

### **Chapter 1131 Stealing the Show**

When most mech pilots broke through to expert candidate, they usually did so under dire circumstances. Even then, the turning point was rarely apparent at first.

Aside from the elevated performance of the mech pilot in the heat of the moment, they only belatedly made the realization when the telemetry of the mech registered the faint onset of resonance.

Only in rare circumstances was the breakthrough strong enough to prematurely show some hints of forced resonance! The summoning of an energy field that only lasted for an instant was like an advanced taste of what might result in the future!

Even though the energy field was extraordinarily weak and only lasted for an instant when Jannzi Larkinson peaked in her performance, all the instruments on the mech and the Grand Skyward registered the resonance phenomenon!

This was incredibly impactful to Ves and anyone in the crowd aware of the implications! This was because forced resonance flickering was a very good sign the newly-advanced expert candidate would easily achieve an eventual breakthrough to expert pilot!

Jannzi Larkinson was strong! Stronger than Ves and the entire audience had expected her to be! Even as she single-mindedly continued her futile pursuit of the spooked ranged mechs, nobody kept the demonstration in mind anymore.

Everyone was abuzz at how they had just witnessed a mech pilot breaking through to a barrier that so many mech pilots failed to pierce!

And she was still so young and unknown!

Some people in the crowd expressed skepticism however. Perhaps the forced resonance flickering had been forced. Perhaps the sensor footage had been manipulated.

Ves knew the situation had entered a fluid moment. He needed to make decisions quickly.

Since the breakthrough already happened, he should run with it and take as much advantage of Jannzi's fortunate moment as possible!

He instantly ordered the control room to call up a projected screen that transmitted all the raw telemetry related to resonance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please! I am very happy to announce that it appears that the mech pilot of the Aurora Titan currently in the field has just broken through expert candidate! Projected to the side is the raw telemetry of what has happened from the moment leading up to her breakthrough! Before she started to demonstrate the capabilities of her Aurora Titan, she was a regular mech pilot. It was only until the demonstration entered into its most heated state did she managed to find the turning point that allowed her to break past her barrier! Please welcome the latest expert candidate to emerge from the Bright Republic, Jannzi Larkinson!"

"Jannzi! Jannzi! Jannzi!" The crowd yelled as all of them had become fully swept up in the moment!

The glory of witnessing a mech pilot transforming into an expert candidate was such a rare occasion that many of them coveted this moment in their memories. They might have witnessed the birth of a future famed expert pilot of the Bright Republic!

In a society that worshipped high-ranking expert pilots, the audience's fervor towards Jannzi Larkinson's ascension was such a glorious moment that some even forgot about the existence of the Aurora Titan!

However, not everyone thought that way! While Ves didn't say anything explicitly, he nonetheless emphasized the fact that Jannzi Larkinson started off as a regular mech pilot until she fully became engaged in piloting a copy of the Aurora Titan!

The hidden message here was that if Jannzi Larkinson could manage to find the turning point to take her first steps to apotheosis, what about other mech pilots? Some of the more affluent mech commanders and mech pilots in the audience wondered if they could also manage to achieve a breakthrough if they piloted an Aurora Titan.

There was no established theory that certain mechs increased the odds of breaking through than others. Some mech pilots even broke through to expert candidate while piloting cheap rust buckets.

Yet Jannzi Larkinson's example stood out by how rapidly and unexpected she broke through! Everyone could see that she was young, too young to participate in the war most likely. Not only that, but the telemetry projected from the control room made it clear that her genetic aptitude wasn't the highest.

A spontaneous breakthrough during a product reveal demonstration of all occasions should have been impossible! Yet Jannzi Larkinson broke through anyway as if she was fighting a pitched battle against overwhelming odds!

Even as Ves shared in Jannzi's turn of fortune, he nevertheless began to hold some doubts in his mind. The extraordinary means he resorted to beforehand definitely played a hand in Jannzi's breakthrough.

The most glaring issue for him was that he truly hadn't expected for Jannzi Larkinson to break through so easily!

"How could she advance to expert candidate with so little foundation?"

Ves just wanted Jannzi to deliver a great show. Therefore, he used his upgrade voucher on her mech to upgrade its quality in ways that he hadn't fully understood yet. He also gave Jannzi some tips on how to engage with the Shield of Samar's in order for her to work with its X-Factor.

Various factors must have combined into play all at once to facilitate Jannzi's transformation. Ves did a lot of preparations beforehand that each contributed to the possibility of breaking through. Nonetheless, he determined that a single source must have tied these factors together.

The Aurora Titan's design spirit.

Ves communed with the design spirit for a few painful seconds. He beseeched the entity that used to be Qilanxo's spiritual fragment to take care of Jannzi Larkinson and to accommodate her as best as possible.

The design spirit must have responded to his plea in a dramatic fashion! Not only had the design spirit facilitated Jannzi's bond with the Shield of Samar, but it also went a step ahead and actively transformed her into an expert candidate!

Ves did not expect the design spirit to go so far! Having witnessed the spiritual fragment's operation in transforming Eloise Pelican straight into an expert pilot, he knew the fragment had lost a significant chunk of spiritual energy. Although the fragment seemed as potent as ever after the Mastery experience, the design spirit shouldn't have been able to recover all of that lost energy after being partitioned from Qilanxo's mind.

"Is my understanding of the fragment mistaken? How is it able to replenish its spent spiritual energy?"

Eloise Pelican's situation was a lot different than Jannzi Larkinson circumstances. The former had already fought ten arduous years in the barren

Dark Sphere. The mech pilot constantly obsessed over protecting her comrades and trying to find a way back home to reunite with her child.

In comparison, Jannzi Larkinson was barely into her adulthood. Fresh out of the advanced mech academy, she hadn't yet found a strong conviction to fight for. Even if some of Ves' advice nudged her into the right direction, she was merely at the start of her formative journey into exploring her place in the galaxy!

The Aurora Titan's design spirit shouldn't have easily been able to infuse spiritual energy into Jannzi's errant emotions and thoughts and turn it into a coherent force of will!

"Unless that's not the case anymore."

If Jannzi followed Ves' advice on how to adopt a compatible mindset with her mech, then perhaps that had given the design spirit just enough material to spin into the beginnings of a uniform force of will!

Even as Ves tried to present Jannzi's ascension in the best possible light, he continued to question the exact circumstances of this event in his mind. He really only wanted to make Jannzi enter into her most optimal condition so that she would be able to showcase the Aurora Titan to the best of her ability. That she would smash through her boundaries came as a surprise even to the ultimate culprit that enabled this situation to occur!

Jannzi Larkinson stole the show in a dramatic fashion! Although her breakthrough while piloting the Aurora Titan would definitely be a great public relations coup for the mech design, a number of headaches quickly resulted as well.

The Mech Corps would probably come knocking at their doors very soon.

In addition, he could already see the conspiracy theories that the Ansel crowd would doubtlessly spread. An expert candidate could not be faked, so they could not discredit Jannzi herself.

What they could do was to accuse Ves of employing someone who was already an expert candidate to fake a breakthrough during the demonstration.

Ves and Professor Ventag needed to get on top of this situation as soon as possible. He flitted his eyes towards the front row. The professor nodded to him before standing up and departing towards the control room.

"I know what to do, Ves." The professor said through their private comm channel. "While the authenticity of Jannzi's breakthrough can be questioned if all of the data comes from us, Bentheim is an incredibly busy star system. There are thousands of ships and mechs in high orbit. If their sensors hadn't managed to catch the resonance readings, the nearby space stations and defensive installations would have certainly captured something. I'll contact everyone present in the vicinity of this area of space and ask whether they are willing to share their sensor readings and corroborate their testimony in public."

"I'll leave the matter in your hands, then." Ves quietly nodded.

Professor Ventag enjoyed a very high status in the Bright Republic. There was no doubt that most of the entities he contacted would be eager to do him a favor.

With that matter taken care of, Ves stared at the Shield of Samar whose mech pilot still hadn't woken up from her single-minded pursuit.

He patched into her comm channel. "Jannzi! Stop! The demonstration is over now! You don't have to fight anymore!"

She didn't respond! Ves had an inkling that she might have followed his advice too closely and lost her awareness of the greater situation!

None of his mechs carried a killswitch, at least in ordinary circumstances. The only way to stop the Shield of Samar would be to employ other mechs to bar her path. Yet that was an exceedingly risky prospect considering the security mechs would have to go against an expert candidate!

Yet was that all Ves could do?

"Perhaps there is another way to shock her out of her immersion."

Ves was familiar enough with Jannzi that he believed he could find her presence in the imaginary realm. Even as it looked as if Ves observed the projection of the Shield of Samar's continued pursuit, he had long drawn his concentration inward and focused his senses in the imaginary realm.

He immediately honed in on Jannzi's unstable presence close by. He found a strange convulsing ball that represented Jannzi's newly-developed force of will. It radiated vague concepts of protectiveness, duty, and other values that Jannzi shared with the Aurora Titan's design spirit.

Although Ves was not too knowledgeable in spiritual phenomena, the ball looked awfully unstable. He guessed that Jannzi's elevation had come too forcefully and abrupt! It might have strained her mind excessively and put her recently-acquired force of will at risk of blowing up!

Ves needed to do something to calm the roiling force of will.

He decided to do so in the only way he could think of. He carefully extended a spiritual tentacle and tried to make contact. Even as various strong thoughts bled through the connection, Jannzi's spirituality was not as overwhelmingly strong as the Aurora Titan's design spirit.

He conveyed a strong message through the connection. "Calm down. It's over now. Stop fighting."

The messages immediately took effect. The force of will stopped churning so much. Even as it calmed down, Ves drew back his attention from the imaginary realm in order to check if the Shield of Samar reacted as well.

The mech ceased acceleration!

Jannzi finally regained her senses and pulled back her machine!

Ves sighed in relief. While she likely wasn't in the clear yet, at least she had a chance of stabilizing her volatile spirituality before it unraveled.

Aware that the public still needed some direction, Ves turned around and clapped his hands. "My apologies for the delay. Jannzi Larkinson is fine. She will be returning to the Grand Skyward's hangar bay as soon as possible. This concludes the demonstrations of the Aurora Titan. Please stand by while the Grand Skyward will soon descend back onto the surface of Bentheim!"

No matter what, if Ves didn't take advantage of this rare opportunity to promote the Aurora Titan, he did not deserve to be in charge of his mech company!

### **Chapter 1132 Lost Investment**

The demonstrations ended in a spectacular fashion. Even as the Grand Skyward dove back down to the surface of Bentheim, a modest number of wealthy businessmen, outfit commanders and other powerful people immediately walked up to the booths where the sales representatives stood by to register their orders for the new mech!

Ves figured that many of them ordinarily wouldn't buy a clunky mech like the Aurora Titan. However, they quickly changed their minds as they witnessed Jannzi Larkinson's miraculous transformation to expert candidate.

How could these wealthy clients not get inspired? The mech pilots among them secretly dreamt of replicating Jannzi's feat. Despite the fact that she was

a Larkinson and a rigorously-trained mech pilot, she was really far too young and inexperienced to break through at such a time.

For her to be able to reach her new heights so easily while piloting the Aurora Titan, what about others? The majority of the people who raced up to impulsively place some orders of the Aurora Titan each hoped to reach Jannzi's fabled status!

The quota for the gold label mechs ran out practically instantly.

The silver label mechs were being ordered by the dozens while the bronze label mechs received more than a hundred orders!

While this didn't really sound that much in the greater scheme of things, these many orders already smashed Ves' wildest expectations!

Even the cheapest bronze label mech sold for 100 million credits per copy! Yet with how fast the orders accumulated from just wealthy individuals from the crowd alone, Ves even had the impression that he should have jacked up the price even more!

"This is crazy!"

In addition to the orders coming from the audience, the people watching the live broadcast from elsewhere also started to register their orders at NORA Consolidated's virtual portal. While they couldn't order any gold label mechs through this channel, the amount of bronze and silver label mechs they reserved was almost equal with the orders from the audience!

Although a lot more people watched the amazing events through the live footage, a much smaller proportion of these people actually placed the orders. They hadn't been close enough to become affected by the auras of the show models, hence they managed to remain a lot more sober than others!

Still, Ves did not delude himself that this would be the extent of the orders pouring in for his latest mech design. Jannzi's example served as an extremely compelling story! That the Aurora Titan design had the privilege of fostering a mech pilot into an expert candidate would doubtlessly turn it into a focal point in the entire mech community for the coming days!

"Even the mainstream news outlets will report on this event!"

All the press coverage that would doubtlessly ensue after this day was free publicity as far as Ves was concerned! Instead of paying all the media outlets to carry ads that promoted the Aurora Titan, their broadcasts and articles would promote the mech design for free!

This was far from his expectations or the expectations of his marketing campaign. They only set up a lot of recorders and sensors near the demonstration site in order to capture good footage to use in their ad campaigns.

Now, all of the footage turned into treasures that the LMC and NORA Consolidated could easily spin into a selling point for their joint design! Not only did Jannzi Larkinson showcase the Aurora Titan to its full potential, but the valiant turnaround at the end looked amazing even if she hadn't broken through expert candidate!

As Ves watched over the crowd of people hurrying to place their orders, Gavin walked up to him to inform him of the latest developments.

"Jannzi Larkinson is mentally and physically exhausted." Gavin said. "When the staff pulled her out of her mech, they immediately brought her to the Grand Skyward's infirmary. While we don't know what exactly transpired that put her into such a state, I've been told that her condition is stable. The Mech Corps is dispatching an armed escort to the Grand Skyward right now to take her to a military hospital for more thorough checkups."

Ves pressed her lips. "Is the Mech Corps already claiming her?"

Gavin shook her head. "Technically, no. They're definitely interested, but Jannzi herself stated that she didn't want to make any decisions regarding her future at this moment."

"That is.. remarkably wise of her to say." Ves grew suspicious. "Who told her to say that?"

"I did." Gavin grinned. "I already anticipated what a storm would ensue so I took the liberty of meeting her first in order to coach her on the things she should say."

Ves looked at Gavin in appreciation. This fellow truly lived up to his current responsibility as his fixer. "Thank you for that. I'll be sure to give you a bonus. Tell me, has Jannzi said what she wanted to do?"

"She.. doesn't really want to leave the Avatars of Myth. She said she likes it here and that she loves her mech."

While Ves was glad that Jannzi expressed some desire to stay with him. He felt like he owned her since he indirectly facilitated her ascension to expert candidate. He didn't want to see his investment being taken away by the Mech Corps.

Nonetheless, if Ves truly wanted Jannzi to remain under his thumb, he needed to fight for it. While expert candidates were not as remarkable as expert pilots, the military still prioritized their recruitment!

Ves knew that the Mech Corps would want to bring Jannzi in their ranks as soon as possible so that they could indoctrinate her into becoming loyal to the state! It would be too late for them to shape her loyalties when she advanced to expert pilot, so it was imperative for the military to get her into their grasp!

"I don't want to let her go." Ves firmly said. "Give me options. What should I do?"

"I don't really know, Ves. If you want my take on it, go call your family. They're much more knowledgeable and connected to the military."

"I'm not sure whether they will be as helpful as you suggest. The Larkinsons probably want to force-march Jannzi to the Mech Corps themselves." Ves shook his head. "The policy towards expert candidates and expert pilots is very military-oriented in the Bright Republic. There are hardly any expert pilots who are working in the private sector."

A small number of known expert candidates and expert pilots did remain unattached to the military. Due to special circumstances, the Mech Corps didn't insist on recruiting them. However, their conditions weren't all that good.

Expert candidates generally needed to develop themselves. The Mech Corps invested a lot of time, attention and resources into helping their expert candidates advance.

As for expert pilots, their full range of abilities would never reach their full potential unless they piloted an expert mech! These fantastic machines cost a ridiculous amount of money to design, develop and maintain. Ves estimated that the cheapest ones were worth about 5 billion credits, but such a cheap machine was simply not a good complement to a genuine expert pilot.

The decent ones probably cost around 30 billion at the very least, though Ves wasn't exactly sure of that. All in all, while the LMC would tentatively be able to develop and maintain an expert mech, it would be a significant financial burden!

"The problem is the Bright Republic." Gavin reiterated. "It's such a war-involved state that it has come to regard domestic expert candidates and expert pilots as strategic resources. Perhaps in the Reinald Republic an

expert candidate can get away with rejecting the offers of the Honored Ones, but the Mech Corps can probably come up with a conscription order to force Jannzi to leave our midst."

It happened before. The Mech Corps were notorious hoarders when it came to expert candidates. Any expert candidate that popped up from the private sector would quickly end up in their hands.

Perhaps in other states they may have a decent shot at retaining Jannzi, but not in the Bright Republic!

Even though the latest Bright-Vesia War had already ended, that did not mean the Bright Republic was without threats. Ves knew the real reason why both states ended the war in a premature fashion!

If an even bigger threat loomed that necessitated the two squabbling states to temporarily put aside their animosity, then the demand for expert candidates and expert pilots would be even higher! The Mech Corps should be vigorously trying to collect as many of them as possible in preparation for an even more intensive conflict!

Ves already started to consider keeping Jannzi within the Avatars of Myth a lost cause. The only thing he could do was to make sure he got as much concessions out of the Mech Corps for relinquishing his cousin.

"Contact my grandfather and coordinate an action plan. If the Mech Corps is insistent on taking Jannzi away, then they better give us something in return!"

"Will do, Ves!"

As Gavin left his side in order to contact the Larkinsons, Ves met with Professor Ventag.

"I've managed to convince more than fifty ships and installations to share their sensor readings and their testimonies to me." The professor said. "The

authenticity of Jannzi's breakthrough won't be in question with so much corroborating evidence."

"Is there any way for me to retain Jannzi in my service?"

The professor shook his head. "Ordinarily, no."

"There is a way, then?"

"Nothing is impossible, Ves. If Senator Tovar exerts his full effort, he might be able to grant an exemption to Jannzi's conscription. The only issue is that he has no reason to do so. Fighting to keep an expert candidate out of the hands of the Mech Corps costs a lot of political capital, and it isn't clear what he can gain from this in return. The other founding families will see the senator's actions as an attempt to secure an expert pilot that is loyal to the Tovar Family, and that is deeply taboo in their circles. One of the rules the five founding families have set for themselves is that they wouldn't compete on expert pilots."

Ves raised his eyebrow. He expected the opposite! "That's a remarkably enlightened stance to take. Why is that?"

"Because they have seen what would happen if expert pilots become loyal to a single faction rather than the state. If the Tovar Family secured the loyalties of three expert pilots, that would mean the Mech Corps would have three fewer expert pilots to deploy during war. If the five founding families and other powerful organizations begin to hoard dozens of expert pilots, that would mean the Mech Corps would become horribly outmatched against the Mech Legion!"

"Won't the founding families and other organizations lend their expert pilots to the Mech Corps in the event of war?"

"That wouldn't work, Ves. The internal divisions and the politicking that will inevitably ensue will disrupt the Mech Corps from within. We've seen the

consequences of excessive infighting and tribalism in the Vesia Kingdom's military! If the Mech Legion's noble officers didn't fight each other all the time, they would have been able to conquer Bentheim already!"

If even Professor Ventag expressed little hope at retaining Jannzi, then Ves figured that the Larkinsons wouldn't be able to come up with anything better. Not that the family wanted to see Jannzi's potential being wasted by staying out of the military.

The high reputation of the Larkinson worked against Ves this time. Everyone would expect Jannzi to join the Mech Corps because that was what Larkinsons did. Renouncing the family name like Raella did wouldn't be of any use. Jannzi was too famous and high profile to resort to that excuse!

"I'll go visit Jannzi in person." Ves said. "Could you take over here?"

"Sure. Go ahead and check up on your cousin. Despite what will follow, do remember that this is a great development for her. Many mech pilots would kill to be in her place!"

Ves parted with Professor Ventag and moved to the Grand Skyward's infirmary while carrying Lucky. He knew that the main reason Jannzi felt reluctant was that she was probably unduly attached to the Shield of Samar and the Aurora Titan model. If the Mech Corps picked her up and put her in a random mech regiment, then she wouldn't have the opportunity to pilot a commercial mech model like the Shield of Samar anymore.

Such a forceful separation might ruin any chances for Jannzi to advance to expert pilot!

"I have to do something about this!"

### Chapter 1133 Close Separation

Lucky rested on Jannzi's lap as the newly-advanced expert candidate sat up on a bed in a guarded infirmary room. She looked visibly drained since the

last time Ves saw her. She spent nearly all of the energy in her body and looked like she would fall asleep at any moment.

When Ves inspected Jannzi with his spiritual vision, he noted that a force of will had already formed within her mental space. The only difference from actual expert pilots such as Venerable Foster and Venerable Pelican was that her force of will was very weak and mostly contained within her mind.

Ves knew that until she broke past a barrier in her mind, she wouldn't be able to affect reality. The reason why expert mechs could display their might was because an expert pilot's force of will was able to extend out of their minds to resonate with their mechs.

Still, Jannzi's case was slightly different in that her barrier already possessed some holes. Her ascension to expert candidate happened by force due to the pivotal influence of an outside factor.

While this led to some damage in her mind, it also prematurely broke the barrier stopping some expert candidates from advancing to expert pilot! The forced resonance flickering that briefly appeared around the Shield of Samar was a sign that some of Jannzi's weak force of will had minutely begun to spill through those holes!

What this essentially meant was that Jannzi possessed a head-start when it came to achieving apotheosis!

Everyone who witnessed the forced resonance flickering knew that his phenomenon essentially meant that Jannzi's advancement to expert pilot was assured!

As someone who grew up in a family of expert pilots, Jannzi knew what it meant as well. Even though she felt jubilant about her luck, she experienced too many strange surprises in one day.

"I heard from Gavin that you don't want to join the Mech Corps."

"They won't allow me to pilot the Shield of Samar." She stated. "I know the Mech Corps. They only work with their own designs."

"Is it vital for you to continue to pilot the Shield of Samar?"

She vigorously nodded. "I have a connection with my mech. It's like your company motto. I found my partner. I can't imagine what it would be like to be separated from my mech just when I learned to appreciate it!

"Unfortunately for you, the Mech Corps won't let you go. The military is always prepared for war, and an expert candidate with so much promise of advancement is not something they can ignore."

Jannzi looked devastated at the thought of leaving behind her mech! "Can't you do something about that? Can you make it so that the Mech Corps would still allow me to pilot the Shield of Samar?"

"This.. maybe. It sounds a lot more realistic than trying to keep the Mech Corps from taking you away."

"You're a bigshot mech designer and war hero, right? Can you please do me this favor? I would really like to keep piloting the Shield of Samar. I would do anything to stay together with this mech. I don't think I'll be happy with piloting a military mech even if it has better hardware!"

Ves had been thinking over this suggestion ever since Jannzi raised the suggestion. He knew how the military worked and he knew that mech regiments carefully curated the mech models they added to their roster.

It wouldn't be easy to convince a mech regiment to absorb the Shield of Samar into their ranks. Even if it was just a single machine, its presence was a disruption to their existing arrangements!

When Jannzi looked like she was already dozing off, Ves quietly picked up Lucky and left her to recuperate. He knew what she valued the most and it matched his own expectations.

"Jannzi truly values the Shield of Samar."

He felt very gratified to feel that. It was the most ideal outcome as far as his design philosophy was concerned. In fact, his design philosophy had begun to churn ever since he witnessed the audience place hundreds of orders for the Aurora Titan!

Ves believed that his advancement to Journeymen was very near!

It could even happen today or tomorrow! His design philosophy had become so energetic that Ves felt it was on the cusp of an unknown transformation!

"Finally! I've been waiting for this moment for years!"

The only regret that held him back was that the primary motivating factor for the initial sales was not entirely due to the merits of the Aurora Titan. Instead, many of his customers became inspired by Jannzi's fortune! All of them regarded the Aurora Titan as a mech that could possibly help them advance to expert candidate themselves!

While the Shield of Samar did indeed play a crucial role in Jannzi's change of fortune, it was undeniable that she stole the show! The crowd was abuzz with conversations about the mech pilot instead of the mech. This was not exactly what Ves and his design philosophy wanted to see!

Even so, a sale was a sale! Selling hundreds of very expensive mechs in such a short time did wonders for his confidence in his design! Even if half of his customers bought a copy of the Aurora Titan for the wrong reasons, it was likely that they would quickly learn to appreciate their new purchases when they took them out for a spin!

Before Ves wanted to explore his design philosophy any further, he first needed to arrange Jannzi's matters. As he walked back to Professor Ventag, he called Gavin.

"Have you heard back from my family?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Benjamin Larkinson is on his way to Bentheim right now, actually. He told you he'll be visiting in order to bring Jannzi up to speed on matters that any expert candidate should know."

"What's his opinion about the Mech Corps?"

"Jannzi has to go. Your grandfather is clear about that this is the best possible solution for her." Gavin said. "He did want to pass on that he can help influence which mech regiment she's assigned to. The Larkinson Family will do the best they can to help Jannzi find a new home in the Mech Corps!"

This was what Ves wanted to hear. He quickly closed his call with Gavin and went back to Professor Ventag.

The older man thought over the suggestion. "I can help you with that. I am involved with various mech regiments. I've helped design some of their military mechs and I've participated in the development of numerous expert mechs. I think at least a couple of spaceborn mech regiments would be glad to accept an expert candidate even with the extra conditions you've added. However, my influence only extends up to the regiment commander. I don't have much sway within the headquarters of the Mech Corps."

"If you can get the mech regiments to agree with allowing Jannzi to retain the Shield of Samar, then the Larkinson Family can take care of the other end."

Ves assured.

As the Grand Skyward slowly descended down to the surface of the planet, Ves and Professor Ventag worked behind the scenes to negotiate such a settlement.

They had to take action quickly! Once the armored shuttles of the Mech Corps arrived to take Jannzi to their military hospital, they wouldn't have much leverage left!

Ves contacted his grandfather directly to inform him of his plan.

"I think I can arrange something if that is what Jannzi wants." Benjamin said over the comm channel. "I'll get on it right away."

A couple of hours went by as his grandfather and Professor Ventag coordinated with each other to exert their influence on the Mech Corps. Their shuttles already came and brought Jannzi away as the event started to wind down.

Almost all of the guests had already left the Grand Skyward by the time Professor Ventag came back.

"Both your grandfather and I cashed in some favors, but we managed to get the Mech Corps to play along. I've sounded out a very suitable mech regiment that is happy to receive Jannzi. They've agreed to most of your conditions. They'll let Jannzi pilot the Shield of Samar, though they insist that she must try out their other mech models and become proficient in their operation."

The mech regiment must be hoping that Jannzi would find their mechs better than the clunky Shield of Samar. Fat chance! Ves knew that even second-class mechs wouldn't be enough to tempt Jannzi away from the mech she formed a bond with! Her devotion to the Shield of Samar transcended the affection that regular mech pilots developed with their machines!

It was very normal for mech pilots to become attached to their mechs. However, it was much like falling in love with a good pair of shoes. If a mech regiment suddenly came by and offered them a mech that was ten times as expensive, then the mech pilots wouldn't hesitate to dump their old mechs to the side in order to pilot a better machine!

Such a dynamic wouldn't take place in this case. Ves was very sure of this prediction.

"As long as the mech regiment abides by the agreement and doesn't force Jannzi away from her Shield of Samar, then I'm fine with it. Which mech regiment are we talking about?"

"The 7th Apocalypse Heralds of the 2nd Bentheim Division. I made sure to work with a unit based in Bentheim so it won't be difficult for you to pay a visit to Jannzi or help make adjustments to her Aurora Titan mech."

The Apocalypse Heralds! Their imposing name came from their orientation around heavy artillery in space. They fielded a mix of medium and ranged mechs oriented around long-ranged firepower and destructive artillery. They were often employed to break heavy-defended installations in space or to defend a vital space station from a determined assault!

While the Apocalypse Heralds likely preferred to obtain an expert pilot who specialized in piloting artillery mechs, obtaining someone like Jannzi was a good fit as well. The ungainly Shield of Samar would not have to move too much to protect the slow-moving artillery mechs!

Although Ves was not too familiar with the Heralds, what Ves heard from Professor Ventag already made him satisfied.

"Did they agree to the conditions with regards to her expert mech in the event that she advances to expert pilot in the future?"

"The regimental commander isn't pleased about this condition. Colonel Efein claims he'll take Jannzi's preferences under advisement, but he still wants a Senior Mech Designer in charge of the design project."

"And that's you, right?"

"That's right." The professor smiled. "I won't be able to become the lead designer if the expert mech in question has to be a heavy artillery mech. However, if we're talking about a defensive space knight, then I have enough qualifications for the Heralds to put me in charge. I'll be able to bring you onboard the project as a contributing designer long as you've advanced to Journeyman."

"Speaking of that, I think I'm very close to taking that step." Ves said, surprising the professor.

He described some of the unusual sensations he perceived from his design philosophy. The professor seemed to recognize what Ves was talking about.

"If you aren't lying, then you are indeed correct. You are close to advancing to Journeyman!" The professor looked surprised. "In fact, I think a breakthrough might be imminent! You should find a quiet place and meditate on your gains today. Apprentices are able to advance to Journeyman when they are able to reflect on their design philosophy!"

Ves did not obtain any more advice than that, as mech designers needed to find their own answers to any questions related to their design philosophy. If the professor went too specific on how Ves should process his thoughts, then contamination might occur that diluted the purity of his design philosophy!

Therefore, Ves immediately raced to a locked room within the Grand Skyward. Only Lucky kept him company this time, and he had his pet activate his ECM systems in order to keep this moment private.

As Ves began to reflect on recent events, he already felt his design philosophy becoming more active!

"It's happening!"

## Chapter 1134 Crystallization of Thought

Ves spent the first fifteen minutes reflecting back on his design philosophy and how it played out with his latest design project.

He contemplated how well the Aurora Titan design embodied the principles and aspirations of his design philosophy. Not only did the audience perceive something special about the show models, but Jannzi's abrupt advancement served as the strongest example yet that all of his beliefs concerning the relationship between a mech and mech pilot was beneficial to them both!

"The key to my design philosophy is symbiosis." Ves described to himself. Only Lucky heard his words, but he was just a cat. "Mechs are inseparable without mech pilots. Not any mech pilot is suitable to pilot a mech. Not every mech is suitable to be piloted by every mech pilot. Only when the two are combined will they both be able to synergize their strengths!"

The mech provided the fighting capabilities while the mech pilot served as the controller. That was the conventional viewpoint on their pairing.

Ves believed in a slightly different relationship. The man-machine connection could be much more than a way to put a human mind in charge of a giant war machine!

"If the mech pilot trusts their mech, why not let it play a role in the decision-making as well?"

Rather than puppeting a mech like it was a lifeless shell, Ves instead wanted to see mech pilots treating their mechs as living partners. Jannzi's analogy of equating her relationship with her mech like Ves enjoyed with Lucky sounded somewhat apt.

Although Ves exerted far less control over Lucky than he liked, the point was that he did not try to control Lucky as if he was a simple mechanical pet. His gem cat was much more than that!

Basically, everything that happened to Jannzi today conformed to his design philosophy. Jannzi's deep bond with her mech and the gift its design spirit granted to her showed that this relationship was not empty talk! It could lead to very real benefits for both the mech and mech pilot!

"It's important that this relationship is beneficially mutual! The gains won't be as much if one is trying to exploit the other!"

Ves resigned himself to the fact that abusive mech pilots existed. Some of them were not right in the head or behaved excessively carelessly. They wouldn't be able to take good care of their mechs, even if they piloted an expensive machine like the Aurora Titan.

In these cases, the mech pilot should never be able to develop a closer bond with their mechs. If the mech pilot only regarded their mechs as tools to be used, then they shouldn't be surprised if their mechs rejected their presence!

"Most mechs are designed without an eye to their intrinsic value. Mine are different. My mechs are alive! If not in body then in spirit!"

As long as both his mechs and their mech pilots regarded each other as equal partners, then true symbiosis could be achieved!

The boundary between the mech and mech pilot would be blurred whenever they established a man-machine connection. The control exerted by the mech pilot gained a substantial boost! The spiritual impulses of the mech would assist the mech pilot in making the best decisions in the heat of the moment!

All of these changes were very real improvements that took place when Jannzi developed a deeper bond with the Shield of Samar!

"What happened with Jannzi is no exception! Not if I have anything to say about it! My design philosophy is all about bringing out the best of both the mechs and mech pilots!"

Ves envisioned a possible future where the LMC became a dominant mech company in the Bright Republic. It might happen twenty, thirty or even fifty years from now, but there would come a time where his company and his mechs obtained a huge amount of market share in the domestic mech market!

Many mech pilots who piloted his designs achieved greater success! While the specs of his mechs may not be at the top, their ability to bring out the most of their mech pilots almost always led to better results in battle!

Such a grand future where the Living Mech Corporation truly lived up to its company name and its motto send Ves into an ecstatic mood!

"A single state is not the end! The entire star sector will come to know what my products bring to the table as well, and perhaps the rest of the galaxy will follow suit as well!"

This fantasy invigorated his mind, his mood and his design philosophy. Ves was so caught up in this future vision that his entire body and spirit seemed aligned in a single, central desire to see his design philosophy come to fruition!

An explosion occurred in his mind at that moment.

The insubstantial mass of spiritual energy that formed his nascent design philosophy began to collapse on itself! Ves noted with wonder as he sensed the loose spiritual energy begin to compact into a single point!

"It's compressing itself!"

This process took place over several minutes, during which Ves began to feel some mental strain as his mind drew upon every single bit of spiritual energy in his mind! Not only his design philosophy was being absorbed, but also some other errant spiritual thoughts!

"This is bad!"

Ves realized what was happening. The process of compacting his design philosophy would transform it into a smaller and more concentrated form. This was likely what Journeymen relied on to give them some advantages in their design work.

"The problem is that it's not related to mech design! All kinds of crap is being shoved inside this seed as well!"

He perceived the compacting process as a crystallization process which took loose spiritual energy and compressed it to an unimaginable degree until only a small crystal seed of fixed spiritual energy was left.

The core of what Ves started to call the design seed consisted of his design philosophy. Yet large portions of it consisted of elements not entirely related to it! His thoughts, his habits, his perspective on life and all kinds of other crap was about to become a part of his design seed as well, which essentially meant those elements became permanent traits to his personality!

This must be what made high-ranking mech designers so eccentric! Because their design seeds absorbed all kinds of random thoughts and impulses during their advancement processes, they became stuck with their personality traits for the rest of their lives!

Ves tried to control the elements that his design seed absorbed. He wasn't very effective at it. His design seed was like a voracious black hole and the entirety of his mind fell within its event horizon! There was no way the mental force he could exert over his spiritual energy could resist the overwhelming pull of his design seed!

"The process proceeded rather chaotically as well. His design seed was like an intoxicated eater at a buffet. The attraction force it exerted was very uneven and often changed directions. This basically meant it was only absorbing some spiritual elements in his mind while leaving others alone!

No matter what Ves tried to do, his influence on the absorption process was minimal. Only until his design seed absorbed a good portion of the loose spiritual energy in his mind did it finally have its fill!

Ves felt a weary ache in his mind. Although the process hadn't been as painful or as straining to his mind than he expected, he definitely felt exhausted!

Yet when Ves tentatively studied the result, he immediately became happy as he mentally observed the spiritual crystal resting in the deepest part of his mind.

"It's beautiful!"

The design seed was a remarkable spiritual object that Ves felt intricately connected to. It was different from a spiritual fragment in that it was a lot more compressed and solid. Ves wasn't sure of the significance of this form, but he could explore the differences later.

It immediately became apparent that his design seed was a far stronger spiritual object than the loose ball of spiritual energy that used to be his nascent design philosophy.

Ves understood now why Apprentices were so susceptible to outside influences. "Their design philosophy is fluid. Their lack of fixed form means that it is too easily to shape them into something else!"

Yet now that his design philosophy had crystallized into a design seed, Ves no longer had to worry about losing his way! He would always be able to depend on his design seed to stand firm against other powerful influences!

A second property about his design seed stood out as well. It seemed to be intimately connected to Ves. Despite the lack of any channels connecting his design seed to the rest of his mind, Ves somehow perceived that his design seed and his consciousness were one and the same!

Ves speculated that all of the random spiritual elements his design seed absorbed from his mind left an incomparably strong personal imprint on it! It would be very hard to steal his design seed from his mental space!

"Hard, but not impossible." He muttered.

He sensed that his grip over his design seed was only as strong as his Spirituality.

Aside from these observations, Ves also determined a third property about his design seed. It seemed to generate and emanate faint spiritual waves from its crystal body. These spiritual waves were very weak, but they reached a huge distance!

Ves scratched his head. He didn't see the significance of this phenomenon yet. He only perceived that this process was self-sustaining as his design seed did not seem to grow any weaker.

In fact, when Ves looked into his design seed further, he somehow perceived that it was absorbing a minute amount of spiritual energy directly from the imaginary realm!

That was quite convenient! His design seed didn't absorb his own spiritual energy anymore so Ves would not have to worry about its upkeep.

Overall, Ves had become endlessly fascinated by the transformation of design philosophy. It was a radically different process from the apotheosis that mech pilots underwent upon becoming expert pilots.

"Mech pilots are predominantly focused outwards, while mech designers are mostly focused inwards!"

A fixed crystallized design seed could not be employed like the force of will of expert pilots. The latter could take on various shapes and could be spread outwards from their minds like empowered fog.

A design seed could not be flexed in this matter. In fact, it couldn't change its shape at all! It was like a shiny rock resting in the center of his mind.

"Ves decided to forestall any further speculation and emerge from the locked room. He ordered lucky to deactivate his ECM before departing from the room as an entirely new man!

When he wearily dragged his body over to Professor Ventag, the older man studied Ves with a critical expression.

"You look a bit less exhausted than I thought. Most newly-advanced Journeymen would get knocked out at the end of the process. I'm surprised you even managed to stay conscious!"

"I have a very abnormal physique. It takes a lot more to put me out cold!" Ves chuckled as he rattled off this excuse. "So what's your verdict, professor? Have I become a Journeyman?"

"Let me touch you for a moment."

"Sure."

As the professor placed his hand on Ves' palm, a small spiritual clash occurred.

Ves felt as if his newly-crystallized design seed bumped into a much larger solid object!

The professor drew back his hand with mild surprise. "Seniors have a way of telling whether you're a Journeymen or not. As far as I'm aware of, you've definitely advanced!"

Jubilant marked Ves' face as he heard the verdict. The amazing transformation that took place in his mind didn't leave him with any doubt, but it was reassuring to receive confirmation!

After several years of toiling away as an Apprentice, Ves had finally taken his first real step towards greater prominence! He had graduated from a kid into an adult in the mech industry!

Ves and Professor Ventag decided to make use of his advancement as a public relations coup! The timing of it was simply too fortunate!

That day, an explosive piece of news erupted on all the news portals!

Not only had Jannzi Larkinson advanced into an expert candidate, but Ves Larkinson, the cousin who designed the mech she piloted during her transformation, advanced to Journeyman Mech Designer as well!

The official statement published by the LMC carefully included a caveat. Right now, Ves could only be regarded as a de facto Journeyman. He needed to obtain official recognition from the MTA in order to be treated as an actual Journeyman.

Nonetheless, this did not detract too much from the explosive events. With Professor Corus Ventag personally testifying that Ves had advanced, few doubted the truth!

The remarkable mech that caused both Larkinsons to transform their lives immediately received much greater scrutiny in the media.

This was the mech that created both an expert candidate and a Journeyman!

#### **Chapter 1135 Private Celebration**

Ves basked in the glory of his successful advancement to Journeyman. After several years of toiling, he managed to succeed just before he reached thirty years old!

"While it's rather close, the fact that I succeeded will mark me as a notable Journeyman!" Ves laughed while he held Lucky above his head.

"Meow."

For once, his cat did not show any annoyance at being handled like a doll. Lucky shared his jubilation and his tail playfully whipped about as if he already envisioned Ves becoming rich enough to feed him billions of credits worth of mineral.

The only snag was that even though he advanced for real, the Mech Trade Association would not see it that way. They maintained a very strict demand that mech designers should design at least five original mechs before they applied for recognition.

The professor explained the reasoning to Ves succinctly earlier in the day.

"The process of becoming a Journeyman is very opaque. You happened to have the benefit of a Senior like me being present to confirm your breakthrough, but what about other mech designers? There are many Apprentices who get high on stimulants and mistake it as a process of grand enlightenment. All of these Apprentices can't approach a Senior so easily, so they go on and knock straight at the doors of the MTA, who have to waste the valuable time of their own Seniors to confirm whether they were really serious or simply crackpots who didn't know any better."

"There are Apprentices who actually do that?" Ves frowned. It sounded absurd!

"Enough that the MTA has implemented a strict policy." The professor smiled. "Design at least five original mechs of significant importance before you apply. This rule alone stops most arrogant Apprentices from trying because the original mechs need to meet a minimum quality standard that only serious Apprentices can surpass."

"Why five? It sounds a bit arbitrary."

"It's actually well below average. Most Apprentices need to design more than a dozen mechs before they even get close to advancing to Journeyman."

You're something of an anomaly that you've designed four original mechs before you broke through. This is quite remarkable and speaks highly of your adaptability. Cases like yours happens every now and then, but not enough to make the MTA change their mind about this rule."

"So what do I do?"

The professor shrugged. "Just design another mech. You don't have to be too thorough compared to the effort you put into the Aurora Titan design. As a Journeyman, you will find all of your design capabilities improve in a significant capacity. I'll let you explore that on your own. The point is that de facto Journeymen like you really shouldn't have any problems designing another original mech."

The professor was right. Ves shouldn't be making a big deal out of the fact that the MTA wouldn't recognize his new status yet. Due to the role the MTA played in verifying Journeymen, the Bright Republic also didn't recognize him either, at least in a formal and legal sense.

If Ves wanted to be recognized as a true Journeyman, then he needed to quickly design another serious mech. He also needed to do it in a few months before he turned thirty so that he would still get that achievement under his belt.

There was a difference between a Journeyman who advanced before their thirties and those who advanced after their fifties. Though both mech designers should be somewhat close in skill by the time they advanced, what about the next step?

Time was a very valuable resource for a mech designer. Each year missed meant one or two mech designs less! Added up to twenty years, then that meant the older Journeyman in his fifties would miss out on designing twenty mechs before he reached the end of his lifespan!

That twenty-mech disparity might mean the difference between advancing to Senior or dying as a capable but bottle-necked Journeyman!

The mech industry's approach to talent also played a large role in evaluating mech designers. Those who advanced to Journeyman early in their career could be expected to advance to Senior fairly early as well.

For example, it would be a great achievement for Ves if he managed to advance to Senior within fifty years!

Those who took a long time to advance to Journeymen might not necessarily take a long time to advance again. There were plenty of examples of late bloomers in the mech industry. Nonetheless, the odds of such cases happening was not very large. Therefore, it was almost always better to advance sooner rather than later.

While Ves disliked the idea of rushing his next mech design, he disliked finishing it before he reached thirty standard years even less!

"I guess I'll have to whip up something quick and dirty." Ves sighed.

So far, Ves designed four original mechs. The MTA officially credited him in playing at least a major contributing role in the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord, the Enduring Protector and now the Aurora Titan designs.

This was an important distinction as playing an assisting role in the design process like Ketis had done for the Aurora Titan's sword didn't count.

Nonetheless, even if Ves did not receive official recognition, he received plenty of unofficial recognition! The press and the mech industry already recognized him as a de facto Journeyman!

Ves already received hundreds of letters of congratulations from the various Journeymen and Seniors of the Republic!

He even laughed a bit when he received a letter from Professor Norman Pendleton as well. The Ansel mech designer's gesture showed that despite their differences, Ves' ascension to the ranks of Journeyman was still a good addition to the Bright Republic.

"We can still come together despite our differences."

Ves felt as if this was a recurring theme in the Bright Republic. Even though different factions constantly struggled against each other, they could still join hands in order to present a united front against their common enemy.

This stood in stark contrast to the Vesia Kingdom, where infighting reigned supreme!

A day after the product reveal, Ves decided to hold a private celebration at an upscale restaurant in Dorum's entertainment district.

As food and drink kept pouring into the luxurious dining room that the LMC reserved, Ves celebrated his success with some of his friends and family.

Aside from bringing Lucky and Gavin, Ves also invited Marcella Bollinger. In addition, he also arranged for Raella and Melinda Larkinson to be present.

While Lucky blissfully munched on a bowl's worth of low-grade exotics, the two female Larkinsons stared at each other with visible animosity. They followed completely opposite career trajectories and if they weren't family, they would have never tolerated each other's presence.

"A Journeyman is a big deal." Melinda said while smiling to Ves. "Having worked on Bentheim for a couple of years, I've learned how important they are to the Republic. There's way too many Apprentices, but so few of them managed to become a Journeyman. The family will get a massive boost now that you've become a big deal!"

"Becoming a Journeyman is just the start." Ves boldly claimed. "Although I won't make any promises, I don't think advancing to Senior in a couple of decades is out of reach!"

He had the confidence to make such a claim due to the possession of the System. Although Ves was confident that he could advance to Senior even without making use of the System, making use of it would likely speed it up, thereby saving him a lot of valuable time!

Out of all the people in the crowd, Marcella looked the most sober. She was the oldest adult in the room, after all, and she had interacted with many different mech designers.

"I wouldn't rest on my laurels so easily, Ves." She said even as she sipped a glass of wine. "This is a great moment for you, but you need to temper your confidence. There are so many Journeymen who have gone so caught up in their new status that they stopped putting their full effort into designing mechs."

Ves nodded seriously. "My motivation for designing mechs hasn't abated. I'm very much aware of the pitfalls of neglecting my job."

He could not forget the instance where Professor Velten shared her many regrets in her life. The old and decrepit Senior Mech Designer presiding over the Flagrant Vandals could have achieved much more in her illustrious life if she didn't waste so much time on distractions.

"I have to admit your advancement still surprises me." Marcella continued.

"When I initially decided to work with you and invest in you, I never conceived you would grow this quickly. In the span of five years, you've grown from a pipsqueak who needs my help to sell individual mechs to a respectable Journeyman who can sell a 100 million credit mech with a wave of your hand!"

"Does that make me your main client?"

Marcella chuckled. "All my other clients are Novices and Apprentices. I've partnered with some of them for over twenty years, but none of them have the combination of drive, talent and capabilities that you possess!"

At the start of his mech design career, Ves used to look up to Marcella as a giant in the Bentheim mech scene. Now that he advanced to Journeyman and his LMC grew into a behemoth, he realized that Marcella wasn't such a dominant entity anymore.

Even though Ves no longer needed her, he still intended to retain their business relationship. Not only were their companies intertwined with contractual obligations, but Ves also appreciated the help she provided him when he was still young, ignorant and poor.

Marcella was a true friend, and a useful one to boot. Her extensive connections to the local Bentheim mech community made life a lot easier for the LMC.

"I think you should consider moving your company to Bentheim." Raella suddenly suggested. "Not only will I be able to visit my favorite cousin more often, but I can also get the Blood Claws to put your company under their wing. Nothing will happen to the LMC while it's here, I swear!"

Melinda snorted from the side. "So Ves is your favorite cousin all of a sudden? I'm sure the main reason for that is the free mechs he gave you. Don't think the Planetary Guard is aware where the three new Crystal Lord mechs the Blood Claws have been flaunting lately came from. Ves is not a mech dispenser that spits out free mechs whenever you want to cozy up to your bosses!"

Ves held out a palm in a placating gesture. "It's fine, Melinda. I didn't give away my mechs for free. As long as Raella gains some benefits, I will benefit as well. As for the topic of shifting my company's operations to Bentheim, I

don't have any compelling reasons to do so. While such a move would definitely simplify the LMC's logistics, a lot of other burdens will weigh down the company instead. At its current scale, the LMC is doing quite well on Cloudy Curtain."

"I think Ves has a fine point." Marcella said in support. "Just the taxes alone on Bentheim will negate most of the gains made in streamlining the company's supply chain. Frankly, there are too many mech companies based in Bentheim. The local government eagerly takes advantage of this by jacking up the local taxes, knowing that there will always be a new crop of mech designers who set up their companies here."

The small gathering continued to throw out ideas on what Ves should do next. He heard plenty of interesting suggestions, though he already had a firm plan in mind for the next couple of years.

"If only Melkor, Calsie, Carlos and Jannzi could be here." Ves sighed.

He only received a few sporadic messages stating that Jannzi required an extensive period of recuperation. Ves worried about her health. The unusual nature of her breakthrough left a lot of mental and spiritual scars behind that would take months or even years to heal.

Hopefully her continued exposure to the Shield of Samar would help her recuperate from all of that damage.

#### **Chapter 1136 Second Upgrade**

Ves spent another week on Bentheim in order to capitalize on the publicity that resulted from the Aurora Titan's product reveal.

The twin breakthroughs of Ves and Jannzi dominated the news cycle for a short period of time.

Unquestionably, the Larkinson Family came under much greater prominence. Aside from Ghanso Larkinson advancement to expert pilot, both Porellia

Larkinson and Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson now gained another equal in the form of Jannzi Larkinson.

Yet that wasn't all. When Ves managed to advance to become a de facto Journeyman, the family took on an entirely different status! Now that the Larkinsons boasted their first Journeyman Mech Designer, their influence had grown beyond the traditional military circles!

It was a great time to be a Larkinson this time!

Aside from the rising fortunes of the Larkinson Family, the LMC gained greater prominence as well. A company led by a Journeyman was a major force in the Republic! Not only that, but the Aurora Titan's involvement in the advancement of both Ves and Jannzi showered the mech model with an immense amount of attention!

This was why Ves found it important to capitalize on the publicity! He subjected himself to back-to-back interviews with both local, domestic and sector-wide news publications.

While it was tiring for him to answer the same boring questions over and over again, he knew that the more he showed up in the news, the more he could shape the narrative around the Aurora Titan.

The Ansel mech designers hadn't remained silent all this time. They attempted to use the pull they possessed in the major domestic mech publications to point out the many glaring weaknesses of the Aurora Titan design.

If not for the twin breakthroughs overshadowing every other news related to the Aurora Titan, then these negative articles might have actually hampered its popularity.

As it was, the Aurora Titan continued to be ordered in generous amounts each day! The LMC and NORA Consolidated registered over six-hundred orders,

which was an exceptionally high amount considering the stupendously high price levels of the different editions of the Aurora Titan!

The only downside to this success was that Ves wouldn't be able to capture the bulk of the profits from its sales. The profit-sharing agreement that Ves had made with Professor Ventag entitled him to only twenty-five percent of the profits.

The professor was definitely raking in a huge amount of money, not that he needed it in the first place!

Ves had to be content with earning a more paltry sum while doing little else other than to fabricate a number of gold label mechs.

"I have to fabricate twenty of them in order to fulfill all the orders the LMC has taken." He muttered.

This would take valuable time away from designing his fifth original design. Ves once again found himself in a spot of trouble where he needed to balance his time. Now that the LMC had taken the orders, the company could hardly renege on their word and cancel them! That would do a lot of damage to their credibility!

"Promises are promises. That said, any promise can be renegotiated."

He decided to fulfill the critical orders first while asking as many clients as possible if they would accept a small delay. Ves even considered throwing in a bonus by allowing for minor customizations to be made to their individual products. The offer to customize a mech should be very attractive, especially when it came from a Journeyman instead of an Apprentice!

Ves passed on his instructions to Gavin between his interviews.

His assistant nodded. "I'll make the arrangements. I think it's a good solution. The people who pay 150 million credits for a gold label Aurora Titan aren't

buying it for its functions. Instead, they're buying it to satisfy their vanity. Customizing a mech by adding a few bits here and there will instantly increase its collector's value."

"Try not to go overboard. Make sure at least a few gold label mechs will fall into the hands of our customers. The more my gold label Aurora Titans are out in the wild, the more attention they'll attract!"

The undeniably strong X-Factor of the gold label Aurora Titans turned the mechs into public attractions. Ves wanted to make use of this effect to encourage even more sales for his notable mech model. What better way to inspire potential buyers than shoving a gold label mech in front of their faces?

Ves, Jannzi, the Larkinson Family, the LMC and the Aurora Titan all enjoyed an unprecedented amount of attention in the Bright Republic! While the other states in the Komodo Star Sector didn't pay much attention to the proceedings, sales from foreign markets ticked up as well.

Achieving a thousand sales in the first year of the mech model's introduction did not sound so ludicrous anymore!

During this hectic period where Ves engaged in public relations, he hadn't forgotten about the System either. The System never cared about the MTA, so he figured it would probably acknowledge his advancement regardless of the lack of official judgement.

Therefore, during a quiet evening after his last interview, Ves locked himself up in the bathroom of his luxurious accommodation and activated both Lucky's ECM field and his personal comm's Privacy Shield before activating the System.

As expected, the System underwent a major change!

[Congratulations for upgrading your status to Journeyman Mech Designer. You are now able to design mechs that are worthy of notice. The Mech Designer System will now initiate an upgrade. Please stand by.]

Ves waited patiently as his comm's projection fizzled out. Shortly after that, his comm turned into a fluid mass of smart metal while wrapping around his hand like a glove.

He felt as if he put his hand in the mouth of an exobeast. Even though his instincts told him that he should get rid of this eerie metallic mass, he tried his best to endure the uncomfortable sensation.

Five minutes later, his comm finally stopped doing whatever it was doing. It changed back into its old metal band-like shape around his wrist and resumed projecting an interface as if nothing weird had happened earlier!

[Your access to the Store has expanded. You are now able to exchange more advanced items with Design Points.]

That didn't hold much meaning to Ves because he knew that most of the items would still be unaffordable. The Store was pretty much filled with traps in that regard.

[You are now able to purchase bronze lottery tickets for the preferential price of 20,000 Design Points.]

While the bronze ones sounded like a step up from copper lottery tickets which cost only 500 DP, Ves did not consider them to be a good deal at all. "20,000 DP is way too much for only bronze lottery tickets."

Spending his precious DP on lottery tickets was another trap from the profiteering system. He could not put it past the System to rig the prizes massively in its favor!

After these perfunctory messages, the System finally came to the message that Ves anticipated the most. It finally unlocked a new ability for Ves!

[The Inventory module has unlocked the Inventorize ability. You are able to select any handheld object in your possession and add the property to materialize and dematerialize them from your Inventory. The Inventorize ability only comes with one use and can only be replenished through lottery ticket prizes, mission rewards and other sources.]

Ves' eyes instantly shone. "So the Inventory won't be acting as a bag for the Amastendira anymore!"

The Inventory was one of the biggest weapons in his arsenal. Although many of the other functions of the Systems overshadowed this module, Ves owed his life to it! Without the Inventory, he would never be able to carry his Amastendira around!

The Inventorize ability gave him hope that he would one day be able to store an entire arsenal into his comm!

If not for the size and mass limitations that came with this ability, Ves would have chosen to Inventorize the Barracuda or something. Carrying a fully-fledged FTL-capable starship around him all the time would ensure he would never have to fear about getting stranded in space!

"One can only dream."

As it was, Ves already made his decision which object he wanted to Inventorize.

He did not choose the Peaceful Repose, his artful custom ballistic pistol.

He did not choose the Vulcaneye, his powerful System-redeemed scanner.

He did not choose the shield generator that Master Olson gifted him long ago.

He also didn't choose the Sparous Vize, his custom light combat armor. When compacted into a briefcase-sized object, it was just small and light enough to meet the Inventorize ability's criteria.

"While armor is important, there is one object in my possession that surpasses them all in importance!"

"Meow?"

Lucky drifted down and nuzzled his cheek.

Ves chuckled. "Not you, Lucky. My personal comm!"

"Meow!"

His cat indignantly floated away from his head after bumping his paw against his nose.

Although Ves toyed with the thought of Inventorizing Lucky, Ves wouldn't gain very much out of it. Lucky was already fairly elusive with his ability to turn incorporeal and pass through solid objects. With his newly-assimilated ECM systems, the cat could hide his presence from almost every form of electronic surveillance as well!

Therefore, the added benefit of being able to hide Lucky in his Inventory was a bit redundant to Ves. Rather than opt to Inventorize Lucky or some other piece of gear, why not try it on the System itself?

One of the biggest annoyances to his military service was that he had been unduly deprived of the System! While his separation from the System did him a lot of good in preventing him from becoming too dependent on its functions, there were many times when Ves wished he could buy something quick from its Skill Tree or Store!

There was another reason why he contemplated using this ability on his comm. Being able to carry his System around in his intangible Inventory not

only ensured constant access to its functions, but kept other people from taking it away!

One of the biggest worries Ves grappled with during his time away from the System was that someone might recognize and steal his comm!

While Ves trusted Lucky to keep his comm safe, his cat was not invincible. If the Mech Trade Association, Common Fleet Alliance or the Five Scrolls Compact somehow tracked the System down, there was nothing a single gem cat could do to keep his personal comm out of their greedy hands!

Keeping the System stored in a dematerialized form in his Inventory neatly solved that problem. Although Ves guessed that the materialization technology could probably be blocked with some sort of advanced tech, he did not think he would be subjected to such an effect very frequently.

"There are too many reasons in favor for me to hesitate any further. Let's try this ability!"

When Ves selected the option in the interface and designated his personal comm as the target, the System surprisingly didn't block the option.

[You have selected this comm to be Inventorized. Do you confirm your selection?]

"Yes, goddammit! If you ask me, you should have come with this function from the start!"

The System ignored his complaints and dutifully went to work. His comm seemed to shimmer around his wrist, causing Ves to quickly remove it from his body. The comm floated in the air before slowly dematerializing.

Eventually, it disappeared.

"It worked?"

Ves concentrated on his Inventory. Right next to the copy of the Amastendira, he perceived the presence of his personal comm.

He sent a mental command to summon it back into realspace.

His comm slowly appeared in the air again. Ves quickly picked it up before gravity asserted itself on the slim object.

"It worked!" Ves laughed.

A huge burden lifted off his shoulders! With the System permanently accompanying him in his Inventory, nobody would be able to take it from his possession!

### Chapter 1137 Supply Missions

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 328,742

Attributes

Strength: 1.4

Dexterity: 1.0

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.2

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 1.3

Neural Aptitude: F

## Skills

...

## Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A young Journeyman Mech Designer with a very distinct specialty.

Just before Ves stowed away his comm in his Inventory and ask Gavin to supply him with a new one, he looked up his Status.

Not much had changed, which surprised Ves a bit considering what a momentous change he had gone through.

"Part of it is because this Status isn't capturing the condition of my design seed."

Was it because the System couldn't access it, or because it didn't know how to assess and quantify it? With the amazing capabilities of the System, those possibilities did not seem very likely to Ves.

"Maybe it's too lazy." Ves snorted.

He first scanned how much DP he earned over the last seven months since he embarked on his joint design project.

While he spent a lot of DP on upgrading his Skills and acquiring Space Knight Mastery I, he earned much of it back through regular sales of his Blackbeak model. The Crystal Lord sold a lot as well, but the System withheld all the DP he earned from its sales because he Superpublished the laser rifleman mech design.

"This ability is really a double-edged sword."

Despite this price, Ves contemplated using the Superpublish ability again for his fifth original mech design. He hated the thought of rushing his next design project because he wouldn't be able to refine and optimize it to the best of his ability.

Superpublishing the design would solve all of the inadequacies that Ves had missed in his rush to bring it to the market.

"It doesn't take very long to design a functional mech, especially now that I've advanced to Journeyman. All those months spent on optimizing the design will only elevate its performance by five to ten percent at best. Superpublishing delivers an equivalent amount of improvement after only a single activation!"

There was no use deciding on this matter at this moment. He would have to design his mech first and see where he stood in a couple of months before he made his decision.

One significant change from his last Status update was that the System finally recognized his specialty now that it had crystallized into his design seed.

"Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis. That's quite a mouthful to describe."

While Ves found the description the System came up with to be extremely clunky and inelegant, it nonetheless fit what he understood of his own design philosophy. All this time, he focused his attention on designing mechs that excelled in spiritually empowering its mech pilots and vica versa.

It was not a label he would be proud to carry in public, though. "If anyone asks what my specialty is, I can probably say that I specialize in metaphysical man-machine symbiosis!"

Replacing the word spiritual with metaphysical made his specialty sound ten times vaguer and broader. Hardly any mech designer would be able to figure out what Ves exactly specialized in when they came across this word soup!

"The more confused they are, the more they'll substitute the actual meaning with their own guesses!"

Ves would never tell the truth about his design philosophy to anyone. He much preferred to be as vague as possible so that other people would come up with their own logical explanations.

He next went over his list of Attributes. All of them remained the same except for a single notable change. His Spirituality jumped from 0.8 to 1.3! This was a substantial leap in score, and while Ves had difficulty figuring out the System's measurement scale for Spirituality, such a big jump meant his spiritual abilities gained a substantial boost in strength!

The most important of which was imbuing his designs with a stronger X-Factor!

"If I am able to apply more of my own Spirituality on my own designs, I'll be less dependent on the strength of external spiritual fragments."

This basically meant that Ves would be able to design mechs with a higher grade of X-Factor by depending on his own imagination. He even developed an inkling that he would be able to create images in his mind that equaled Qilanxo's potent spiritual fragment in strength one day!

"I'll probably have to advance to Master or Star Designer before I reach that point." Ves chuckled deprecatingly to himself. That was too far away for him to contemplate at this time. "At least I'll be stronger during my spiritual incursions through the imaginary realm. There are a lot of treasures there to be mined as long as I'm strong enough to brave its many threats!"

After passing over his Attributes, Ves quickly turned to his Skills.

His extensive list of Skills hadn't changed at all. Ves might decide to spend some of his DP to upgrade some of his cheaper Skills and Sub-Skills, but right

now he did not feel a pressing need to do so. He was already very knowledgeable compared to other Journeymen!

The Inventorize ability rested immediately below the Superpublish ability. The single descriptor signified that Ves had already spent his single use of this ability.

"Even so, since this ability remains on my Status page, it shouldn't be impossible to gain another chance to Inventorize an object!"

The greedy, slave-driving System wanted Ves to work for the opportunity this time. Unlike the Superpublish ability which refreshed every year, Ves probably needed to work his butt off in order to earn this reward!

Speaking of tasks, the System prompted him with a message.

[You have received several new missions. Please check the Mission page for the details.]

Five new missions popped out of nowhere!

[Supply Mission]

Mission: Material Supply 1

Difficulty: S-Rank

Prerequisites: Advance to Journeyman Mech Designer

Description

The Mech Designer System needs to be supplied with several rare materials to facilitate future upgrades.

This Supply Mission can be completed by offering 45.5343 grams of Orpheidan Glow Glass.

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 1,000,000 Design Points, 1 golden lottery ticket.

[Supply Mission]

Mission: Material Supply 2

Difficulty: S-Rank

Prerequisites: Advance to Journeyman Mech Designer

Description

The Mech Designer System needs to be supplied with several rare materials to facilitate future upgrades.

This Supply Mission can be completed by offering 2.353 kilograms of EE-343F-00334R.

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 1,000,000 Design Points, 1 golden lottery ticket.

[Supply Mission]

Mission: Material Supply 3

Difficulty: S-Rank

Prerequisites: Advance to Journeyman Mech Designer

Description

The Mech Designer System needs to be supplied with several rare materials to facilitate future upgrades.

This Supply Mission can be completed by offering 49.53 kilograms of Timpala Steel.

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 1,000,000 Design Points, 1 golden lottery ticket.

[Supply Mission]

Mission: Material Supply 4

Difficulty: S-Rank

Prerequisites: Advance to Journeyman Mech Designer

Description

The Mech Designer System needs to be supplied with several rare materials to facilitate future upgrades.

This Supply Mission can be completed by offering 12.556 milligrams of Yondu Milk.

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 1,000,000 Design Points, 1 golden lottery ticket.

[Supply Mission]

Mission: Material Supply 5

Difficulty: S-Rank

Prerequisites: Advance to Journeyman Mech Designer

Description

The Mech Designer System needs to be supplied with several rare materials to facilitate future upgrades.

This Supply Mission can be completed by offering 2 complete pieces of Abalask Eyes.

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 1,000,000 Design Points, 1 golden lottery ticket.

"What the hell? Why did you dump all these S-rank missions on my lap all of a sudden! Orphedeian Glow Glass? EE-343F-00334R? I've never heard of this crap before!"

Surprisingly, the System deigned to provide him with an explanation this time.

[The aforementioned materials are rare, high-grade exotics found in specific parts of the Milky Way Galaxy. Please endeavor to secure these materials in the specified amounts in order to complete the Supply Missions and obtain your generous rewards.]

Ves wanted to puke out blood. Although he already had an inkling that it was not going to be easy to secure these high-grade exotics, the rewards seemed very uneven!

Oh sure, earning 1,000,000 DP and another opportunity to Inventorize an object sounded great to Ves. The only objection he had was that the System only added in a single golden lottery ticket!

"I recall an A-rank mission where you rewarded me with 10 golden lottery tickets, System! Why have you cut back on them all of a sudden! Shouldn't you at least maintain the same amount?!"

[...Suggestion noted. Please wait while the rewards for the Supply Missions are being adjusted.]

Ves didn't wait and immediately browsed the details of the Supply Missions once again. The rewards for each of them changed!

Reward: 1 use of the Inventorize ability, 10 golden lottery tickets.

"What?! Why take away the 1 million DP!"

The System didn't respond this time, evidently having enough of Ves' demands.

While Ves momentarily bled over the loss of all of those points, he quickly reigned himself in. Now that he advanced to Journeyman, was it really impossible for him to earn a million DP from a single design?

DP was by far the easiest reward he could earn by himself. Although it hurt a lot for him to say goodbye to the 1 million DP reward, he figured that all of the

extra lottery tickets was more than worth it! Ves hit the jackpot by winning his copy of the Amestendira from one of them! The prospect of earning more rewards as remarkable as his Inventorized laser pistol sent him into a greedy mood!

"As long as I complete all five Supply Missions, I'll not only be able to Inventorize five more objects, but get fifty golden lottery tickets to test my luck on! With so many draws, I'm bound to hit the jackpot at least once or twice!"

His luck with lottery tickets wasn't all that great. The odds of drawing a price at least comparable to the Amastendira was woefully low, but as long as Ves could go through so many lottery tickets, he was bound to get something good eventually!

The only snag was that these missions didn't seem very easy to fulfill. "I've never seen an S-rank mission before."

A-rank missions already gave him a lot of trouble. If he had to do something that surpassed the Glowing Planet campaign in difficulty, then obtaining these five different high-grade exotics should not be simple!

As soon as Ves memorized the names of the materials, he deactivated the System and put down his Privacy Shield and Lucky's ECM. He quickly went on the galactic net and searched for the plainest-sounding one.

[Timpala Steel. Processed alloy made by a long-extinct alien race. Remnants of this highly-desired material is occasionally found in the Wilting Rose Star Sector. No actual market price.]

"No market price?!"

This was worse than he thought. If the galactic net could not cough up a market price, then obtaining Timpala Steel was not as simple as throwing enough money at a supplier. This material was probably as valuable as a thin sliver of high-grade Rorach's Bone, if not more!

S-ranked missions weren't S-ranked for nothing!

Ves immediately grew suspicious at the System for imposing these missions on him all of a sudden. It strengthened his theory that the System may be incomplete or suffered from serious damage and required a number of exceptional materials to recover its former strength.

"I don't need to search the other materials to know they're just as priceless!"

He felt like the System knew him too well. It wanted these materials, and it had no scruples dangling bits of juicy bait in front of Ves in order to get him to gather them in its stead!

The worst part about it was that it was working!

#### Chapter 1138 Elevated Status

Throughout the week of interviews and celebration, Ves also received a very important call. As soon as he read the name of the person calling him, he immediately took a break.

"Ves Larkinson. Congratulations on your successful advancement to Journeyman."

"Thank you, Master Olson."

Although his Master hadn't been very present during his formative years as an Apprentice, he still enjoyed some of the halo she bestowed on him. Ves was very cognizant that Master Olson didn't pay too much attention to Apprentice Mech Designers like him unless she nurtured them to inherit her design philosophy.

It was different when it came to Journeymen. Even in the prosperous and highly-populated Friday Coalition, Journeymen were valuable resources that could be employed in many areas as long as their loyalty could be assured.

The problem that Master Olson faced in this situation was that she probably did not expect Ves to advance to Journeyman so fast!

This threw her calculations on him completely out of whack, though she did her best not to show any of her doubts to Ves in this comm call. By all appearances, Master Olson genuinely looked pleased at his turn of fortune.

"Now that you have become a de facto Journeyman, it won't be long before you receive recognition from the MTA. Are you aware of your obligations once you reach that point?"

Ves nodded. "I'll have to travel to the MTA's sector headquarters."

"There are some important ceremonies and rituals that you have to go through. Advancement to Journeyman not only means your ability to design mechs has matured, but it also means you have become a true galactic citizen. The MTA will outline all the benefits a Journeyman like you is entitled to. They will also reveal some very important secrets about the true meaning of our profession."

That sounded as if his impending visit to the MTA's headquarters in the Komodo Star Sector wasn't just a regular meet and greet.

"I look forward to my upcoming visit." Ves said, even though he felt anything but enthused.

His relationship with the MTA was admittedly mixed. Ves flagrantly broke their rules and ran roughshod over their taboos several times. Like a crook visiting a police station, Ves didn't want to be close to them at all, especially considering that his body was marked by gene optimization treatments from the CFA!

Even so, as far as Ves was aware of, every Journeyman went on a pilgrimage to one of the bulwarks of the MTA. The Mech Trade Association might

possess an innocuous name, but they were very adamant on keeping every mech designer in civilized space under their control!

"Your visit to the MTA's headquarters come first." Master Olson emphasized.

"After that, I would like you to pay a visit to Leemar to inspect you on your progress and impart some knowledge to you. I will also be offering some opportunities to you that are well worth your time. I advise you to clear your schedule and arrange matters at home before you embark on your visits."

It sounded like Master Olson already wanted to put Ves at work. "What are these opportunities you talk about?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word Journeyman?"

"A Journeyman is a craftsman who has matured. They are competent in their craft and can be trusted to deliver a sound product by themselves."

"One of the historical customs of journeymen in ancient crafts was that they traveled from place to place after graduating from apprentices. This allowed them to move beyond their hometowns to experience different approaches to their own craft. A Journeyman Mech Designer is not obligated to travel around, but it is generally a good idea to broaden your horizons."

This sounded rather big to Ves. "You want me to travel around?"

Master Olson smiled. "Have you ever traveled beyond the Komodo Star Sector?"

"I have." Ves admitted. "Several missions brought me to the Faris Star Region."

"Then you must be very much aware that different customs exist for mechs depending on the region they operate. A resource-poor region like the frontier cannot sustain the existence of high-quality mechs. Each star sector exhibits their own nuances when it comes to the prevailing mech doctrines. I'm very

glad you've already taken a step to expand your horizons, but it would do you well to explore what more prosperous star sectors have to offer as well."

It seemed to Ves that Master Olson was trying to encourage him to accept the opportunities she wanted to present to him during his visit to Leemar.

Since he was quite intrigued by the prospect of travelling to another star sector, he expressed some enthusiasm.

"I look forward to what you have to offer."

In any case, he could neatly fit a possible excursion in his schedule as long as it didn't take too long.

After he designed his fifth original mech design, he wasn't under very much pressure to design another mech.

With the next generation of mechs about to arrive in five years or less, any mech he designed in the waning years of the current generation would quickly be devalued. While his Aurora Titan model exceeded its initial sales projections, Ves would not be able to spiritually empower his other mech designs with something as strong as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment.

Without possessing the critical element that allowed him to elevate the X-Factor of his design to A-rank, his subsequent mech designs would never match the Aurora Titan's splendor. Rather than spending his time on designing lackluster mechs, Ves would rather go on an excursion to expand his horizons and improve his ability to design mechs for the upcoming mech generation!

After a bit more chatting, Master Olson finally ended the call. While she wanted to impart a lot more information to him, he would visit her soon enough at Leemar anyway.

"A Journeyman really receives different treatment from everyone." He sighed.

It kind of made sense as Journeyman Mech Designers technically enjoyed the same status as expert pilots. Nonetheless, the MTA treated high-ranking mech pilots with much more reverence than high-ranking mech designers. It was as if they believed that expert pilots needed extra protection while Journeymen Mech Designers could take care of themselves!

"Well, with how difficult it is to extend the lives of expert pilots and how often they are subjected to combat, it's really hard to insure that enough of them are around at any single time."

Mech designers were more than capable of taking care of themselves. Journeymen and higher were guaranteed money-making machines. It was impossible for them to go bankrupt and starve on the streets unless they pissed off the state or the MTA!

As long as someone had enough money, they could convert it into different forms of power and influence. Ves happened to be flush with money right now, so much so that he didn't know what to do with it other than to invest in the Avatars of Myth.

"The Avatars are growing stronger every day, but it's still a slow process."

Throwing more money at the Avatars at this stage would do more harm than good. Melkor was very clear about the need to grow the Avatars organically rather than by brute force. A rapid growth would introduce too many unstable elements in their ranks.

As the days of interviews and celebrations came to an end, Ves finally had the opportunity to pay a final visit to Jannzi.

He arrived at the same military hospital which he had been treated for the injuries sustained by his last assassination attempt with Lucky in tow. While the guards looked at his cat with askance, they let them through anyway.

When Ves and Lucky entered the hospital room where Jannzi recuperated from her arduous breakthrough, they encountered an extra guest!

"Grandfather! You're here!"

Benjamin Larkinson amiably smiled at his exceptional grandson. "I took the fastest corvette to Bentheim in order to catch you before you returned to Cloudy Curtain. I'm very proud of what you've achieved, Ves. Your sudden advancement has completely upended the family!"

"Are there any changes in store?"

"Now that you've become a Journeyman, you carry real weight in the family. As far as I'm concerned, you have the right to stand equal to the expert pilots in the family! While it will take some time for me to convince the other elders to respect you in this fashion, it is undeniable that you are a leader of the family!"

That.. was pretty big news to Ves. While the Larkinson Family did not specifically obey the orders of their experts unquestionably, they still had a lot of say in how the family was being run.

Most of Benjamin's leading influence in the family came from his past status as an expert pilot! Even though his battle injuries took away his strength, Benjamin was still an influential leader in the family!

For Benjamin to suggest that his grandson enjoyed the same renown was to suggest they now stood as equals when it came to decision-making within the family!

"I'm honored you feel that way." Ves responded mildly. "I'm not really chasing after power in the family, though. I'm already occupied with my own work."

"I know you aren't interested. Ghanso Larkinson isn't interested in exercising his power either. The day-to-day operations of the family will still remain in the

hands of old geezers like me. The only important point to keep in mind is that if you really want something that requires the support of the entire family, it's a lot easier to get our backing now. For example, the recent moves you've made to align ourselves to the Tovar Family has long been met with resistance from many conservative Larkinsons. That's different now."

This was what it meant to be a leader in the family. The Larkinson Family didn't know what to do with the first Journeyman Mech Designer in their ranks, so they defaulted to treating him as an expert pilot.

Both of them turned to the patient in the room. Jannzi looked a bit better than Ves had thought. She already looked as if she could be up and about after a few more weeks of recovery.

"How are you, Jannzi?" Ves asked gently while placing Lucky on her bed.

The cat playfully climbed up to Jannzi and allowed himself to be petted by her hand.

"The doctors say I'll have to make a long recovery. They've been pouring over the telemetry and they've all been scratching their heads over why my breakthrough was unusually violent."

Ves had a good idea why, but it was best to keep his thoughts to himself. "Will you be able to regain your strength?"

"I think so. The Apocalypse Heralds will help me recover. Thank you for letting me keep the Shield of Samar, Ves. I know it's a very expensive mech for you to give away."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the true owner of the Shield of Samar. I already arranged Gavin to transfer the ownership of the mech over to your name. It is truly yours now!"

Jannzi looked very ecstatic at the news! She brightened up instantly and spontaneously hugged Lucky to her chest.

"Thank you for this gift, Ves! I don't know how I can repay this favor."

"I'm just paying you for your services, Jannzi. The stunt you pulled off during the demonstration has already inspired many people to buy a copy of the Aurora Titan. The earnings I've made from those extra sales are more than sufficient to cover the value of your mech. Besides, we're family."

Ves, Jannzi and Benjamin all enjoyed a happy moment. Benjamin was glad to see that Ves was generous to Jannzi. Family needed to stick together and help each other out.

"Are you happy with joining the Apocalypse Heralds?" Ves asked.

"To be honest, I would rather join a heavy assault regiment that likes to take the fight up close." She said. "Still, my Shield of Samar is a lot more useful protecting the slow-moving artillery mechs of the Heralds. Their static, defensive-oriented mech doctrine fits well with a low-mobility mech like mine."

She'd be able to fulfill the core purpose of her mech to the utmost with the Apocalypse Heralds. With all the murky signs that another conflict might be on the horizon, Jannzi would have plenty of chances in the future to distinguish herself in battle with the Heralds!

### Chapter 1139 New Old Face

The visit to Jannzi capped off a fantastic week for Ves. With orders for the Aurora Titan continuing to pour in, Ves believed he had done all he could do to maximize the exposure of his mech model. After achieving a sufficient amount of saturation in the public sphere, further interviews and publicity stunts wouldn't be of much use.

While most of the public heard of the Aurora Titan's existence, they still reserved their judgement on its design. Only through seeing it in action would

they truly make up their minds on whether this eccentric mech possessed any actual merit!

In fact, as Ves boarded the Barracuda along with Lucky, Ketis and Gavin, his assistant handed him a datapad containing the first reports of what his first customers were doing with the first batch of mechs that had already rolled off NORA Consolidated's formidable production lines.

"This looks quite bad." Ves remarked.

"A lot of your customers overestimated their skills or the skills of their space knight specialists." Gavin shrugged as they secured themselves to their seats as the Barracuda lifted off from Dorum's spaceport. The corvette would quickly be joining the Greenfeather on their way back to Cloudy Curtain.

"While the LMC and NORA Consolidated attached plenty of warnings to the Aurora Titan, the reality is that the majority of our customers are woefully ill-prepared to make use of such a machine."

The lack of mobility didn't seem so bad when viewing Jannzi Larkinson's brief performance in her Shield of Samar, but it was a lot more glaring in practice! In addition, the operation of the alien crystals and the polarizing module both required a lot of extra effort on the part of the mech pilots. It took Jannzi months to become proficient in their uses!

"I hope our companies have made it clear that the Aurora Titan comes with a steep learning curve. We don't take refunds and I don't want to see our customers begin to second-guess the Aurora Titan and cancel their outstanding orders."

"We're aware of how much this problem can blow up in our faces." Gavin said. "The LMC and NORA Consolidated already joined hands to tackle this problem and nip it in the bud before it grows into a major problem. Right now, we're rapidly developing a number of virtual and realspace training programs.

The mech pilots of the other four show models are already being employed as trainers."

"All of that sounds good. I'm very pleased with the initiative being shown. Good work, Gavin."

The LMC did not require any intervention from Ves when it came to addressing problems of this nature. Phase 2 not only set the tone of the company's corporate culture, but also introduced many organizational changes that decentralized the different departments of the company.

In some sense, the organizational structure of the LMC resembled the way the Starlight Megalodon organized her own departments, if not as dysfunctional and prone to tribalism.

As much as Ves held some misgivings over this decentralized approach, it was the most appropriate one to take when it came to larger companies. As the LMC grew larger and larger, delegating more responsibilities became a necessity as Ves and the top management of the company couldn't possibly micromanage its massive day-to-day operations.

Therefore, the LMC transitioned to an organizational model where the departments gained more autonomy to make their own decisions. Supervisors at the top and inspectors rotating among the different departments of the company made sure that they did their jobs, but other than that Ves did not care too much about the direction they took.

At this point, Ves was not exactly the most active CEO of his company. His only two responsibilities was to lead the design team and pump out more mech designs.

"What about the pushback we received from Ansel? Has Professor Pendleton and his ilk made any notable moves against the Aurora Titan?"

"Not as such." Gavin shook his head. "So far, they've only been content with publishing nuances critiques of the Aurora Titan design. However, their reviews have a very wide reach in the Bright Republic's mech community. Although our marketing blitz has managed to overshadow the unflattering reviews for the moment, after the immediate excitement dies down the reviews will gain a lot more weight!"

Many people blindly followed the reviews from authoritative mech designers. The Ansel mech designers learned the hard way that it was best not to engage in a debate with Ves directly, so they decided to address the many shortcomings of the Aurora Titan design through numerous reviews and evaluations.

Ves could hardly rebut the criticisms directly. He'd have to go through the trouble of writing up a formal rebuttal which the mech publication could opt to publish it or throw it in the trash can.

"I believe plenty of customers will come to learn to appreciate the Aurora Titan in time." He said. "All the negative reviews only pay attention to the specs of my design. They aren't evaluating it holistically or mention anything about well a mech pilot is able to mesh with the mech. As long as word of mouth about the remarkable properties about my mechs are spreading, the reviews won't hold as much weight anymore."

The Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord models already underwent something similar, if to a lesser degree. The mechs of the LMC always turned out to be more remarkable than met the eye!

While many mech buyers put a lot of stock in mech reviews, they were also highly susceptible to the recommendations other people who boasted about their fantastic experiences with their new mechs!

"Has the Ansel crowd done any more than that?"

"We haven't seen any signs." Gavin said. "According to Marcella, you're protected by the halo of your recent achievements. It's not wise to attack you at your current peak."

"Are they planning on retaliating when the dust dies down?"

"Maybe. We're not sure. There isn't much point to it. Usually, the main way the Ansel mech designers puts down their competitors is to publish a competing design with the same mech concept!"

The mech designers who graduated from the Ansel University of Mech Design possessed so much confidence that they weren't afraid of direct competition!

If Professor Pendleton really wanted to hit back at Ves, then he would surely be designing his own version of a super-medium space knight at this very moment!

Nonetheless, Ves did not express any apprehension towards this possible threat! Instead, he grinned with excitement.

"The Aurora Titan can not be matched so easily. No one can replicate the special sauce I've added to my own mech designs. Even if the specs of the Aurora Titan's competitors are a little better, the piloting experience will still differ by a drastic margin!"

Competition was the prevailing rule of the game. Mech designers constantly competed against each other. Nothing forbid any mech designer to compete directly against the LMC's products.

Perhaps any other mech designer would be shaking in their boots at the thought of publishing a fantastic new mech design, only to be overshadowed by a superior mech of the same type a couple of months later!

Heck, the competing mech model didn't even need to take that long to enter the market. Corporate espionage allowed a competitor to get wind of what

another mech designer was designing early. As long as the competitor worked harder and better, they could publish their design first!

Although these kinds of shenanigans took place a lot of times if the sensational stories in the mech publications were true, none of it was forbidden. As long as a competitor didn't get caught with engaging in corporate espionage, they could publish all the competing mech designs they wanted!

As Ves kept himself up to date on the market reception of the Aurora Titan, the Barracuda and the Greenfeather quickly arrived at Cloudy Curtain. Ves, Lucky, Ketis and Gavin departed from his personal corvette after landing at the Mech Nursery.

Ketis took Lucky and quickly ran off, leaving Ves and Gavin to their business.

Since he had just returned to the company, Ves wanted to check by his office to see if anything new had been placed on his desk. He entered the headquarters and rode the elevator to the top. Once there, he encountered a surprising old face.

"Carlos!"

His old friend and classmate finally returned to the LMC after the Mech Corps released him from his draft!

Ves and Carlos immediately hugged each other before separating and taking in each other's appearances.

"You look a lot more formidable than last time, Ves." Carlos said with a slightly hoarse but impressed voice. "Wow, so this is what becoming a Journeyman will do to you!"

"You look different as well, Carlos. You're much more fit and mature. I see the war has left a heavy mark on you as well."

Carlos wore simple work clothing while sporting a plain buzz cut. His skin had tanned by quite a bit and it appeared he also seemed to be a little jumpier than usual.

Most notably, one of his arms wasn't as tanned as the other!

"That arm.. Is it cloned?"

"Yep." Carlos shrugged. "It's nothing compared to what you've been through. I heard you got shot in the heart on Bentheim and that your entire chest needed to be replaced."

Ves chuckled a bit. "Yeah. I enjoyed some of the best medical treatment in the Republic, so hardly any mark is left behind. The doctors even made sure to match my cloned skin's pigment with my original skin!"

The disparity in the quality of their treatments reflected their importance to the Republic. While Ves enjoyed the attention and favor of Flashlight, the Tovar Family and Professor Ventag, Carlos had been left on his own!

As a low-ranking Novice Mech Designer, his status among all the drafted mech designers was firmly at the bottom! This made Carlos no different from cannon fodder in the eyes of the brass.

From the glimpses of haunting gazes that Ves sensed in the eyes of his friend, Carlos must have endured a lot of traumas during the war!

"The LMC will always welcome you back, Carlos." Ves gently said and invited him inside his office. "Let's go inside. You're welcome to share your story if you want."

"It's nothing special, really." Carlos wearily said. "I spent most of my time during the war assigned to supervise a maintenance division at a landbound mech regiment deployed to the frontlines. It was a very hectic three years."

Having gone through a lot of dangerous encounters himself, Ves recognized that Carlos didn't want to bring up painful memories.

Ves quickly changed his tack. "That's fine. Just know that Cloudy Curtain has always been very far away from the action. It's the perfect place for you to recuperate and integrate back into society."

His parents chose to settle on Cloudy Curtain for a very good reason that Ves only realized after he returned from the war itself.

The planet was very tranquil! While it was conveniently positioned close to the Bentheim System, it was also an unimportant, rural backwater where nothing exciting happened!

To people haunted by the war such as his parents, himself or Carlos, spending their placid days on this underdeveloped planet was a great way to heal from the mental scars left behind by the war!

As Ves tentatively managed to engage Carlos in casual conversation, he carefully asked an important question.

"How far have you progressed in your mech design career? Have you learned a lot."

"I have." Carlos nodded with a bit more energy. "My recent improvement in learning ability quickly caught the attention of more senior mech designers. They assigned a lot of reading material to me over the years! While I don't claim to equal your knowledge, I'm sure I can be of use to you now!"

"That's good to hear. Have you found your specialty yet? Deciding upon the basis of your design philosophy is an important step to take for a mech designer."

Carlos tentatively nodded. "I've almost settled on an idea, although I'm not entirely comfortable with it yet. I keep coming back to it despite my reluctance to embrace the idea."

"Are you willing to describe your potential design philosophy?"

"Alright, but please don't laugh. Simply said, my design philosophy revolves around big guns. There's just something about unleashing powerful physical impacts and explosions at range that fascinate me. If I ever design my own mechs, I want them to be armed with the biggest and most powerful rifles and cannons I can hook up to their frames!"

"That is.. certainly a very specific idea." Ves answered while doing his best not to look nonplussed. "If that is where your passion leads to, then you should pursue it without hesitation."

"That's the thing.. I don't know if it is something I want to focus on for the entirety of my mech design career. What if I regret the decision?"

"Only you can resolve the doubts in your heart, Carlos. Take all the time you need. I'll be waiting."

## THE MECH TOUCH

### Chapter 1140 Friendly Business

Throughout the evening upon his return to Cloudy Curtain, Ves managed to worm out a few more details on what Carlos had been through.

After a brief bout of training, the Mech Corps immediately assigned him to the 5th Root Raiders of the 5th Havensworth Division.

Ves immediately understood what Carlos might have gone through once he'd been assigned to the Root Raiders. The mech regiments of the Havensworth Divisions usually saw the most action as they were based at or around the Havensworth border system.

The Root Raiders served a very specific role in the 5th Havensworth Division. They excelled in operating in arboreal terrain. Forests, trees and abundant alien or Earth-standard fauna posed fewer difficulties to them than other mech regiments.

They fielded a large range of light mechs and slimmed-down medium mechs. Their mechs either wormed their way through trees or chopped them down with the axes that every Root Raider mech carried in their default loadout.

In fact, the Root Raiders were famous for not issuing a single sword to their melee mechs!

The reason the Root Raiders developed such a specific mech doctrine was because they were mostly employed to contest the rural, underdeveloped border planets at the frontlines.

Although the systems they fought at weren't necessarily important in a strategic sense, the Root Raiders still played a vital role in forcing the Vesians to divert additional forces to root the raiders out.

Naturally, the Root Raiders often had to play with fire when they deployed. Time and time again, they suffered major casualties when they overplayed their hands or came across more Vesian reinforcements than expected.

Knowing this, Ves did not feel the need to ask Carlos to share more of his story anymore.

"The fifth of the fifth are my brothers." Carlos said. "To be honest, sometimes I doubted whether I should return home after surviving so much with them. The Raiders extended an offer to me, you know."

"Why did you decide to return?"

"I promised to come back to you, right? Also, I don't think I can stomach more war. At that time amidst the explosions and hasty evacuations, I became

aware of what mech designers are truly capable of. We design engines of destruction! Each mech is a killing machine! Destruction is central to what they bring to the table! And where destruction ensues, death eventually follows!"

Ves was taken aback by his friend's sudden outburst. "Whoa, there Carlos. Perhaps you should calm down a bit. The Republic is long at peace now. The Vesians won't return to rain down destruction on us. The Mech Nursery is one of the safest and most heavily-guarded sites on the planet."

"I.. I'm sorry Ves. I think my mood swings have gotten the better of me. The reason why it took so long for the Mech Corps to release me from service is because I had to go through a few months of therapy."

If Carlos was this bad right now, then he must have been quite a sight in the past!

"Are you taking any medicine?" Ves asked suspiciously.

"I'm on a prescription."

"Make sure you check up with our own doctors about your medication. The LMC should have a competent staff on hand, and if not you can always check with the doctors from Sanyal-Ablin."

"I'll do that."

"So now that you've left the Mech Corps, is your return to your expectations?"

"I don't know." Carlos admitted. "I feel as if I went through hell and back, but then I hear about you earning the Darkness Eater and the Golden Mech while possibly going through something ten times worse than I've ever experienced! Not only that, but you also managed to advance to Journeyman shortly after the war!"

"How does that make you feel?"

"It makes me feel as if I can never catch up to you. It makes me feel jealous of your sudden good fortune these past few years. It makes me feel that no matter how much sweat and tears I put into my work, it will never equal a minute's worth of effort on your part!"

This.. was very honest of Carlos. Ves could see why he would feel that way. His friend obviously suffered a lot, but he likely never received anything close to Darkness Eater as a recognition of the services he rendered during the war.

"I can't do anything about the way you feel about me." Ves replied after a brief but deliberate pause. "I've enjoyed some spates of good luck, I admit. However, I don't think it's healthy for you to compare yourself to me. What will that do except to strain our friendship even further? Mech design is not a race. There are Masters and Star Designers who are a million times more capable than me, but do you see me casting jealous glances at the success they enjoy?"

"They're all older than you, Ves. They have hundreds of years to develop a head-start. My situation is different. We were classmates! We attended the Rittersberg University of Technology in the same class in the same year group! We graduated at the same time with pretty much the same level of grades! How can you move so far ahead since then? You're a Journeyman now, for heaven's sake!"

"Not officially. Technically, I'm merely a de facto Journeyman."

"Don't be pedantic with me. I'm not the Carlos you knew back then. There's something very odd about you. Between the time you graduated and since you designed your first variant, something weird must have happened that gave you a leg up in your mech design career. What is it, Ves?!"

Carlos was not the first person to cast doubt on Ves' unusual background and his abnormally rapid career progression.

Normally, Ves would have denied every accusation for fear of exposing the System. While this concern never went away, he had grown a lot more confident about himself lately.

Even if others found something suspicious about Ves, so what? With all of the pervasive influences at work in every layer of society, it could be anyone who secretly backed his ascent.

Ves figured that the best way to deflect these questions was to simply leave them open and let the person make up their own guesses.

However, on account of his friendship with Carlos, Ves believed he needed to supply some sort of answer this time.

"Carlos.. if you've seen a glimpse of the full extent of the galaxy as I have, then you'll realize that the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are only tiny fishes in an unimaginably huge pond. I think in the coming years you'll begin to realize that only the greater powers truly matter."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"It's the truth. Whether you believe me or not is up to you. All I want to add is that if you are not comfortable working under me anymore, you are free to go. As long as you abide by the NDA's you've signed, I'll support you whether you want to return to the Root Raiders or work for another company?"

"Will you support me if I want to found my own mech company?"

"I'm even willing to do that if that's what you want. However, my help will come in the form of a business investment rather than a personal handout. I will expect to have a say in how your company is run and be entitled to a commensurate share of dividends."

"What if I don't want your help?"

"Even if you manage to secure alternate funding sources, I will still insist on owing a small share in the profits your company has earned." Ves bluntly replied. He firmly shook off the velvet gloves this time. "With all the assistance I've provided over the years, you owe me at least that much. I invested in you because I'm hopeful that you'll be a fine addition to my design team. If you want to walk away, then I will at least demand a small proportion of the profits or income you make in any future endeavors. This is the custom among mech designers in the mech industry."

The harsh dose of reality poured cold water on Carlos' increasingly wild ambitions. Even though he had become much more competent as a mech designer lately, what would he be without Ves?

As much as Carlos yearned for more, he needed to consider whether he had the ability to make it on his own in the first place!

Unless his buddies at the Root Raiders provided the seed money for him to found his own mech company, Carlos could only turn to his old friend and employer for funding. Yet where would that leave him? Having Ves as a major shareholder of his new company was no different than working for Ves directly at the LMC!

Either way, there was no escaping the fact that Carlos needed to continue to work for Ves if he wanted to get his mech design career off the ground!

As Carlos went through various calculations and considerations, Ves calmly observed his friend while maintaining a calm facade.

Ves did not want to coerce his newly-returned friend. He hoped that Carlos would set aside his overblown ambitions and fall in line.

The two might have been classmates once, but as a Journeyman Ves had gone much further ahead in his career!

The disparity between the two had widened so much that Ves would only be doing Carlos a disservice by coddling him. They were both adults. While their friendship and their shared past counted for a lot, as a successful mech designer Ves could not set aside basic realities when deciding how to handle this thorny situation.

Stuck between a gentle approach and a firm approach, Ves decided to assert himself and put his foot down!

Sentiment may have counted for something, but Ves would not allow it to stand in the way of business to this extent!

After a minute of internal struggle, Carlos lowered his shoulders. "I don't know what I want to do with my life, Ves. I think I need some time to myself to figure it out on my own. Can you give me some time?"

"Sure." Ves nonchalantly waved his hand. "I suggest you go on vacation. Go on a trip to Moira's Paradise or something and clear your mind. Once you figure out what you want in your life and the best way to accomplish that, you can come back to me to deliver your answer."

"Thanks.. I know I've crossed a line, but.. I'm really tired."

"I understand. Some people come back from the war with more scars than others."

As someone who grew up in the military family, Ves was very cognizant about the psychological wounds that war could leave behind in someone's psyche. Not all wounds could be healed by replacing damaged portions with cloned tissue. When it came to wounds to the mind, aside from taking dubiously effective medicine, only time and therapy worked.

"Do you have any family, Carlos?"

"You've met my parents before, Ves."

"Then I suggest you visit them for a time. If there's anything the Larkinsons have learned about healing from the war, it's that spending your time around family is the best solution!"

"That's a good suggestion. I'll do that."

After packing Carlos off, Ves watched the high doors of his office close, leaving him alone in his imposing office.

At the beginning, he felt as if he reunited with a friend.

At the end, he felt as if he ended an inconclusive negotiation with a recalcitrant employee.

The two demanded different approaches to the problems that Carlos presented to him. Ves made the decision to prioritize business over friendship in this instance.

"Although I will always consider Carlos as my friend, I won't allow him to take advantage of me." Ves muttered to himself. "If he thinks he can resign from my company in order to pursue other prospects, then he better pay back what he owes."