

### **Chapter 1111 Ves the Artis**

A lot of time went by as Ves and Professor Ventag iterated on the Aurora Titan design. After the second prototype followed a third and a fourth prototype. Each subsequent tests revealed fewer flaws and inconsistencies. All the major flaws had been worked away, and most of the newer problems that popped up emerged in response to earlier solutions.

Along the way, Ves also adjusted the Aurora Titan's aesthetics in order to make it look more appealing. The mech's likeness began to look more like its namesake. It looked like a large and bulky titanic sculpture with a modest amount of muscle definition. The mech resembled an ancient marble statue, but Ves swapped the humanoid head with an exobeast head on a whim.

That last change perplexed Professor Ventag a bit.

"The Aurora Titan is very much a humanoid mech. Why would you change it to a dinosaur head, Ves?"

"Since every test pilot who interfaced with the prototypes describe that they feel like they are piloting an exobeast, why not play around with it?" Ves replied over the comm. "Both you and I know that appearances matter. A humanoid head is so ubiquitous that it doesn't convey any particular meaning. The lizard head on the other hand will make the Aurora Titan a much more interesting visual spectacle. It stands out even more from the crowd of standard humanoid space knight designs."

The professor still looked like he disapproved. "The Aurora Titan's intrusive aesthetic features are too bold and in your face. I know from your previous works that you have a flair for adding an artistic touch to your mech, but the muscle definition that you've added to the mech will increase the cost and demand more skill to make the armor plating. This complex-looking lizard head is much more troublesome to produce than a standard humanoid head."

"Only the gold label edition of the Aurora Titan will feature all of these frills." Ves retorted. "The extra care and attention put into the aesthetics of its top-shelf model will make buyers more happy with spending tens of millions more credits on what is essentially the same mech. I've also worked on simplifying the artistic elements on the bronze and silver label editions to make them more suitable for mass production. The crystal tech I incorporated in them is also weaker but simpler to reproduce."

The three-tiered mech model scheme of the LMC somewhat clashed with NORA Consolidated's own approach. While Ves favored an artistic touch if he could get away with it, Professor Ventag generally valued form over function. The Senior preferred to design simple and clean-looking designs that were easy to fabricate and easy to repair.

The two argued over this issue for a while but Ves held his ground despite going against the will of a Senior. Since the Aurora Titan was pretty much his brainchild, Ves eventually got his way.

The professor dismissively waved his hand. "Fine. I'll indulge you on this matter. I do have to admit that your art does look appealing in some sense. This will be a benefit to our marketing campaigns even if you don't plan on selling a large number of gold label mechs."

The gold label mechs often times became the public face for the lesser editions even though there weren't that many out there in the wild. This happened with the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords. Their rarity turned them into genuine collector's items in some circles.

Ves did take the liberty of adding one particular aesthetic feature to every edition of the Aurora Titan.

He first scoured through NORA Consolidated's expansive library of licenses but failed to find what he needed.

He then browsed the MTA's library of endless component licenses and found the perfect component for the job.

The Rescue Particle Generator was a small and energy-efficient component that emitted long-lasting glowing particles. As its name suggested, it was meant to be employed as a signal flare for stranded mechs and shuttles who were waylaid in deep space.

Unlike the Festive Cloud Generator, it did not require a source of fluid to function. It worked on both on land and in space and only increased the energy consumption of the Aurora Titan by a negligible amount. It was also small and flexible in its employment.

Ves added the emitters of the Rescue Particle Generator on the rear of the Aurora Titan design. The particles emitted from this addition not only blended in with the glow emanating from the flight system, but they also left behind a persistent trail in space that looked fantastic when the Aurora Titan was on the move.

Of course, Ves took into account that not every outfit or mech pilot wanted to paint a glowing golden stripe of its passage through space. There was no reason for the mech to puff itself up during routine patrols.

Aside from deactivating the Rescue Particle Generator, owners could also opt to remove them entirely without affecting the structural integrity of the mech.

"Hopefully, not a lot of people will choose this option."

The best part about the Rescue Particle Generator was that its function was so useless in raising the functional battle performance of a mech that its license was dirt cheap. It hardly impacted his bank account at all to license it for ten years, though he did contemplate on licensing it on a perpetual basis instead.

"With the knowledge I possess, it shouldn't be impossible for me to design my own gadget one day." He judged.

A perpetual license was many times more expensive than a standard ten-year license. Ves figured that within this span of time, he would surely be able to come up with something that provided even more visual flair than a component meant simply to put up a colored light to attract rescue.

Perhaps distracting himself with these visual aspects may not be entirely to the benefit of the actual design. However, both his design philosophy and Qilanxo's spiritual fragment approved of his attempts to beautify the mech. It turned the Aurora Titan into a much more interesting mech that distinguished itself further from the concept of mechs as disposable commodities.

"A mech that costs 100 million credits or more to buy ought to represent more than function."

While Ves admitted that form over function or simplicity to the point of minimalism each had their good points, that was simply not his design style.

"Functionalism and minimalism devolves the identity of a mech into its base role to its extreme. The company brand matters plays a greater role in how the mech is seen than its individual merits."

Some mech companies built up a very strong brand name and reputation for quality. They published simple-looking mechs with a unified aesthetic design that all leaned towards simplicity. Their designs were also part of the same product family, so they worked particularly well with each other.

All of this resulted in a trend whereby some outfits fielded an entire force of uniform-looking mechs! Actually encountering such a mech force was quite a sight!

In general, most mech designers didn't bother all that much with the visual design of their mechs. The general trend of mechs was to treat them as

functional war machines. Mech designers therefore tended to lean towards simplicity and leave aside any unnecessary visual elements that might negatively impact the performance of their mech designs.

Ves actively fought against this trend. Why couldn't mechs be art?

"Even if mech designers don't actively work on the aesthetics of their mechs, they are still engaging in art."

The most important factor to take into account to Ves was that mech design involved both art and science. In fact, the profession blended the two into an intermingled whole. The science part affected the parameters of the mech while the art part shaped people's perception of the mech.

Many people and even mech designers often underestimated the impact of perception to the performance of the mech. Ves believed that mech pilots would treat their mechs like crap if they looked like garbage. On the other hand, if their mechs looked classy and expensive, then the mech pilots would never treat them like crap!

While these were extreme examples, mechs that looked boring or generic would not arouse any specific feelings to the mech pilot. This was a wasted opportunity to shape their perception and therefore the way they treated their mechs.

"If mechs are bots, then their appearances don't matter. The AIs that control them won't perform any differently whether machine looks like a rust bucket or a sculpture come to life. Humans are different. They are ruled by logic as well as emotions. It's the latter that is the key."

Due to his design philosophy, Ves spent a lot of effort in trying to master the ability to shape people's moods and emotion.

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words."

The true meaning of this phrase was that a picture was a great means of indoctrinating an audience without resorting to overt means!

"To put it more bluntly, art brainwashes people!"

This was a crazy statement to make, but as a mech designer Ves constantly tried to find a way to shape the perception of his target audience to his product.

Every artist tried to convey meaning in their works. Even if Ves visited an art gallery and taped a nutrient pack onto a wall, this work would still qualify as art! While the idea of affixing a nutrient pack onto a wall sounded ridiculous, it nonetheless sent out a specific message that affected the thoughts, emotions and moods of its audience!

Therefore, Ves very much thought that mech designers who focused more on the science and engineering aspects of their designs missed some of the points about their profession. Design encompassed both function and form. The latter deserved at least some attention, if only to prime the opinion of the market without resorting to expensive marketing campaigns!

Still, Ves was very cognizant that he could take this particular quirk of his and turn it into an obsession. His preoccupation with visuals frankly distracted him from paying more attention on the basic functionality of the design. Because he was very much willing to sacrifice a bit of performance if it made his mech look better, his products would never reach their full potential in terms of performance!

"So what? With my current design ability, my mechs already perform well enough to keep up with competing products."

While Ves did care about the performance of his mechs, he did not fixate on improving it at all costs. Mech designers such as the Skull Architect

were so sensitive towards inefficiencies that they would keep themselves preoccupied for weeks or months just to find a way to solve a minor issue.

During his time with the Whalers, the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens, Ves made an important observation that shaped his perspective on mech design. While many people tended to nitpick over the technical specifications of a mech, hardly any mech pilot ever managed to reach the upper limit of what their machines were capable of! What a mech could do in theory and in practice were very different!

Again, the example of the Skull Architect came to mind. His mechs were such impressive high-performing machines that one would think that his products would dominate the battlefield. The reality was very much different, especially in a very poor environment like the frontier.

Only aberrantly-skilled mech pilots, expert candidates and expert pilots hit or surpassed the limits of their mechs. The overwhelming majority of mech pilots always performed significantly worse than the capabilities of their mechs implied.

Therefore, rather than wrack his brains on maximizing the theoretical performance of his mechs, Ves would rather attempt to increase the average performance of the mech pilots that used his products.

"This approach is central to my design philosophy."

Shaping opinions and brainwashing his mech pilots through a mix of spiritual and visual design were very underappreciated aspects in modern-day mech design.

Any product or work of art that involved some design aspects always conveyed a meaning.

Ves just recognized this fact and weaponized it in order to advance the goals set by his design philosophy.

"Let's not kid myself. The biggest reason why I bother so much with visual design is because it will help me sell more mechs!"

### Chapter 1112 The Final Touch

The time to develop the Aurora Titan surpassed the time limit initially set by Professor Ventag. With all the successive iterations being developed and sent to the Green Nebula region to undergo testing, they wasted a lot of time on improving and optimizing the design.

However, Ves considered the effort to be fairly worth it. By the time they developed a fifth prototype and got it tested, Ves and the professor decided that this would be the final iteration of the design.

Aside from implementing some very minor last-minute tweaks, the lengthy design process eventually came to an end!

"It's done!" Ves celebrated.

"The design is functionally complete." The professor nodded over the comm.

"As long as you are sure that this is the product that you wish to publish in our names, I will fabricate a copy myself and send it to the MTA for validation."

"That sounds good. I trust in your capabilities."

Ves still held the same concerns as before. Unless it was absolutely necessary, Ves did not plan on visiting Bentheim at all!

Unfortunately, he might not have his wish.

"While our companies have prepared elaborate marketing campaigns for our new product, it is nonetheless vital for us to announce it in person. My company has already booked a large exhibition venue in Bentheim. As the lead designer of the Aurora Titan, it mainly falls on you to introduce the public to this mech design. Are you up to the task?"



This was a difficult question to Ves. If he declined, then the professor would take up the stage. That might be good in attracting more attention to the Aurora Titan design because any mech designed by a Senior was notable.

However, letting Professor Ventag be the public face of the joint design project did not help Ves out in any way.

The audience might think that the Senior was the real lead designer and that Ves was only a junior hanger-on who coasted on Ventag's reputation!

If Ves wanted to put some truth into the fact that he was responsible for setting the concept, vision and around seventy-five of the Aurora Titan design, then he needed to step onto the stage in person!

Therefore, despite his great reluctance to return to Bentheim, Ves eventually nodded. "Please let me do the product reveal. In fact, could you let me be in charge of fabricating the show models as well? It will help if I can present the works I made with my own hands."

"Are you certain? NORA Consolidated's production equipment is a lot better than our own company's production equipment. You've entrusted the fabrication of the prototype to my company and I don't see the need to change that. At least one of my crews have become quite adept at fabricating copies of the Aurora Titan."

"Your mech technicians are very capable." Ves praised. "Yet a mech designed by myself will carry my personal touch. I think that is what the show models need the most at its upcoming product reveal. I'm very good at this. Otherwise, my gold label mechs wouldn't be so valued compared to their bronze and silver label counterparts."

"What about your company's fabrication limits? Is it capable of fabricating an Aurora Titan?"

"The situation is different now." Ves stated. "I've tasked my company to order some extra equipment and rework some of my production lines. My manufacturing complex is now fully capable of producing the Aurora Titan without any complications."

The professor eventually agreed, dismissing it as one of Ves' many eccentricities.

These upgrades may have cost some money, but Ves considered the investment to be well worth it. It helped that he only upgraded a couple of production lines, thereby minimizing his expenditures.

If everything went according to plan, then NORA Consolidated became responsible for the bulk of fulfilling the orders for the Aurora Titan model. The bigger company was much more equipped to output a lot of Aurora Titans at a consistently high quality.

NORA Consolidated therefore became responsible for the production of both the bronze label and silver label editions of the Aurora Titan model.

While it was weird to entrust the company with the production of both the bronze and silver label editions of the new mech model, neither mech designers thought it was a good idea to involve a third-party.

The Aurora Titan design was very much a niche product that fulfilled a very narrow role. It would never sell as much as standard medium space knights. With its low sales projection, there really wasn't any point in outsourcing production of the most affordable edition to a different company.

That didn't prevent other companies from licensing the design from the MTA, but even so they would likely be wasting their money.

While the professor's mech company became responsible for mass production, the LMC would fulfill more special orders. Ves planned to fabricate the gold label edition of the Aurora Titan in limited amounts in order to impress

the public, meet the needs of the Avatars of Mech and propagate mechs with the strongest X-Factor he had ever produced up to this point.

He would also fulfill any custom orders he found worthwhile to fulfill. Ves considered his time to be very valuable, so he wouldn't easily spend his time on customizing an Aurora Titan to a specific client without getting a lot of rewards in return.

All in all, both of their companies had already made full preparations for the upcoming introduction of the Aurora Titan design. From both a production and a marketing standpoint, their companies were as ready as ever to work with the new design!

After agreeing on several other matters, Ves eventually ended the call with the professor.

"Heh." Ves chuckled. "This will likely be the end of my easy access to a Senior Mech Designer."

The joint design project gave Ves a lot of opportunities to interact with a Senior in an intimate manner. For all intents and purposes, the professor had taken on an unofficial role as a mentor to the younger mech designer.

This was something that Ves really lacked. While he showered Ketis with a lot of attention before during his time with the Vandals, this time he had become the beneficiary of someone who was better and more experienced.

Naturally, Ves did not think that Ventag spent so much time on mentoring him because the professor appreciated his talents. Perhaps that might have played a role, but ultimately Professor Ventag was trying to pull Ves deeper into his orbit.

As long as Ves continued to become more prominent, the professor's investment would pay off big time!

Ves recognized the influence game that the professor was playing and implicitly accepted it as he benefited from the tutelage of a Senior. He gained a lot of small but important insights such as the importance of marketing to a mech company.

However, both of them were busy mech designers with many priorities on their minds.

Professor Ventag not only had to design a lot of mechs to keep NORA Consolidated at the forefront of the mech market, he also fought to keep the DCTI relevant in the face of AUMD's dominance in Bentheim's academic mech community.

Meanwhile, Ves had to prepare his company for the impending transition to the next mech generation. In order for the company to maintain its market presence, Ves also had to come up with a number of stopgap designs in the next couple of years.

Just like the Aurora Titan design, these stopgap designs would straddle between two different mech generations and be able to provide value in both instances. Ves aimed to work with more versatile mech concepts for his stopgap design with greater sales potential than his Aurora Titan design.

"It's all well and good to innovate on a mech design, but I shouldn't lose sight on the importance of making money."

The LMC needed to offer appealing mech designs in the next couple of years. These products would fill the void that emerged when the company retired the Blackbeak and Crystal Lord models from its mech catalog.

"If my company stops receiving orders, my production lines will all fall dormant. Most of my company's employees won't have anything to do and my company will continue to bleed an enormous amount of money while remaining idle."

A company that spent most of its time by sitting on its hands all day was not a productive company! Even if Ves could use extraordinary one-off means to generate huge amounts of money, this was not a sustainable way to run a company.

If Ves needed to bail out his company out of its dire financial straits all the time, what would that do to the confidence of his employees? They would think that the LMC wasn't strong enough to stand on its own! If such a sentiment ever took root in the minds of his workers, then their morale and shared identity would all plummet into nothing!

Therefore, in order to sustain the long-term health of the company, Ves needed to pump out several mech designs with interesting formulas. As long as these designs achieved enough sales as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord, then that was enough of a success in his book.

"I also can't forget about my other obligations." Ves grimaced.

In other words, Ves would likely be so preoccupied with his own matters that he wouldn't be able to remain in regular contact with Professor Ventag.

"Perhaps it's for the best. If I continue to learn from him, eventually I will lose my own way."

As a mech designer, Ves had a very clear idea on what kind of mechs he wanted to design. While there wasn't anything wrong with learning from another mech designer, he should always be wary of supplanting his own design philosophy with someone else's!

"Well, enough musing about. Let's finalize the design."

Ves upheld a very different definition of finalizing a mech design than others. Most mech designers would simply file some paperwork to convey the message that the latest version of the design was the official one.

Not him. While Ves would still have to follow the same steps in order to satisfy the laws and regulations set by the MTA and the local jurisdictions, he needed to take one additional step to truly finalize a design.

"It's time to add the final touch."

Ves called up the design schematics of the Aurora Titan from his desk projector and centered himself for a moment. He concentrated his mind and connected himself to the dormant spiritual fragment in his mind.

He conveyed a simple message to the fragment.

The fragment pulsed in response.

Ves could sense the excitement emanating from Qilanxo's augmented spiritual fragment. After months of riding inside his mind and taking an active part in designing the Aurora Titan, it could finally end its months-long wait!

With the spiritual fragment's assent, Ves opened up his mind while staring intensely at the projected design of the Aurora Titan.

It was time for the spiritual fragment to breathe life into the design!

"Go! Take up your new home!"

With a mental breeze, the spiritual fragment phased right through his mental space and flitted over to the spiritual domain of the Aurora Titan.

The design seemed to glow in his mental vision. Some very inexplicable reactions occurred as the design truly seemed to come to life in his eyes! Its X-Factor became more and more enlivened, and in some sense Ves even received the illusion that the design even managed to surpass a limit that he never knew before!

As the design stopped glowing in his spiritual vision, Ves felt a huge void in his mind. The immensely powerful presence of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment no longer inhabited his mind!

Even though he missed its presence, he nonetheless felt an unprecedented amount of satisfaction. The spiritual fragment not only succeeded in integrating itself into the design, but also pushed its X-Factor to unseen heights!

Ves cherished the memory of this moment. "It will be a long time before I can replicate this amazing moment."

### **Chapter 1113 Pavlovian Dog and Ca**

Finalizing a mech design meant that the System would inevitably evaluate the design. While Ves felt very curious about learning what the System thought of the unprecedentedly strong X-Factor of the Aurora Titan design, he held himself back from activating it right this instant.

"I designed the Aurora Titan for myself."

He did not design the Aurora Titan to impress Professor Ventag, to make a lot of money, to enhance his reputation or to please the rigid priorities of the ambiguous System.

In fact, Ves felt disgusted at himself for his impulse to immediately reach for the System like a Pavlovian dog salivating for treat from its master.

"I think I deserve a break."

Ves decided to take a few days off in order to clear his mind and readjust himself to his changed mental landscape. The lengthy presence of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment in his mind left a lot of marks behind. Not only that, he never felt he was completely alone while the fragment still resided in his mind.

It was simply too lifelike for Ves to dismiss it as a soulless entity.

While it didn't hurt to take a few days off, he should also try to regain his peak state as fast as possible.

If Ves wanted to make the best possible splash during the product reveal, then he needed to show the Aurora Titan in its best state. How better to accomplish this goal than to present a number of gold label mechs?

"I have to be in the best condition possible in order to fabricate the most impactful copies of the Aurora Titan."

Even without reading the System's evaluation for the Aurora Titan's X-Factor, Ves also sensed its extraordinary strength. What kind of benefits the X-Factor provided, Ves frankly didn't know. However, they would most definitely allow the Aurora Titan to stand out to the mech pilots who came in touch with a copy!

Ves already looked forward to seeing the reactions of his customers. The Aurora Titan was meant to fulfill the needs of space knight pilots, after all. If he couldn't satisfy their desires, then he considered the design to be an abject failure.

"Hopefully, the market can look past its weaknesses and appreciate its strengths."

Ves particularly cared about how Jannzi Larkinson took in the new mech. As a member of the Avatars of Myth, she was entitled to pilot some of his best mechs. The Aurora Titan he planned to provide her would not only be a gold label mech, but also incorporate one of Lucky's super gems.

"Your byproducts will finally play a role again, Lucky." He told his cat who was lounging on a cat bed placed on his imposing desk.

"Meow."

"Yeah yeah, I know. I haven't made use of your gifts for a long time. It's different now. The Avatars of Myth deserve the best of what I can offer. After all, my safety is in their hands so it stands to reason that their mechs are better than the rest."



The powerful effects of Lucky's super gems made Ves feel a bit leery about implementing them in any commercial mechs. If anyone ever compared a gem-augmented mech to a non-augmented mech of the same design, then they would find that the disparity in performance was too blatant, especially when the differences reached as high as forty percent!

Ves couldn't risk his secret sauce being found out. Even if he made use of the Anonymizing Stamp to hide the presence of the gem, determined researchers would still be able to sniff it out through employing a process of elimination.

It was best to keep this advantage close to his chest. By customizing the mechs a bit, Ves could worm the super gem into its frame and use the excuse that the elevated performance was due to the more expensive exotics he added to the mech or something.

"Custom mechs always perform better than standard mechs. It stands to reason that their parameters are higher."

Ves considered this a good way to camouflage the effect of the gems. Not only that, but the benefits brought about by the changes to the standard design would also synergize with the effects of the gems, thereby multiplying the performance gains!

Since the gem-augmented mechs strictly belonged to the Avatars of Myth, their abnormally high performance wouldn't be at risk of any outside scrutiny! It was his personal mech troop after all. Why would he conduct an investigation in his own mechs?

Ves picked up Lucky and carried him against his shoulder as he left his office. Every employee in the headquarters of the LMC was used to seeing Lucky alone or in the grasp of Ves or his confidants, so he did not attract more attention than the usual admiration and hero worship that he already received.

His ploy of making his workers and the public get used to see him carrying around his mechanical pet continued apace.

Ideally, Lucky would become an inseparable accessory of Ves in their impression of him. This was because aside from his gem production ability, Lucky was his strongest bodyguard!

Ves paused his journey alongside a wall that depicted the company's logo with the motto placed underneath.

All this time, the LMC adopted a stylized depiction of Lucky resting comfortably on a rainbow cloud surrounded by a triangle.

"It's a shame it's outdated." He remarked.

"Meow!"

Back when he initially conceived of the logo, Lucky looked like a bronze mechanical contraption. After consuming a lot of exotics as well as high-quality Rorach's Bone and whatever materials the CFA put into its shuttle and gear, Lucky looked very different now.

While he was still as small as an organic cat, Lucky's exterior pulsed with glowing blue energy between his metallic white exterior plating. The gem cat looked a lot more futuristic than when Ves initially received him as a gift from the System.

A gift that Ves found out hadn't been a random prize from a lottery ticket. Instead, his mother deliberately rigged the System somehow in order to put Lucky in his possession.

Ves still didn't know what to think of it. Despite Lucky's intimate relationship to his incorporeal mother, he still considered his pet to be his closest companion.

In some way, Lucky was the family pet. That perspective made it a little easier for Ves to accept his cat's uncertain origins.

He turned his attention back to the logo. Even though Lucky's exterior no longer looked like bronze, Ves didn't think it was worth the effort to implement a vast and costly company-wide change just to reshade the company logo.

"With your bottomless appetite, you'll probably look different again a year from now."

"Meow!"

Lucky tried to look innocent, but Ves knew better than to take his cute pet at face value. The heart of a gluttonous devil resided inside the metallic bone shell of his cat.

"Well, let's move on."

Ves continued to carry Lucky downwards until he reached the ground floor. Some security guards automatically followed him as he made his way outside and beheld the cloudy skies of his home planet.

"I can never get tired of this sight. Others might think this planet is drab, but to us it's home."

"Meow."

Lucky probably didn't care. He was a cat, after all. The only concerns on his mind was eating valuable minerals and exotics while making sure that his master remained alive to continue feeding him these goodies.

Ves leisurely strolled across the garden-like plaza of the Mech Nursery and reached the annex of the complex reserved for the Avatars of Myth.

Their base so far became increasingly crowded as the Avatars continued to expand their ranks. Ves figured that at some point it would be best to erect a separate base for his personal force.

"Ves!"

Melkor stepped out of the administrative office of the Avatars of Myth and greeted Ves in person. "I've received word that you are heading this way. What brings you to our base?"

For a moment, Ves admired the sight of the Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords and various other mechs in his sights.

"I wanted to check up on Jannzi." He said. "She's been practicing in the simulators, right?"

"Correct. Ever since you tasked her with piloting a show model of your new mech, she's been hard at work trying to master its intricacies. She's really devoted to doing the best job possible. All of us know what your new design means to you and the company."

It gladdened Ves to hear that Jannzi maintained her diligent practice all this time. "How good is she with the latest virtual version of the Aurora Titan?"

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

They moved over to the practice facility which hosted a large variety of training equipment for the mech pilots. The Avatars made use of quality simulators to train the mech pilots, though no simulator could ever model reality with total accuracy, so the actual benefits didn't compare to practicing with actual mechs.

If not for concerns about accelerating the wear and tear of their existing mechs, the Avatars of Myth would be practicing with actual mechs all the time.

When Ves, Melkor and Lucky stepped into a control room that administered the simulators, they called up a projection that depicted Jannzi's current practice run.

It depicted a harrowing battle while Jannzi's Aurora Titan desperately tried to shield three vulnerable rifleman mechs against a full company of enemy rifleman mechs!

It was impossible for the Aurora Titan to shield its fellow mechs from the onslaught of firepower pouring in from each direction. The enemy ranged mechs surrounded their outnumbered prey on all sides.

Yet even if it was impossible to shield her comrades in every direction, Jannzi didn't go down without a fight! The Titan glowed in gold and white as it mustered out as much energy as possible to present a shielded front against the most intensive volleys of incoming fire!

"I can last longer!" She shouted to herself as she gritted her teeth.

The Aurora Titan proficiently absorbed pinpoint laser beams with polarizing fields that were only a couple times larger than the radius of the beams. This was a very efficient application of the polarizing fields as it was just large enough to block the laser beams and its scattering heat!

Even so, much of the shield and armor plating of the Titan slowly turned to slag or vaporized away as the mech endured volley after volley of laser fire!

Eventually, the Pisaro armor plating gave up the ghost, exposing its internal components to space. Laser beams quickly raked the gaps, inflicting substantial internal damage to the mech! If not for the effort that Professor Ventag put into compartmentalizing the internal architecture of the mech, a couple of laser beams might have already crippled Jannzi's virtual mech!

Even so, the widening armor breaches gave the enemy mechs more and more opportunities to beat up the Aurora Titan from within. The insides of the Aurora Titan was nowhere near as resilient as its exterior armor plating, so the mech finally succumbed from all of the damage a short time later!

The simulation ended!

"Damn it! I lasted shorter than the last time!" Jannzi berated herself as one of the simulator pods cracked open.

She suddenly came to attention when Ves and Melkor entered the room that hosted the simulator pods.

"Melkor! Ves!" She yelped and straightened her back.

"At ease." Ves said with mirth. "You don't have to act like we're in the military. We're family."

"Ah, yes."

She still looked nervous though. Even though Melkor was her older cousin, he was also the force commander of the Avatars of Myth. Meanwhile, Ves possessed an eminent status in the Bright Republic. His bank accounts alone was rumored to be countless times bigger than the Larkinson Estate's entire investment portfolio!

"You performed quite impressively in the last simulation." Ves praised. "You lasted several minutes longer than an average mech pilot would have lasted in the same position."

Jannzi firmly shook her head. "It's not enough. I know my uncles and aunts would be disappointed in me if they witnessed my performance. It's just that the strain of using the polarizing module to block laser fire coming in every direction is too burdensome for me to cope."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jannzi. It's not every day the Aurora Titan will find itself surrounded from all sides by an entire mech company. It's inevitable that the Aurora Titan will succumb when caught out alone with only a couple of friendly mechs by its side. A regular space knight wouldn't perform any better in the same situation, you know."

"I know it's just a practice exercise." The female Larkinson said. "It just gnaws at me that I still have a lot more to go before I can perfect my use of the polarizing module."

"Well, if you are really determined to do better, just wait until you receive one of the first copies of the finalized design of the Aurora Titan. I expect you'll be able to perform real miracles with my new mech!" Ves grinned.

#### **Chapter 1114 Breath of Life**

Aeon Corona VII. A planet of the gods. When the Starlight Megalodon crashed onto the surface of this heavy gravity planet, an endless cloud of disruptive but extremely potent higher-dimensional particles covered its skies and blanketed the rest of the star system. This not only caused the planet to become isolated from the rest of the galaxy, but also formed the basis of remarkable forms of life.

The vault of the gods, the all-encompassing clouds of higher-dimensional particles, not only blocked the suns of the star systems from shining on the surface, but also wormed their way into the native lifeforms of the planet. Everything changed due to the higher-dimensional particles leaking from the perpetually-active FTL drives of the Starlight Megalodon.

Perhaps the most drastic effect was that time passed ten times faster on the surface of the planet. Three-hundred years went by in the galaxy since the disappearance of the Starlight Megalodon, which meant that the planet went through three-thousand years of change and transition.

The planet's ecosystem underwent massive, directed changes as the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon terraformed the planet to suit their needs.

However, they did more than turn Aeon Corona VII into a livable planet. After some of the surviving researchers initiated Project Icarus, they began to employ widespread genetic modification on both humans and the native exobeasts of the planet.

This led to the proliferation of the Cursed People, genetically engineered dwarves that used to come from the stock of enlisted spacers of the Starlight Megalodon. It also led to the emergence of the Blessed People, genetically optimized humans with remarkable mental properties due to their exposure to the remarkable properties of the planet.

However, the extreme genetic modification performed on the native exobeasts served as the central focus of the CFA's followup investigation. A small fleet of warships maintained a permanent presence in the star system, preventing the aggressive sandmen from disrupting the proceedings on the planet.

The Starlight Megalodon was no more. Sigrund's awakening made sure of that. The hybrid alien AI was long gone as well after making sure that it left no traces of its existence behind.

The sentient AI had also been vindictive enough to sow mass destruction onto the planet, using its influence over his lesser sandman cousins to destroy each and every ancient city on the planet.

Hardly any Blessed People survived the genocide. Hardly any Sacred God survived as well, as most ignorantly tried to resist the massive sandmen motherships with their metaphysical powers.

While Sacred Gods possessed remarkable powers, these land beasts stood no chance against the might of a warship-equivalent like a sandman mothership.

Only those few Sacred Gods who wandered the wilderness between the ancient cities survived. Most of the Wild Gods, lesser exobeasts that hadn't been implanted with the remarkable god crystals, survived as well.

The CFA attempted to preserve the the god beast race when they arrived on Aeon Corona VII and learned some of the events that transpired.

Despite their remarkable scientific advancements, they were failing.



The researchers watched with dismay as every Sacred God and Wild God on the planet began to waste away, losing energy and body mass on a constant basis no matter how much they ate.

The god crystals implanted onto the hides of the Sacred Gods and the murky crystals that both Sacred Gods and Wild Gods were born with all lost their luster and energy.

The vault of the gods had disappeared, and the constant influx of higher-dimensional particles into the ecosystem disappeared along with it. This was disastrous because the god crystals and the murky crystals both consisted of crystallized higher-dimensional particles!

The sudden end of the supply of higher-dimensional particles caused both types of crystals to lose the ability to retain their integrity in the material dimensions. The god beasts that Project Icarus spawned slowly lost their integrity as well as their massive physical bodies depended on higher-dimensional particles as well.

"They're all dead." A head researcher said. Sadness suffused his voice. He was disappointed in himself and his subordinates for failing to come up with a way to retain the research gains of his predecessors. "Only one remains, but she is not long for this galaxy."

A visiting CFA commander standing next to the researcher frowned. "Your research teams have exposed our diminishing number of captive god beasts with various forms of higher-dimensional particles. Why have these remarkable exobeasts fail to sustain themselves with the new sources?"

The researcher sighed. "Higher-dimensional particles are a catch-all term for the myriad of unknown forms of matter that exists in what we colloquially call the higher dimensions. In this case, the particles that we presume to have

leaked from the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives are exceptionally difficult to pin down."

The CFA research teams tried their best. They employed advanced machines that emulated the peculiar behavior of the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives to expose the exobeasts with many different types of higher-dimensional particles.

However, finding the right type was like looking for a nanometer-sized needle in a galaxy-wide haystack! There were too many different types of matter and energy in the endless higher dimensions!

The researcher and the commander both looked through the giant cage through the transparent screen. The last living exobeast, breathed her last breaths as her emaciated body began to experience widespread organ failure.

Various researchers, bots and medical equipment were on site trying to keep the animal alive, but its aberrant physique was too alien and too dependent on higher-dimensional particles! Not even locking it in stasis worked, because the deterioration of the giant beast's body continued irrespective of the passage of time!

At some point, her nineteen god crystals began to crack. Minute by minute, the cracks grew bigger. The surface of the dim and listless crystals also began to crumble in tiny grains that slowly faded out of existence.

"This is the end."

The Sacred God known as Qilanxo breathed her last natural breath as her decaying body finally succumbed.

However, moments later, in a different place and in a very different state, Qilanxo breathed yet again!

To some entities in the galaxy, death was not the end of life!

Back on Cloudy Curtain, Ves still basked in the pleasure of completing his fourth original design. He knew nothing of what had occurred on Aeon Corona VII and wasn't even aware of Qilanxo's passing.

Instead, he became preoccupied with his next steps after finalizing the design. On its own, the Aurora Titan design did not have much significance. Only when Ves introduced the mech to the market and attracted orders would he truly feel that he succeeded as a mech designer.

In order to know how he could best market his design, it was imperative for him to know how it fared.

When Ves finally thought his mental state entered into a good state, he decided to activate the System. Out of every individual he could ask to judge his design, only the System provided the most objective and complete evaluation.

He took Lucky down to his lab and locked himself inside his isolation chamber before activating his Privacy Shield. Only then did he feel safe to engage the System.

"Here goes nothing."

[Design Evaluation: Aurora Titan AT-A-01]

Model name: Aurora Titan AT-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Super-Medium

Recommended Role: Defensive Space Knight

Armor: A

Carrying Capacity: C

Aesthetics: A

Endurance: C+

Energy Efficiency: D+

Flexibility: C-

Firepower: D+

Integrity: A+

Mobility: E

Spotting: D

X-Factor: A

Cost efficiency: B-

Project involvement: 67%

Original component composition: 13%

Overall evaluation: The Aurora Titan is a super-medium space knight that excels in defending relatively static positions and withstanding directed energy damage. The mech is able to offer the best performance in low-to-medium intensity combat against ranged opponents, but performs poorly in other situations such as withstanding physical damage and fending off melee mechs. The Aurora Titan's X-Factor is tied to Qilanxo, the Shield of Samar, an exobeast and Sacred God native to Aeon Corona VII.

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

Fifty-thousand DP. That was way more than the System ever bestowed Ves for finishing a single design! Designing the Aurora Titan for up to seven

months had not been in vain in this aspect at least, because with this much DP he could easily afford to obtain another Mastery from the System!

"So the Aurora Titan's X-Factor did manage to break into A-grade territory!"

Ves labored for years to bump the X-Factor of his mechs out of the C-grade. He finally succeeded when he designed the Crystal Lord. The key to his success back then had been to employ the heavily eroded spiritual fragment of a long-dead leader of the crystal builder race as the basis of one of his images.

With the Aurora Titan, Ves resorted to the same method but ran it to the next level. The spiritual fragment that Qilanxo voluntarily bestowed to him had always been exceptional. Its strength was so immense that to call it a mere 'spiritual fragment' was a huge misnomer!

"I should probably call it a spiritual clone or a spiritual egg or something." He shrugged.

No matter what he called it, the gift from Qilanxo offered him a glimpse of the future. He knew that he could never obtain a spiritual fragment as potent as the one bestowed by the Sacred God through his own power.

If Qilanxo wanted to, she could have crushed his own spiritual existence when he initially made contact with her through the imaginary realm!

Ves therefore felt incredibly grateful that she was friendly enough to play along and work with him on integrating her spiritual fragment into the X-Factor of the Aurora Titan design.

"What a powerful X-Factor! I can't even fathom how powerful an A-Grade X-Factor can be! What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

"Uh-huh. Any copy of the Aurora Titan will be incredibly remarkable, that's for certain. The silver label edition of my new mech might be as strong if not stronger than the gold label of the Crystal Lords."

As for how a Aurora Titan would turn out if Ves passionately crafted it by hand, he could hardly wait!

The product reveal for the Aurora Titan took place in three weeks, giving the LMC and NORA Consolidated a narrow window of time to prepare. While Professor Ventag and his mech company organized the upcoming event in Bentheim, Ves had tasked himself with fabricating five gold label copies of the Aurora Titan.

One of which would be piloted by Jannzi Larkinson, while the remainder fell into the hands of four skilled mech pilots of Professor Ventag's company mech force.

"Jannzi will get the best copy." Ves had already decided. "I should add something extra to her mech to spice it up. She's family, after all."

An interesting notion popped in his mind. As a mech designer, Ves became used to designing mechs for the market. His customers mostly consisted of random citizens in the Bright Republic and elsewhere in the Komodo Star Sector.

Ves did not share a connection to them other than selling them his mechs. He did not know people like Raymond Costa and Carla Dio, who recently shared their stories to the LMC's workforce.

While Ves appreciated the successes his customers had achieved with his products, he nonetheless did not feel much sympathy if they encountered a mishap and died.

Ves had way too many customers to care about lives!

Yet it was different when it came to his own family. Melkor piloted his own personal gold label Crystal Lord for a couple of years now with great skill. Now, another Larkinson partook in his bounty.

Ves often equated the X-Factor as a metaphysical phenomenon arising from the alignment in thoughts and beliefs between the mech, mech pilot and mech designer.

If this description was accurate, then changing the mech pilot from a stranger into a family member might result in a stronger effect!

#### **Chapter 1115 Spiritual Thrum**

In order to fabricate the best Aurora Titans for the upcoming product reveal, Ves obtained a special shipment of raw materials.

The metals, alloys and composites used in the fabrication of a mech was not as consistent as mech manufacturers would like. Various impurities and imperfections resulting from rushed and careless processing led to various inconsistencies in the materials.

Therefore, like any mech company, the LMC first scanned the materials in order to determine how many inconsistencies and impurities they contained. Any batch of materials that contained too many flaws would soundly be rejected and sent back to the supplier.

Aware that something like this might happen, Professor Ventag went out of his way to have NORA Consolidated ship an excellent batch of materials to Cloudy Curtain. It was enough to fabricate six complete copies of the Aurora Titan!

When the mech technicians scanned the materials and inspected their quality, they couldn't help but sigh in admiration at the lack of impurities! They were almost completely flawless!

"All of these materials are the cream of the crop." Chief Cyril noted to Ves, who visited the warehouse floor in order to supervise the inspection process. "Our existing suppliers are nowhere near as good as those who have a long-term relationship with a big mech company like NORA Consolidated. The suppliers give their fixed customers the best batched at reasonable rates, while dumping their excess batches of middling quality into the open market."

In other words, up until now, the LMC only received the leftovers from the big suppliers in the Bright Republic.

This wasn't as bad as it sounded like. Any company that did business in the open market needed to deliver what they promised, or they would run afoul with the law.

Even so, no company promised that the batch of materials they delivered would always be of acceptable quality.

Did Ves wanted to keep working with materials of mediocre quality? Of course not! Yet establishing a close relationship with a supplier did not come about just because he wanted to. A company led by an Apprentice Mech Designer simply didn't sell enough mechs to earn the consideration of all the major suppliers!

"Right now, the LMC hasn't acquired enough standing in the mech industry." Ves stated frankly. "Only until I advance to Journeyman or the company sells ten times as much mechs will they finally realize that we exist."

"How long will it take to reach that point?"

"Not long, I hope. Please finish the inspection of the materials. I want to work with them as soon as possible."

The mech technicians didn't rush their work but instead continued to perform their duties diligently. Even though they hadn't found any major issues with



the materials they received, Ves still wanted to be absolutely sure that neither the supplier or some nefarious third party tampered with the batch."

He couldn't rule this possibility out. Ves had various enemies and his recent exploits garnered him the attention of even more opponents. Ruining the upcoming product reveal by fudging with the materials used in the fabrication of the show models sounded like an easy way to ruin his career.

The mech technicians found nothing amiss. Even though it took a decent amount of time to inspect the special shipment, Ves felt relieved that all the elements were in place to fabricate the inaugural copies of the Aurora Titan.

"These gold label mechs will set the standard for this mech model!"

Ves went to work with the excellent batch of materials. They were simply too tempting for him to leave aside, so after a bit of prepwork they had all been transferred down to the manufacturing floor.

After some consideration, Ves decided to fabricate his new mech with one of the new Hanover production lines instead of the old Dortmund production line. The specialized production equipment of the Hanover production line shared some resemblance to the high-quality machines in Professor Ventag's private workshop facility.

"It's better to fabricate my components with specialized equipment rather than leave it entirely to an all-purpose 3D printer."

Specialization often led to greater results. The Hanover production lines may have been a potentially ruinous investment for the LMC, but Ves could not deny that they deserved their price.

To assist in the fabrication process, Ves enlisted the aid of Ketis and some of the best mech technicians of the LMC. He felt confident that his Spirituality was strong enough to minimize the influence of others during the fabrication

process. As long as he played a pivotal role in the creation of the mechs, their X-Factor would still remain pure.

They worked slowly. Ves wanted to insure as little imperfections carried over into the physical copies of the design. He instituted regular breaks in order to relax his mind so that he would be able to return to his peak state.

During these breaks, engaged in regular conversation with Ketis on the nature of their work.

"The Aurora Titan should be the first mech design in which you are formally credited with its development." Ves said.

"Really?" She perked up.

"Yep. As long as the MTA completes the validation process and puts its stamp of approval on the design, you will be credited as one of the handful of assisting mech designers who participated in our joint design project!"

That was no small honor for a mech design as sophisticated as the Aurora Titan! Even though she would be placed alongside a number of other Novices and Apprentices from NORA Consolidated that performed all of the simulation work, Ves believed that Ketis already got off to a great start in her career.

Naturally, Ves deserved most of the credit as the lead designer in the joint project. While he couldn't have designed the Aurora Titan so well without the help of Professor Ventag, the Senior was content with leaving behind his name on the project as a lesser co-designer.

As the first production mech of the Aurora Titan design slowly took shape, Ketis and some of the mech technicians already began to feel its remarkable nature. Even in an unfinished state, the Aurora Titan's X-Factor already started to exert its influence!

"There's something funny about this mech." Ketis frowned after the first production mech was halfway done. "Ever since I arrived at the LMC, I often studied your mechs, you know? Your designs are all remarkable from the schematics, but they always manage to look even better up close. This mech carries that same quality, but there's something very different about it! What did you do with the mech that makes it stand out so much?"

Ves confidently smiled back at Ketis while he petted Lucky who was nuzzling on his lap. "Do you recall my design philosophy?"

"Something about making mechs come alive and turning them into valued partners for mech pilots. To be honest, I never understood your design philosophy. Even now, I still can't say what you are trying to achieve, but this mech.. this mech has given me a clue."

"All of my mechs are special, Ketis. Out of every mech designer in the galaxy, there is hardly anyone who treats them with more care and affection than me. All of these mechs are my babies in a sense."

The old Ketis would have dismissed the unusual nature of the unfinished mech frame. The new Ketis who gulped a large amount of candy was different.

"I'm starting to think your design philosophy has a lot more going to it than I initially thought. What are you hiding, Ves?"

"What makes you think I'm hiding anything?"

"Oh come on. The way you describe your design philosophy and the LMC's principles is so vague and obtuse that it's clear to me that you're holding something behind your back."

Ves shrugged. "Perhaps you're right. If what you say happens to be true, then I can hardly reverse my course all of a sudden. Some secrets are too dangerous to divulge."

"No secret lasts forever, Ves."

"I know, but I can at least enjoy it while it lasts."

"Why am I even here, Ves, if you don't trust me with your secrets? Your whacky design philosophy isn't the only funny business going around here. Lucky here is able to do things that shouldn't be possible for a mere pet of its size, and there's also your abrupt and stupendous pace of improvement!"

Ves turned his full attention to Ketis and subjected her to some of his Spirituality. "Some day, I'll tell you my secrets. Until then, I suggest that you keep learning and progressing so that you will become worthy to learn my secrets."

Ketis nodded vigorously, causing the poofy beret on her head to flop back and forth. "I understand. I'll do my best to catch up to you. Even though my design philosophy is nowhere near as complicated as yours, I don't think my mechs will be any worse than yours someday!"

"That's the spirit!"

The first production mech of the Aurora Titan continued to take shape. Even though NORA Consolidated already fabricated a copy of the finalized version of the design for the MTA, Ves did not really consider it as a true representation of his design.

No. The true first production mech in his eyes would be the mech that took shape in front of him. Within a closed hall of the Mech Nursery's underground manufacturing floor, the mech continued to gain in size and mass as Ves added more and more parts to its frame.

At the end of a four-day fabrication process, the mech was close to finished!

Ves looked considerably more exhausted as he exerted his utmost focus and attention on getting it right. If all went according to plan, then Jannzi Larkinson

would have the privilege of piloting the first production mech! It was therefore of vital importance to him to get it right the first time!

Even though the mech still required some additions to announce its completion, the sheer spiritual strength that emanated from the mech already floored Ves. Within his spiritual sight, the mech glowed with life. Each single part glowed with spiritual energy. Its X-Factor pulsed with life.

This was the most living mech that Ves had ever seen!

Even Ketis and the mech technicians looked impressed, and they had been working on the mech for days!

"This mech looks quite complete." Ketis said. "What more do you want to add?"

"The finishing touch." Ves replied mysteriously and climbed up to the cockpit of the mech alone with only Lucky hovering over his head.

The mech designer and the mechanical cat both plopped inside the cockpit where Ves took out a very familiar gem to Lucky.

[Ardent Wish]

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

Ves wanted to bestow the mech intended for Jannzi Larkinson with a special property. Out of all of Lucky's super gems, he finally decided to go for the Ardent Wish.

While other super gems such as the Sin of Altruism elevated the performance of the mech in a much more concrete fashion, Ves did not think it was prudent to implement it in a mech intended to be used as a show model.

"This mech and four others like it will be put on display in Bentheim in a few weeks. There will doubtlessly be instances where it will be used to demonstrate its performance."

With that much media attention, Ves simply found it too risky to make Jannzi's mech stand out so much. As a show model, Ves couldn't customize the design in order to provide some cover for the benefits brought about by the super gems.

The only super gem that would work in this case was the so-called Ardent Wish. This odd gem applied purely to the spirituality of a mech, boosting it by as much as 40 percent!

If Ves applied this super gem to one of his bronze label mechs, then it would have been an enormous waste. His bronze label mechs exhibited the weakest X-Factor of all of his mechs, so boosting it by 40 percent would simply simply turn it into a mech with a weak X-Factor.

"This is very different, though."

A 40 percent amplification of a mech with the most powerful X-Factor that Ves would ever be able to achieve for now would be absolutely huge!

Ves had already treated the super gem with his Anonymizing Stamp. This convenient tool provided by the system ensured that the gem would not attract any attention from any scans or inspections, at least directly.

Not that the gem carried anything that attracted attention aside from its remarkable luster.

After taking a deep breath, Ves affixed the gem in the position of the button that allowed the pilot to activate the mech.

As soon as he installed the super gem and the golden plate that served as its label into the cockpit, the mech was finally complete.

Ves felt a thrum from the cockpit seat. It was a thrum that resonated with his Spirituality instead of his body!

### Chapter 1116 Shield of Samar

Ves could not entirely describe what he experienced at that moment. An enormous sense of nirvana overtook his mind as he blanked out for a time. Even Lucky became affected by the abnormally strong pulse of spirituality that emanated from the first production mech at the moment of completion!

In fact, not just Ves, but Ketis and the mech technicians standing next to the feet of the mech had been swept up in the spiritual ripple that expanded from the mech.

For a moment, every single worker at the Mech Nursery inadvertently paused!

Although their moment of inattention lasted for a short time, the pause led to a fair amount of mistakes and defects on the manufacturing floor! A lot of mech technicians quickly cursed as they were forced to throw away their work and redo the same procedure again.

As for Ves who sat in the very epicenter of the phenomenon, he simply didn't know what he just experienced. What had just happened? Why did he suddenly blank out?

Only a vague impression of what just transpired remained in his mind. For some reason, Ves felt as if he had just resonated with Qilanxo. Some of her thoughts and impressions that he had become familiar with by hosting her spiritual fragment in his mind had come to the fore again.

Love. Protection. Survival. These words and more encompassed the ideals that Qilanxo had long strived for. Even though she was an exobeast, a Sacred God as every bit as sentient and alive as any human!

And now, what Ves believed to be an echo of this great entity now lived onwards in the Aurora Titan design!

As the first production mech of this new design, the mech that Ves just augmented with the Ardent Wish was perhaps the greatest reproduction of the Aurora Titan of all times!

"This mech embodies the greatest strength of the Aurora Titan!"

If Ves presented the Aurora Titan to others, they would probably think its greatest strength was its supreme defensive capabilities and directed energy weapons.

They weren't wrong. The spec sheet of the Aurora Titan made it clear that the design revolved around defense.

Yet that did not make the mech special in Ves' eyes. Instead, the element that excited his design philosophy the most was its very potent spiritual nature.

Not only was the Aurora Titan's X-Factor already ludicrously strong, but the addition of the Ardent Wish amplified this remarkable property to even greater heights!

For a moment, Ves feared that he may have moved too quickly and went a little overboard. Even though he wasn't a mech pilot, Ves already felt as if he wasn't alone in the cockpit of the recently-completed mech!

"Meow!"

Lucky hissed with agitation as he perceived a great threat. An enormous predator was eying them right now!

"It's okay, Lucky! There shouldn't be any danger around! It's just a mech!"

No matter how much he tried to coax Lucky, his cat remained poised against danger.

"Let's go out."



In order to prevent Lucky scratching up the interior of the cockpit with his powerful energy claws, Ves grabbed Lucky and quickly exited the cockpit.

He met Ketis, Chief Cyril and the mech technicians just in front of the recently-completed mech.

"That is something." Ketis said simply.

"It's a very emotional moment for all of us to complete the first production mech." Ves replied smoothly, trying to downplay the unusual moment that occurred as a purely psychological phenomenon. "With how much care and attention we put into its fabrication, it's not usual for us to be swept by the jubilation of completing it. We should all be proud of what we accomplished!"

While most of the mech technicians looked like they bought his story, Ketis remained a bit more skeptical.

"Uh-huh. Whatever you say, Ves."

Once Ves calmed down from whatever happened, he arranged the mech to be shipped to the testing ground. Even though the Aurora Titan was a spaceborn mech, it could be activated on the surface of a terrestrial planet. It could even go out for a walk, though it wouldn't be too healthy for the mech to go on a sprint.

For now, it was enough for them to see if the mech would activate and function properly. They could ship the mech out into space and into the hangar bay of the Redfeather light carrier sometime later.

Ves, Ketis and Lucky arrived at the testing ground first and waited until Melkor, Jannzi, Rhode and Chette Larkinson all arrived.

The moment they beheld the first production mech, they exhibited the same reaction as Ketis upon the mech's completion.

"This.. this.. what is this?"

"What an amazing machine!"

"Why am I not piloting something as remarkable as this mech?" Rhode whined.

Ves patted Rhode's back. "You'll get your turn someday when I came around to design a landbound striker mech."

Even the normally inscrutable Melkor looked visibly moved at the first production mech. "When I initially heard you describe your next mech design, I didn't think you could pull it off very well. Now.. regardless of its faults, there is no way this mech will fail to turn heads!"

"A mech as remarkable like this should carry its own name." Jannzi said.

"What's its name, Ves?"

Just as Ves tried to wrack his brains for a suitable name, a strong impression already formed in his mind.

It appeared the mech had already chosen its own name for itself!

"It's called the Shield of Samar. It is the title of a great beast and a protector of the Ancient City of Samar."

Ketis recognized the name. She immediately turned to Ves for an answer, but Ves did not elaborate any further. It was already dangerous for him to say this much because he divulged something he shouldn't have.

Even so, Ves wanted Jannzi to know some of the context behind the name in order to facilitate her bond with her new mech. The Shield of Samar was the most spiritually strong mech that Ves had ever made or seen.

Even the Larkinson Ancestor's ancient mech did not carry as much spiritual weight as the Shield of Samar!

Jannzi rolled the name off her tongue. "Shield of Samar, huh? It's like this mech is made to carry that name!"

Once they finished admiring the mech from a distance, Jannzi changed into her piloting suit and slowly entered the cockpit. Ves and everyone else entered an observation room and stood behind the specialists sitting behind their terminals.

"Commence the test. Activate the mech!"

Ves turned his gaze towards the projection that depicted the interior of the cockpit of the Shield of Samar. As soon as Jannzi pressed the super gem with her finger, a number of screens and projections came to life.

"It's activating!"

More than just the mech woke up. A dormant beast seemed to wake!

For a moment, Jannzi blanked out as she experienced something much like Ves once did when he completed the design at that very same seat. She was undergoing an unknown process that was completely unknown even to Ves!

Even though he worried a bit about Jannzi's safety, he trusted that the X-Factor of the mech would treat her right. There shouldn't be any reason for the spirituality of the mech to turn against her. Ves specifically fabricated the Shield of Samar just for Jannzi!

Now that Jannzi finally interfaced with the Shield of Samar, two pairs of a greater whole united for the very first time. An abnormally strong bond developed between Jannzi and her new mech, so much so that some of the specialists yelled in alarm.

"The interfacing strength between the mech pilot and the mech is showing some unusual parameters!"

"Jannzi Larkinson's physiological reactions are spiking!"

"Mr. Larkinson, do we abort?!"

"No! Nothing should be wrong! Continue the activating process! Don't interrupt it under any circumstances! It might do more harm than good!" Ves firmly ordered.

Even though the managers of the testing facility all expressed concerns, Ves knew for sure the man-machine connection that had just been formed did not pose a threat to Jannzi.

After several minutes of blanking out, Jannzi slowly recovered her wits. In Ves' spiritual vision, he noticed that the Shield of Samar had stopped convulsing. It managed to stabilize itself and form a strong and unbreakable bond with its mech pilot.

Ves took his time to study the telemetry transmitted by the Shield of Samar, and he noted that other than some elevated readings, nothing else unusual seemed to have occurred.

"Everything appears normal, mostly. Proceed with the initial tests. Jannzi, can you please try and move your mech? Just a few steps is enough."

"I can do that, sir."

The recently-activated Shield of Samar moved its ponderous weight and took a weighty step forward.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

Each footstep seemed to fall like the thump of an exobeast. The super-medium mech possessed legs that were barely strong enough to move the Shield of Samar in standard gravity.

Ves admittedly did not strengthen the mechs as much as he would have for a landbound mech. A spaceborn mech was not as dependent on its legs as a

landbound mech, thus being able to walk in standard gravity was already a luxury!

Even so, the Shield of Samar moved with confidence. Nothing seemed to crack or fall apart or malfunction during the arduous movement.

The mech was a success! The absence of any major defects meant that Ves had succeeded in fabricating a great copy of the Aurora Titan design!

"It's working!"

Ves only needed to know so much at this point. He had no doubt that its space trials would go on swimmingly.

"That's enough, Jannzi. You can return the Shield of Samar to its starting position and shut it off. We'll ship the mech into orbit to perform some space trials tomorrow. You'll get the opportunity to flex your skills at that time."

"Can I stay in this mech for a while, Ves?" Jannzi asked over the communication channel. "I'm still acclimatizing to piloting the real thing. This mech is so impressive that I don't ever want to leave the cockpit!"

Ves understood her sentiment. With a mech as spiritually strong as the Shield of Samar, it made sense that she wouldn't want to separate from it so quickly.

"You have three hours. After that, a transport will come by to pick both of you up and move you to the Redfeather. For the next two weeks until the product reveal, you'll be spending your time on the light carrier in order to practice with your new mech."

"I know. I'll be sure to become familiar with this mech! I haven't practiced in the simulators for nothing!"

Jannzi's clingy attitude towards her new mech pleased Ves immensely. He felt as if he fulfilled his mission as a mech designer by providing a mech pilot with

the best mech that he could provide to her. The growing bond between the mech and mech pilot already hinted towards something great!

"From the way Jannzi is so ecstatic about her new mech, you'd think that they've already become partners for life." Ketis joked to Ves.

Ves nodded seriously. "I think that's an apt description. Those two are inseparable the moment they first interfaced with each other."

Partners for Life. This phrase was part of the LMC's motto, but up until now, he never felt as if his company embodied these words. Only now did Ves believe that his company gained some hope of fulfilling its mission. With the Aurora Titan design as its new standard bearer, the LMC would surely be able to become a distinct mech company in a mech industry full of strong competitors!

"Let's return to the manufacturing floor." Ves told Ketis. "We've got four more mechs to fabricate, and I hope they'll all be as impressive as the Shield of Samar."

His hope would remain unfulfilled. There would never be another mech like the Shield of Samar unless Lucky produced another super gem like the Ardent Wish. For better and worse, the Shield of Samar would always stand above the other copies of the Aurora Titan design.

Jannzi didn't even know how lucky she was when Ves bestowed her the privilege of piloting the Shield of Samar!

#### **Chapter 1117 Avatar Commander**

Four more gold label Aurora Titans emerged from the Hanover production line. After Ves and his crew fabricated the Shield of Samar, they became more and more familiar with the quirks of fabricating this model.

Each Aurora Titan carried a strong aura. The X-Factor that the copies possessed each possessed a lively touch that resembled the one on the Shield of Samar.

However, unlike the first production mech, the other four copies lacked the super gem that spiced this quality up. Their auras were not so dramatic as the one on the Shield of Samar, and while the test pilots noticed plenty of unusual sensations, it did not result in anything drastic other than a yearning to keep piloting the Aurora Titans.

This last quality proved to be rather problematic. While Ves claimed that he excelled in designing mechs that provided mech pilots with a comfortable experience, the effect was very strong when it came to his handcrafted mechs!

Concerns popped up from those who observed the abnormal reactions of the test pilots. Specialists persistently inspected the mechs and particularly their neural interfaces for anything amiss.

They found nothing, of course.

"These mechs are the Aurora Titan sent to the MTA for validation." Ves argued tirelessly. "If my mech has a brainwashing component built inside of it, then the MTA would have rejected the design."

The MTA generally took their time to validate the mechs that they received on account of how many they received. Still, they usually returned their results early if they found a serious defect. Why bother testing the full range of parameters of a mech when a disqualifying feature rendered the mech unsuitable for sale?

So much time had passed and while the MTA hadn't given their approval yet, the lack of rejection thus far should be a hopeful sign. Ves and Professor

Ventag weren't the kind of mech designers who submitted a sloppily-designed mech, so they saw no reason why the MTA would ever reject their design!

As the LMC and NORA Consolidated continued to prepare for the product reveal, the venue of the announcement had been fixed.

In order to attract as much public as possible, they chose to announce the Aurora Titan at the Grand Skyward Exhibition Hall.

"The Grand Skyward!" Ves uttered with surprise when he received the message. "That's one of the best places to introduce a spaceborn mech!"

The Grand Skyward was a prestigious exhibition hall situated in the Old Commercial District in downtown Dorum. The octagon-shaped hall resembled a huge octagon, and while its capacity may not be the biggest among convention centers and exhibition halls, it featured one exceptional feature.

It could launch into space.

Although its ascent was not the fastest, the enormous structure had an excellent track record of lifting off into space with a combination of thrusters, lightweight construction and prolific use of many, many antigrav modules.

This made the Grand Skyward Exhibition Hall a popular venue for revealing spaceborn mechs. Even though it cost a lot of money to book a slot in the Grand Skyward, its ease of access from the city center and its ability to bring many bystanders in space was practically essential to mech designers who wanted to attract big crowds at their product reveal.

"Crowds are a measure of success. A product reveal that is crowded with people can foster a lot of hype."

It was much more difficult to attract a crowd if the product reveal took place in space from the start. For security reasons, working mechs weren't allowed to operate near or inside a space station. Shuttling random visitors and



commuters at those space stations to one of the specialized venues in space was a lot of hassle.

The Grand Skyward could also land back down in Dorum with ease. The operators of the flying exhibition hall already received all the permissions they needed from the local government.

"If we had more time to prepare, we could have sent out invitations ahead of time." Ves muttered.

Even so, the Grand Skyward consistently attracted huge crowds for every product reveal that it saved them both a lot of time and effort.

With the venue set and the four gold label mechs shipped to Bentheim ahead of time, Ves only had a couple of days left before the start of the product reveal.

He decided to check up on Melkor at the headquarters of the Avatars of Myth.

"Ves. What brings you here?" Melkor said as he looked up from his terminal.

"I'm just stopping by to check up on the security arrangements." Ves said while he took a seat at a nearby chair. "I've shared my concerns about Bentheim before. How many Avatar mechs will you send this time?"

"It helps that we know about the event in advance. Also, a detachment of Avatars recently completed a small mission, so we have more mechs on hand than before. I'll be able to allocate a full squad of twelve mechs to your security detail. They're all geared towards urban combat and protection duty, so they can help secure the surroundings of the Grand Skyward. Our mechs won't be able to follow it in space, but I've been told that the exhibition hall has made their own security arrangements in that regard."

Ves nodded. "That's great to hear. I don't expect any threats to arise during the product reveal. NORA Consolidated and the Grand Skyward are both very

accustomed to arranging these matters that the Avatars likely won't even be needed. It's just the time before and after the event that I'm worried about. I will have to stick around in Bentheim for a few days to promote the Aurora Titan and attend some interviews."

As the lead designer of the Aurora Titan, he could not just show up once and disappear right after. As Ves and his company grew more prominent, the impact of media appearances increased. News portals devoted much more time and attention on famous and notable mech designers. Just the involvement of Professor Ventag alone was sufficient to elevate the standing of the Aurora Titan!

"Let's talk about the future of the Avatars." Ves said. "Are you satisfied with your role as the Avatar Commander?"

Melkor frowned a bit. "What has brought this on all of a sudden?"

"I'm just curious. You've led the Avatars for a couple of years, but I don't really know whether you even like your job. You wanted to join the Mech Corps, right?"

The Mech Corps discharged Melkor from their ranks for a murky reason that Ves still didn't know.

"To be honest, I do regret the opportunity." Melkor spoke frankly. "Like most Larkinson mech pilots, I dreamt of joining the Mech Corps all my life. That dream is over now. The door is closed and the war has already started and ended without me. Yet there is more to piloting mechs than serving in the Mech Corps. Even though I'm not an outfit commander, I did my best to raise the Avatars from scratch. They are much my men as they are yours."

That was a very important admission. Even though Ves funded the Avatars, to most of the mech pilots that signed on, they were most familiar with following Melkor's orders rather than Ves' orders.

This might lead to problems if Ves and Melkor disagreed on a particular course of action.

Yet who else could Ves put in charge of the Avatars of Myth?

Ves would only exacerbate the problem of authority if he put an older and more experienced Larkinson in charge.

As for putting a complete stranger in charge of his own bodyguard force, Ves did not even consider that option. At the very least, the Larkinsons wouldn't do something like plotting the death of their own family members. The same couldn't be said for a mercenary commander who possessed no particular attachment to Ves or the Avatars of Myth.

"Are you willing to remain in charge of the Avatars of Myth for the long haul, Melkor?"

Melkor took a moment to formulate his answer. "If you trust me enough and if I think I can competently discharge my duties, then I would gladly like to stay with the Avatars. With all the funding and mechs you're willing to provide for my men, they can become something great. Trying to raise the Avatars of Myth into one of the most premier private outfits in the Bright Republic is not an impossible dream!"

"It's good to hear you're ambitious, Melkor. As long as I advance to Journeyman and continue to progress my career, I'll do my best to facilitate its growth. The star sector is becoming more and more unstable over the years. In such cases, all the money and business relationships in the galaxy won't be of much help to me. I'll be counting on a solid mech force to keep me safe during these turbulent times."

"I'll do my best, but keep in mind that it is hard for us to do anything other than protecting you and the Mech Nursery."

That reminded Ves that he also wanted to broach another topic.

"I want to expand the ranks of the Avatars of Myth. I'm thinking of adding landbound and spaceborn mech company. The money is already there." He said.

"That's a little hasty. Why now?"

"Now that the war has ended, a lot of mech pilots are about to retire from the Mech Corps. Those military veterans are excellent prospects. If we can manage to hire some of them, then the Avatars will be set for the next five years as the LMC continues to expand."

"I'm not too sure about that, Ves. Raising a mech force is harder than it sounds like. The Avatars of Myth is not completely stable as an outfit. It lacks the heritage, tradition and reputation to stand upon its own. We've barely started to raise our first spaceborn mech company and now you want to add at least eighty mechs and mech pilots to our roster. That's too fast."

"You don't have to expand the Avatars immediately. Go ahead and finishing raising our first spaceborn mech company first. I just want the Avatars to consist of four mech companies in total by the time the new mech generation starts. The transition to a new generation is always accompanied by upheaval. Having an abundant amount of protection at hand is essential for me to take advantage of the opportunities that arise."

Melkor nodded. "I will make some plans for the coming years. It will help me out a lot of I know what you intend for the Avatars."

"It's the same as before. As my personal force, the principal goal of the Avatars is to protect me. Protecting the company's assets come second. As for my other intentions for the Avatars, we can talk about that later when the Avatars are more established."

Ves eventually wanted to have the Avatars accompany him to any eventual excursions in the frontier, but at this moment of time that simply wouldn't be

possible. Many of the mech pilots that agreed to join the Avatars did so in order to enjoy a stable posting on a single location so they could return to their families after the end of each shift.

For Ves to force them to accompany him to the frontier for weeks or months was too much to ask for most mech pilots in the private sector.

It frustrated him a bit that he couldn't snap his fingers and order his subordinates to do whatever he wanted, but that was the reality of the situation. Only military mech pilots could be ordered to undertake lengthy, risky missions far away from home.

A couple days later, the Greenfeather landed at the Mech Nursery and took in twelve mechs of the Avatars of Myth. The light carrier also loaded in the Shield of Samar.

In the meantime, Ves, Ketis, Lucky and Gavin all boarded the Barracuda.

Ves invited Jannzi to travel on his personal corvette, but she refused, opting instead to remain by the Shield of Samar during transit.

Both ships lifted off into space and traveled to the nearest Lagrange point in order to transition into FTL.

The time to reveal the Aurora Titan to the mech market was close at hand!

#### **Chapter 1118 Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation**

Professor Ventag arranged for Ves and his entourage to stay at one of NORA Consolidated's guest accommodations during their visit to Bentheim. It was a much better option than staying in a luxurious hotel because it offered plenty of room for the squad of Avatar mechs to secure their surroundings without bumping into the security detail of other important guests.

With only two days to go before the product reveal, everyone that Ves took along split off.

Gavin paid a visit to Marcella Bollinger in order to discuss some final details about the LMC's marketing campaign that was just about to kick off.

Ketis expressed a desire to explore Bentheim for a day on her own. She had grown increasingly curious about Bentheim and lost her apprehension towards the stupendous amount of people living on the planet.

"It's not safe on the streets right now." Ves warned her. "The Bentheim Liberation Movement is a serious threat to public safety, particularly now since it appears they've prepared to launch a major attack for years."

"Oh, come on, Ves. An attack hasn't occurred since your last visit. Why would the BLM choose to attack now of all times? I'll be perfectly safe. You know I can take care of myself. I'll even bring my greatsword and my armor along in a floating case."

While Ves still expressed a lot of concerns, he was not her parent. Eventually, he acquiesced to her request, though he insisted that she'd be accompanied by some guards dispatched by Sanyal-Ablin Security Services.

During the first day of his stay on Bentheim, Ves received an invitation to meet with Professor Ventag. This time, his armored shuttle didn't travel to Mech Designer's Row, but instead turned towards Dorum's Academic District.

As its name suggested, the Academic District hosted a large amount of schools, universities and other academic institutions. It was a city within a city as it hosted a very vigorous student community. Many of the students consisted of Bentheim natives, but the rest came from all over the Bright Republic and even beyond the border!

Only mech academies didn't make their home here. Due to all of the live practice they conducted, it wasn't safe to operate so many mechs in the middle of a metropolis. Most of the mech academies of Dorum were situated in the outskirts of the capital city.

As the armored shuttle touched down on a very expansive landing zone, Ves emerged with Lucky in his grasp and with some armored guards in tow. Around the shuttle, a number of mechs from the Avatars of Myth began to prepare for a long standby session as they weren't allowed to step onto the campus of the DCTI.

"So this is the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation." Ves sighed as he and Lucky stared out through one of the gates.

The DCTI was the second mech university of Bentheim, so it took up a considerable amount of valuable real estate within the Academic District. As a premier learning institution, it provided its students and staff with a tranquil but very mech-focused campus environment.

Large amounts of greenery and parks suffused the campus. Huge facilities capable of holding dozens of mechs were spread across the campus, and large empty fields provided the students with plenty of space to try out their new creations.

"Not even the Rittersberg University of Technology is willing to give its mech design students so many opportunities to work with real mechs!"

Even if the students practiced with outdated mechs and cheap materials, the costs could easily run up over time. To be frank, most mech design students simply couldn't afford the tuition costs that could easily run up to several hundred-thousand credits a year!

And this was already factoring the generous subsidies the DCTI received from the central government in order to maintain its competitiveness against the Ansel University of Mech Design!

The Ansel University of Mech Design cast a huge shadow over the DCTI. No matter how impressive its campus looked, it simply didn't compare to Ansel's splendor!

Ves shook his head. "Both are already fine institutions. The gap between them concern me very much."

He knew that Professor Ventag didn't invite him to the DCTI for nothing. The Senior's intentions couldn't be more clear.

A university was not without its students. Most were attending classes, but plenty of them were still out and about. Many of them took immediate notice of Ves and his bodyguards.

Some of them even recognized his face.

"Is that Ves Larkinson?"

"That famous Apprentice Mech Designer? The one who was awarded with the Golden Mech?! What is he doing here?!"

Ves ignored the idle speculation of the students. They would come to learn of his visit in two days when he officially revealed the Aurora Titan to the public.

Ves slowly crossed the campus and reach the administrative building of the DCTI's Internal Design Faculty. The faculty specialized in teaching all manner of courses related to the mechanics, internal architecture and other aspects about the insides of a mech.

Professor Ventag happened to be the dean of the Internal Design Faculty. The DCTI employed six Senior Mech Designers in total. Each of them were deans who led the different faculties of the school.

As far as Ves knew, the DCTI also employed twenty-five Journeyman Mech Designers as associate professors.

However, these esteemed mech designers did not spend all of their time teaching the students or grading their work.

The actual teaching work was being done by various respected academics in the various fields of science and engineering related to mech design.



In order to teach courses that dealt directly with mech design, the DCTI employed various older Apprentice Mech Designers who possessed an abundant amount of experience as assistant professors.

Overall, the students of the DCTI did not have a lot of opportunities to get in touch with the Journeymen and Seniors who fronted the university. These esteemed individuals all invariably led their own companies or worked for the government in some capacity, so they could never devote their full time to teaching the next generation of mech designers.

Still, their presence at the DCTI was very essential because they determined the curriculum, decided upon high level policies, occasionally motivated the students and judged many mech designs.

Ves knew that one of the main benefits in accepting a professorship at a university was that they could look out for emerging talents and promising experts. As long as they spot someone first, they could immediately offer them an attractive contract that bonded them to the professor after they graduated!

All in all, mech universities like the DCTI organized themselves in a way to maximize the benefit of its professors!

That said, the students got a pretty good deal out of it as well. The most promising ones would receive great hiring prospects while the average ones still occasionally received some direction from the Journeymen and Seniors that put some of their time at their disposal.

After some time, Ves met Professor Ventag at the top floor of the administrative building. The Senior's office offered a very attractive of both the campus and the rest of the city.

"I see you've made it here, Ves. How is your impression of the DCTI? Is it to your liking?"

"It offers a very harmonious learning environment. It's very comfortable here."

"Does it look like a place where you might want to work in the future?"

"Maybe." Ves replied ambiguously. "Right now, I'm fully preoccupied with my design work. The LMC demands too much of my time for me to divert my attention to other activities. Perhaps we can revisit this topic later when I'm not busy anymore."

The professor accepted that excuse. "The DCTI offers more attractive conditions for Journeymen and Seniors. Apprentices who teach our classes are paid well, but they are mostly expected to work fulltime. That's not very ideal to a young and growing mech designer like you. It's clear from the work you've done with the Aurora Titan design that your time is better spent on designing mechs rather than teaching others. However, once you've achieved a great measure of success, don't neglect the obligations that come with your great position. Successful mech designers have a moral obligation to provide guidance to aspiring mech designers."

This was more than a moral obligation. It was something actively encouraged by the MTA. Becoming a teacher was a good way to earn some kudos from the powerful organization.

"You've received the show models I've fabricated by myself, right?" Ves asked, changing the topic. "What do you think about the mechs?"

The professor sent Ves an appreciative expression. "They are very impressive, and not just from a technical standpoint. Your fabricating and assembly skills are very developed, which is unusual to see from a mech designer. In this area, you are already more than qualified to teach these subjects. Your handmade mechs are so impressive that I feel we should have sent one of them to the MTA for validation instead!"

"The mechs produced by you and me should be virtually identical. It won't make much of a difference." Ves awkwardly laughed.

"I think there is a strong difference. This must be related to your design philosophy, right? Having collaborated with you on the Aurora Titan design has forced me to discard my initial misgivings on your rather esoteric design philosophy. To put the focus on the mech pilot rather than the mech should be obvious, but many mech designers including myself have forgotten the human element. The four show models I've received make it clear that mechs made humans are different than mechs designed to advance their maker's interests."

"I don't think you're bad at this either, professor. You care a lot about the safety of the mech pilots who use your products."

Ves felt a bit relieved that Professor Ventag hadn't nailed the truth. A Senior Mech Designer could be frightfully insightful when it came to mechs, so Ves always risked exposing some of his secrets by working together so closely on a single design.

Fortunately, the general vagueness of his design philosophy made it so that Professor Ventag filled the gaps with his own interpretation.

In fact, the Senior came fairly close to the truth. It wasn't wrong to say that Ves put the needs of the mech pilot central to his designs.

After a bit of chatting, the professor invited him to a short tour around the campus.

"Come walk with me while we discuss our upcoming plans."

"Okay."

Ves continued to hold Lucky while he walked alongside Professor Ventag. Both of them were accompanied by guards, though they kept a wide distance in order to provide them with the illusion of privacy.

"Have you practiced your speech?" Ventag asked.

"I have. Don't worry, this isn't my first rodeo."

"That's good to hear. Public speaking is an essential skill to master when you become a prominent mech designer. A mech design does not exist in isolation, but is intricately tied to its creator. Your conduct in public can affect the public's perception of your work. Every product reveal is a grand show that has to impress the audience from start to finish."

The two discussed some of the arrangements of the product reveal. Central to the introduction of the Aurora Titan was to display its prowess in a realistic scenario.

To that end, Ves and the professor prepared to demonstrate the Aurora Titan's formidable defensive capabilities by subjecting the show models to a lot of firepower!

This was a very risky addition to the event, but there was no better way to demonstrate its value otherwise. Performing a few empty maneuvers in space wouldn't cut it, not if Ves wanted to convince the skeptics among the crowd that a super-medium space knight was not an impractical toy!

"It's a shame to damage the show models." The professor said with a regretful expression on his face. "Your personal works are almost as precious as mastercrafted works."

"I can make more as long as I spend enough time on fabrication. Besides, the show models can be repaired and restored to their peak condition. I don't intend to wreck them entirely."

However, they would certainly be banged up quite a bit. Even the Shield of Samar wasn't an exception!

#### **Chapter 1119 Professor Norman Pendleton**

The next day after his visit to the DCTI, Ves intended to supervise the final preparations for the upcoming product reveal.

However, Professor Ventag rang his comm first thing in the morning.

"Ves, there's trouble! Go read this article first!"

The professor sent him a link to an article published in the current edition of the Bentheim Mech Report, an authoritative mech publication in the Bentheim mech community! While not every mech designer and mech pilot read or watched it every day, its standing was among the highest!

When Ves followed the link, he came across an article with a very pertinent headline.

THE TRINITY OF WEIGHT CLASSES: WHY LIGHT, MEDIUM AND HEAVY MECHS ARE THE ONLY PROPER MECHS

BY PROFESSOR NORMAN PENDLETON

Ves knew of Professor Pendleton. He was a famous Senior Mech Designer and a professor of the Ansel University of Mech Design.

He specialized in mass reduction and weight management, which was a complicated way of saying that he was really good at making his mechs mass lighter than they ought to!

This was a very valuable specialty because every design project he became involved with resulted in mechs that moved faster while retaining almost the same capabilities.

Therefore, Professor Pendleton held a considerable amount of authority on the subject of weight classes.

As Ves rapidly read through the article, he basically got the gist of it. Professor Pendleton claimed that the custom of artificially categorizing mechs into light, medium and heavy mechs had become so ingrained in the mech industry that there was no longer anything artificial about it. Each weight class came with

their own strengths and weaknesses, but they were so well balanced that any other weight class besides these three categories were inevitably worse!

"This article is very biased." Ves frowned at the text before looking up at Professor Ventag's projection. "The timing of it is even more suspicious."

The Senior nodded. "It's not a coincidence that the Bentheim Mech Report published this article a day before our product reveal. My sources have found out that the Ansel mech designers have managed to uncover some information about our design! They're already starting to spoil the launch."

"Why would they do something like this? It's just a single mech."

"It's because of me." The professor admitted. "My enemies have to haunt you. Any project I'm involved in will eventually face opposition from the mech designers associated with Ansel."

Ves was already aware that Ansel might oppose him, but he didn't think they would take action so directly. Publishing this opinion piece a day before the Aurora Titan's announcement was a direct shot across the bow!

A single opinion piece in a single publication could single-handedly change public opinion. Not under ordinary circumstances. However, if Ansel took the article as a basis and criticized the Aurora Titan in multiple occasions, then the damage could quickly build up to become a major threat to his design's success!

"Is Ansel really so bored that they are taking their valuable time out of their own work to criticize my work?" Ves asked with dismay in his voice.

"The AUMD is very cognizant of their status as the premier mech design university on Bentheim and the Bright Republic. They are constantly fighting to remain in first place, and this attack is a part of their overall strategy to discredit every mech designer associated with the DCTI as much as possible!"

The goal was not to discredit the Aurora Titan, but rather the people involved in its design! Professor Ventag may have attracted Ansel's attention at first, but Ves' willingness to work with a mech designer from the DCTI inevitably made him their enemy as well!

Ves felt as if he got dragged into a war between two irreconcilable mech design universities. No matter how much he professed his neutrality, Ansel would always recognize him as an enemy!

"This article isn't their only attack, right?"

"Correct. This is just the start. Aside from wielding their considerable influence in the local mech publications to agitate against the very idea of the Aurora Titan, Professor Pendleton has personally sent word to me that he will personally attend the product reveal!"

Obviously, Professor Pendleton of the AUMD would not come to cheer Ves and Professor Ventag on as they revealed the Aurora Titan!

"What?! Did you reject his attendance?"

"I can't, Ves. That's not the way that mech designers work. Any mech designer who publishes a design in such a public fashion will need to be prepared to face public scrutiny over their works. If you block Professor Pendleton from entering, then he'll use his own media presence to roast your design as much as possible. Not only would we be unable to neutralize his criticism on the spot, but he'll also use the fact that you barred him entry into the Grand Skyward as an act of cowardice!"

Basically, to bar his critics from entering provided proof that Ves wasn't confident enough in his own design. Such a perception could prove fatal to the success of the Aurora Titan design!

Ves already envisioned facing a tougher crowd than expected. If Professor Pendleton heckled the design from the side, then his status as a Senior Mech

Designer from the most renowned mech design university in the Bright Republic might allow him to steal the show!

Who in the audience would ever question a Senior when he argued against a mere Apprentice?

To that end, Professor Ventag offered to take over for the product reveal. "I know that the Aurora Titan is mostly your creation, but a heckler in the form of a Senior is a grave threat, one that you aren't equipped to handle. Let me take over the presentation."

"No."

"No what?"

"The Aurora Titan is my principally my mech design." Ves stated emphatically, and he said those words with his heart. "It is a great mech design, and while it isn't perfect, it stands on its own merits! With such a good product, Professor Pendleton would have to work hard to tear it down! I don't think another Senior is required to defend the Aurora Titan! I will do!"

The professor shook his head over the comm. "I admire your enthusiasm, but this is the big leagues. I don't need to tell you how incisive and formidable a Senior can be when he wants to pick apart a mech design. I know Pendleton well enough that he'll be perceptive enough to point out every single flaw and weakness of your design and magnify them until they drown out its good points!"

"THIS IS MY DESIGN!" Ves yelled.

The outburst came so violently that Lucky yowled and jumped out from his lap in alarm!

It even brought the professor to a pause. "You care about it a lot."

"I do." Ves said with a tired voice.



"You're making a very poor decision here, Ves."

"I don't care. It's my design. It's my responsibility to defend it during its introduction to the public. Am I wrong?"

"You are making an emotional decision instead of the right decision. Please sober up, Ves."

"Dare to design."

"What?"

"Isn't that what you imparted me back then? I followed your advice. I came up with a radical mech concept and worked with it until it resulted in the Aurora Titan design. Since I dared to design a super-medium mech, why wouldn't I dare to face a Senior that is heckling my design?"

"Ves, I keep telling you, Professor Pendleton is extremely skilled at analyzing mechs. Your entire design will be exposed regardless if you showed him the schematics or not. With his access to the MTA's database, he might have already called up the schematics from the license catalog. The MTA just validated the design, after all."

This meant that Professor Pendleton would have done his homework on the Aurora Titan design. There truly was no hiding from his criticism if he had access to the nitty gritty details!

Ves personally experienced the damage such acid words could do. Hadn't he single-handedly turned away the Blind Men from attacking the remnants of the Flagrant Vandals and the Swordmaidens by incessantly criticizing their shabby mechs?

This would be similar, but this time Ves would be on the receiving end!

Yet Ves did not waver in his fighting spirit. Even if a Master Mech Designer came to scorch his mech design, he would still fight back tooth and nail!

Ves stood behind each of his mech designs!

Just because an authoritative figure in the mech industry decided that they didn't like it was no reason for Ves to abandon his own work and distance himself from it for fear of suffering damage to his reputation!

A true mech designer stood by his work no matter what storm it endured. That didn't mean that Ves should consider his design to be the best design ever. He merely believed that its combination of strengths and weaknesses still resulted in a mech that brought very real benefits in the right conditions!

That was enough of a reason for the mech design to exist!

Ves and Professor Ventag argued back and forth over this issue for a while, but Ves insisted on going through with the original plan.

His principles and his pride as a mech designer accepted nothing less!

"Fine." Professor Ventag said, throwing in the towel. "You're making the wrong decision here, but I've seen how stubborn mech designers can get with regards to their own creations. If you employ at least this much vehemence against Professor Pendleton tomorrow, then you might be able to salvage some regard for the Aurora Titan."

"Thank you, professor. I know it looks as if I've impulsively decided to argue against a Senior, but I'm not going to underestimate his threat when I walk up to the stage tomorrow. I'll prepare for any criticism he might mention and develop some responses beforehand."

A mech designer knew their own designs the best. Ves was more than capable of pointing out the weaknesses of the Aurora Titan. If he could do that much, he could also develop counterpoints for why they existed and how they facilitated the other strengths of his design.

However, the professor did not intend to let Ves take on the full brunt of Professor Pendleton's criticism alone.

"Just to be sure, I'll be present in the front row myself. We should maintain contact with each other through a private communication channel. I can provide you with some advice on how to respond to Professor Pendleton's arguments. If he ever mentions something related to my own specialty, I'll stand up and defend my design choices by myself. You should grant me at least this much."

Ves nodded after a few seconds. He could concede at least this much.

"Will there be other complications during the product reveal tomorrow?"

"As I've stated earlier, Ansel wields a considerable amount of influence at the various mech publications based in Bentheim and Bright Republic. They are giants in the mech industry, and no publication dares to cross them. Not if they want to keep receiving invitations to attend their press conferences and other events."

"Are these publications going to torch the Aurora Titan design regardless of what happens tomorrow?"

"It's not that bad. Some mech publications lean towards Ansel while some take pride in remaining objective. Even the former will sometimes publish articles that criticize the works of Ansel mech designers if they are really bad. This is also the reason why the Bentheim Mech Report remains so authoritative despite its Ansel slant."

In other words, the journalists of these mech publications did not work directly for Ansel. Ves could work with that. The outcome of the fight tomorrow would not be in vain. As long as he did a good job in defending his controversial mech design, then enough publications might come around to take his side and approve of the Aurora Titan!

"I don't see Norman Pendleton as a threat." Ves said.

"Oh?"

"He's also an opportunity. As long as we can beat his arguments and convince the audience and the mech publications that the Aurora Titan is a good design despite its unusual weight class, then other skeptics won't be able to command much respect!"

If even a Senior Mech Designer couldn't tear down the Aurora Titan, then how could the public be so easily convinced by a lesser critic?

### **Chapter 1120 Pressing Aura**

The Grand Skyward Exhibition Hall lit up in splendor yet again, signifying the impending announcement of a new mech design. Mech designers announced their new designs on Bentheim all the time, and it was something of a fun attraction to both locals and visitors attend these shows.

Who didn't love to witness a new mech? Especially one announced at the renowned Grand Skyward, a premier venue to showcase amazing new spaceborn mechs.

The LMC and NORA Consolidated both extended numerous invitations. Friends, acquaintances, business partners, customers, the press and numerous other figures arrived first. Each of them enjoyed the frontmost seats.

The Grand Skyward opened up its doors to the public as well. Many people on Bentheim considered themselves to be mech aficionados, so plenty of people paid the modest fee to enter the venue.

It helped a lot that the mech to be announced involved NORA Consolidated, one of the largest and prominent mech companies in the Bright Republic!

In comparison, the involvement of the young and upcoming Living Mech Corporation attracted much less attention. Perhaps in the eyes of most

people, the upcoming design had been designed by Professor Corus Ventag with Ves contributing some small and important elements.

Ves would abuse the audience of that notion very soon.

Tens of thousands of seats quickly started to fill up. The journalists already set up their live recording bots and began to speculate on the nature of the soon-to-be-announced mech design. A lot of mech insiders in the Bright Republic avidly followed the exploits of their favored Seniors. They rooted for them much in the same way fans supported their favored mech athletes!

In a backstage prep room, Ves studied the text of his speech for one last time. He already knew what to say, but it helped to review the points he needed to raise. In the meantime, various bots neatly groomed his appearance and his clothes.

"The opening speech isn't important." Gavin said. "The real challenge is when Professor Heckler stands up and forces you to enter into a debate with him. You need to be quick on your feet while maintaining your composure. Are you sure you are up to the task?"

"I don't fear Professor Pendleton. Even if he's a renowned Senior from Ansel, he will have to stick to the facts if he wants to tear down the Aurora Titan."

"Even Seniors aren't above resorting to misdirection and distortion to win an argument." Professor Ventag warned. "The competition between mech designers can get very ugly sometimes. The only saving grace is that Professor Pendleton should still maintain some reserve when he heckles our mech. It is unseemly for a Senior to go all-out to put down an Apprentice's mech design."

"He'll probably approach it with a patronizing mindset, like an elder correcting a wayward child."

That would make Professor Pendleton appear as the wise man and Ves as a stupid and misguided kid. If all the mech publications portrayed the upcoming debate in such a light, then the Aurora Titan would inevitably be branded as a whimsical mech design!

Gavin emphasized the most important priority. "Regardless of whether you win or lose, you need to look good in front of the live recordings and archival footage. If you break down for some reason, you'll completely destroy your credibility as well as the credibility of your new mech. As long as you look confident and composed, our marketing campaigns can still use the footage to paint the Aurora Titan in a good light."

In other words, even if Ves failed to sound convincing in his attempts to refute Professor Pendleton's arguments, the Aurora Titan's prospects could still be salvaged. Many mech designs that had been torched by rival mech designers had always managed to climb back from their purgatory.

However, their damaged reputation meant that their designers were forced to discount them and cut their prices.

Since the Aurora Titan's viability as a product depended heavily on its high product margin, it could not afford to be discounted! If Ves had to cut its price by 20 million credits, then he would inevitably have to cut it by another 20 million credits after the new mech generation arrived.

This would essentially wipe out any profits that could be made from selling the Aurora Titan!

Professor Pendleton doubtlessly aimed to achieve this result and more. Anything that gave the mech designers associated with the DCTI some difficulties was a win in Ansel's book!

"It's almost time." Gavin reminded Ves. "Even Professor Heckler arrived. He's sitting in the center in the front row."

Senior Mech Designers deserved the best seats. That was basic courtesy, but even if that custom didn't exist, Ves still wanted Professor Pendleton to be as close as possible to Ves who would be standing on the stage in a couple of minutes.

"Are the show models in place?" Ves asked.

"Yup. All of them have been checked and we found nothing amiss. They're ready to be shown off at any time."

The mech pilots of the show models had already geared up and entered the cockpits of the mechs. Janni Larkinson and the four mech pilots sent by NORA Consolidated had all trained with the Aurora Titan in the simulators and with their actual mechs for a considerable amount of time.

All five of them became very familiar with the more advanced functions of the Aurora Titan. As a mech with a high learning curve, it was essential for the mech pilots to demonstrate the best uses of the mechs.

"It's time now."

Ves took a deep breath. "Wish me luck."

While Professor Ventag exited the backstage in order to take a seat close to Professor Pendleton, Ves walked up to the stage in a confident gait. Lucky followed him as well, this time held in his grasp.

The noise and conversation in the entire exhibition hall slowly died down, partially helped by the sound-dampening measures built into the enormous chamber. Gavin and a team of professional technicians manned the Grand Skyward's many controls, allowing them to manipulate the senses of the audience to their liking.

Right now, the lights in the main hall had dimmed down. Aside from lighting the emergency exits and Ves himself, hardly any details could be seen. Curtains currently blocked their sight of what lay behind.

Ves "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Grand Skyward. My name is Ves Larkinson, and you may have heard of me. Over the last couple of months, I have worked together with the esteemed Professor Corus Ventag on a joint design project that incorporates features that are rarely seen in mechs currently on offer. Today, the LMC and NORA Consolidated is proud to present to you an innovative new mech design!"

The curtains behind his back slowly drew back, revealing the outlines of five huge objects. The relative darkness in the chamber prevented the audience from seeing the mechs in their full glory. However, even the faint backlight that outlined their contours was enough to suggest that they were considerably large mechs!

As soon as the curtains parted, the audience already sensed something remarkable about the mechs! A strong, formless aura emanated from the mechs. All of the gold label mechs possessed an identical X-Factor, with the mech at the center exerting the strongest effect.

All five of their auras blended together, amplifying their effects on the minds and spirit of the audience members.

Even Professor Pendleton at the front row looked discomfited for a short moment before he wiped the confusion off his face.

Ves smiled as he noticed that the auras accomplished their intended effect. These machines were the closest things to living mechs that he had ever designed and fabricated! With the Aurora Titan's potent A-grade X-Factor, how could its effect on average, spiritually weak humans be negligible?



From the start, Ves intended to take advantage of this property to manipulate the audience to his side. The threat of Professor Pendleton standing up to badmouth the Aurora Titan only increased the importance of this measure!

Even if Professor Pendleton won the upcoming argument on facts and logic, how could the audience ever be convinced by them when their mood and emotions overwhelmingly became impressed by the mechs?

The upcoming verbal battle was not meant to force either Ves or Professor Pendleton to admit their wrongs. Mech designers could be rather stubborn people especially if it came to their own work.

No, their actual goal was to get the audience on their side. As long as Professor Pendleton managed to work the entire crowd against the Aurora Titan, then the live broadcasts and subsequent footage could be used to hammer the Aurora Titan over and over again until practically nobody would dare to buy the mech for fear of inviting ridicule!

Yet even without revealing the full appearances of the five show models, Ves already gained an inestimable advantage. Tens of thousands of attendees already became mesmerized by the strong compelling aura emanating from the five mechs looming at the rear of the stage!

"What is a mech?" Ves rhetorically asked while stroking Lucky's back. The cat had garnered some attention as well. "A mech is a fighting machine. We all know that. Yet I believe that they can be something more. My company and I believe that mechs carry an intrinsic quality that goes beyond their technical performance on the battlefield. Don't believe me? Then what about the mechs you see behind me? Can you really call them lifeless machines that are only meant to be used as tools?"

The audience went completely still. Even if someone farted loudly or something, the systems running in the background would make sure to not

only suppress that sound, but suck away the awful odor before it went on to disturb the people sitting next to the offending farter!

The silence seemed to magnify the unusual pressure in the air. To Ves, it appeared that his remarkable mechs responded to his meaning!

The Aurora Titan wanted to become a success as much as Ves! No mech design wanted to remain forgotten and unused!

Ves grinned as the dramatic pauses and the other little tricks continued to sway the crowd to his words. Even though he was cheating by taking advantage of the strong auras of his best mechs to date, he nonetheless gained a lot of confidence, and it showed.

He leisurely petted his cat while he continued his opening statement. "As the lead designer of the mech design that I'm about to reveal to you, I am proud to say that it is an innovative product with no equal in the mech market. In coming up with the mech concept, I questioned every assumption that many mech designers take for granted and reevaluated them according to their individual merits. This has led to a radical vision for a new mech that is incredibly suitable in both the current mech generation and the next mech generation!"

Anticipating music began to play in the massive chamber. Vibrations emanating from the air and from the seats helped build up everyone's expectations!

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the LMC and NORA Consolidated's latest mech design, the Aurora Titan AT-A-01!"

A huge glow of bright light washed over the five Aurora Titans from above right at the climax of the music!

As people's vision adjusted to the sudden brightness, they beheld the splendor of the Aurora Titans in full!

At least half of the crowd gasped in surprise. Others showed milder reactions that nevertheless hinted at their amazement of the mechs!

The tantalizing hints that Ves fed the crowd had not prepared them to the full sight of the mechs! The Shield of Samar and its four sibling mechs of the same model finally showed themselves to the crowd, to the Bright Republic and to anyone else who was watching the live broadcast!

After more than seven months of development and design work, the Aurora Titan design finally made its debut to the mech market!