

Chapter 1141 Avatar to Myth

Ves paid a visit to the base of the Avatars of Myth. Few mech pilots were lounging about. Instead, they disappeared into their mechs or simulator pods and poured their hearts and souls into training!

How could they continue to take it easy when Jannzi Larkinson, a young mech pilot fresh out of the mech academy, underwent a highly improbable breakthrough to expert candidate!

One of their own ascended from the ranks of mortals and took her first step onto godhood! Jannzi had only been an Avatar for a scant few months, but already she shed her role of emulating a mythical being into becoming one herself!

How could this incredibly fortunate example not inspire the remainder of the Avatars into a frenzy?!

Aside from that, everyone heard about Jannzi's close connection to the Shield of Samar. Melkor told Ves all the details when all the Larkinsons on Cloudy Curtain met in the Avatar Commander's office.

"The men and women of the Avatars of Myth have developed the belief that your mechs can help them turn into expert candidates. Even though there is only a sample size of one so far, Jannzi's circumstances during her breakthrough are very remarkable. Aside from being a Larkinson and paired with a mech that is practically tailored for her use, the rest of her background made a quick advancement extremely unlikely."

Mech pilots fresh out of the academy just don't advance to expert candidate after a single show match." Rhode Larkinson added with a hint of incredulity. "You need to accumulate at least some battle experience to get a realistic chance of becoming an expert candidate."

All the other Larkinson expert pilots that popped up over the years all broke through under arduous combat. Each of them faced tough opponents and put their lives on the line, forcing them to sum up every scrap of ability before they ultimately broke through an invisible barrier in order to achieve even greater performance!

Having heard from both Melkor and Rhode, Ves turned to Chette. "What about you? What do you think?"

Chette was the oldest Larkinson mech pilot among the three little chicks. Well, Ves supposed he should call them two little chicks now. One of their own had suddenly evolved from a plain juvenile chicken into a majestic young phoenix!

"A lot of us Larkinsons dream of becoming expert pilots. You know that, Ves. Yet even though the family boasts hundreds of active mech pilots, less than ten have managed to take the next step. The odds that we can follow in Jannzi's footsteps aren't all that big. If it happens to me one day, I'd be ecstatic, but if not I'll just live my life as a normal Larkinson."

"That's a very sober outlook to take." Ves nodded to Chette in appreciation. "While there's nothing wrong with harboring some ambitions, don't put too much stock in my abilities. I'm not a sorcerer who can simply wave my hand and turn you all into expert candidates. Jannzi's example is a very clear outlier that likely won't be repeated."

He was being a little disingenuous here. Ves knew more than anyone how expert candidates emerged! Not only that, but he also possessed the tools to replicate the feat!

However, for a second expert candidate to emerge from the ranks of the Avatars of Myth was too conspicuous. Once may be coincidence, but to have something incredible like that happen again in a short time would definitely attract a lot of attention from some very high places!

Nonetheless, was it really so bad if people began to associate his mechs with an increased chance of advancing to a higher form of life?

Even if Ves did nothing to encourage this phenomenon, the remarkable X-Factor of his mechs would do the job for him. As long as the mech pilots became aligned with the X-Factor of their machines and earned the favor of their design spirits, their chances of breaking through would definitely increase!

This effect should be most pronounced when the mechs they piloted came from designs with A-grade X-Factor or higher!

For now, Ves did not think he could reproduce an A-grade X-Factor without resorting to extraordinary means. Without the aid of something as powerful and benevolent as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment, his customers shouldn't transform into expert candidates anytime soon.

Still, considering he was facing family, Ves decided to throw them a bone to chew on for a while.

"I don't want to dash your hopes. Maybe you'll achieve something similar one day." Ves said to his cousins. "I will share some of the same advice to you that I gave Jannzi just before she deployed on that fateful day. What do my company and my mechs stand for? What is most remarkable about each of my products?"

"Living Mechs. Partners for Life."

"You're just parroting the company motto, Melkor."

"I know the meaning, Ves. I haven't attended all of those company events for nothing." Melkor frowned. "Your mechs are supposed to be valued partners to mech pilots. Treat them right, and they will treat you better. That's the idea behind your mechs, right?"

"Correct. However, few people truly embody that ideal. You all have a tendency to regard your mechs as cold machines or lifeless tools, right? What if I tell you that Jannzi firmly rejected that stance. What if I tell you that Jannzi put her faith in my ideology and earnestly tried to bond with her mech?"

That put the three Larkinson mech pilots in Melkor's office into deep thought. Staying at the Mech Nursery for a few months taught them all about the LMC's beliefs. Yet that did not necessarily mean they took them literally.

Perhaps only now that Ves directly connected Jannzi's lucky break with the company's ideals did Melkor, Chette and Rhode begin to take them seriously.

Maybe Ves was really on to something here!

"I'll let you guys figure out the rest yourself." Ves shrugged. He only wanted to give them a push in the right direction but not much more. "I can only promise you that as long as you stay in the Avatars of Myth, you will be in the best possible place to follow in Jannzi's footsteps. Melkor, what is the founding principle of the Avatars of Myth?"

"The Avatars of Myth are meant to showcase your mechs." Melkor replied.

"Our name comes from your aspiration to have our mech pilots exhibit the full potential of your mechs. Each time we pilot our mechs, we become avatars for the incredible machines that are inspired by beings of myth!"

Ves smiled. "Exactly! The avatar component in the name of my personal mech troop refers to mech pilots such as you and Jannzi. The definition of an avatar is a manifestation of a mythical godlike being. While that generally means that you are only able to emulate a god, perhaps you'll be able to learn from the experience. The key is the Myth component of the name."

A light shone in Melkor's eyes, not that everyone saw it due to his annoying habit of covering his upper face with an opaque visor.

"I see now. You are saying that the key to being an Avatar is to understand the myths we are meant to embody. That's what you intended from the start when you decided upon the name, right?"

"Correct." Ves nodded. "As you all know, I hold some very unusual and eccentric beliefs with regard to the relationship between mechs and their mech pilots. You can review all of the LMC's reading materials if you want to refresh your understanding on them. Suffice to say, I don't just design a mech as a functional product. Instead, I get inspired by great beings and figures of myth. If no convenient examples are within my reach, I just let my imagination get the best of me. You can say that my mech designs each have the shadow of a mythical being behind them. What Jannzi understood that you do not is that there may be some benefits to opening yourself up to this shadow."

After passing on his words of advice, Ves left his relatives to stew on them. Even though he didn't think they would be able to advance from his lessons, he at least expected them to perform significantly better. His mechs had always been designed to perform at their best when their mech pilots believed in them. As the most prominent members of the Avatars of Myth, his Larkinson cousins should lead by example!

"The Avatars of Myth do not yet live up to their name." Ves shook his head in regret. "It will take a lot of time for Melkor to build up their ranks and for me to supply them all with my own mech models."

Perhaps a few years earlier, Ves would be content with fielding only one or two mech companies. Now that he advanced to Journeyman, he knew it was not enough to keep up with his growing ambitions.

"All of that takes time."

Speaking of time, Ves already had his hands full with tasks to occupy his time. Before he embarked on designing his fifth original mech design, he needed to fulfill the promises made by his company.

After Gavin arranged the LMC to renegotiate the sales contracts, he managed to postpone the promised delivery of fifteen gold label Aurora Titans in exchange for Ves adding a little something extra to the machines!

"We had to work hard to get some of the more stubborn ones to loosen their stance." Gavin said as Ves returned to his office.

"I hope you haven't promised too much."

"It's fine, boss. As long as you make their mechs look unique from every other gold label Aurora Titan, they'll be content. I know enough about your design style that making cosmetic changes to your mechs is as easy as pie for you. You can do it, right?"

"No problem. Art is in my blood. It's really no problem for me to dress up my Aurora Titans in a different coat."

Perhaps other mech designers would have some objection to trying to develop fifteen unique looks for a single mech model, but Ves possessed a very creative mind.

While he preferred to think that he inherited his active imagination from his mother, the truth was that all the Creativity Attribute Candies he ingested supercharged his imagination. Ever since he bumped his Creativity to practically inhuman levels, he never worried about running out of ideas!

After he finished checking with Gavin about the LMC's daily business, Ves decided to pull up his sleeves and go to work.

Over the next thirteen days, Ves, Ketis and a dedicated crew of mech technicians labored hard to pump out five excellent gold label mechs.

Although Ves rushed the fabrication process, he still worked meticulously enough to ensure the mechs equaled the condition of the show models when they first rolled off the production lines.

With the production of five new gold label Aurora Titans, ten of them existed in total now!

Ves gifted the Shield of Samar to Jannzi while putting the other four show models at Professor Ventag's disposal. The delivery of these five new mechs should ensure that a small but decent sample of gold label Aurora Titans showed up in the wild!

Some of the lucky clients who obtained the first batch of gold label Aurora Titans bought them to show them off to the public. One notable client that Ves prioritized highly happened to be the Bentheim branch of Bosworth's, one of the most renowned mech show room operators in the star sector!

Bosworth's was like a museum for notable mechs! For them to decide to place a gold label Aurora Titan on display was a massive honor to Ves!

"With all of the foot traffic that Bosworth's attracts each year, millions of people will be able to experience one of my best works up close!"

Projections of his mechs simply didn't cut it. People had to witness his mechs in person to experience their full splendor!

"Infatuation is great for sales!"

After all, if customers became infatuated, they wouldn't hesitate so much when deciding to purchase a product. To Ves, they were pretty much suckers fooled into impulse buying one of his products!

Chapter 1142 Private Commissions

Now that Ves took care of his immediate business, he turned his attention to a project that had been on his mind for a while.

"It's time to design my fifth original mech."

This would be a milestone for Ves. As long as he completed this project to the MTA and the market's satisfaction, he met all of the conditions to be recognized as a Journeyman!

With his thirtieth birthday within reach, Ves needed to design his next mech at a brisk pace in order to earn the much-coveted achievement of advancing to Journeyman while young!

"Mech designers who are older than thirty aren't young anymore in the eyes of the MTA." He muttered to himself.

Although Ves and everyone else already regarded him as a de facto Journeyman, the MTA did not compromise at all when it came to enforcing their rules on others. If they say a Journeyman needed to design at least five original mechs, then they better have at least that much designs under their belt before they applied for recognition!

"If the MTA isn't so insistent on this point, I wouldn't be so much in a hurry to finish this project!"

The most important implication of his lack of time was that the quality of his next design would not be as good as his previous design.

Aside from the lack of time, Ves had also been deprived of a crucial advantage that helped elevate the quality of the Aurora Titan design by a substantial degree!

"I won't have the benefit of Professor Ventag by my side this time!"

They collaborated on only a single joint design project. Now that they published the Aurora Titan design and put the model on the market, their cooperation came to an end.

Ves deeply benefited from collaborating with a Senior Mech Designer! Not only did Professor Ventag act as a sounding board for his ideas, the Senior also contributed substantially to the Aurora Titan's internal design!

"If that isn't enough, gaining access to his company's expansive library of component licenses is a massive convenience!"

Now that Ves returned to designing a mech on his own, he no longer enjoyed any of these advantages.

"The only two mech designers I have on hand is Ketis and Carlos. They won't be much help to me at this point."

While Ketis made a lot of strides over the past few months, she still had ways to go before she met the standard of becoming a contributing designer in any of the LMC's major design projects.

As for Carlos... Ves slowly felt the onset of a headache as he thought about how extensively the war had changed his friend.

Right now, Carlos took his advice and went back to the Rittersberg region to stay with his parents for a time. Ves hoped that returning to his familiar childhood home would put some perspective in the man.

Privately, Ves already made some preparations to write Carlos off. If his friend couldn't let go of his envy towards Ves, then it was best that they went their separate ways.

"Time changes everything, and not always for the better."

He put his two subordinate mech designers out of his mind for now. Right now, he was back on his own when it came to designing another mech.

"My fourth original design was a grand project and a marvel of innovation."

Ves wanted to make his fifth original mech design an innovative work as well, but he had much fewer means to work with this time. Without Professor

Ventag and more important a powerful spiritual fragment from Qilanxo, it was inevitable that his fifth original design would disappoint him in many ways.

"It's as if I enjoyed a taste of heaven before descending back to reality!"

He only managed to reach that height with assistance. On his own, he could never jump high enough to enter the gates of heaven!

The only way to design a mech as good as the Aurora Titan was to keep improving himself until he became capable enough to make up for the shortfall!

Therefore, Ves did not wish to place too much expectations for his upcoming design project. "My next mech has to be good enough to uphold my reputation, but that is all. It doesn't have to sell thousands of copies a year like the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. It also doesn't have to be as innovative and groundbreaking as the Aurora Titan either. Perhaps my fifth design will share the most in common with my third original design.

The short-lived and underutilized Enduring Protector design was very different from his other original designs. Developed specifically for the Flagrant Vandals, only a handful of copies had been made before the circumstances at Aeon Corona VII quickly made them irrelevant.

Ves always regretted that his Enduring Protector never received the opportunity to fulfill its purpose. It never got the opportunity to fight back against the Vesians in the hazardous red zone around the Starlight Megalodon where the breakdown effect was the strongest.

"It would be great to design a mech that doesn't have to appeal to the market."

One of the most enjoyable aspects about designing the Enduring Protector was that Ves only needed to please the Flagrant Vandals. It was a lot easier

to design a mech for a single client than to attempt to make it as appealing as possible to a wide variety of potential buyers.

With all the renown that Ves and the LMC had earned, perhaps completing a private commission wasn't out of reach anymore!

Ves summoned Gavin to his office.

"You called, boss?"

"Yes. Let's say I'm in the mood to accept a private commission to design a mech for a specific client. Has the LMC received any inquiries of that nature?"

"We have. Not a lot, and they're mostly fishing attempts. The majority of the people who sent these requests to us have approached hundreds of different mech companies. To them, it doesn't matter how many mech designers they annoy. If at least one of them accepts their request, then they're already happy!"

"I see no value in working for undiscerning clients like these. If I am about to design a mech that is tailored to a specific client, then they better be sure about what I can bring to the table!"

A client who didn't care about which mech designer fulfilled their request would never fully appreciate his work. Ves wanted his work to have meaning, and to do that he needed to make sure they fulfilled their purpose.

The case where he poured his heart and soul into designing the Enduring Protector, only for it to become irrelevant should never happen again! Not if Ves had anything to say about the matter!

This time, Ves had the luxury of choosing his own clients and commissions. Out of all the requests he received, some of them should meet his standards, right?

"Tell me about the most promising or the most meaningful commissions. They don't have to offer the most money or result in the most mechs."

"Well, we've received three possible commissions that are both interesting and promising." Gavin said. "Given what I understand about your personality and your standards, only these three options are worth your time."

"Okay, then. Let's hear it. Tell me about the commissions."

"The first commission is to design a mech for a mech athlete. Not just any mech athlete, but one with prior ties to our company. Do you remember back in the day you designed virtual mechs? The team captain of the Mosville Fireflies fell in love with your DarkSpear virtual design."

It took a second for Ves to refresh his memory. "I remember. Jarle Brenthill. We sponsored him to showcase my old DarkSpear assassin mech in Iron Spirit. That was a long time ago."

"It seems like Jarle Brenthill fell in love with your design style. He wants to commission a dueling mech designed by you. He specializes in piloting landbound light skirmishers, but he's okay if you incorporate some elements of the DarkSpear design into the commissioned mech."

"So he basically wants a single custom mech?"

"Yep. Mr. Brenthill doesn't plan on adding another light skirmisher to the roster of the Mosville Fireflies."

That basically meant that Ves would be designing a mech for a single person. In other words, a custom job in the most traditional sense.

Even so, as long as Jarle Brenthill made use of the mech in a serious capacity, it qualified as a serious mech design that enabled Ves to meet the MTA's quota.

Gavin was right. Ves became intrigued by this commission. Even though its scale was on the small side, Ves felt that it might be helpful in his development if he branched out to designing a dueling mech for a professional mech athlete.

"The Mosville Fireflies are big on Bentheim. If you are credited with the design of the mech used by the team captain to crush his opponents in the mech arena, then your reputation will definitely soar!" His assistant enthusiastically gushed. "While designing commercial mechs is all well and good, it's mostly geared towards the more serious mech insiders. Your reputation hasn't penetrated into the massive audience of the mech games as of yet! Fulfilling this commission can help you break new ground!"

"It can also backfire on me." Ves noted with much less enthusiasm.

"Designing mechs for the market is difficult because I have to appeal to many mech pilots. However, the advantage is that a single bad mech pilot in the wrong place and the wrong time won't be able to do much damage to my reputation. For every bad mech pilot, there is at least one good mech pilot who is able to showcase the potential of my products."

"I don't think you have to worry about incompetence, boss. We're talking about the Mosville Fireflies here! Jarle Brenthill was already good enough to become the team captain when he worked with us on promoting the DarkSpear virtual model, but he's even better now that he's had more seasons under his belt!"

Perhaps a bit paradoxically, the mech games still took place during the war. Even though much of the Bright Republic became consumed by the war, the citizens still needed their regular dose of entertainment. The mech games was by far the most popular sport in the state!

If the Bright Senate ever tried to abolish the mech games during wartime, at least half of the Brighters would rise up in rebellion! If the Vesians came and

promised to restore the mech games, then the most ardent fans of the sport would definitely defect!

This extreme example showcased the importance of the mech games in the lives of many average citizens. The Bright Republic was no exception to this either. Practically every state hosted their own professional mech dueling circuits to please the masses!

As one of the mainstays in the Bentheim duelling circuit, Ves knew very well that the Mosville Fireflies possessed a lot of reach. While their hometown of Mosville on Bentheim was their strongest bulwark, they attracted fans from every corner of the Bright Republic, including Cloudy Curtain!

For Ves to design a custom mech for the team captain was to undertake a very major responsibility. If Ves screwed it up or if Jarle simply didn't pilot his new machine well enough, then both of them would suffer the consequences!

While Ves normally loved to gamble every now and then, the stakes were so high now that he visibly hesitated whether he should take this opportunity.

"Tell me about the other two commissions." Ves requested.

If the first commission was to design a mech for Mr. Brenthill, then the other commissions should be interesting as well!

Gavin outlined the second commission. "We've received an offer from a basic mech academy in the Green Nebula region. The Astreya Mech Academy has noticed a trend where many of their mech cadets are piloting your Young Blood and Old Soul virtual mechs in their free time. The teachers have even had some success in incorporating those virtual mechs in their simulator lessons!"

"I'm very glad to hear my virtual mechs remain relevant."

He designed the two virtual mechs as training mechs for young mech cadets. It gratified him to hear that many mech cadets still polished their skills with his two old designs.

"The teachers aren't content with working with virtual mechs. They believe they can achieve better results if they incorporate your physical mechs into their classes! They want you to adapt the Young Blood and Old Soul designs to make them practical and workable to be put into use in reality!"

Chapter 1143 Marketing to Children

Fulfilling the Astreya Mech Academy's commission sounded very interesting to Ves. He would have to design training mechs that played the same role as his virtual training mech designs.

The Young Blood design consisted of a knight mech with a few gimmicks that put some oomph into its performance. The Old Soul was a much more eccentric mech that made use of ECM and a very powerful but low-capacity rifle to assassinate unsuspecting targets with a single shot!

While both of them possessed a number of weird quirks that made them unsuitable to be piloted by every mech cadet, they nonetheless helped their users develop some very specific skills.

Ves saw the advantages in designing physical training mechs for mech cadets. What better way to capture the hearts of his customer base by getting to them when they were young?

As a marketing specialist, Gavin was more than aware of the implications.

"While designing a mech for Jarle Brenthill is a good way to reach a wide audience, this option is pretty good as well! Mech pilots are most impressionable when they are young! Why do you think so many companies market their products to their kids despite mainly selling their products to adults? That is because they know that if they can turn those kids into early

converts, their loyalty will already be assured by the time they grow up and have the means to buy their products!"

Marketing to children was one of the most effective ways for companies to grow their market share and insure their dominance in their sectors.

This strategy was most pronounced at a very famous trans-galactic casual restaurant chain. Even though the quality of their food was dubious at best and as awful as nutrient packs at worst, scores of people still frequented their chains in the trillions!

While it helped that their franchises was present in every corner of civilized space, another reason for their dominant market share in the business was their deliberate strategy to hook in children.

By offering a kid-friendly environment and using many other means to hook them in and earn their love, their devotion to the restaurant chain would be seared into their psyche even after they shed their innocence and grew up to be parents themselves!

While these adults really should have known better and frequent a better restaurant chain, the fond childhood memories they cherished kept pulling them back to the same damned franchise, this time with their own kids in tow!

This way, this deviant restaurant chains could already begin to indoctrinate their next generation of customers!

This pattern of wooing children into becoming their future customers was so strong because it continued to build up its momentum with each passing cycle! In fact, it was so strong when done right that it propelled that ancient restaurant chain from its modest beginnings on Old Earth before the Age of Space into one of the most far-reaching trans-galactic enterprises in the Age of Mechs!

While all of this sounded rather devious, it was a legitimate business strategy that worked in countless different sectors!

"Just think about it, boss! The brand loyalty that emerges from childhood infatuation is one of the strongest forces in the multiverse!" Gavin slavishly gushed at the thought of indoctrinating thousands of mech cadets into becoming the LMC's devoted fans!

Even Ves became awfully tempted by the opportunities presented by this commission. While training mechs are designed to be cheaper, simpler and less sophisticated than commercial mechs, the competition in this market was extremely intense!

The example of that millenia-old restaurant chain proved that even if you offered a crappy product, as long as you captured the hearts of the young, you could still achieve enormous success!

Therefore, countless mech companies competed to supply mech academies with training mechs at such low prices that they practically gave up any hope of making a profit.

This was because these savvy mech companies knew that they would be able to earn much more money down the line once the mech cadets grew up and influenced the purchasing decisions of their outfits!

While Ves understood this logic and wanted to take part in it as well, one major caveat stood out.

"If the Astreya Mech Academy wants me to adapt the Young Blood and Old Soul designs, then I can't accept this commission. Neither of those virtual designs are original works of mine. They're both variants based off existing mech designs!"

Back then, designing an original mech was an unimaginably daunting challenge to Ves. Designing variants was a necessary stopgap to earn money, expand his reputation and get some much-needed practice.

"Astreya isn't demanding something as modest as that." Gavin retorted. "They have several lists of demands for the two training mech models that diverge from the Old Soul and the Young Blood."

"So the commission is to design a knight mech and a rifleman mech that merely resembles my virtual training mechs?"

"That's the gist of it, boss. It shouldn't be a problem to design original mechs that are 'inspired' by your old variants, right?"

"It sounds like they expect two different mech designs from me." Ves grimaced. "Even if I'll be working with outdated component licenses, it's still a tall order for me to design two training mechs in just a handful of months. It is critically important for me to deliver a flawless product. If any flaw in the design remains, it might end up resulting in the death of a mech cadet, which will present my company with a public relations nightmare!"

Marketing to children had a lot of merits, but the risks were high as well. If the company behaved in an ethically unscrupulous fashion, it would quickly provoke a backlash among parents. If it acted negligently in their handling with children, then the lawsuits that ensued would drag its reputation into the abyss!

After Ves returned to the LMC, he put a lot of effort into restoring its reputation for quality. With all of the renown he earned lately, the LMC once again became a standard for selling classy premium mechs.

If Ves wanted to maintain his company's hard-fought reputation, then he needed to put his full effort into designing the two training mechs for the Astreya Mech Academy.

"I spent seven months to design a modern, feature-bloated mech design like the Aurora Titan." Ves said. "Designing the two training mechs based on outdated standards should take much less time, but even then, due diligence requires me to put at least months in each design! That's too much time!"

Eventually, Ves decided to reject this commission despite the benefits it brought to him and his company. He simply didn't think it was responsible for him to rush the design of vital teaching tools.

"Please send a message to Astreya telling them that I appreciate their interest in my work, but that I am too predisposed to fulfill their commission. Does that sound polite enough?" Ves asked.

"It will do, boss. It's kind of a bummer to them but they many other mech designers are eager to fulfill their commission. They won't be short on new training mechs."

Ves grunted in acknowledgement. He knew that even if Astreya commissioned another mech designer to develop copycats of his Young Blood and Old Soul designs, the mechs they received would never be able to replicate the charm of Ves' work!

He hoped that Astreya's mech instructors prepared themselves to be disappointment, because their mech cadets would definitely perform differently!

"Okay, let's move on to the third commission. Give me the details."

Gavin presented his boss with the last commission worthy of consideration.

"The LMC is becoming more known outside the Bright Republic. While our market penetration in foreign states is miniscule, we are involved in many different markets so the amounts all add up. What if we gain an opportunity to increase the brand recognition of the LMC in a foreign state? Perhaps we can even elevate it to the level of one of their domestic mech companies!"

Ves raised his eyebrow. "A foreigner wants me to design a mech for them? Why me? Why not approach a mech designer from their own state?"

"The client is a powerful family from the Ylvaine Protectorate. You know how those religious nuts are fairly closed off to the Bright Republic despite being neighbors, right?"

"They are known to be rather insular and intolerant to foreigners."

"Well, somehow, your mechs have started to build a small but loyal following in the Protectorate. In fact, of all the orders that the LMC and NORA Consolidated has received for our new Aurora Titan mechs, the Ylvainans number the most out of all of our foreign customers!"

That sounded fairly remarkable to Ves. "I thought the Ylvaine Protectorate has always been a marginal market to the LMC. Is the Aurora Titan popular with them because we are riding on NORA Consolidated's coattails?"

"NORA Consolidated has a wider presence in the Protectorate, but they're still small fry all considered. Instead, a recent development has occurred. Some bigshot came into power and suddenly ordered numerous batches of Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords for whatever reason. That single-handedly aroused the interest of the Ylvainans into our products!"

That sounded very odd. Perhaps that bigshot had encountered one of his gold label mechs and became a fan of his designs. No matter what, a customer was a customer, and Ves was always happy to sell his mechs to more people, regardless of whether they were Brighters or Ylvainans.

Hell, Ves was even willing to sell his mechs to the Vesians if he wasn't afraid of seeing his own products used against him and his state!

"So what is the commission, exactly?"

"The client wants you to design a mech that is suitable for ceremonial guard functions. They are supposed to be part of that Ylvainan leader's mech bodyguard detail."

Ves frowned at that request. "Are the mechs supposed to be for show or primed for battle?"

"Both. That's why she commissioned you specifically. Something about how your art will be able to compliment her stature or something. She wants six copies of whatever you come up with that meets her demands. That said, the client doesn't want you to design something that looks pretty but collapses at the first blow. The mechs you design will have to be at least as formidable as the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords."

"What mech type does the client want?"

"A landbound mech that is unique, looks good in projections and is versatile enough to deal with both distant threats and dangers up close."

Ves immediately had a bad feeling about the mech type in question.

"Does the client expect me to design a hybrid knight?"

"No." Gavin shook his head. "She wants you to design a hero mech."

"Are you kidding? A hero mech? A mech armed with a sword in one hand and a rifle in the other hand? How can they possibly act as bodyguard mechs?"

"They won't make up the only mechs of the client's security detail, boss. She's already accompanied by knight mechs and other mech types. She merely thinks that she'll look better in her public appearances if the mechs in the backdrop consists of hero mechs. That they are versatile enough to respond to many different threats to her life is merely a bonus."

The request to design a hero mech was not simple at all. While Ves believed that fulfilling the request of a very powerful and very influential foreign

customer would do his company a lot of good in the Ylvainan mech market, the difficulty was immense!

A hero mech defied the trend of specialization common among mech designs in this region of space! Their versatile loadout and their ability to adapt to many different situations all sounded great, but it presented countless problems to mech designers!

Ves would have to put in as much work as he did into the Aurora Titan design to even come up with a decent hero mech design!

He might as well ignore the commission and design it for the market instead if that was the case!

"Rejected. Hero mechs require way too much time and effort to design. I'm not looking to work on something so complex at this time."

Gavin's eyes glinted. "What if I told you that the reward will be worth it? The client is such a fan of your products that she promised to open up the LMC to their mech market without restrictions! That means we'll be treated the same as a domestic company by the Ylvainans!"

Ves widened his eyes. That was indeed a very magnanimous offer! The Ylvaine Protectorate's mech market was a lot more closed than the Bright Republic's mech market. Quota, tariffs and other trade barriers made it so that the LMC would never be able to reach more than a fraction of their potential customer base.

Yet this reward might change everything! It could turn the Ylvaine Protectorate into the LMC's second home market!

Chapter 1144 Dynasties of the Protectorate

Gavin presented three interesting commissions to Ves.

The first one was to design a dueling mech for the team captain of the Mosville Fireflies.

The second one was to design original and more practical versions of his Young Blood and Old Soul virtual training mechs for the Astreya Mech Academy.

The third one was to design a hero mech geared towards ceremonial guard duty for a powerful and wealthy foreign leader.

Each of them had their pros and cons.

While more commissions doubtlessly existed, Ves trusted Gavin to act as his gatekeeper and filter out the more frivolous and insincere requests.

The personal power of a gatekeeper was not that impressive. While Gavin was effectively a nobody, his access to Ves and his responsibilities as a personal secretary to serve up the information that his boss required to make very impactful decisions turned him into the second-most important individual in the LMC!

This was a lot of power to put into the hands of a single person. Gavin was effectively able to shape Ves' decision-making by manipulating the options he brought to the table. The power of an executive assistant sometimes even surpassed that of the Chief Operating Officer or the rest of the top management team!

Yet even if Ves knew all of this, he could hardly do all of the secretarial work himself. He'd be stuck behind a desk all day while he juggled various schedules and requested various pieces of information from the various departments of the company.

For better or worse, Ves couldn't properly exercise leadership over his company without an executive assistant by his side.

If that was the case, he preferred having someone who stood by him at the beginning of his career. An added benefit was that Gavin originally studied

marketing, so he possessed a very keen commercial mind that Ves could use as a sounding board.

Right now, Gavin showed his value yet again. "It's a shame you don't want to consider the commission from Astreya. Getting your hooks into the mech cadets while they are still in their formative years is one of the surefire ways to pave the way for the LMC's future dominance in the domestic market. If all the mech pilots that graduate in the next ten to twenty years have drunk much of the LMC's milk from birth, they'll become loyal customers for the rest of their lives!"

Obviously, the prospect of indoctrinating impressionable mech cadets into loving the mechs of the LMC was a marketer's wet dream.

It didn't help that each successive mech that Ves designed became more and more pronounced into converting mech pilots into adoring the LMC's products!

"The time constraints are really thorny." Ves repeated with a frown. "Working on two designs is a serious commitment. I only have the time to design a single mech. Although this opportunity sounds like a great way to secure greater market share in the domestic market, I don't think it fits with the current direction of the LMC."

This time it was Gavin's turn to frown. "You want to orient the company towards foreign markets?"

"That has always been the strategy the LMC pursued. As you know, I have a penchant for designing odd mechs that fill a narrow niche. The Blackbeak and the Aurora Titan stands out in this regard. While designing mass-market mechs is definitely on my agenda, I don't think it's a good idea for the LMC to put too much emphasis on the Bright Republic's mech market."

"You have some great advantages in the Bright Republic, though. Your fame and your exploits has turned you into one of the most promising debuting

Journeyman Mech Designers! If you take advantage of your public profile and work together with Jarle Brenthill or the Astreya Mech Academy, you can convert your momentary fame into enduring brand equity!"

The kind of attention that Ves and the LMC attracted recently all consisted of short-lived news. While they were very noteworthy, the public didn't instantly recognize the LMC as a mainstay mech company in the Republic.

Although the scale the LMC had reached in recent years definitely propelled them into the ranks of major mech manufacturers, Ves had seen that there was much more to go. The old KNG and NORA Consolidated both dwarfed the LMC's relatively modest output. The larger and older mech companies also offered at least twenty to fifty times more mech models!

Therefore, if the LMC wanted to become as revered as the old KNG in the Bright Republic's mech market, it needed to become a lot more involved in domestic affairs!

Partnering up with a celebrity or a mech academy were some of the surefire ways to improve the LMC's brand equity!

Yet having seen the wider galaxy, Ves no longer believed there was anything special about the Bright Republic's mech market. Why limit himself to a single market when he could cast his gaze further?

"With our current product strategy, I think it is best to develop the LMC as a true sector-wide mech company." Ves stated. "Although most of my mech designs are unlikely to capture significant market share in any single mech market, as long as my company maintains a presence in fifty mech markets at once, it's fine if we only sell a couple of hundred mechs in each state!"

"I don't know, boss. That sounds dangerous. What if we are suddenly cut off from all of those markets? The LMC at least needs to have a strong presence in our domestic market to serve as our fallback point."

"I don't want my company to become too dependent on the Bright Republic."
Ves shook his head.

"Ah, but that's the beauty of the third commission, I suppose." Gavin replied with a smile. "As long as we fulfill the request posed by the Ylvainan leader, we can expand our presence in the Ylvaine Protectorate without restrictions! It'll be our second home base!"

The third commission intrigued them the most. It offered the most bountiful rewards for the LMC. The only problem to Ves was that it sounded rather too good to be true!

"Tell me more about the background of the Ylvainan client. Who is she and why is she offering such generous terms?"

"To explain her position, I'll need to explain how the Ylvaine Protectorate is run. Do you know their history?"

Ves nodded. Of course he did. "The basic story is that during the latter days of the Age of Conquest, some guy called Ylvaine emerged from the galactic heartland and believed himself to be a prophet. He was charismatic enough to convert billions of people into his followers while he issued all kinds of wild predictions. His burgeoning Ylvaine Faith started to become a major force to be reckoned with, so much so that the local states felt threatened and launched a huge attack on the new religion!"

The Ylvaine Faith suffered immensely at the attack from the local states! Prophet Ylvaine himself succumbed to the attacks along with the entire Ylvaine Dynasty that consisted of his harem and descendants!

Even though Prophet Ylvaine married hundreds of wives and conceived thousands of children, the assassins and bounty hunters employed by the states were very thorough!

Practically overnight, the entire Ylvaine Dynasty that lay at the heart of the powerful and expansive Ylvaine Faith had been rooted out from existence!

Stunned by the concerted attacks of the states and devastated at the loss of their visionary and his entire line, the remnants of the Ylvaine Faith suffered blow after blow!

At some point, the three most powerful surviving dynasties decided they had enough! They gathered their ships into a hasty refugee fleet and gathered their most pious and fanatic followers and made a bee-line towards the galactic rim!

Their flight coincided with the start of the Age of Mechs and the opening of the Komodo Star Sector. While they had too little strength left to contest the best colonization sites, they eventually managed to settle down at a decent region of space next to the newly-emerged Bright Republic.

Ever since then, the three surviving dynasties, scarred from the betrayals and the loss of their prophet and his descendants, adopted an isolationist posture over the centuries that followed.

Although a lot of tensions existed between the Ylvaine Protectorate and the neighboring Star Faith Collective, the Ylvainans generally kept to themselves.

"The three leading dynasties that brought the Ylvainan survivors from the galactic heartland still rule over the Protectorate to this day." Gavin reiterated.

"I'm aware of them. Each of them wield more power than the founding families of the Bright Republic or the ducal houses of the Vesia Kingdom!"

The Kronon Dynasty, the Protectors of the Faith.

The Poxco Dynasty, the Attendants of Ylvaine.

The Curin Dynasty, the Shepherds of the Flock.

Their titles spoke for themselves.

The Kronons became responsible for protecting the followers of Ylvaine and the state they founded.

The Poxcos led the Faith and curated the many claims, predictions, tenets, customs and rituals of Prophet Ylvaine.

The Curins provided secular leadership to the masses. They became responsible for managing the internal and external affairs of the state.

"So which dynasty does the client come from?" Ves asked. "The Curin Dynasty?"

Gavin nodded and summoned up a projection of a pretty but shrewd-eyed woman. "A new scion of the Curins rose up from obscurity last year. While it's difficult for us to map out the Curin Dynasty, all of our investigations so far suggests that Madame Cecily Curin is highly ambitious and destined for greater heights."

"What is her current position in the Protectorate?"

"The moment she joined the Protectorate's Ministry of Industry and Trade, she's been assigned as the Director of Strategic Mech Development."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It basically means that Madame Cecily is responsible for setting a direction for the development of non-military mechs." Gavin succinctly explained. "With the power the Curins wield over the Protectorate, they have more than enough pull to put Madame Cecily into this very influential position despite her obscurity and lack of experience."

Ves equated the Ylvaine Protectorate's Ministry of Industry and Trade to the Bright Republic's Ministry of Economic Development.

Regardless of how they named themselves, they both existed to manage and meddle into the affairs of foreign and domestic companies that did business in their states.

Having experienced how powerful the MinEcDev had become and how they were more than willing to throw their weight around, Ves expected the Ministry of Industry and Trade to be a major force to be reckoned with. The title and position of Director of Strategic Mech Development was likely not a toothless appointment!

"So this Madame Cecily is a big fan of my mechs?" Ves frowned. The more he thought about it, the more this situation started to reek. "With the influence of her dynasty and the vast amount of power she wields in her current position, why does she want to work with a foreign Journeyman like me instead of one of the Protectorate's many Seniors?"

The Protectorate was a fully established third-rate state with a strong mech tradition of their own.

"It's not entirely clear to me, boss." Gavin admitted. "From what I have gathered, the Protectorate closed their mech markets from foreign competition for a very long time. Only in the last century did they decide to loosen up and open their markets to foreign entrants a little bit. Evidently, that isn't fast enough for Madame Cecily's liking. One of the first moves she made since she took up her position was to loosen up some of the most restrictive trade barriers that held foreign mech companies like the LMC back from expanding our businesses in the Protectorate."

"That must have pissed off a lot of domestic mech companies who have grown fat and lazy from maintaining their oligopoly in the mech market." Ves pointed out.

"This is also why Madame Cecily doesn't want to bring her commission to any of the Protectorate's domestic mech designers. Her new policies have made her an enemy out of all of them. How could she entrust her safety to the mechs from people who want nothing more than to get rid of her and place a more pliable Curin in her position? There are plenty of lesser scions in the Curin Dynasty who can't wait to become the new Director of Strategic Mech Management!"

The jostling for power in the Curin Dynasty reminded Ves of the infighting among the Vesian nobles. The Curins were very big and very powerful, but that also led to an even greater degree of infighting!

To Ves, it seemed that Madame Cecily was playing with fire. Working with such a controversial client would definitely pull him and his mech company into a very nasty political struggle.

Yet the rewards made it difficult for him to turn away from the request.

"Let me think over this commission." He said. "Continue to gather more information. Tell the analysts to estimate how much the LMC stands to gain if the Protectorate's mech market is no longer closed."

Chapter 1145 Surprising Initiative

While Ves mulled over the implications of accepting a commission to design a hero mech for Madame Cecily Curin, he decided to address some other matters.

"Where is Lucky and Ketis?" He frowned.

The moment the Barracuda touched down at the Mech Nursery, Ketis grabbed Lucky and quickly absconded to parts unknown.

Normally, Ves didn't pay too much attention to the comings and going of Ketis, but he was starting to miss having Lucky by his side.

Lucky was his cat! What right did Ketis have to monopolize his pet?!

After making use of the monitoring system, he finally tracked the errant pair down at his private laboratory floor.

Finding out that Ketis and Lucky barged into his private workshop and laboratory immediately alarmed Ves! That was his private sanctum! He never gave anyone permission to enter his lab because he required completely concentration when he designed his mechs!

Only one other entity besides Ves received permission to enter his lab, and that was Lucky!

"What are they doing there?!"

The monitoring system only tracked their progress up to the entrance of the lab. Paranoid as he was about being observed, the entire lab and workshop floor did not contain any sensors and recorders that could give Ves a remote view of what the pair was doing at the moment.

Ves rode the elevator deep underground and stormed right through the entrance. Hearing sounds of active machinery at work, he immediately barged into the workshop section to see Ketis operating a small 3D printer by herself!

As for Lucky, the lazy cat was munching on a pile of valuable minerals that he got from who knew where!

"What is the meaning of this?" Ves announced.

His abrupt arrival and interruption caused Ketis to jump! She almost ruined her ongoing work!

"This isn't what it looks like, Ves!" She awkwardly laughed.

Ves continued to glower at Ketis. "This lab is my personal workspace. While I would have opened it up for you in time, it's very rude of you to use Lucky to squirm your way inside. Do you think I wouldn't have found out about your intrusion?!"

"Oh, come on, Ves. You trust me, right? I never intended to do anything bad to you. Can't you forget about it?" She pleaded while employing her puppy eyes.

The effect fell flat. Ves remained completely unmoved. "Tell me what you're up to. What are you working on that's so important that you need access to my lab facilities?"

"Well, I didn't originally want to use your lab, you know. When I went to the manufacturing floor and asked the chief technicians there to reserve a 3D printer for me, they all said no! They said that all the production lines are working in full capacity and that their use is carefully managed!"

Ves did not suffer from the same problem, obviously. He could borrow whatever production equipment he wanted with no questions asked. Whatever scheduling arrangements the chief technicians had made, they were forced to readjust their planning whenever Ves wanted to hog a production line to himself, as was the case when he fabricated five gold label Aurora Titans sometime earlier.

This was his privilege as the boss of the company!

As for Ketis, her position within the company was largely toothless. Despite bringing her in as one of the first members of his design team, Ves mostly handed a lot of homework for her to sink her teeth into. He still considered her a bit too raw and fresh to embark on actual mech design work.

Perhaps he had been belittling her too much, though. With all the textbooks she devoured during her months of study, she had become a lot more knowledgeable than Ves had been when he initially started with designing his first variants!

"I apologise. I've neglected your development lately." Ves sighed. "It's always my intention to make you feel at home at the LMC. Considering your current

level of competence, I'll order Gavin to give you permission to make limited use of the LMC's production equipment. In the meantime, you haven't answered my question yet. What are you fabricating?"

Ketis still stammered in her response, so Ves simply decided to step up and inspect the interface of the 3D printer with his own eyes.

The object that Ketis tried to make turned out to be a scale model of a swordsman mech that shared a strong resemblance to the Blackbeak!

Ves remembered that he taught Ketis how to work with precision tools by having her play with mech miniatures. From what he could observe, her proficiency with working on small details progressed so much that she had no issues with controlling a 3D printer to fabricate a fairly intricate mech miniature!

"Is the design of this miniature your own work?"

Ketis reluctantly nodded. "It's my first work. I'm much further ahead than you think. Enough that I feel confident about my first variant. I know it's not up to your standards, but I did the best I can to apply the lessons I've learned into its design. I figured I'd surprise you with a miniature instead of some boring design schematics!"

While Ves could already glean a lot of details from the data on the 3D printer's interface, he was willing to entertain Ketis this time. Despite her shifty behavior, Ves felt very pleased that she showed some initiative when it came to expressing her urge to design a mech.

She was making her first formal steps into the mech industry!

Everyone could study all day and night. That did not make a mech designer any better necessarily. Too many mech designers spent way too much time in the library and not enough time in their design studios or workshops.

A mech designer needed to balance their time between fulfilling their responsibilities, accumulating more experience and expanding their knowledge base.

Unlike every other mech designer, the last was something that Ves did not concern himself too much about. With the System at his disposal, he only needed to spend minutes or hours to learn what other mech designers took years or even decades to learn!

While Ves expected Ketis to require a few more months to develop a solid foundation to design a mech, evidently he underestimated her artificially-elevated intelligence and concentration attributes.

As long as she was motivated, it wasn't impossible for her to make great strides!

"I'll let you finish your little project." He said in a gentler tone.

"Thanks. It won't take too long. I think I only need an hour to put the finishing touches on the scale model."

Ves loved mechs. His entire life revolved around mechs. Even if he lacked the ability to pilot them, he never stopped adoring them. Mechs would always be a part of his life.

To design mechs was a dream to him. To become so successful in this job that he had advanced to become a de facto Journeyman in a scant few years was an amazing opportunity to work with mechs on a higher level.

Therefore, Ves couldn't help but feel happy when he was present with other people who were passionate about mechs. He enjoyed his recent interactions with Professor Ventag and he enjoyed seeing Ketis becoming more and more capable of designing mechs on her own.

Both of them loved their craft!

As Ves stood a few paces away in order to give Ketis enough room to work with, he casually studied her work ethic.

For some reason, he felt like he saw echoes of himself in the amount of diligence she put into her work. Having observed Ves at work plenty of times, it appeared that Ketis acquired some of his habits.

Ves didn't know how to feel about that. The amount of concentration she put into her work was so much that she even stopped registering his presence after a few minutes!

In fact, as long as Ves could nudge her in the right direction, she might even be able to imitate some of his methods with regards to shaping the X-Factor of her creations!

The notion of passing along some of his extremely valuable and exclusive knowledge on the X-Factor popped up in his mind.

It quickly left his mind soon after.

How could Ves reveal such secrets so easily? Even if he trusted Ketis by quite a bit, it wasn't to the point of sharing everything yet. For now, Ketis would be best served with focusing on developing her own specialty rather than inherit a limited version of his own.

A few more minutes passed by until the small 3D printer finally spat out the last scaled-down parts of her variant. Ketis did not skimp too much on the materials she used to present her design in the best possible light!

She moved over to a workbench where she already laid out various precision tools. She picked one of them up and used them to assemble the parts into a complete mech miniature in the span of less than an hour!

The little mech was as tall as two palms and was very heavy for its size. When Ves stepped forward and picked up the menacing-looking mech, he had the

odd sensation that he held a Blackbeak that shed its kite shield in order to dedicate itself to wielding a single sword!

"This variant bears a lot of resemblance to its base model." Ves commented.
"Maybe a little too much."

"I didn't want to mess too much with its internal architecture. I'm not confident enough yet that I can rearrange them into something more suitable for swordsman mechs." Ketis admitted.

"Before we go into further detail about its expected performance, tell me about the concept and vision for this variant. What is its purpose?"

"I haven't named it yet. As you can tell, I started off with your Blackbeak design and attempted to turn it from a knight mech into a swordsman mech. The difference between the two mech types may be big, but they share a lot in common. It helps that your Blackbeak design is already geared towards offensive use. I got rid of the shield, slightly increased the size and strength of the arms and replaced its one-handed sword with a two-handed greatsword. I mostly kept its excellent armor coverage intact, though I shaved off some portions here and there to increase its mobility, agility and range of motion."

Aside from some other minor adjustments, the changes she described was pretty much the extent of her work. It didn't sound like much, but then again most variants never strayed too far from the parameters of their base models.

"First off, I'm very pleased to see you go as far as to attempt to change the mech type of an existing mech design. Usually, mech designers who want to develop a swordsman mech variant will just license an existing swordsman mech design and work from there as all of the essential elements are already in place."

"I know. I wanted to do that as well, but your library of licenses isn't very extensive. Since I don't have the means to license an existing swordsman

mech design, I thought why not work with one of your own mechs? The Blackbeak design is a great design for my purposes!"

"That sounds great and all, but what is the overarching concept behind this design?"

"I guess it's my attempt at designing a premium swordsman mech. It adopted much of the same defenses and endurance of its base model. While it is not as tough as the Blackbeak, it possesses enough brute force to hack aside most opponents standing in its way!"

Ves shook his head in disappointment. "Is that all? You just wanted to design a swordsman mech so you made some adjustments to the Blackbeak design before handing it an oversized sword?"

"Uhh, yeah."

"So you haven't set any distinct vision for your variant? Have you forgotten my teachings already?"

It appeared that Ves had been a little remiss in his teaching. It became quite clear that despite the amount of concentration she put into the design of her variant, she did not have a clear picture of what she wanted to design from the start! The variant she eventually came up with was just a collection of various ad-hoc decisions without any overarching strategy in mind!

Chapter 1146 Hearty Designs

While Ves was pleased that Ketis shared his enthusiasm for designing mechs, he hated seeing her squander her energy like this. The variant she came up with might be decently put together when it came to its technical performance, but the lack of a coherent vision made the mech seem like a mere collection of parts in his perspective!

This was pretty much blasphemy to Ves! How could he tolerate the haphazard way that Ketis designed her variant?

"Come sit down with me for a moment."

The two moved over to a nearby table where Ves always ate his meals at. Once they made themselves comfortable, Ves picked up the miniature and waved it around.

"This is an interesting variant. I can see that you've applied much of the new knowledge you've learned. Whether it's mechanics, physics, metallurgy and more, you've all shown you possess at least a basic level of competence in applying the knowledge you've accumulated in those fields. The only problem here is that while you've been so focused on applying your mind that you haven't applied enough of your vision and your heart."

That remark threw Ketis off a loop. "Okay, I get how I screwed up with not having a clear vision for my design, but what does my heart have to do with my work?"

"That's a complicated question to answer. Have you heard of the saying that mech design is both an art and a science?"

She nodded. Most mech designers encountered the phrase in their earlier textbooks on mech design.

What Ves found out after meeting many different mech designers was that they brushed right past the meaning of this saying!

"I don't get it, Ketis. You've seen me at work so often and you even received an opportunity to contribute to the Aurora Titan's design. You've heard me describe some aspects about my design philosophy and learned some of the principles that my mech company adheres to. How can you forget about all of that when you designed your variant?"

"I thought.. it was something special about you. I never saw Mayra put too much emphasis on the stuff you cared about. A mech is a mech, right?"

"A mech can be more than a mech." Ves emphatically replied. "While I am aware that my beliefs aren't all that transparent, that doesn't mean you should ignore all of my best practices. There are some methods that you can easily apply. I think a mech designer like you is best served with adhering to the prior vision method."

"Figure out a solid vision for your mech before you begin your design work? I tried that, Ves, but I wasn't quite sure if I can implement all of the stuff I wanted to see in my design. This is all very new to me, you know, so I mostly spent my time trying out various stuff to see what worked."

"That's the approach of a student who aren't familiar with their limitations. You'll outgrow that once you get some more practice under your belt."

Ketis kept frowning. The more Ves pointed out her inadequacies, the more her confidence faded from her body.

"I guess I still have a lot to go before I design a good variant." She muttered.

"It's not so bad. At the very least, I can see from your miniature that you have a sufficient eye for detail. Your technical competence is a lot better than most Novices. You just have to adopt an approach to mech design that makes good use of your strengths."

Ketis' approach to mech design was as chaotic as a huge mob of rioters. A different mech designer who possessed a much shallower foundation would nonetheless be able to design a much better variant than hers if their approach was like a small but disciplined army!

"An important concept in mech design is the utilization and application of knowledge." Ves said. "This is why physics professors and excellent academics who are at the top of their fields are incapable of designing a mech that can surpass the work of a fresh Novice. They are capable of solving many problems, but they aren't trained to put together a mech."

The importance of maintaining a solid vision of a work began to dawn upon Ketis. "I think I get it. You're saying that a vision helps me coordinate my knowledge and makes sure I use them in the right way."

"That's the gist of it. It's clear that you've spent way too much time in the library lately. You need to return to performing a lot of practical exercises in order to for you to learn how to apply your gains. Designing a variant like this is a start, but I hope you develop solid visions for your next projects."

Ketis nodded with sparkles in her eyes. She wanted to rectify her earlier mistakes and design a variant that matched the one in her mind!

"What about that other stuff, about the heart and such?"

"That goes further into the phrase I mentioned earlier. Now that you have tried your hand at designing a complete variant on your own, have you paid any attention to the heart of your mech?"

"Uhh.. I think I was too busy trying to get the technical stuff to work to worry too much about that." Ketis morosely explained. "I think my lack of vision for what my mech is supposed to be didn't do me any favors in this regard."

Ves picked up the miniature again and played with it for a bit. "While you are free to adopt any design methodologies that you like, I highly suggest you try my ways. Not only will it make it easier for us to collaborate in the future, I truly think it will do your mech designs much good if they are designed to be coherent from the start."

"So how do I have to approach my design work?"

This was the moment where Ves stood at a crossroads. While he already resolved to share some of his methods, he didn't want to override her developing design philosophy with an imitation of his own. He needed to be very careful with the advice he gave.

"I think.. it is enough of a start if you imagine that your designs all possess a metaphorical heart. While I know this sounds rather silly considering that mechs don't have hearts, but it makes a real difference in your work if you treat them with love."

"Loving a mech design.."

"It's not as absurd as you think. This plays into the artistic side of mech design. Have you ever witnessed art created by AIs?"

Ketis shook her head.

"Well, they're pretty but shallow. Either they are pale imitations of existing masterpieces, or mathematically-oriented nonsense that is completely meaningless to humans. The point is that certain mech designers are so caught up in the technical aspects of their designs that they lose sight of more holistic concerns. I don't want you to fall into the same trap."

The analogy really shed a light in Ketis. "Ah, so I have to act less like an AI and more like a human when I design a mech?"

"Exactly! Designing a mech is like raising a child. You don't want them to put them in school all day and have them learn all the basic subjects. You want them to live out a full life full of joy and meaning as they grow up. Only then will your children grow up to be great individuals. It's the same with mechs. The heart you shaped for them plays a very important role in tying all of the tangible and intangible elements of the mech together."

Ves only started with these basic points but Ketis already looked overwhelmed. He decided this should be enough for her to chew on for the moment.

"Think over my words and see if you can apply them in your own work. I think your subsequent designs will be a lot more remarkable if they possess hearts!"

Naturally, Ves did not refer to literal hearts. He didn't wish Ketis to do something gruesome in the mistaken belief that she needed to integrate her mechs with actual organs! That sounded way too much like the extreme behavior of a very deviant fugitive mech designer!

Ketis looked down at the mech miniature she made and let out a frustrated grunt. "This mech has no heart at all. It's nothing like the original Blackbeak!"

She angrily picked up the mech miniature and moved over to the trash chute to chuck the useless object away. Far from impressing someone, Ketis only managed to display her shortcomings in a physical form!

As Ketis wrapped up her work in his private lab, Ves turned to Lucky who had finished his sumptuous meal of minerals. The cat currently lazed about in the air.

Ves grabbed his gem cat. "As for you, Lucky. Don't think I've forgotten about your transgression."

"Meow?"

"Don't you meow at me. You know exactly what you've done. My lab is off-limits to anyone except for us! Heck, the only reason why I gave you permission to enter is because you'd phase through the walls and floor anyway if I refused to clear your entry. That doesn't mean it's okay to bring people over who aren't authorized to enter this place!"

Lucky knew he was in trouble this time. The cat did as he had always done in response to earning the ire of his owner and attempted to turn intangible and phase through the floor.

Not this time!

Ves exerted his full concentration and attempted to lock Lucky's spirituality in place!

Different from last time, Ves was now a Journeyman! His Spirituality had grown significantly stronger ever since his loose design philosophy compacted into a solid design seed!

It worked! Lucky was far weaker when it came to spirituality and could never beat Ves in this regard! Not only that, but Ves also became much more adept at controlling his Spirituality.

All of these changes made it so that Ves had finally gained the power to prevent Lucky from slipping out of his grasp!

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

Lucky yowled with panic as he desperately tried to slip away, but no matter how much he squirmed, his body simply refused to shift into an incorporeal state!

Ves grinned at his wayward pet in a devious manner. "You won't escape your punishment this time, Lucky. What should I do with you? Should I dump you in a bath and wash you? Should I lock you in a box and deprive you of minerals for a month?"

Lucky's yowling grew twice as loud!

"Hahaha! I'm just kidding." Ves said in a teasing manner. "While I'm still pissed at you, you're simply too cute to be punished."

"Meow?"

"I forgive you."

Lucky seemed to relax at that moment and sank into Ves' arms.

"Meow!"

"Yeah, I love you too. Even if you are naughty every now and then, you're still my companion."

After Ketis wrapped up the equipment she used and put them into their places, they left the lab floor.

The next day, Ves met with Gavin again who returned with various reports on the situation at the Ylvaine Protectorate. Although inserting himself and his company into the Protectorate's contentious political battles seemed unwise, the reward was simply too good to pass up!

"This offer won't be on the table forever, I think." Gavin noted as Ves speed-read his way through dozens of detailed reports on a data pad. "Madame Cecily might be a bit fond of your work, but every day that passes is another day her life is under threat."

"I understand, Gavin. I know I have to make a quick decision on whether to accept this commission. I think I'm almost getting around to the idea. The only issue here is the odd conditions she supplied with her request."

"Madame Cecily is really insistent on her demands." Gavin helplessly shrugged. "She doesn't want you to design and fabricate the hero mechs she requested from home and export them to the Protectorate. There are too many opportunities for bad actors to intercept the shipment or to tamper with them along the way."

The commission called for Ves to visit the Ylvaine Protectorate in person and use the component licenses and production equipment that Madame Cecily prepared beforehand!

The client really wanted to meet Ves in the flesh to discuss the details of the design in person!

"It seems I'll be going on vacation for a couple of months."

THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 1147 Opening the Marke

A formal business trip to the Ylvaine Protectorate entered the agenda. Ves made up his mind. Despite the many risks associated with Madame Cecily Curin's commission, the rewards sounded too good to pass up!

Of course, now that Ves became a de facto Journeyman, he could not just pack up his backs and travel immediately to Ylvaine. The entry of any notable mech designer to a foreign state on official business needed to be arranged in advance, especially to a restrictive state like the Protectorate.

The LMC worked behind the scenes to arrange a visa and other bureaucratic necessities for Ves and the people he decided to bring along for this months-long working vacation.

Fortunately, Madame Cecily exerted some influence on the relevant government institutions to expedite the paperwork.

"It will only take a week for us to receive the final permits." Gavin reported to Ves in the penthouse office. "If we depart now, by the time our ships reach the borders, we can immediately pass through and make our way to the Kesseling System."

The Ministry of Industry and Trade housed their headquarters in Kesseling. The Curin Dynasty wielded a lot of influence in this star system. Kesseling VIII not only hosted a fair amount of government institutions, but also boasted a modest industrial presence, which included many mech designers.

While the level of industry in Kesseling didn't come close to that of Bentheim, it was nonetheless very respectable.

"Is there anything else to note on the Kesseling System?" Ves asked.

"The Curin Dynasty has the most say in that system, but that doesn't mean that the other dynasties are powerless there. The three leading dynasties that

led the original refugees of the Ylvainan Faith to the Komodo Star Sector are all equally in charge over the state."

"What does that mean to us in practice?"

"The three dynasties used to be of one mind." Gavin explained. "They all agreed to close their borders to the rest of the galaxy and develop their own state in peace. However, tensions between Ylvaine Protectorate and the Star Faith Collective has increased over the years, sometimes leading to outright war. The disparity between the two forces has become increasingly more evident. The Protectorate's insular mech market has led to too little competition, and their domestic mech designers aren't working as hard to push the limits of their mech designs."

"And with every skirmish and limited conflict that breaks out, the Protectorate's mechs are faring worse and worse." Ves nodded. He understood the consequences of closing the mech market to foreigners and coddling domestic mech designers like babies. "As far as I've heard, the Protectors of the Faith are still faring well in those conflicts. The Kronon Dynasty's mech pilots are known as the most fanatic fighters."

"Fanaticism can only partially compensate for the lower quality of mechs the Kronons have at their disposal. The Kronons have grown a lot more pragmatic over the years. They recognize that their domestic mech market needs to be shaken up. The Curin Dynasty had been advocating for opening up not their mech market, but their other markets as well, but not every Curin agrees and the supporters have always been outnumbered by the two other leading dynasties."

"I see. That has changed now?"

"Yeah. A large majority of Curins and a small majority of Kronons came to the consensus that they need to loosen up the trade barriers holding back foreign

mech companies from doing business in the Protectorate. That's why the Ministry of Industry and Trade recently created the office of Strategic Mech Management and installed Madame Cecily as its director."

Ves came to an important conclusion. "In other words, while Madame Cecily obtained a mandate to reform the mech market, it isn't all that strong."

The opposition to opening up the market must be fierce. Any change would always be met resistance, but to overthrow centuries of tradition was bound to attract trouble!

Yet the greater the risk, the greater the reward!

"While we need to keep an eye on all of the factions of the Protectorate, there is one leading dynasty that we really have to tiptoe our way around." Gavin warned. "The Poxco Dynasty aren't called the Attendants of Ylvaine for nothing. While every Ylvainan is a believer in the Faith, the Poxcos are the most fanatical of them all! Worse, they're also extremely doctrinists! They can never tolerate any that goes against the teachings of Ylvaine!"

"What is their exact stance on opening up the mech market?"

"While Ylvaine hasn't explicitly said much about economic matters, the Poxcos have never gotten over the trauma of being betrayed. They're the most vocal advocates for closing off the Protectorate, and you can be sure that they'll do their best to hinder your work."

The opposition coming from the Poxco Dynasty concerned Ves quite a bit. As a whole, they were extremely sincere in their beliefs, which was something that Ves could respect. Yet their overly restrictive interpretation of Prophet Ylvaine's teachings and predictions also turned them into the most troublesome Ylvainans to interact!

"Clearly the Poxcos are in the losing trend if someone like Madame Cecily has come into power." Ves observed. "The other two leading dynasties have

already started to come to their senses. The Poxco Dynasty either need to get on with the times, or be left in the dustbin of history."

"The trend is undeniable. The wind in the Protectorate is definitely changing." Gavin agreed. "As long as we complete this commission to the client's satisfaction, we can be among the first foreign companies to receive unrestricted access to their mech market. Obtaining such a first-mover advantage is extremely lucrative for the LMC!"

The process of liberalizing the economy took a lot of time. If the LMC waited for the Protectorate to open up on its own, then it might take decades before they could enjoy anything close to unrestricted access.

The value of Madame Cecily's reward couldn't be overstated! It was a really huge deal for the LMC to be able to effortlessly do business in the Protectorate like it already does in the Bright Republic!

Still, Ves was very cognizant that the choice of going in bed with the LMC was not just because Madame Cecily adored his products. After calming down a bit, he increasingly grew suspicious that the choice of issuing a commission to the LMC was a politically calculated move.

He scratched his chin. "If Madame Cecily wants to teach the Protectorate's domestic mech designers a lesson, then inviting a foreign mech designer is a great way to rile them up. However, the effect won't be very pronounced if she invites a lowly Apprentice. As for inviting a Senior, they are very difficult to get a hold of, and their entry into the Protectorate will scare the domestic mech designers to death!"

From his judgement of the situation, he concluded that inviting a newly-advanced de facto Journeyman like Ves was a middle ground solution. He was competent enough to pose a modest threat to the established circle of Ylvainan mech designers, but not much more.

Madame Cecily didn't wish to escalate her conflict with the Ylvainan mech industry unnecessarily. Working with someone like Ves was a shot across the bow that served to signal the Ylvainan mech designers that they needed to get off their butts and start working harder!

This was also why Ves considered the risk of accepting this commission to be within his range of tolerance. He knew he possessed a reckless streak, and an exciting foreign venture like this tickled all of his fancies.

Even if the risk was twice as big, he would still go ahead with designing a mech for Madame Cecily!

Ves inwardly wondered if this particular trait of his had been permanently absorbed by his design seed.

A comment from Gavin quickly pulled him out of his rumination. "Don't forget that Madame Cecily expects you to design a hero mech. I heard that they're as complicated to design as hybrid mechs and multipurpose mechs. As far as I know, you've never designed something as complex as that as a fully-featured mech. Are you sure you are up to the task?"

"While I don't possess any experience in designing hero mechs, I've witnessed several good ones in action. I know I have the chops to design one." Ves confidently replied. "I still have to hit the books and understand the nuances of the hero mech type, though. I'll be spending the entire trip to the Kesseling System cramming everything I need to know about hero mechs."

In fact, Ves was planning to do more than read a lot of textbooks on hero mechs. Seeing that he was flush with DP, he could easily afford to purchase another Mastery from the Skill Tree.

Considering the uncertain time duration of his previous Mastery experiences, Ves considered it best to go on a mental trip to the past while his body was

travelling on the Barracuda. By the time he emerged from his Mastery experience, he would be ready to meet with the client.

Naturally, nobody else needed to know this little detail. Ves quickly turned to another topic.

"Has our final roster of people been set?"

"Melkor reports that he won't be able to bring as much mechs and mech pilots as he wished. The decision to go on an excursion to the Ylvaine Protectorate came too suddenly. He's scrambling to free up the existing commitments of his mech pilots and get them to agree to accompany your business delegation. Last I heard, he only managed to secure eight mech pilots, along with himself, Chette and Rhode."

That amounted to a guard detail of eleven mechs and mech pilots in total. While that didn't sound very impressive, Ves expected the Protectorate to cover most of his security issues during his stay there. He did not mind the lackluster amount of mech pilots that Melkor managed to scrounge on short notice.

"What about Ketis and you?"

"My visa will be ready as soon as yours. As for Ketis, it's a bit more troublesome to request a visa for her because she's a citizen of the Reinald Republic. You know how slow bureaucracy can get, especially when it involves cross-border communications."

Ves nodded in understanding. Ever since the galactic net came into existence, many theorized that distance no longer mattered in human civilization.

Reality turned out to be very different. Almost anything could be faked in the virtual realm. Much of the delays the Reinald Republic imposed on Ketis' paperwork was due to the sheer amount of verification they demanded in order to fulfill what should have been a simple bureaucratic procedure.

"If no additional snags come up, we depart tomorrow."

A day quickly passed by as the LMC arranged every matter that needed to be done before departure. The Barracuda received a thorough inspection while stocking up on fuel, energy and other supplies.

The Greenfeather took in eleven mechs. Most of them consisted of landbound mechs like the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords, but the light carrier also took in a single laser rifleman mech so that Chette Larkinson had something to pilot.

In the morning before the departure, Ves just finished giving Calsie some instructions on how to run the company in his absence before he received an important notification.

He received word of a discreet visit from someone that Ves would rather not meet!

Unfortunately, refusing to meet the guest was a really bad idea, so Ves had no choice but to allow the newcomer to enter his office.

"We meet again, Ves."

"Leland." Ves pressed his lips while stroking Lucky's back. "What are you doing here?"

Leland grinned. "Oh, come now. How could you leave us out when you abruptly decided to go on a business trip to the Protectorate? Flashlight is feeling left out, so they sent me to join your little business delegation. Foreign affairs is a very delicate matter, and everything you do abroad can result in major implications to our diplomacy towards the Protectorate."

"So you've been sent by Flashlight as a minder?"

"If that's how you see it, then sure. We just don't want you to open your big mouth at the most inopportune time and spoil the Bright Republic's relations with our neighboring state."

Ves looked at Leland with an askance expression. "Is that the extent of Flashlight's intentions?"

Leland wordlessly smiled.

Chapter 1148 Permanent Minder

Ves did not want Leland anywhere near him right now!

"As far as I know, Flashlight is a military intelligence agency. We've never gone to war to the Protectorate before and the chances of them turning against us is low. If any spy agency wants to butt their heads into my business, shouldn't I be welcoming someone from Searchlight instead?"

Leland snorted disdainfully at the mention of the Bright Republic's foreign intelligence agency. "While Searchlight is more competent than Spotlight, they don't hold a candle to us. As for the matter of jurisdiction, don't forget that our front company Sibilant Asset Management owns twenty-one percent of the LMC. Any business you do automatically makes it our business as well."

It seemed like Ves couldn't prevent Flashlight from meddling in his business, not that he realistically expected to succeed in the first place. If Flashlight wanted something done, they just did it without any regard for existing laws and customs!

"You should be happy, Ves. Flashlight has taken notice of your recent achievements. Remember our earlier visit? Well, our analysts had to revise our estimates of you and your company's potential yet again! It's becoming more and more clear to us that you are one of the most promising Brighter Journeyman to have arisen in recent times!"

"Isn't that a bit overblown? There should be at least a couple of other Journeyman who advanced just as fast or even faster than me. I hardly broke any records."

"They're different." Leland dismissively waved his hand. "Prodigal mech designers born in the Republic like Edwin McKinney are spending so much time in the Friday Coalition that they are basically only Brighters in name at this point."

Even though foreign mech designers faced numerous uphill battles if they decided to put down their roots in the Friday Coalition, a lot of them still pulled the trigger. The mech market there was far more prosperous and the scale was enormous!

Ves also became tempted to move to the Friday Coalition a few times.

"I'm glad that Flashlight considers me to be a loyal Brighter. Shouldn't you guys just trust me then?"

"That's not how the game is played, Ves. Your entourage sorely needs someone like me to keep your head above the water while you're diving head-first into a foreign lake. In fact, I won't be leaving at the end of this special business. I'll be staying at the LMC in a more permanent capacity from now on!"

No matter how much he argued, Ves could not prevent the annoying stain that was Leland from forcing his way into his company. Flashlight had already made up its mind to place one of their agents directly by his side!

The Flashlight agent already arrived with all the paperwork that supported his cover identity as an unimportant secretarial worker for the LMC.

The thought of Leland becoming one of his company's employees did not sit well with Ves at all.

When Gavin arrived in the office soon after, he was flummoxed by the new addition as well.

"Who is this?"

"This is Leland Toll. He's been sent by Sibilant Asset Management to join my staff and advise me on matters pertaining to government affairs. I expect the two of you to get along closely."

It looked as if Gavin picked up the discomfort in Ves' tone, because he immediately gazed at Leland with a wary eye.

As for the devil incarnate himself, Leland offered casual smile and handshake to his new colleague. "Pleased to meet you, Gavin Neumann. Ves regards you very highly. I hope you keep up the good work."

"Thanks." Gavin hesitantly replied while shaking the newcomer's hand. "So you're basically here as a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?"

"You can look at it that way. The government can't let Ves go to the Ylvaine Protectorate without supervision, after all. Who knows what diplomatic incidents can arise if he makes a misstep. It is very risky for Brighters to visit the Protectorate because most of their citizens are rather xenophobic towards non-believers."

"I see."

While Gavin still looked uncertain, he largely bought Leland's story.

Only Ves knew Leland and Sibilant Asset Management's true allegiance to Flashlight. To everyone else, Sibilant Asset Management was merely one of several holding companies managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Leland's abrupt involvement in the business trip made it clear that Ves had entered into contentious territory this time. By now, it was impossible for Ves and the LMC to disassociate business from politics!

While Gavin took Leland away in order to help the latter integrate into the LMC, Ves remained in his office while stroking Lucky's back.

For some reason, he couldn't help but suspect that Leland wouldn't be staying obediently by his side during his stay in the Kesseling System.

"What does the Bright Republic want with the Ylvaine Protectorate?"

The two states may not be the best of friends, but they never entered into any major spats. Both of them had their own rivals to contend with to bother too much against each other.

Ves found it amusing that a highly religious state like the Ylvaine Protectorate tolerated a secular state like the Bright Republic but could not get along with the Star Faith Collective, which was another religious state!

If there was one thing a religion couldn't tolerate, it was another religion that advocated for completely different beliefs!

Lately, it seemed the Ylvaine Protectorate became more and more embroiled in conflict against the Star Faith Collective.

Many outside observers in the Komodo Star Sector even equated their relationship as another version of the irreconcilable hatred between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom!

While Ves didn't think the conflict between the two religious state was equivalent to the Bright-Vesia Wars, it did mean that the Protectorate was in desperate need to shore up its military and industry!

"The Protectorate will rather go in bed with the Bright Republic than the Star Faith Collective!"

Ves wasn't really interested in the Ylvainan Faith. He didn't have a bone in their religious conflict with the Star Faith either. He only wanted to expand the

LMC's market presence in the Protectorate in order to sell more mechs and make a lot of money!

By the time the local afternoon rolled in, everything at home had been arranged.

While Melkor and the Avatars of Myth already boarded the Greenfeather in orbit ahead of time, Ves and his entourage stepped inside the Barracuda.

With Ketis, Lucky, Gavin and Leland on the corvette, Ves did not have to worry about running out of company.

Therefore, his announcement of locking himself in his stateroom for a few days or weeks came as a surprise to the rest.

"What are you up to?" Ketis asked with narrowed eyes.

"Nothing much." Ves tried to brush the matter off. "I just want to be left alone so I can immerse myself in my own studies. You know how I work, Ketis. I am always at my best when I'm completely alone and undisturbed."

"What if there's an emergency?"

"I doubt matters will arise that require my intervention. If I'm not available, you can defer to Captain Silvestra or Melkor for instructions."

"What if there's an issue that requires your direct attention?"

Ves already took this possibility into account. It would be highly inconvenient if the Barracuda and the Greenfeather bumped into trouble while his mind was still stuck in the past!

"You can go ahead and knock on the hatch to my stateroom. Lucky will decide whether it's worth bringing to my attention."

In truth, Lucky's job was to prevent anyone from entering his stateroom and uncover his seemingly comatose body!

To that end, Ves turned his attention specifically to Leland. "Without permission from Lucky or myself, no one enters my stateroom. I can't guarantee your safety if you decide to barge in against your better judgement. Is that clear?"

Leland slowly nodded. The Flashlight agent must be wondering what security measures Ves set up to keep out intruders. Perhaps some of the gadgets he brought along could help him circumvent those safeguards.

He could try. Lucky would be ready to meet any intrusion with violence.

Everyone brought their gear for this trip. Ves and Ketis did not forget to bring along their custom suits of armor and fancy weapons.

As for Leland, who knew what gadgets he brought along in his boring-looking floating coffer. Perhaps only Gavin stuck to bringing in plain civilian luggage.

As the Barracuda slowly lifted off into orbit, the corvette quickly flew alongside the Greenfeather and formed a small group.

The pair of ships deftly traveled to the nearest Lagrange point and simultaneously transitioned into FTL.

The LMC's business delegation had at least two weeks of travel ahead of them. While the Barracuda could have reached her destination faster, the Greenfeather was not as swift.

"Two weeks should be more than enough time for me to finish my private excursion." Ves muttered as he closed and locked the hatch to his stateroom.

"Meow."

"Yes, I know the timing isn't great and all. The crew and passengers are already looking at me with suspicion, but what can I do? A hero mech isn't easy to work with! Reading a bunch of literature won't be enough to bring me up to speed on all of the nuances of this complex mech type."

Ves set up an automated feeding system attached to his bunk while Lucky floated down from the ceiling.

There was no way for Ves to predict how long his upcoming Mastery experience would take.

If it dragged on for more than a week, then at the very least he didn't have to worry about returning to a starving body this time!

He raised a lot of eyebrows from Captain Silvestra when he ordered the Barracuda to integrate this system, but he didn't need to explain himself. He was the boss after all, and the Barracuda was his private property!

After setting everything up, Ves laid down on his bed and let the automated feeding system scan and connect to his body. Only until he triple-checked the diagnostics of the device did he move on to the next step.

He activated his Privacy Shield before engaging the System. He immediately entered the Skill Tree and sought out the Mastery he desired to acquire.

[Hero Mech Mastery I]: 80,000 DP

Ves almost puked out blood at the price. "You greedy System! Why does this Mastery cost twice as much as the others?!"

Like usual, the System didn't deign to answer his question.

In fact, Ves knew it was futile to complain. The System charged more for every Mastery related to more complex mech types.

"I hope it doesn't last longer just because it's more expensive."

With his ample reserves of DP, Ves could still stomach the doubling in price, even if it left a foul taste in his mouth.

"You're getting greedier and greedier, System!"

With no other choice, Ves confirmed his purchase.

The System's interface quickly faded away. As Ves laid down on his bunk hooked up to a feeding machine, invisible hooks quickly latched onto his consciousness and dragged it through a portal that led to the past!

As Ves' mental consciousness endured the ravages of this extremely incomprehensible mode of travel, he tried his best to retain his wits. He needed to be ready to hide his presence in the mind of his next host!

After what seemed like hours, the System finally deposited his consciousness in the mind of a stranger!

The sudden entry caused the host to jump.

"Is there something amiss, Mr. Axelar?"

"No, Benny. I think I've spent too long without a dose. Can you hit me up again?"

"As you will, sir."

A sturdy bodyguard-like figure withdrew a sophisticated syringe and pressed the soft tip against Mr. Axelar's neck. A quick injection later, a flood of chemical euphoria flooded the young highborn's mind!

Having just entered Mr. Axelar's mind, Ves' consciousness almost became swept by the rush of artificial pleasure emanating from all around!

"Goddammit!" He inwardly screamed. "Of all the candidates that the System could put me into, it chose a junkie of all people!"

Chapter 1149 Axelar Streon

In his last Mastery experience, Ves spent a week inside Eloise Pelican's mind.

Venerable Pelican was a respectable mech pilot even before she became an expert pilot.

While Ves did not relish his stay inside the mind of a woman and especially a mother who missed her son, he had nothing to complain about when it came to her deployments or her battle performance.

A decade of harsh living and dealing with constant shortages turned Eloise and the rest of the mercenary corps she was a part of into stoic, disciplined warriors. Their conduct was exemplary for remaining stuck in the horrible Dark Sphere for so long.

This was very different. For some reason that Ves couldn't fathom, the System had the bright idea of inserting his consciousness into the mind of a drugged-out wastrel!

In the six hours that passed since Ves entered Axelar's mind, he spent most of that time trying to anchor his consciousness in place against the violent waves of pleasure and euphoria induced by frequent injections of recreational stimulants!

Benny Smit, Axelar's tough and sturdy-looking bodyguard, obediently brought out a seemingly endless amount of high-tech syringes from his uniform!

"Oh, hell no, not another injection! This is your fifteenth already! How can an utterly degenerate person like you still remain alive with all of the drugs running through your body?!" Ves mentally wailed, not that Axelar was even coherent enough to detect the intrusion in his mind!

As the waves of chemical pleasure grew into yet another tsunami of euphoria, Ves endured the tides as best he could while he tried to dig out the details of where he landed this time.

Axelar's constant highs made it very difficult for Ves to dig up details from the mind of his host. If Ves hadn't broke through to Journeyman, he would have faced a steeper challenge.

Fortunately, his vastly-improved Spirituality allowed him to resist the tides and employ his abilities with more finesse. Even under adverse conditions, Ves slowly managed to glean some details about the current time and place.

As soon as Ves found out in which state he landed in, his consciousness practically jumped out of Axelar's mind!

"What! I'm in the Greater Terran United Confederation!"

This was a massive surprise! This was so far beyond his previous Mastery experiences that Ves turned speechless.

The System deposited him deep inside the galactic center!

Not only that, but Ves also entered the mind of a highborn scion of the Streon Clan, which ruled over several hundred star systems in the extremely prosperous Radiant Pulsar Star Sector!

The Radiant Pulsar Star Sector wasn't anything like the Komodo Star Sector. Comparing the two was like comparing a plain nutrient pack to a twenty-one course meal prepared by the best human chef in the galaxy!

No third-rate states existed in the Radiant Pulsar Star Sector. In fact, no second-rate state existed either. The entire star sector was just one of many ludicrously prosperous star sectors in the Greater Terran United Confederation.

Still, just because Radiant Pulsar was only ruled by a single state didn't mean that everything was peaceful.

Just like how the noble houses of the New Rubarth Empire struggled for power, wealth and influence, the Terrans were little different.

Various ancient clans with pedigrees spanning for thousands of years constantly competed against each other.

The only difference was that the Rubarthan houses frequently rose and fell. Hardly any noble house could rest on their laurels and rely on their past achievements to enjoy their positions of power.

As the originator of the Societal Vitality Theory, the Rubarthan houses were constantly compelled to fight in order to maintain or expand their current positions in their huge superstate.

While the Terrans snobbishly regarded themselves better than the Rubarthans, the competition between its ancient clans was just as serious, if not as frequent or violent.

Any conflict or competition that played out between the various rivalling clans only played out in extremely restricted battlefields determined in advance. Ves already knew that clans could only send out a restricted number of mechs to another star system and engage in battle in a very narrow region in order to determine whether the conquest succeeded.

This pattern of fighting led to a very peculiar mech culture in the Greater Terran United Confederation.

While clans still spent huge amounts of resources to maintain large standing mech armies, they nonetheless put most of their attention to training a smaller number of elite mech forces.

With every conflict between the clans restricted to a relatively modest number of mechs, it was vitally important that each clan raised at least one elite mech corps!

The amount of mechs the Terrans allowed to fight at any one time for the ownership of a star system differed from star sector to star sector. In the Radiant Star Sector, the maximum amount of mechs a clan could bring to a restricted battle was 50,000 mechs, which amounted to a full mech corps.

This sounded like a lot, but it was actually very small compared to the sheer number of mechs that ancient clans had at their disposal!

"It's the equivalent of determining a battle by sending out champions." Ves mentally concluded.

The ancient clans could easily field millions or even billions of mechs at a time! However, a battle involving so many mechs was extremely destructive! Not only would most of those mechs become trashed, but the sheer amount of collateral damage that ensued with the use of highly advanced and destructive weapons could wipe out all life on every habitable planet!

The fear of squandering so many assets and resources led the Terrans to adopt this custom of limiting the amount of mechs involved in a battle.

The strength of a clan and the amount of star systems they ruled no longer depended on their total military might. Instead, it depended on how well they are able to train and equip their elite mech corps!

One of the unintended consequences of turning every internal battle in the Confederation into a fair competition was that it turned into public spectacle!

While the Terrans still held many versions of competitive mech games, the actual battles between the clans drew the attention of countless Terran and foreign citizens!

Axelar Streon was a legitimate highborn scion of the Streon Clan. While he wasn't the firstborn heir of a prominent figure in the clan, he nonetheless enjoyed a very privileged station in life!

At the moment of his conception, his genes had already been tailored to perfection! The Streon clan spared no expense in insuring the genes of their main clan members was as superior as possible!

The result was that Axelar was already exceptional as a human from the moment of his birth! He was smarter, faster and stronger than the average citizen of the Confederation.

Compared to baseline humans who lived outside the first-rate superstates, the disparity in capabilities grew even wider!

Axelar enjoyed a pampered upbringing. The high position of his parents ensured that he was constantly surrounded by luxuries.

Naturally, Axelar quickly turned into a spoiled brat.

His situation changed a bit when he turned ten. Axelar's parents found out that their son possessed the genetic aptitude to pilot mechs!

This was a great opportunity for Axelar. His parents instantly packed him off to one of the Streon Clan's many premier mech academies.

For the next fifteen years, Axelar endured a very rough time. While the mech academies he attended treated any Streon clan member very well, the mech instructors nonetheless forced every student to become good at piloting mechs!

No matter what background the Streon clan members possessed, the mech academies did not let up on them just because their parents were powerful!

For Axelar, his time at the academies was hell! There wasn't a single hardworking bone in his body. He often got in trouble with the mech instructors for doing less than his best to learn how to pilot mechs.

Despite these odds, Axelar managed to graduate from both the basic and advanced mech academy with respectable grades.

Two reasons allowed him to pull through.

First, his genetic aptitude was graded at A-, which was extremely good! This meant that Axelar needed to spend less time in practice to become proficient in a specific skill!

Second, the talented young mech pilot resorted to taking stimulants in order to get through the day!

Even after he graduated from the advanced mech academy, Axelar still continued to take recreational stimulants. Even though he visited a doctor in order to flush out his body and remove his physical dependence to stimulants, his mental addiction still remained as strong as ever!

"What a huge waste of a mech pilot!" Ves lamented.

Axelar Streon was only a little bit inferior to Venerable Foster when it came to piloting talent. In fact, his superior gene treatments and the other advantages he received should have turned him into an even better mech pilot than Relia Foster in her pre-expert days.

Yet Axelar did not spend his time on polishing his piloting skills. Although the Streon Clan transferred him to an elite mech corps upon graduation, the wastrel actively avoided serving with them and instead spend much of his time in an incoherent daze due to all of the stimulants he took!

"What a stupid pig!" Ves berated his host. "You've got all of these advantages! Trillions of people in the galactic rim would kill to enjoy even a fraction of your good fortune!"

Of course, Axelar was so insensate that Ves could be yelling for hours without ever arousing the junkie's attention.

To Ves, this was no way to live!

"Don't tell me that my entire Mastery experience consists of witnessing Axelar getting high all the time?"

What about piloting mechs? The entire reason why Ves went along with this trip to the past in the first place was to witness a mech pilot in action from their very minds! He did not sign up to get caught up in the constant euphorias of a useless druggie!

"Benny, please hit me up with the seventh formula. I'm in the mood for something more mellow this time."

"Master Axelar." Benny coughed. "You have a mech duel on the agenda. One of your friends have come to visit your home planet. You agreed to duel him tonight."

"Ah.. is that so? I don't remember. Well, a buzz won't hurt while I'm piloting my mech. Give me the seventh formula, please!"

"If that is what you wish."

Ves looked with amazement as Benny acquiesced to Axelar's demand. As a different wave of pleasure erupted in the mind of his host, Ves simply couldn't fathom how Axelar continued to partake in stimulants with a mech duel just hours away from commencing!

After Benny tucked away the syringe containing the seventh formula, he raised his voice yet again.

"Master Axelar, seeing as you are about to enter another duel, you should prepare your mech at this time."

"Okay.. please summon the interface."

Benny pressed a button on his comm which summoned a large projection of what appeared to be a very slick and simplified mech design interface.

To Ves' amazement, Axelar raised his shaky fingers and began to manipulate the interface. He selected various parts which the software automatically put together. Through picking and choosing all of the essential parts of a mech,

the AIs working behind the scenes automatically put them together into a single, technically-sound design!

Not only that, but the AIs completed the design without the input of any human mech designer!

Axelar grinned like a bleary drunk. "What do you think about my latest creation, Benny? It's a work of art! Just look at its smooth lines and its cool posture! I'll definitely be victorious tonight!"

"It is an excellent, Master Axelar. No mech designer can ever equal your work!" Benny said with a smile. The attendant manipulated the interface before turned it off. "Your mech is being materialized right as we speak. It will be ready for your upcoming duel."

Ves practically looked on with horror with what had just occurred. The mech that Axelar designed in his highly intoxicated state was anything but a piece of art! It was a bona fide abomination that should have never existed in the first place!

Chapter 1150 Extreme Abundance

The Greater Terran United Confederation was the latest manifestation of the oldest continuous state in human civilization. Although the names might change, the humans who looked up to the ancestry of Old Earth always referred to themselves as Terrans.

As one might expect, Terrans thought highly of themselves. Old Earth was the original birthplace of mankind and even in the Age of Mechs it continued to play a pivotal role as one of the most important cultural institutions of the human race.

The stuck-up ancient clans that ruled at the top were so oppressive and insufferable that at some point during the Age of Conquest, a large amount of colonies rose up in rebellion!

Suffice to say, a lot of non-Earth humans hated the Terran elites and were just waiting for a moment to shake loose from their rule!

While the Terrans managed to suppress most of the uprisings in time using their awesome military might, the cowardly Terran leaders kept too many warships close to home. This afforded some of the more powerful rebellious colonies situated further away from Old Earth precious time to establish themselves!

By the time the conservative Terrans finally realized what their cautious defensive and reactive stance had wrought, the New Rubarth Empire already came into existence!

Ever since then, the Terrans needed to contend with the new kid on the block. Having unshackled themselves from the stuffy Terrans, the newly-emerged Rubarthans quickly caught up and overtook their old masters! The bold and daring reforms they implemented through every layer of their society enabled the Rubarthans to become incredibly productive!

Seeing the Rubarthans rise up and take over the crown that rightfully belonged to the original birthplace of mankind, the Greater Terran United Confederation tentatively reformed their own society.

They had no choice! If they continued to stick to the old ways that led to most of their far-flung colonies rising up in arms, the Terrans would continue to decline!

In the end, while the Terrans implemented a lot of decent reforms, the ancient clans were far too unwilling to enable others to challenge their oligopoly on power. Many outside observers considered their reforms to be too half-hearted. Many of the same inefficiencies and excesses that plagued the old Terrans still existed in modern times.

This was why most of the galaxy considered the New Rubarth Empire to be the new standard bearers of humanity. Other than the Big Two, most of human space now looked up to the Rubarthans for leadership.

Ves always thought that the weakness of the Greater Terran United Confederation had always been overstated. Much of the galaxy became so inured in the wide reach of pro-Rubarthan influences that they completely disregarded the fact that the Confederation was still a first-rate superstate!

Yet now that the System forcefully inserted his consciousness in the mind of a decadent junkie like Axelar Streon, he began to think the Rubarthans may had a point!

Axelar possessed so much talent and ability, but he squandered it all!

Just the a-la-carte automatic mech design service he had access was an incredibly powerful tool in the right hands! Ves had never seen a layman put together a mech so easily!

In the right hands, a mech pilot would be able to use the auto designer to pick and choose the properties of a mech from the ground up!

This was incredibly valuable because a mech pilot would not be stuck with the same strengths and weaknesses of their existing mechs. A mech pilot who used an auto designer to their full potential would be able to put together a mech that precisely countered the opposition!

Combined with materialization technology that could faithfully reproduce any mech design down to the atom, then the power and versatility at Axelar's disposal should have been enough for him to dominate

Yet what did Axelar do with all of this power?

He just picked and chose random components and let the AIs mash them together without any regard for fit and synergy!

Ves was vaguely able to determine the date from some of the tech he witnessed in the auto designer's catalog. He estimated that the System sent him back at least ninety years this time.

Even then, most of the high technology at Axelar's disposal astounded him! Even though this junkie probably hadn't been coherent enough to know what he was putting in his own mech, the parts he selected all cost a fortune!

The mech that Axelar ended up with was technically a multipurpose mech. It featured half-a-dozen weapon systems, most of them integrated all over the torso and the head of the abomination the AIs produced.

Axelar only added a positron rifle and a Destroyer Sword out of force of habit.

The bloated hero mech that came out possessed arms unsuited for the weapons they carried, a targeting system that only worked well with heavy artillery weapons, legs that were a bit too light for all of the mass it was meant to support, a flight system with wings that were way too massive and cumbersome, an armor system that should have only been used in heavy mechs, and an amazingly resilient active shielding system that drained the mech's insufficient power supply within minutes!

In other words, the auto-generated hero mech that Axelar was about to duel with was a sluggish, bloated mess with practically no endurance should it activate all of its systems!

If Ves was in charge, he would have easily been able to build a mech that was at least ten times more effective in battle!

"You stupid drug-addled idiot!" Ves mentally cursed at Axelar. "Even if you know nothing about mech design, you should at least know better than to weigh your mech down with such a cumbersome armor system! Even if the flight system you chose is powerful, that is only the case with proper medium mechs!"

As it was, the hero mech that Axelar ended up with was practically a sitting duck! Its turning rate was so slow that practically any competent opponent would be able to circle around and attack Axelar's mech from the rear!

Even as Ves vented his frustration at Axelar for constantly clouding his mind with recreational stimulant, he also noted the technologies at the Terran highborn's disposal.

Practically every aspect surpassed the technology used in the galactic rim by an incredible margin!

"With all of this high technology and high-grade exotics at the Confederation's disposal, it's no surprise that they don't stick to specialized mech archetypes."

Many weapon systems didn't take up a lot of space, but could nevertheless inflict a lot of damage. This led to the trend of integrating various weapon systems in the frame of the mech.

It was kind of like integrating frontline mech traits into the frame of a standard humanoid mech. Through combining numerous internal and external weapon systems into a single machine, a multipurpose mech exhibited much fewer apparent weaknesses.

Not only that, but many of the high-tech flight systems available in the auto designer were not as cumbersome as those used in the galactic rim! Better tech and better materials allowed component designers to miniaturize and even break up the flight system into remarkably compact modules!

This basically meant that pure landbound mechs didn't exist in first-rate superstates! Almost every mech possessed the capability to fly because it was incredibly easy to integrate flight systems and flight modules to even the heaviest mech frames.

If designed correctly, then first-class mechs might even be able to operate under all four major environmental conditions! This meant that a single mech

could operate on land, in the air, in space and underwater without suffering any major handicaps to their performance!

"This is practically the holy land of mech design!"

Ves envied Axelar's access to so much high technology and excellent materials. Although the scion of the Streon Clan was a member of the Terran elite, the mechs piloted by the rank-and-file shouldn't be too much worse!

"No wonder a lot of Masters succumb to the temptation of moving to the galactic center. With so many possibilities, Masters have a much easier time in realizing their ideal mech designs."

Still, the sheer amount of abundance at the disposal of the Terrans also led to a lot of waste. Every mech was overengineered and tried to stuff far more exotic systems and gimmicks than any single machine ought to possess. The high degree of restraint exhibited by mech designers in the galactic rim was nowhere present in the galactic center!

"More is not always better." Ves mentally shook his head.

As a mech designer from the galactic rim, Ves inherited the prevailing values of the region. Efficiency was paramount, and even if he did not always put this priority first, he still valued cost-efficient designs.

His exposure to Terran mech standards still left him reeling to be honest. Ves felt like he was a pauper who lived in the slums all his life, only to be picked up and dropped into a prosperous downtown city district!

"How many Terrans have access to something like the auto designer?"

Although Ves looked down on the crappy auto-generated mech that Axelar casually put together, it was still a genuine first-class mech that could defeat hundreds of third-class mechs in a straightforward battle!

"What a waste!" Ves couldn't help but lament at Axelar's ugly creation.

In practice, the multipurpose mech's lack of mobility and low endurance made the mech far too susceptible against long-ranged artillery bombardment.

While Ves continued to mentally berate the awful mech design that Axelar put together, a few hours passed by. Benny finally injected Alexar with some sort of flushing chemical that pulled the completely insensitive junkie back into a half-coherent state.

"Master Oliver of the Renwald Clan has arrived." Benny dutifully informed.

"Oh? Why is Oliver here?" Axelar asked with a slur in his voice.

"You scheduled a friendly mech duel with him tonight. Don't you remember?"

After seven painfully long seconds, Axelar a light finally dawned in his eyes.

"Oh right! I promised I would kick his butt this time! With the amazing new mech that I've designed, I'll finally be able to gloat in front of his face!"

With the assistance of Benny and an array of bots, Axelar freshened up his appearance and donned a very sharp outfit. If not for his hazy eyes and his swaying movements, he might have actually lived up to the high reputation of the Terrans.

Moments later, Axelar moved to the foyer of his villa and met his friend.

"Axelar! How's it going, buddy?"

"I'm feeling fantastic, Oliver! Ever since I took over that pharmaceutical company, I've been enjoying some of the best highs in my life!"

"Hey, don't keep all the good stuff to yourself!"

"I would never deprive you of my stimulants. Benny, hit Oliver up with the latest formula."

Axelar's bodyguard silently stepped forward. Benny nodded once to Oliver's bodyguards before he injected the guest with a powerful stimulant.

"Whoa! I'm seeing stars! Damn, I need to sit down for this. I can feel the next wave coming already!"

"Hahaha! My drug company makes the best stimulants in the galaxy!" Axelar boasted. "Benny, hit me up with a dose as well!"

"Master Axelar, what about your duel?"

"Forget about the duel! Testing my company's latest formula is much more important! In fact, scrap the duel!"

"And your newly-materialized mech?"

"Dump it into a star for all I care."

Ves watched with mounting disgust as Axelar and Oliver both forgot about the mech duel they previously scheduled. Instead, they spent the rest of the evening sampling some of the latest stimulant formulas that Axelar's pharmaceutical company developed for their owner!

All of the drugs were very potent on their own, but when taken in quick succession, their effects blended with each other to achieve incredibly powerful physiological reactions!

Both Axelar and Oliver drugged themselves into a completely smashed and insensate state! Even newborn babies were more coherent than this pair of degenerate druggies!