have to say, at first I did not think that the Aurora Titan can do much." The station manager told Ves. "A mech that's heavier than a medium mech but lighter than a heavier mech should ordinarily exhibit the worst of both weight classes. Yet now I see that the Aurora Titan's defensive prowess is sufficient to call it a pocket heavy mech. While it is nowhere near as resilient as a genuine heavy space knight, it still offers more than enough protection to justify its value."

Ves nodded in agreement. He liked the word pocket heavy mech. "Super-medium mechs don't make sense to powers that have the ability to field heavy mechs. In the past, the specs of super-medium mechs simply aren't good enough to justify a mech of this weight class. However, better materials and the use of defensive tech allows it to provide just enough protection while not being bogged down to a total crawl."

If Ves designed a super-medium space knight a hundred years ago, then the mech wouldn't be able to present a good value proposition. It would have been weighed down too much by heavy armor plating that didn't offer a sufficient amount of protection.

Even so, a regular third-class mech of this weight class still presented a rather unattractive package. If Ves allocated much of the space taken by the polarizing module into thicker armor, then sure the resulting mech would be able to sustain more damage.

The only problem there was that the mech's mobility reduced even further, to the point where it could only be used to defend relatively fixed objects such as space stations. Another factor that made it unattractive was that all of that armor not only increased its upfront cost enormously, but also made it very expensive to repair when it sustained serious damage!

Losing five or more medium space knights was cheaper than repairing a heavily damaged super-medium mech that largely consisted of armor!

The charm of the Aurora Titan was that while it may be larger, it wasn't as weighed down by armor so much. While its polarizing module took up a lot of internal volume, it wasn't as dense and heavy as an equivalent amount of armor plating!

The polarizing module allowed the Aurora Titan to act as a defensive mech without breaking the bank for the outfit that fielded it. The mech operated best during short raids and skirmishes where neither side committed to an all-out attack. As long as the polarizing fields absorbed all the damage, its expensive armor plating required little to no repairs.

The station manager praised the utility of this feature. "The polarizing fields perform quite well. It is interesting to see the mech be able to absorb lasers with ease. Those strange crystal of yours helps out the mech as well, though I am not sure whether they are completely necessary. This mech is highly capable in absorbing energy damage, but it does not offer anything special aside from its thick compressed armor to withstand kinetic and explosive damage."

The increasingly arduous tests made that clear. The polarizing field could negate some physical damage. It fared better against ballistic shells and missiles as their explosive damage was usually spread across a wider surface area.

However, kinetic weapons and railguns formed a substantial threat to the Aurora Titan due to their highly concentrated damage projection. A polarizing field was like skin which could easily hold up against a slap or a punch but pricked easily when being poked by a needle.

The only consolation was that the Pisaro armor system fared decently against physical damage, so it wasn't as if the Aurora Titan fell apart when hit by a couple of kinetic rounds.

"Unfortunate, with the way that space battles are being fought, kinetic weapons and melee weapons will be its downfall. The only way for the Aurora Titan to remain viable is if it is paired with mechs that can divert these threats." The station manager concluded.

Ves never intended the Aurora Titan to be deployed in isolation. It was a mech that worked best when protecting other assets. Its relative vulnerability to physical damage and its ineptness in melee combat sounded rather bad, but no mech was perfect.

The key to any modern mech force was to employ combined arms that integrated multiple mech types to cover each other's weaknesses while achieving synergies in the areas they were good at. With the upcoming generation rumored to herald a golden era for laser weapons, a mech which excelled against lasers should turn into a very appealing product.

After three weeks of thorough testing, the prototype endured so much damage that much of its internal compartments became exposed. When Ves, Ketis and the station manager paid a visit to the hangar bay just as the mech returned from its final round of testing, they both gazed up at the massive mech and its scorched, cracked and hole-laden exterior.

"Wow." She said. She couldn't stop saying that word when she witnessed the prototype's performance. "The testers threw so much firepower at the mech, but it still managed to limp its way back to the hangar bay."

The heavily-damaged prototype took its time to return, as heavy damage from the rear damaged the flight system to such an extent that they looked like stubby wings. Its propulsion was so weak that it took five times as long to return than if its wings were still intact.

"The flight system is still too vulnerable from attacks from the rear." Ves shook his head.

Every spaceborn mech shared the same common weakness. The more defense-oriented mechs might come equipped with more robust flight systems, but they could only be reinforced so much before their propulsion power took a nosedive.

Overall, Ves became very satisfied with the results of the tests. NORA Consolidated's professionals did a great job in testing almost every single feature to their limits. The Aurora Titan performed well in the areas that Ves expected to do well.

Of course, the prototype also exhibited some reactions that neither Ves or Professor Ventag expected to happen. While the inconsistencies were fairly minor, they became increasingly more impactful as the mech sustained more damage.

The simulations of the Aurora Titan generally modeled the mech's performance adequately when it was at its peak state. As the mech sustained serious damage, its actual performance began to deviate from its simulated results.

These discrepancies became bigger as the mech sustained more damage. However, what surprised Ves the most was that in many cases, the mech actually held up better than the simulators predicted.

Even though the mathematical models employed by NORA Consolidated approximated the effects of Professor Ventag's design philosophy very accurately, they still failed to encompass every inexplicable effect.

In fact, even the station manager exhibited some surprise. "We all know what to expect from Professor Ventag's designs. His mechs always seem to be able to hold up better against damage than normal, and we have tweaked our tests to take these qualities into account. Even so, the Aurora Titan fares just a little bit better than what we are used to seeing in the professor's work."

That sounded a bit unusual to Ves. "The Aurora Titan is a mech that is almost completely geared towards defense. It shouldn't be much of a surprise to see it working well even if it looks like it is falling apart."

"It's more than that." The older man said while gesturing towards the damaged prototype that was shutting down. "Our testing facility knows what to expect from Professor Ventag's defensive mechs. We have already calibrated all of our tests and instruments to account for their increased performance with regards to damage control. Nonetheless, there is a small but significant improvement. Either collaborating with you has brought more benefits to the design than expected, or the professor has achieved a new milestone in his research."

Ves did not think that Professor Ventag achieved anything notable recently. If the Senior did make a breakthrough in his research, then he would have showed it in his behavior.

Even though these results were rather unexpected, the whole point of testing the prototype in realspace conditions was to unearth these kinds of surprises.

Not all of the unexpected results turned out well for the Aurora Titan. If there was one area which the prototype disappointed Ves, then it had to be how fast its energy cells drained when employing its polarizing fields.

"This is a really energy-hungry mech." He remarked. "The prototype showed that all the extra energy cells I've added barely manages to extend its operating time when subjected to a lot of incoming fire."

Ves could foresee that in some situations, it was better for the mech pilots of the Aurora Titan to turn the polarizing module off and tank the damage with the Pisaro armor plating. Even though it cost an outfit a lot more money to repair the damaged armor plating, the mech would at least be able to remain on the battlefield for a while longer.

"Well, we've gathered enough data to tweak the design." Ves stated with satisfaction. "What is the usual procedure when it comes to handling the prototypes?"

"They usually end up in such a damaged state that we will immediately recycle them down. We know it's important to deconstruct them as fast as possible in order to minimize its exposure to spies." The station manager explained.

Ves agreed with that approach. "Please see to the processing of the prototype. At its current state, it is too damaged to be of any use."

He found it somewhat regretful to consign the prototype to a quick death after a short period of existence, but the station manager had a point. At this stage, Ves wasn't ready to publish the design.

As a number of mech technicians already started to assess the prototype for dismantlement, Ves, Ketis and Lucky bid farewell to the testing facility and returned to the Barracuda.

"Captain Silvestra, please take us back to Cloudy Curtain."

"Aye aye, sir. We've already locked in our route."

Ves already entered his stateroom aboard his corvette and began to study the abundant amount of data he received from the testing facility. Almost every aspect about the mech's actual performance became known to him. With so much data at his fingertips, Ves would be able to implement a lot of small improvements.

"The Aurora Titan will definitely become more perfect after my second pass on the design."

#### Chapter 1109 When to Qui

Some time went by when the Barracuda returned to Cloudy Curtain. The excursion to NORA Consolidated's space testing facility located in the Green Nebula region provided Ves and Professor Ventag with a lot of practical data.

The tests exposed a considerable amount of deviations from predicted results. What this meant to Ves was he would have to make so many changes that the Aurora Titan design needed to undergo at least two more iterations of realspace tests.

"You've seen from the results that simulations and realspace testing can diverge significantly." The professor said over a comm call. "The unexpected problems we've uncovered need to be addressed, but this will change the design in such a way that we won't be able to judge if it will perform as predicted. The simulations performed on the changed design will only deliver more skewed results that will certainly deviate from the realspace testing of our second prototype."

Ves smiled grimly. "Testing the second prototype will reveal new flaws and inconsistencies that we've introduced by trying to solve the old flaws and inconsistencies. This will force us to go back to the drawing board yet a third time to address the new issues. Yet that in turn causes the mech design to change so much that a third round of realspace testing is required."

"This process can indeed become a vicious cycle in which a mech designer would be endlessly stuck in a constant process of adjustments and improvements. However, it will only become a detrimental process so long as the mech designer doesn't know when to quit."

"When should a mech designer quit, professor?"

"When your time is better spent elsewhere. You have to realize that the more iterations a mech design goes through, the more its overall parameters improve. At some point, however, the improvements become so marginal that it is frankly a waste of time to continue iterating on the design. A good mech designer with sound judgement will be able to recognize when enough is enough and go through with publishing the design despite its remaining flaws."

Designing a mech without flaws was impossible. No mech design could ever be perfect or free from flaws. The best a mech designer could do in this situation was to do the best they could until the improvements they could achieve became too marginal to bother with. Who cared about spending several months on developing a solution that elevated the effective performance of a mech by only 0.00001 percent?

Such a compromising approach likely wouldn't result in designing award-winning mechs. That said, spending years to design a single mech was not a good use of time! An efficient mech designer would be able to design three or four mechs at the same time as a perfectionist mech designer finally became satisfied with designing a single mech!

In short, unless a mech designer was certain that they'd be able to design a mech that sold as well as four imperfect mech designs, they shouldn't be getting hung up on trying to perfect a single product.

The professor did offer a caveat. "Mind you, trying to pursue perfection isn't always detrimental to a mech designer. Some mech designers have completely devoted themselves to designing trendsetting mech designs that everyone wants to own. However, it is always a gamble whether a particular mech design can achieve mass market appeal. All the marketing research in the galaxy can't predict market response with even a moderate degree of accuracy. Too many factors are in play that can skew results in one direction or another. Trying to model the mech market is thousands of times more difficult than trying to model the Aurora Titan design."

One had to do with human behavior and the other had to do with purely technical matters sprinkled with some metaphysics. No matter how much magic a mech design made use of, it was still far less complicated to predict than the mech market!

The two ended the call shortly afterwards. Both of them had some design work to do in light of the data they gathered.

Before Ves resumed his work, he took the time to check in with various people. One of the people he paid a lot of attention to lately was Jannzi Larkinson. At this point in time, the Avatars of Myth would soon be setting up the nucleus of its first spaceborn mech company. Two of the three new Larkinsons would finally get to pilot a real mech instead of virtual ones.

"You called, sir?" Jannzi asked after stopping by his office.

"Yes. I wanted to talk to you about your upcoming role in my new mech design. As you are already aware, the Aurora Titan will be the LMC's first spaceborn mech design. It is imperative that the Aurora Titan will be able to showcase its capabilities in practice."

"You want me to demonstrate your new mech?" She frowned. "I don't know, sir. I'm barely out of the mech academy, you know."

"You don't have to sell yourself short. Your Larkinson training as given you an excellent foundation that puts you ahead of mech pilots who are older and possess a lot more experience. There is no one else nearby who I can entrust this responsibility except for you. As a Larkinson, I know you will be able to do right by the Aurora Titan."

While Jannzi still looked a little floored, the gleam in her eyes showed she was definitely interested. "I'll do it if you are confident in my skills."

"I know you can. The only thought you have to keep in mind is that the Aurora Titan is different from other space knights. It's a lot heavier and therefore a lot more sluggish. You'll need to get used to its lack of mobility and cope with it the best you can. You also have to become proficient in operating its polarizing module. It makes a huge difference to the mech's operating time if you master its use in the most efficient way possible."

Ves arranged Jannzi to train with a special simulator pod which held the virtual version of the first iteration of the Aurora Titan design. While the mech she would eventually get to pilot would deviate substantially from the older version, they shared enough in common that piloting one version was still very similar to piloting another version.

In any case, Ves really wanted Jannzi to get as much practice with the polarizing module as possible. Back when the first prototype was being tested, the test pilot constantly found ways to improve her ability to work with the active shielding system.

After sending Jannzi off, Gavin entered the office to report on the company's performance.

"Our market presence is diminishing again now that the effects of publicity has faded." Gavin stated. "The LMC has been able to prolong the good times by

sustaining a persistent marketing campaign that builds up on your recent fame, but people's memories are short."

"I know. I never expected the recent uptick in orders to last. Is the LMC at least still getting enough orders?"

Gavin nodded. "Our analysts expect that the company is still good for a year. The only problem is that the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord are continuing to lose value in the eyes of our consumers now that the new mech generation is very close. We can either reduce the prices of our mechs to match the expectations of the market or we can maintain our current price levels and see our orders fall even further."

The decision to lower the prices was very sensitive to the company. If they lowered the price too soon and too much, then they would be devaluing the two mech designers even further in the eyes of the market. When the next mech generation finally commenced, the LMC would inevitably be forced to drop their prices once again, to the point where the two mech models stopped generating profits.

From a long-term perspective, it was best to hold back on dropping the price and instead maintain the current level to give the market the illusion that the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord were still valued designs. This course of action would at least insure that the company would be able to generate some profits five or ten years from now.

Yet... was it really important for the LMC to continue selling the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord after such a long time. While they were only a couple of years old, the onset of the new mech generation made them a lot less relevant in the changing battlefields of tomorrow.

Ves made a judgement call at this time.

"The LMC should prepare to phase out the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord from its mech catalog. Just like the old Marc Antony Mark I and II's, the two mech models are products from an earlier time. I've improved a lot since I initially designed them. The LMC is not the small company it used to be a few years ago."

One of the biggest turning points that Ves anticipated was his impending advancement to Journeyman. Once that happened, his older work plainly lost a lot of relevance.

There was a big difference in mechs designed by Apprentices and mechs designed by Journeymen.

The former would never be able to capture any meaningful market share and could only be content with filling up the cracks.

The latter on the other hand stood a realistic chance of success in capturing a substantial chunk of market share!

Even though foreign mech models and the mechs designed by Seniors dominated the Bright Republic's mech market, plenty of Journeymen still found ways to become a real presence in the mech market. The old Kadar-Neyvis Group served as a good example.

Even though scandals forced it to shutter its doors, the KNG at its height impressed Ves a lot with its expansive mech catalog. The company had so many mech models on offer that even if most of the models only sold modestly, the accumulated volume of sales built up to a very sizable amount!

Not only that, but due to the KNG's frequent product releases, they gained a lot of opportunities to hit the jackpot. Some of their mech models won so much regard from the mech market that they became overnight successes!

Part of the reason why this model worked so well with the KNG was because it operated flexible production lines that could switch to mass producing a

different mech model when needed. The training and logistical flexibility required to run their manufacturing complexes in an efficient manner under these circumstances still provided a lot of inspiration.

Gavin thought over the argument for a moment. "I think you're right that the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord are getting on in their years. However, as long as we adopt more flexible pricing, we can extend our sales of those two mech models. Are you really sure about phasing them so soon? We will need other mech models to prop up the LMC. You'll have to design a lot of mechs in the coming years in order to fill up the gap."

Ves nodded. "I'm sure. Don't worry about our mech catalog. I'll be adding plenty of new designs that tide us over in the coming years. Even though many customers are waiting for the new mech generation to roll in so that they can buy the latest products, many price-conscious mech buyers won't be able to afford the elevated prices of the latest mechs. The market demand for competitively-priced mechs is still strong as ever."

While the Aurora Titan would not be able to meet market demand as well as Ves would like, the mech design still served a useful role in proving that he could design better mechs than before.

"Are you confident in my abilities, Gavin?"

"Even if you haven't improved, as long as you design mechs like the Blackbeak or the Crystal Lord, I'm sure the LMC will do fine. I'm just afraid that you're overestimating your abilities. Your first two original mech designs happened to become a commercial success. I know enough about the mech market that this doesn't happen very often. What if your latest design flops?"

"It won't flop, or at least not as severely as you think." Ves replied confidently.

He already prepared a backup plan if the Aurora Titan failed to catch on. The market would come to appreciate the Aurora Titan one way or another.

## Chapter 1110 Marketing Budge

A week passed by as both Ves and Professor Ventag adjusted the Aurora Titan's design. They worked away as many flaws as possible without compromising the strengths of the mech.

When it came time to fabricate the second prototype for testing, Ves begged off the opportunity to do it himself.

"I trust in your company's capabilities."

"Oh? That's quite different from last time, Ves. Why the change of heart?"

"I am used to doing everything myself." Ves replied over the comm. "However, after seeing how competent your subordinates are, I think they can do an excellent job in my stead. The difference in quality won't be very noticeable."

"That is true. I hardly ever bother with fabricating a mech by myself. My employees have gotten very good at fabricating even my most complicated designs due to focused efforts on enhancing their capabilities. This is something that every mech company can accomplish over time as long as you keep nurturing your mech technicians."

The professor raised a good point. At this time, Ves would never trust his mech technicians as much as the professor did his own. The LMC's mech technicians were still rather basic in their qualifications. Learning how to fabricate an entirely new mech design took way too long. They would need to fabricate at least dozens of Aurora Titans in order for them to pass through the steepest part of the learning curve.

Aside from not wanting to bother with redundant work, Ves also had two other reasons to leave the matter in someone else's hands.

First, he already observed the effect of the Aurora Titan's underdeveloped X-Factor. Its strength was so strong that the test pilot already noticed its presence from the start.

Ves did not wish to attract more attention to this aspect of his design than he liked. The testing facility would doubtlessly be scratching their heads trying to disassemble and reassemble the Aurora Titan over and over again if they encountered the same phenomenon yet again.

By letting others be responsible for fabricating the prototype, the X-Factor of the mech would still be present, but in a substantially weaker form. It shouldn't be strong enough to attract any alarm.

Ves figured the incident with the prototype mostly had to do with the fact that Ves fabricated the prototype personally by hand. As his Spirituality increased in strength, its effects gained in strength as well. Any mech designed and handcrafted by Ves gained a lot more value than before!

In general, this was good news, because his gold label mechs and any custom mechs he developed became even more fantastic compared to their bronze and silver label counterparts. Even the latter two editions also rode along as the more potent X-Factor of the design meant that even if others mass produced his mechs, they would still retain a good amount of spiritual strength.

It was like diluting a cup of wine. In order to retain its alcohol content even after dumping some water in the cup, it was best to start with a stronger wine.

Aside from his concerns on the prototype's X-Factor, Ves also had a second reason to remain in Cloudy Curtain.

He simply didn't want to travel to Bentheim again. After seeing how close the planet was about to blow during his last visit, Ves couldn't wait to get out as fast as possible! Why would he possibly return and expose himself to the same risks as last time?

Even though Bentheim remained oddly quiet during the past few weeks since his departure from the planet, Ves still didn't want to take the risk of getting caught up in a terrorist attack!

They moved on to discuss the marketing of the Aurora Titan. The closer they came to publishing the design, the more they began to shift their attention towards prepping it for the market.

So far, the initial tests showed that the Aurora Titan held a lot of promise. The challenge was in trying to convince the market to appreciate the value it could bring to a spaceborn mech force.

Marketing the mech was crucial to the mech design's commercial success. While neither Ves or Professor Ventag would bleed if the Aurora Titan flopped in the market, it wasn't in their nature to give up before a fight.

This was why both of them pooled together a substantial amount of money into the Aurora Titan's marketing budget. The LMC together with Bollinger Mech Trade would focus on marketing the Aurora Titan in Bentheim. NORA Consolidated would try to market the mech model in the rest of the Bright Republic and the star sector.

These two marketing campaigns required a lot of funding to take hold. If the Aurora Titan didn't sell more than a thousand mechs per year, then both companies would lose more money than they earned from its sales due to all of the money wasted on ad campaigns and other marketing activities.

"Where do you think NORA Consolidated spends most of its money?" The professor suddenly asked.

"Research?"

Ves knew that a Senior Mech Designer often engaged in expensive research in an attempt to advance their design philosophies. They needed to perform

many different experiments, many of which involved the use of very high-end materials.

Advancing to Master was the ultimate dream of every Senior Mech Designer. Without devoting a sufficient amount of time and money into their research, they would never be able to come close to join the ranks of vaunted Masters in their profession!

Yet surprisingly, the professor shook his head. "It's actually marketing."

While Ves had an inkling that the professor might say that due to the current topic of discussion, the answer still surprised him a lot!

"How much do mech companies actually spend on marketing?"

"It depends on many factors, but generally the larger the mech company, the more they are able to leverage their scale to achieve very substantial gains from marketing. There are mech companies in the Bright Republic that spend twenty, thirty or even forty percent of their budgets on marketing!"

Forty percent! A mech company that spent almost half of their budget on advertising and other marketing activities alone must almost certainly run on hype alone!

"Does it work?"

"That's a difficult question to answer, but generally yes. Marketing does work. Why do so many mech companies allocate such a high proportion of their budgets to marketing activities if it's just a waste of money. It's an investment, Ves. In order for a company to make money, they have to spend money. Even if my company releases a new mech model, it can't rely on my reputation alone to turn it into a great success. Even though my company's brand is very strong, there are other companies that are also just as well-regarded."

"So mech companies are constantly competing against each other on marketing?" Ves furrowed his brows. "Won't that turn into an arms race at some point? Company A spends ten percent of its budget on marketing to capture marketing share from Company B. Subsequently, Company B spends twenty percent of its budget on marketing to recapture that same marketing share. In response, Company A ups their spending on marketing by thirty percent, and so on. Won't that eventually eat away at every company's profitability?"

The only companies who won in this arms race were the news portals and other media outlets who played the advertisements on behalf of the mech companies! They must be rolling in credits with all the money the mech companies threw at them to run their ads!

Even now, the LMC prepared to invest up to 8 billion credits on marketing the Aurora Titan! This was far more than the company invested in marketing the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord during their launch!

For the same money the company prepared to spend on its upcoming marketing campaign, it could have easily used the money to buy another Hanover production line and still have 2 billion credits left to spare!

"These spending levels are fully reasonable, Ves." Professor Ventag stated. "Sure, we are gambling heavily on our Aurora Titan design to achieve at least moderate success, but in order to maximize these odds, we need to invest a great amount of money."

"Still, ten billion credits is a lot of money for the LMC. If not for.. extenuating circumstances, my company would have never been able to gather this much money for the Aurora Titan's marketing budget."

The problem the LMC faced was that 10 billion credits was actually on the small side! The advertising landscape was so saturated with ads for different

mech models that it was hard to get a consumer to pay attention to the Aurora Titan unless ads about it continued to pop up. Not only would ads have to be present in Bentheim's virtual sphere, but a physical presence was also essential.

The professor underscored the necessity of spending this much money. "Think about how many Aurora Titans need to be sold to earn back all of this money. Leaving aside our profit split, we only have to sell 100 copies to recuperate your share of the marketing budget. Does it seem so difficult for us to manage to sell at least this much mechs?"

This rosy picture conveniently ignored the other costs related to producing the mechs. Even so, selling a couple of hundred Aurora Titans would still allow the LMC to pay back its investment in its marketing campaign.

Ves nodded reluctantly. "If you put it that way, then maybe spending so much on marketing doesn't seem so bad. With how extensive our marketing campaigns can be, achieving a couple of hundreds of sales doesn't seem impossible."

This was the perspective of a true major mech manufacturer! The LMC still had a long way to go before it began to equal the likes of the old KNG or NORA Consolidated.

The Senior elaborated on the issue of marketing. "Right now, you're still an Apprentice, so you have always treated the competition as numerous but formless. Yet will that last? When you advance to Journeyman, you no longer compete with kids anymore. The moment you lift yourself up is the moment you and your company enters the big leagues. Not only will you be competing in a much less crowded arena, your competitors are as capable if not better than you. Even if you believe that marketing is a waste of money, what about your competitors?"

Ves knew that the nature of an arms race was that both sides had to one-up each other in order to remain viable in the race. The moment a participant stopped competing, they would quickly fall out of consideration.

While Ves became increasingly more dour, he knew that Professor Ventag had given him a very necessary dose of reality.

No mech company could do without marketing! Not if they wished to continue to grow!

A marketing campaign was like a mech regiment meant to be employed in the war for market share. In this analogy, the side which fielded the best and most numerous mechs gained the upper hand against a less-well funded mech regiment.

If Ves continued to remain as miserly with regards to marketing as before, his company's marketing activities would only be as strong as the Flagrant Vandals.

In an equal battle, the Flagrant Vandals would definitely lose out against the Hostland Warriors or the Spiral Shockers!

The Mech Corps invested a lot of money into maintaining the strength of their mech regiments. Mech companies were similar in that they spent huge amounts of money into their marketing activities.

Whether it was the military or a private mech company, both of them were required to fight their own battles.

A mech company like the LMC would always need to fight against someone in the market in order to secure some market share.

Ves ended the call shortly afterwards in order to digest the lessons he received.

The professor was also a teacher, after all, so he always imparted the information that Ves needed to know the most.

"I'll be glad if the Aurora Titan sells a hundred copies at the start. Yet with all of this money being spent on marketing, the Aurora Titan needs to sell a lot more copies in order for our companies to break even!"

This was quite an expensive gamble!