

Chapter 241 Market Research

Their stay in Cava City came to an end. Ves, Raella and Lucky boarded the Nautilus of the Deep with memorable moments of their stay.

"The play is fun and all, but I don't get why it's so highly rated."

"With parodies, you have to look underneath the surface to get the message." Ves responded to Raella. "Have you noticed how the humans appeared more dimwitted than the aliens in the performance? My take on the play is that if humans for whatever reason lose their drive for war, they'll eventually turn into harmless monkeys who are only good for comic relief."

"Hah! As if that will ever happen. Too much blood has been shed for us to go all lovey dovey all of a sudden."

"You never know if the prevailing winds will change. There's always a portion in our society who are advocating for peace and understanding."

"That sounds pretty bad for you. Without all the fighting, who's going to buy your mechs?"

Who would buy his mechs indeed, Ves thought. For better or worse, the mech industry depended on the continuation of humanity's thriving martial culture. The amount of mechs that got wrecked and needed to be replaced in the Komodo Star Sector reached an astounding sum.

"Did you enjoy the holiday?" Ves asked.

"Well, it's not an adventure, but it's okay. Moira's Paradise is so different, it's like the people here are aliens. I don't get their fascination for living under a fragile dome all year long. The moment it cracks, all of that water will come crashing down on their heads! I'd rather live underneath the open sky."

Ves enjoyed the holiday as well. Besides the inspiration he received, it also felt refreshing to forget about his job, if only for a couple of days.

After the Nautilus returned to the surface, a large number of passengers departed the luxurious cruise ship. Ves and his entourage spent a short time on the artificial island before boarding the Barracuda.

"Back to Cloudy Curtain?" Captain Silvestra asked.

"Yup. Take your time, you don't have to hurry."

Before he returned to his workshop, Ves intended to do some market research as a final preparation for his draft design. While he could start to draft a design right now, he risked a disappointing reception if he disregarded the demands of the market.

"What do people in the Republic want from a knight mech?"

Ves already read up on the subject. Marcella had been very helpful in sharing some of her market research and industry reports. To make the long story short, the private market mainly geared up for a brutal slog against the Vesians.

Everyone expected the upcoming war to proceed in the same vein as the previous conflicts between the two rival states. The Bright Republic would be put on the defensive while the highly motivated Vesians did their best to break through.

The irreconcilable hatred between the Vesians and the Brighters ensured the war could drag on for up to five years or more. The mercenaries and company security forces that made up the bulk of the private market demanded robust designs that could potentially last them the entire war.

This fell into his niche, as his phoenix concept centered around extending the life cycle of his upcoming design. Still, his knight needed something more in order to distinguish his product from the masses.

Ves took inspiration of the late Jackknife Jake. While his dauntless personality made a profound impression in his mind, he also admired the semi-modular nature of his fish mech. To design a mech that continued to function bereft of most of its surface components took a lot of guts and skill.

He wanted to adopt such a feature into his own design to complement its undying nature, but practical concerns prevented him from going through with this idea.

"It's a lot easier to pull this off in the water than on land. The diminished form will have to come with its own miniature engine and power source, as well as a form of mobility."

Such demands took up too much space to make the concept feasible with the means at hand. Nesting mechs like the fish mech became more prevalent in the galactic center, where superior technology and materials brought about significant gains in performance while requiring relatively little space.

He turned his newly invigorated imagination in another direction. What do mech pilots want in their knight mechs? Ves poured into his research materials to look up the answer.

Ves spotted a tiny detail hidden beneath the personal testimonies. Besides the usual demands for power, armor and speed, the mech pilots wanted to own a mech that could dig.

He played a clip of an interview with a veteran mercenary pilot.

"How often did you find yourself huddled underneath the ground?"

"More often than I liked. The noble armies of the Vesians generally consists of a hodgepodge of designs, but one thing that's very consistent is that they bring lots of artillery, particularly missiles. They ship them in by the bulk and fire off their entire magazines in our direction to soften us up. Sometimes, the

Vesians don't even care if they don't hit anything, because the bombardment has already frayed our nerves."

"If you know that they will be throwing missiles at you, why not prepare a portable bombardment shelter?"

"Those things work well, but they're only good for a single time. The cheaper ones weigh a lot so it's a massive pain to lug them around. The more expensive ones don't last long enough to pay for their expenses. It's better to take advantage of the natural soil around us and put a lot of earth between your mech and the missiles raining down in your sector."

"What about bringing in a digger module?"

"Are you kidding? Those things take up even more space, and they're finicky as hell! No, forget about those stupid gadgets. The only thing I need is an old-fashioned spade."

The veteran proceeded to detail the intricacies of digging a makeshift shelter. Different planets and climates led to different soil conditions. It took a lot of technique to dig out a semi-enclosed trench in a reasonable amount of time.

Ranged mechs that formed the mainstay of any squad often broke down easily if they helped with the digging. The arms of a rifleman mech specialized in aiming the weapon as accurate as possible. These types of limbs easily exceeded their maximum carrying limits if they went too far with digging.

More often than not, squads designated knight mechs as their go-to diggers. While knights possessed a lot of strengths, that didn't mean they excelled at digging. Many mech designers overlooked such demands when they came up with their knight designs.

"Interesting." Ves spoke to himself. "Could this be a gap in the market?"

In truth, many mercenaries preferred to be deployed in areas with readily available cover. If they couldn't find anything nearby, they would rather retreat and avoid the bombardment entirely. Only rarely did they decide to stay and ride out the storm.

However, his research into this topic revealed that digging became more prevalent in the later stages of the war. Most battles shifted from well-prepared fortifications to bombed-out ruins and temporary encampments in the wilderness. As everything started breaking down, a mech could only rely on his simple spade for suitable cover.

"So am I going to design a mole mech now?"

Ves wouldn't go that far. It became tempting to believe in the market research and try to form a response to every issue, but Ves only had so much space in his design.

"It's enough to take the possibility into mind."

A mech that could dig efficiently required a specialized set of limbs that diminished its ability to fight. Ves decided to make due with half-measures that made the digging a little easier while preserving the combat effectiveness of his design.

"This should be the base role of my design. A scrappy knight that also makes for a decent entrencher."

With this decision, Ves formulated the three required images for his Triple Division Technique.

The totem animal consisted of the mythical phoenix. This image represented his desire to design a lasting mech that would grow over the years and become more distinct with each round of repairs.

Ves decided to dedicate the human myth to Jackknife Jake. It saved him the trouble of formulating a fictional character. As a mech athlete, Jackknife Jake possessed keen instincts and a great sense for risk taking. Even if he lost out at the final moment of his career, the preceding feats in his career showcased his talent in this area.

"I need something with the drive to win no matter how frigid the situation has become."

This kind of motivation sounded rather dangerous. If Ves went too far with embedding this message into his design, his customers might be tempted to dive head-first into danger.

After a brief internal struggle, Ves decided to integrate this image into his design. "A knight has to possess a lot of courage to perform their roles. Otherwise, how will my design be able to excel in the field?"

The reality of the mech business was that the market paid attention to a design's performance in the field. Word of mouth spread quickly about good and bad designs. Mechs that performed poorly quickly resulted in cratering sales, while mechs that excelled on the battlefield exploded into popularity.

Much of this phenomenon depended on the habits and perception of the mech pilots in the field. Perfectly decent designs on paper might inexplicably be regarded as a harbinger of bad luck if a single pilot suffered from consecutive breakdowns.

Even if a lazy mech technician carried the actual blame for the mishaps, rumors always trumped over facts. Sometimes, investigators even found proof that a mech pilot deliberately made a fuss about their mechs at the behest of a competitor.

These days, the MTA came down hard on these kinds of practices, so Ves didn't worry too much about getting bad mouthed. What he actually concerned

himself with was whether his design could stand out from the other knights in the market.

"With my reputation, it should be fairly easy to generate some initial sales. It's what comes after that I have to focus on."

The buyers in the mech market spent their money wisely. If Ves could influence his designs in such a way so that his customers used them in flamboyant ways, he'd be able to generate a lot of buzz for his designs.

He only hesitated because it could also backfire on him. If his design gained a reputation for driving his pilots into reckless action, his mechs would cease to sell as well as he hoped.

In the end, he decided it was worth the risk, and confirmed the concepts that he would use for his design.

"Two of my images are focused on different aspects of survival, while the remaining one prioritizes victory."

The lack of balance in the images had been a deliberate choice on his part. There was no point in employing separate images if they all fulfilled the same role. By splitting the ratio from defense to offense in this manner, Ves emphasized the defensive aspect of his design while leaving room for offensive action.

"I'm ready to start my draft design."

Designing a draft meant he'd sketch out a loose outline of his mech. It fixed the general shape, type and weight-class of his mech and allowed him to figure out what type of components he should license for his final design.

Ves hunkered down in his stateroom aboard the Barracuda and projected his design software into the whole room. He took a deep breath and composed his mind, employing the Triple Division Technique at full strength.

His images showed signs of stirring up. As Ves infused the hungry concepts with his mind, they started coming to life. He held back his full force as he did not wish to wake them prematurely before he started with his actual design.

"This should be enough. Let's go with a medium mech."

He held out a finger in the air and slowly slid it downwards, leaving a single projected line. His finger turned direction, leaving behind another line, this one in a different angle. Ten minutes went by as Ves flicked his finger left and right, back and forth, up and down.

The resulting three-dimensional sketch looked like a mech doodled by a six-year old child. Yet in the eyes of Ves, it looked beautiful.

"Perfect."

Chapter 242 Draft Design

At first glance, his rough draft evoked more grace than grit.

The relatively sturdy profile of the knight took on a concave shape at the waist to save as much weight as possible. Most knight designs opted to beef up this area in order to protect the fragile engine and other related components. Unfortunately, all of the extra bulk tended to slow down the frame in a very major fashion.

"It's a good thing I've licensed a decent armor system."

The Keltrex armor system he licensed in exchange for merits allowed him to get away with more for less. It took up less weight for a comparable amount of protection to other armor systems, so Ves liberally took advantage of this trait.

While some people might consider that he went a little bit too far in trimming down the weight, Ves hoped that some would appreciate the upsides of his design choice. His draft design currently hovered in the middle of the mediumweight mech classification. Such mechs offered substantially more

mobility than other medium knights that often strained against the limits of their weight class without sacrificing too much protection.

Besides trimming down the waist, Ves gently beefed up the areas that his mech couldn't cover with its shield. Most notably, he bulked up the shoulders to the point where it appeared his mech possessed pauldrons.

Knight designs sometimes included oversized shoulder pauldrons with the aim of employing them as disposable half-shields.

Any incoming attacks could be absorbed by the pauldrons instead of the mech's more sensitive parts. Mech technicians would be able to replace the pauldrons fairly easily if they got damaged. While it risked damaging the underlying arm mechanisms, it still beat risking the integrity of the highly vital power reactor.

"My power reactor runs on medium-density mech-grade fuel. It can't handle battle damage like a power reactor that runs on electric current."

Another license he obtained from the Clifford Society, his power reactor focused mainly on endurance and durability. As a tradeoff, it plateaued fairly quickly, delivering a low level of peak performance. Still, paired with Oleg's efficient Trailblazer engine, his mech possessed an enviable level of endurance.

"My design should be able to operate for weeks without requiring resupply."

The only downside to this amazing feature was that his design relied on the supply of medium-density mech-grade fuel.

Generally, most mechs in the Republic that incorporated fuel cells ran on low-density fuel. Refiners produced them by the bulk with hardly any effort at all. In contrast, high-density fuel was strictly regarded as a strategic asset and could only be synthesized at specialized refineries owned by the state.

Medium-density fuel sat in between these two extremes. While refineries in the private sector possessed the capability to synthesize this kind of fuel, they often left it at the wayside due to limited demand. It cost several times more to run a mech on medium-density fuel, which was reason enough for most mech outfits to balk at the expense.

"Still, the tradeoff is worth it. It's not like the mech outfits can stock up on the fuel beforehand."

Incorporating the use of medium-density fuel in his design did not come without risk. While refiners managed to develop formulas that did not combust very easily, if exposed to sufficient heat, they might catch on fire. Ves had to draw up an array of fuel cells that could be emptied or ejected rapidly in the event it became exposed to something like a laser or a flamethrower.

"As long as its armor holds up, my knight shouldn't worry too much about getting caught on fire."

Ves trusted in the Keltrex armor system to endure lasers without transferring all of that energy to the mech's internals. As far as he was concerned, he got his merits worth and more when he obtained this license.

"Too bad my licenses are only valid for ten years."

The value of the licenses would probably decline by more than half after the start of the new mech generation, but it still presented an unwelcome circumstance. Merits did not come cheap, even for the more established mech designers. Ves did not relish the prospect of running another life-threatening mission for the Clifford Society.

Hopefully, he made enough progress in the next ten years that he'd easily be able to afford the expense of renewing the licenses.

"Maybe I don't even need to bother with this hassle. Everything that's currentgen will soon turn into lastgen. There's not going to be much of a market for lastgen mechs."

The newer licenses introduced at the start of a new generation always cost a massive fortune to procure. This gave the larger mech manufacturers a head-start in the race to design a new generation mech. If Ves wanted to take part in the upcoming rat race, he'd have to grow the LMC to the point it could afford the investment.

"It all depends on how well this design will sell."

His draft design incorporated several other premium aspects by taking advantage of his remaining licenses he obtained from Leemar.

The fuel cells he mentioned earlier came in a configuration that minimized the chance of setting off its contents.

The ECM he included in his design came with advanced active countermeasures that spoiled the locks of any targeting systems. The Coalition-developed system did not possess a large margin of superiority over local ECM variants, but it should be sufficient enough to handle anything the Vesians threw at his mechs.

Finally, the cockpit deserved a special mention. The reason why he went out of his way to obtain a cockpit license in Leemar was because it insured the pilot's safety without taking up too much space. It incorporated a powerful set of one-time boosters that lifted off quickly and traveled far enough to escape capture.

As an added bonus, Ves also clad it with a thin layer of Keltrex armor. While the cladding added to its bulk, the extra protection offered his customers a lot of added reassurance.

Put together, his draft already possessed the right elements to compete against the prevailing models in its target segment. While the market offered a lot of better designs that approached the performance of a second-class mech, they also cost a fortune to buy.

Like Ves, their designers incorporated several second-class aspects to their design. This resulted in wildly varying prices in the upper segment of the local mech market.

"There's more."

His vision for his knight and the images he used to guide his design work led to a couple of distinctive design choices.

First, Ves included a couple of optimizations that enhanced his design's ability to dig. He strengthened the internal frame and the spine so that it could exert more force into hardy soil without causing any internal stresses.

Ves even incorporated a free spade with his design. If his knight didn't need to dig, it could slide the spade into a specially-designed slot at the base of the spine. The blade of the spade also happened to offer some extra rear protection to the Trailblazer engine that rested inside the lower torso.

Secondly, he flourished up his draft with a couple of phoenix motifs. This started with the head, which Ves formed into an avine shape. He even added in a protruding beak that the pilot could use as a weapon of last resort.

Besides the bird-like head, Ves modified the shoulder pauldrons to look less like slabs and more like overlapping feathers. While it looked rather gimmicky, this enhanced their ability to absorb wide-area impacts at the cost of slightly worse performance against piercing attacks.

It also made maintenance a little easier since the mech technicians only had to replace a few damaged feathers rather than a large slab of armor plating.

As an added touch, Ves also planned to add the Festive Cloud Generator underneath the shoulders. If the mech pilot wished to make his mech stand out, he could choose to pump out fire-colored vapor from the feathers, giving allies and enemies alike the illusion that they faced a phoenix.

Perhaps this extra feature looked a little gawky, but it resulted in a very distinctive appearance for his design. "It looks really cool, that's for sure."

The sword and shield rounded out the phoenix theme that Ves was running. His upgraded creativity sprang into full as he figured out ways to embellish the armaments without taking it too far.

The sword incorporated a standard one-handed longsword design, but Ves styled its crossguard in the shape of a phoenix in flight. With its sweeping wings extending out of the sword and the beak that transitioned into the actual blade, it looked rather fetching in his eyes.

The shield on the other hand took an asymmetrical design. It was shaped like a phoenix turning in flight, leading to a crescent shape that covered one side more than the other. The sharpened edge of the moon-shaped shield provided his knight with an extra offensive option.

Ves had to admit that he spent a lot more time on detailing the surface of the shield than he should. While the sculptured surface looked fantastic, Ves envisioned a lot of added work should he push it into fabrication.

"It's worth it."

For a draft, the phoenix-themed knight already appeared unique. Ves was pretty certain that very few mechs looked identical to his own. At the very least, the Bright Republic's mech market had never seen anything like it. Its distinctive appearance alone distinguished his product from the rest.

"Let's iterate on this draft."

The first draft merely represented the starting point of his journey to publish an original design. Ves constantly tweaked the general shape of his design, adding in refinements and fixing some of the more obvious flaws. He only put down his weary finger once the Barracuda arrived at Cloudy Curtain.

Once the passengers returned to the workshop, Ves decided to seek some input from his circle. He gathered up Calsie, Gavin, Carlos and Chief Cyril and brought them to his enclosed office. He secretly activated his Privacy Shield before he turned on a projector of his draft.

"This is a preliminary draft of the original design I've been working on. It's an endurance-focused medium knight that excels in long, drawn-out conflicts. It's a premium design that incorporates several exclusive licenses from the Coalition, but I think I can manage to keep its price tag to around 60 million credits."

Besides the schematic, Ves also included his estimates on its specs. The guesswork shouldn't deviate too much from the actual numbers should he turn his draft into an actual design.

Carlos immediately raised his hands. "Okay, forget about its performance. What's up with the bird stuff?"

"I've been wondering about that as well. It looks tacky as hell."

Ves expected their feedback to start with this point. "I'm running a phoenix theme for my mech because I want to convey the message that it's not the end if it sustains a lot of damage. The core of my mech is very strong. In the event it suffers a lot of damage, as long as the owners are able to recover the mech, they should be able to repair it close to mint condition."

"That's a pipe dream." Chief Cyril shook his head. "You're selling a lie if you boast about infinite repairability for your mechs. Unless you're using smart

metals or self-repairing alloys or some expensive stuff like that, a battleworn mech will always degrade over time and use."

The chief suggested Ves to take care of the kind of language he used to boast about his design. Hyperbole might be fine if he used it sparingly, but he should not make promises he could never deliver.

"What do you think about the phoenix theme?" Ves probed the oldest man in the room.

"I agree with the others it looks needlessly like a bird. You're laying it on a little thick. I suggest you cut back on the length of the beak and the feather covering of the shoulder pauldrons. The shield looks really good, although I'm not too certain about its asymmetrical shape."

All of his core personnel provided sensible remarks. Calsie pointed out that his design incorporated both feminine and masculine traits. "It's not the point where you can call it a typical 'girl mech' or 'boy mech', but I thought you should know. Knight pilots tend to be guys, right?"

"It's about the same as the total ratio of male and female mech pilots." Cyril noted. "There's always going to be a bit more men than women in the field."

"Well, your design isn't offputting to men or women in particular, so that should be a boon."

Ves turned to the final person in the room. Gavin hadn't spoken out a lot, which is strange as he possessed the strongest marketing background among the gathering. He appeared to be mulling over the draft with his chin resting on his fingers.

"What's your take on my draft?"

"That depends." Gavin uttered in a pretentiously serious fashion. "Do you want to make a lot of money or do you want to sell a lot of mechs?"

"Isn't that the same thing?" Ves frowned. Mech manufacturers made their money by selling mechs.

Gavin shook his head. "Not exactly. Let's take a step back and define your goal. What do you hope to accomplish with your initial original design?"

His related to the business rationale of releasing a new design.

Chapter 243 Feedback

To clarify Gavin's question, Ves thought about his competitors. Some mech designers made a career out of their ability to develop fantastic designs but turned out to be awful businessmen. They didn't know how to run a business or hire someone trustworthy that did.

In contrast, the more business-savvy mech designers made the most out of their limited means. Even if their designs lacked a spark, as long as they marketed their product correctly, they ended up presiding over a vast consortium of production facilities.

Right now, Gavin hinted that Ves leaned towards the former while having ambitions for the latter. While the two did not fundamentally conflict with each other, the market might not think so.

"It's a great-looking design, fantastic even." He explained. "It fits right in with the display models you designed for the Vintage Festival. Yet most of the designs we see on the battlefield are predominantly plain. If they have any decorations at all, it's usually the unit emblem and whatever personal crest the pilot is using."

Ves had to admit that his runaway creativity prompted him to go overboard in adding art to his design. As he looked at the projected schematic, he felt that it would be a huge shame to diminish that aspect. The draft he drew up already matched up with the images in his mind.

"It's an artsy design, there's no way around it. Maybe it will scare some people away, but making great-looking designs has always been an interest to me. A good design should have an iconic look."

This aspect had always been present, but his increased creativity practically forced the matter out in the open. Ves felt the downsides to upgrading his major Attributes to suddenly. Sometimes he couldn't help himself from acting on his impulses.

"So are you marketing your product as a battle mech or a show mech?"

"Definitely a battle mech. With the specs it carries, it's a waste to use it as a decorative ornament."

"Hm, if you're determined to go this route, then you should make some adjustments to your strategy."

Gavin proceeded to outline his suggestions. "You can have the best of both worlds. You don't have to choose between selling out or maintaining your artistic integrity. Simply stick a gold label to your current design. You can associate the silver label to your dumbed-down mass-market variant."

"I see." The idea had a lot of merit and solved the dilemma Ves was beginning to develop. He could accept toning down the detail on his silver label variant if he could retain them in the gold label base model. "I like the sound of it. Simplifying the design will also make it easier for the mech technicians to fabricate the parts."

"You'll also elevate the gold label version into a desired product with this strategy." Gavin pointed out. "The extravagant appearance of your mech will turn into a boon since it will only be rarely seen. Anyone who buys your gold label product will feel privileged for owning it, just like with your other limited edition mechs."

"So it's basically taking advantage of perceptual contrast."

"Exactly so. It's like evaluating a pile of dung. A small mound is ugly and smelly, but people will prefer it if their only alternative is an even larger mountain of dung."

Everyone laughed at Gavin's words. Ves shook his head. "They're both dung, so I don't think that analogy works in this case."

"You get the idea. By the way, why did you use a bird theme on your landbound mech? Shouldn't you be designing an aerial mech instead?"

"Uh, oops." Ves sheepishly let out and scratched the back of his head. "I didn't think about that incongruity. I'll probably design an aerial variant once the base model achieves some success. For now, it's not important that my mech can't fly. It's merely decorative, anyway."

Many designers incorporate mythical beasts as themes for their mechs. It wouldn't be too odd to come up with an eagle mech or a dragon mech as landbound mechs, for example.

Calsie and Gavin didn't have much else to say about his design, while Carlos lacked too much experience. Only his chief technician possessed the background to dig deeper into the feasibility of his design.

"There are two more aspects about your design that look sketchy. The specs suggest you're aiming to keep the weight down so that you can enhance its mobility. Don't you think you've gone too far? The most basic job of a knight is to endure attacks before they go through and hit more vulnerable mechs. Depriving your design of the maximum affordable protection makes your knight suboptimal for that specific role."

Ves had thought about that issue. "You aren't wrong. I deliberately set out to design an offensive knight with a decent amount of mobility and agility. I think the tradeoff is worth it in this case because the quality of the Veltrex armor system will be able to compensate for the lack of thickness."

"Do you realize how unusual it is to publish an offensive knight design? The use of defensive knights is standard doctrine. When someone is seeking to procure a knight, they always default to designs that excel in defense. Gavin, what's the ratio in the current market?"

"It's about four to one in favor of defensive knights. That means offensive knights only take up twenty percent of the market share for knights."

Ves saw an upside to that observation. "That also means that the market for offensive knights is a lot less crowded. I've done my market research. Defensive knights are easy to design so they're crowding out the market. It's a lot more challenging to design an offensive knight and it can't be done without a high quality armor system."

They argued a bit more about the feasibility of his design, but Ves had already set his course. Nothing Cyril said could change his mind.

It was not as if Ves set out to ignore the wisdom of his advisors. He simply wanted to do something new. After all his work on the Caesar Augustus and its variants, Ves preferred to enhance his catalog with something lighter.

"There's nothing wrong with sticking to your own judgement on things. That's why you're the boss. You have no one else to blame but yourself if it turns out you're wrong."

A company ran on the whims of its boss. Sure, larger corporations possessed a more refined corporate governance, with the board of directors overseeing its general directions while the various executives decided on the specifics. The larger they grew, the more they resembled states.

Even with an annual revenue of over a billion credits, the Living Mech Corporation still remained stuck in its startup days. Ves hoped to change that very soon after his grandfather sent him some retainers to beef up his administrative department.

"What's the other point you want to make about my mech?"

Chief Cyril pointed at the rear of the design. "That spade is an eccentric addition to your design. I'm not arguing the utility of including it, but it doesn't seem to fit with the concept of your mech. You're selling a 60 million credit knight to the private market. At that price, the mercenaries who buy your products will be putting them in leadership positions. Digging is something that's done by grunts, not by officers."

"I think you're a little too optimistic about that statement. According to my market research, mechs don't always have the right supplies on hand. It's tough to carry adequate supplies around on a fluid battlefield. The integrated spade should prove very useful against the Vesians with their penchant for missile bombardment."

"You won't convince anyone to purchase your mech on this feature alone. It's not something you can brag about and expect to be taken seriously."

"Even if it sounds extravagant, I'm willing to bet my customers will be thanking me for embedding that spade in my mechs."

His design resembled a work of art, but a robust internal architecture underneath its attractive exterior. Combined that with a nucleus of high quality components, his design should be more than ready to tough it out in the field.

That said, Ves only drew up a superficial design so far. It remained to be seen whether he'd be able to realize the potential of his design by solving every engineering challenge in his way.

After wrapping up his conference with his confidants, he decided to solicit the opinion of his mech broker. Gathering feedback and getting second opinions formed a very important part of the formal design process. He called Marcella over the comm and showed off his draft.

"Looks like you have a very solid idea of what you want to design." Marcella commented. "You'd be surprised how many mech designers muddle through their design process without a clue of what they'll end up."

She began by asking a couple of obvious questions that Ves had already discussed with his employees. Surprisingly, she expressed neither approval or disapproval at his visual design.

"I've seen weirder things in my life. Mechs come in all shapes and sizes. I can work with any kind of design as long as it works." Her words reflected the attitude of a veteran mech trader. "Rather than say the market is more receptive to certain designs, it's more accurate to say that most designs start off as a blank slate. It's up to your marketing to drum up demand for your product."

"It's going to be my debut mech, so I'm guaranteed to receive some free publicity."

"I'm aware of that, but don't think you can sit back and rely on the press to market your mech in your stead. There are many people who don't pay attention to this kind of news. I highly recommend you set aside some funds for an ongoing advertising campaign."

"How much money are we talking about?"

"A hundred million credits if you want to spend the absolute minimum."

That took out a very sizable chunk out of his cash. Ves hated the thought of spending so much money on something that had no effect on the quality of his design. Yet Marcella didn't lie to him about the necessity to have a marketing apparatus in place at the time of his design's introduction. Ves risked missing out on a huge chunk of early sales if he couldn't get a message out.

Besides this comment, Marcella sounded very positive about his design. The estimates specs ensured that it would be a good fit for his targeted price point.

"There's only one problem with releasing a design at this point in time. The next generation of mechs is only nine years away. Your currentgen design will be relegated to the bin of lastgen designs in less than a decade. While you can take advantage of refined and discounted component licenses this late in the current generation of mechs, you'll also have to deal with early depreciation of your design. It's an unfair trade-off."

"There's nothing I can do about the timing." Ves shrugged. "If my design pans out, I'll have the capital to participate right at the start of the next generation of mechs."

After discussing more details, Ves ended the connection. He considered asking his grandfather and some other people for advice, but called it off after considering they'd hardly bring anything new to the table.

"I think it's time to spend my warchest."

Now that he completed a draft design, he should have a good idea on what kind of components fit with his mech. With a budget of around a billion credits, Ves had to be prudent in his spending if he wanted to compliment his existing component licenses. He sat down next to his terminal and visited the MTA's internal market.

With his design still fresh in his mind, Ves hoped to obtain everything he needed so that he could move on to the next phase of his design project.

"Let's see what I need."

Chapter 244 Senior Management

Ves could spend as little or as much as he wanted to acquire the necessary component licenses.

If he wanted to splurge, he could blow a billion credits on the sensor systems alone, yet such an improvement hardly affected his design. "It's not about

adding further improvements to my design, but retaining the strengths it already enjoys."

Desperate designers with an acute lack of money sometimes licensed outdated components offered by the MTA. They utilized technology that had been developed at least sixty years ago to plug a hole in their designs.

If Ves tried to do the same, he risked condemnation. As a premium design, his phoenix knight had to maintain a minimum level of performance across the board. He couldn't justify the 60 million credits price tag if he played fast and loose with his design.

He proceeded to splurge his entire budget on a number of generic licenses. Some components cost a little more than others, but Ves spent just enough to stray away from bargain bin territory.

Besides acquiring licenses for minor components that only die-hard enthusiasts cared about like gyroscopes or inertial compensators, Ves also made some big ticket purchases that played a vital role in the performance of his mech.

The sensor system cost an easy 100 million credits to pick up its license. At that price, Ves obtained the right to use a serviceable set of sensors that had specifically been designed to compliment knight mechs. It prioritized close-range detection over long-range detection and could take a beating as well.

"It's not like my knight will ever be used for a scout. It's enough if it can detect a sneaking mech up close."

The second major transaction consisted of a set of supplementary alloy formulas for the sword, shield and internal frame. Each part demanded different degrees of hardness, ductility, density and sharpness. The alloys that came with the Veltrex armor system only covered the exterior of the mech,

and should not be used in other areas. Ves spent a total of 250 million credits to obtain all of these licenses.

The last major license consisted of the right to apply the Bright Republic's Modular Fitting Standard to his design. The Modular Fitting Standard or MFS was a relatively recent invention that aimed to standardize the dimensions of modular attachments for mechs.

Basically, the MFS ensured that every mech that used the same standard could share the same type of backpacks or other compatible devices.

For example, an MFS allowed a mech pilot to attach a standard energy pack from the Republic without worrying about compatibility issues. If he happened to come across an abandoned Vesian pack in the field, then he would have no luck, as the Vesian standard used a different set of dimensions. The plugs wouldn't fit in the sockets.

Before the proliferation of MFS, different companies and individual mech designers all employed their format. This led to a maze of confusing choices along with plenty of kludges as mech technicians tried to mate different modular standards together in the field.

Nowadays, each state or major faction stuck to a single standard to ease their logistics. The Mech Corps no longer had to keep track of fifty separate fittings.

Along with many other miscellaneous components such as transceivers and processors, Ves finally obtained all the necessary ingredients to design a mech.

"One billion credits down the drain. I only have around 400 million left in disposable cash."

The LMC still earned a decent amount of money out of routine transactions, so Ves didn't worry about running out of cash. Ves already reserved 100

million credits for an upcoming ad campaign, and he expected to spend a bit more to supplement the development of his phoenix knight.

"I'll have to fabricate a prototype at the very least." He mused as he stroked Lucky's back. The cat had woken up from his nap and demanded his daily dose of petting. "I can recycle it down to its constituent materials once I'm done with my tests, but I'm better off if I donate it to the MTA."

If Ves wanted to submit a valid original design to the MTA, he had to demonstrate he actually did all the work. The reality of the mech industry was that mech designers often cheated in their work. The worst cases involved stealing someone else's work through hacking or applying pressure.

"It's best to bring in the MTA right from the start. I should send my development logs to their servers."

He took some time to setup a secure connection to the MTA. Once every day, his computer systems passed along his documents, his data sets and more. He even included camera recordings of himself working on the design. This should leave ironclad proof that he alone developed the phoenix knight.

That was very important. A mech designer's first original design should always be the culmination of his own efforts. While he'd be allowed to employ assistants or specialists who worked on the components, the overall design of the mech must always be the reflection of a designer's skill.

Otherwise, any designer could ask a senior to 'help' him along. How could anyone be proud of their first original design if the senior did ninety percent of the work?

After establishing a connection, Ves was ready to move on to the next phase of his project. "It's time to mold my draft into an actual design."

This would be the most important phase of his design project. Ves couldn't afford any missteps at this point.

To turn his draft into a design, he had to incorporate the newly acquired components and fill out all of the missing gaps in the schematic. He expected to face a lot of bumps in trying to make something work the way he wanted to. Ves had to be inventive in order to make all of its goodies fit inside a single frame.

"At least it won't be as bad as the Caesar Augustus. Trying to fit multiple weapon systems in a single frame is a lot harder than trying to design a simple knight."

Ves faced two particular challenges in designing an offensive knight. First, he had to maintain a careful balance between mobility and protection. While he wanted to have the best of both, sometimes he could only prioritize one over the other. Ves had to make sure he didn't overshoot his priorities and put their balance out of whack.

His second priority lay in ensuring an adequate level of redundancy and compartmentalization in his mech's internal architecture. The downside to trimming the waist of his design was that it cut back on a lot of space that could have been used to toughen up his mech's internals.

He pondered over the issue. "The Keltrex armor system should be able to prevent a lot of breaches. It's not a disaster if my RF and CF ratios are merely average. A good mech pilot should be able to pull back before an enemy can exploit the holes in his mech."

Unless it was a matter of life and death, mech pilots always retreated before their mechs sustained too many battle damage. It took only a few stray shots to completely ruin a mech's internals. The benefits of staying in the field didn't outweigh the risks of death or totalling an expensive machine.

Before he embarked on his work, Ves wanted to take care of any upcoming matters. He worked best if he could devote his entire concentration on his design.

"Yes!" Carlos called as he stepped inside his office. "You've got another pair of visitors from your family."

"Bring them to the lounge. I've been expecting them for a while."

After brushing up his clothes, Ves met with the retainers the Larkinsons had groomed on Rittersberg.

At first glance, the newcomers still retained the air of an elite from Rittersberg. The man looked like a typical bureaucrat, with his neatly groomed grey hair and impeccable suit. The woman looked younger, but still mature enough to occupy a senior position in a company. Both looked like they mean business.

"Yes, it's good to see you. My name is Jake Altern and this is Primrose Mackarie. We've been working on behalf of the Larkinson Estate for over a hundred years combined. I think you will find we can add a lot of value to the Living Mech Corporation if you let us take part in your venture."

Ves shook both of their hands. "I've already inspected your resumes, and I'm fairly satisfied with your qualifications. However, both of you have mainly worked in the retail sector. You will find that managing a mech business is a whole other beast than running a department store."

"We are aware of this shortcoming, but the Larkinsons have extensive connections to the mech industry."

Jake and Primrose had made an effort to immerse themselves into the world of mechs by reading up a lot of industry-specific textbooks. They also exchanged knowledge with various industry insiders. Together with their existing business acumen, the two should be amply prepared to take the helm of any medium-sized mech manufacturer.

"I'm glad to hear you've made the extra mile. The LMC is still in its infancy at this point, but I expect a lot of growth in the future once I publish my first original design. I'm going to need a competent COO and CFO to support my company's rise."

Without any further hesitation, Ves appointed Jake as the COO and Primrose as the CFO.

The chief operating officer often acted as the number two within the corporation. In the case of a mech manufacturer, the founder and principal mech designer usually occupied the title of CEO while the COO performed the actual day-to-day management of his company.

Since Jake occupied various leadership positions for the businesses under the Larkinsons, Ves could think of no other suitable position for him to adopt. His age and experience should provide a steady hand at the top.

The chief financial officer took care of the finances and bookkeeping of the company. The CFO led the financial department of a company, which managed the its accounts and made sure that no one secretly siphoned any money away. They also kept track of any transactions and made sure that their ledgers complied with the law.

While Primrose's resume did not look as impressive as Jake's, her knowledge in the field of accounting surpassed anyone else in the entire company by far. Ves had always intended to hire on an accountant to straighten up his increasingly burdensome transactions.

"The amount of money flying around will easily surpass a billion credits every year, spread over thousands of individual transactions. Right now, I don't have a lot of contingencies if something goes wrong. I hope you can help me with that, Miss Primrose."

"Just call me Primrose." She smiled at him. "I've already taken a peek at your records. It's a bit crude, but not as messy as I've thought. There are a number of entries that your automated management suite has been producing a lot of errors."

With his permission, Primrose brought up his asset listings and pointed out the nonsensical credit values attached to some of his licenses and his equipment. The accounting software mainly failed to estimate the proper values of things Ves had acquired by exchanging merits or DP.

"Oh, yeah, I haven't really thought of that." Ves awkwardly grinned. "The value of some of these things is very substantial but have a complicated background."

For example, Ves had no clue how to estimate the credit value of his reconstructed Dortmund printer. It should be worth several billions of credits, but it wasn't exactly market standard.

Fortunately, his newly hired CFO didn't mind the oversight. "I can take up this task. It's imperative your company can deliver a proper accounting to the Republic's tax office if asked. They may even confiscate your assets if you've been negligent in this area."

That sounded very scary to Ves, so he eagerly handed off all responsibilities of this nature to Primrose.

Besides discussing accounting, Ves also laid out his future plans to Jake. "I'd like you to take care of three things. First, I want you to setup an administrative department for the LMC. You don't have to hire a lot of people, just make sure you hire enough to take care of all of the routine stuff that needs done."

"Consider it done."

"Next, I want you to help lay down the groundwork for the debut of my first original design. I don't think I need to explain how important its success affects my company and my career. My biggest priority is to secure a fixed supplier to supply the most critical exotics for my design. I'll send you the list."

"That will be difficult to accomplish." Jake admitted. "A fixed supply contract is mostly established through existing connections or referrals and needs to be maintained through trust and communication. I think it's best I hire a specialist that can facilitate a connection with a specific supplier."

"Just get it done." Ves didn't care about the specific method. "My third demand is to get a handle on the political situation of Cloudy Curtain. My business is hovering on uncertainty right now because the ruling coalition has a beef with me. I've got a part-time law student filling me in on the situation, but I don't have the time to manage my relations with the scumbags in power."

"It's best to start up a relations department that can maintain ties with the local stakeholders of your company."

"Sounds good."

They had a fruitful talk about his intentions for the company. By the time the day came at an end, his new executives should have a good idea on how to perform their jobs. Ves would keep an eye on them, of course, but he didn't expect any missteps on account of their experience.

Chapter 245 Skill To Pay The Bills

The addition of Jake and Primrose set the LMC's household in order. Ves granted them a liberal amount of authority as the newly seated COO and CFO of his company. They utilized their power immediately by setting up a couple of departments and staffing them with young hires from Cloudy Curtain and Bentheim.

"How many departments are you setting up?" Ves asked Jake as he drew up an increasingly complicated organization chart.

"I'm only thinking of six so far. I'm setting up the Human Resource Management Department first to expand on our recruiting. Once we get that going, Primrose will be setting up the Finance Department while I'll be hiring or appointing the people who can head the Marketing Department, the Research and Development Department, the Relations Department and the Production Department. I'll be taking care of the Administrative Department myself."

Ves practically leaned backwards when he heard his COO's ambitious plan. "Don't you think that's a little much?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised the Living Mech Corporation has made do with a handful of people so far. It's not appropriate to run a company that's worth a couple of billion credits with automated software and a few young enthusiasts. It's time for the LMC to grow up and act like an adult."

Even if Ves didn't see the need to expand his administrative overhead right now, he sorely needed it once he unveiled his original design. "I can see the rationale for all of the departments you've mentioned, but It's going to be a huge problem keeping everyone under control if you hire fifty people at a time. I want trustworthy people under my wing."

He continually hammered on this priority. Ves would rather be understaffed than let a bunch of strangers get close to sensitive data and equipment.

"There are methods we can use to minimize the risks. For a fee, we can resort to employment agencies that specialize in vetting job seekers. You're not the first person who harbors these kinds of concerns. Corporate espionage is very prevalent in the mech industry."

Unpleasantries like this could never be fully prevented. Rather than quiver in fear, Jake went on with his hiring spree, trusting his newly setup management systems to contain any attempts at sabotage or espionage.

"A malicious actor can't do much damage anyhow." Jake observed. "You're a step ahead in terms of securing your software and hardware. Sanyal-Ablin enjoys a stellar reputation in this front."

"They better be. I'm paying out of my nose for their services."

His workshop's office space had always appeared rather spacious, but within a matter of weeks, it became filled to the brim with new administrative recruits. Jake hired a bunch of flexible middle management types from a renowned employment agency in Bentheim to take charge of most departments.

Besides a clean background, the managers also had to possess untapped potential so that they could grow with the company.

New faces appeared in the office every day that Ves stopped bothering to learn their names. The officers of the various departments coordinated with the chief human resources officer to entice the right kind of people to join the company. Despite Cloudy Curtain's lack of development, HRM managed to attract a lot of talent.

"Bentheim isn't a very pleasant place to live once you think about it." Jake explained to Ves. "Prices are high and public security is low. If criminals aren't running roughshod around the streets, they still have to contend with the Bentheim Liberation Movement."

"I thought the Mech Corps succeeded in containing the BLM."

"Their off-world assets are diminished, but their roots will always be Bentheim itself. No one knows how many people they recruited and how many supplies they managed to scrounge up. Their leadership is in disarray right now, but they'll hit back hard once they get their act together."

That sounded very ominous. The news portals only published encouraging news that the BLM had been neutered to the point of barely being able to muster up a suicide bomber. On second thought, Ves considered that the government engaged in a very deliberate messaging strategy in order to sap momentum out of the rebels.

"I see. What we see and hear in the news doesn't always match up to the facts in the ground. How did you know?"

"You can thank our new officers for that insight. Most of them are aware of the real circumstances on the ground when they still worked in Bentheim."

A touch of worry appeared on his face. Ves did not know what to think about the backgrounds of his unfamiliar officers. The need for competence meant that his HRM department took on managers who previously worked for his competitors. Even if they officially cut their ties to their old company, they might be keeping in touch.

Still, the added workforce already made a difference. They eased the procurement of materials and set his inventory straight. They straightened up his accounting and made sure they complied with the law. The chief relations officer even started probing various suppliers for the possibility of entering a mutually beneficial relationship with each other.

Maisie Duval, his CRO, put it this way. "It's much like dating if you think about it. There is plenty of fish in the sea, but you have to make an effort to find the right partner in the dark. Right now, I'm sending out a signal that tells the fish we're interested while simultaneously looking out for potential partners that are doing the same."

"What about the insular nature of the relationships at the top? Much of the resource market is kept in a stranglehold by the major industrial players."

"It's an ongoing issue, but I'm confident we can elbow our way into the periphery of their circle. We're too small to threaten their core interests."

In the meantime, Ves didn't sit back and do nothing while his workforce expanded. He turned his attention back to his design project. Before he embarked with the next phase of his project, he decided it was time to spend his generous savings of DP on upgrading his various Skills. He holed up in his private office and turned on his Privacy Shield before starting up the Mech Designer System in his comm.

"You're still my secret weapon, baby. With you around, I'm certain to make a splash with my new design."

The System had remained dormant all this time. Ves thought that he had been on the right track lately, so the System didn't prompt him with annoying Missions to get him to progress his career. He had no doubt that once he slacked off, the devious System would slap him with an impossible task.

"I love you, but you're still a bastard."

As usual, the System pretended to be a soulless AI and declined to respond. Ves knew the real score, however. Of all the wonders he witnessed so far, he refused to believe the System was as dumb as it sometimes looked. He would wring the truth out of the System once and for all one day.

"Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 97,279

Attributes

Strength: 1.3

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 1.9

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1.9

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Apprentice - [3D Printer Proficiency III] [Assembler Proficiency III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging III] [Speed Tuning III]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Journeyman - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II]

[Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]

[Melee Weapon Optimization II]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice

[Signals and Communications]: Apprentice

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer with a random collection of Skills.

"You're hinting something at me, right? That remark on my evaluation isn't a random statement."

The System sneakily expressed its opinion about the depth and breadth of his Skills. It thought that Ves lacked focus in any particular area.

"Most of my major Skills are Journeyman-level, so at least I have a solid foundation."

However, no mech designer truly excelled with only a good foundation. They had to offer something special to differentiate their products from the competition. The key lay in the Sub-Skills, which Ves had to admit he spread his attention somewhat. He possessed Sub-Skills that covered both ranged and melee mechs, for example.

Since Ves prioritized the development of an offensive knight, he decided to spend over 80,000 DP on Skills related to this archetype, leaving 20,000 DP as an emergency reserve.

"It will be a bit dangerous to drain my pool of DP, but I don't think there are any threats on the horizon that will push me to the brink."

Ves had no intentions of leaving Cloudy Curtain for the foreseeable future. He already felt quite secure with Raella and Melkor taking up routine patrolling duties around the perimeter of his compound. Sanyal-Ablin prevented assassins and saboteurs from getting in while Walter's Whalers deterred the criminal elements of society from disturbing his work.

"There's a time to save and there's a time to spend. I can't hold back when I'm about to design my first original mech."

He proceeded to spend his DP like a man who won the lottery.

[Assembly - Journeyman]: 2,000 DP

[Electrical Engineering - Journeyman]: 2,000 DP

[Signals and Communications - Journeyman]: 1,600 DP

First he upgraded a couple of his Major Skills that stalled in the Apprentice-level. All of them played a very integral role in enhancing his ability to design a good mech.

The upgrades enlightened him to many insights. Ves had to take a break for a couple of hours to digest the influx of knowledge. Even with his augmented mind, he still had to sort out the complicated theories and mountains of practical know-how all at once.

[Melee Weapon Optimization III]: 2,000 DP

[Melee Weapon Optimization IV]: 4,000 DP

[Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV]: 2,400 DP

[Speed Tuning IV]: 1,600 DP

After that, he gradually upgraded the related optimization Sub-Skills. At the fourth level, these Sub-Skills started to show their strength, granting Ves many little nuggets of knowledge that took Journeyman Mech Designers years to figure out on their own.

The optimization Sub-Skills didn't necessarily widened his options, but they allowed him to make the most of what he already got. They helped him spot more flaws and provided him with a little more solutions to squeeze out more performance out of his design. Reaching the fourth level in those Sub-Skills practically doubled his library of tricks.

Ves knew the value of this knowledge. "It's like I've apprenticed to a Journeyman Mech Designer for years and accompanied him as he designed his mechs. This isn't something I can learn from any book."

[Structural Pathway Configuration III]: 4,000 DP

[Alloy Compression III]: 4,000 DP

The following two Sub-Skills enhanced his ability to design the interior and exterior of his knight. Unlike the optimization Sub-Skills, Structural Pathway Configuration and Alloy Compression came with a lot of heavy theories that required Ves to employ his Major Skills to the limit to digest them all. The burden they placed on his Skills discouraged him from upgrading them to the fourth level.

"It's already sufficient for me to reach the third level in those two Sub-Skills." Ves decided after he recovered from the burden placed on his mind.

Now that he upgraded his existing Sub-Skills, Ves turned to acquiring some new ones, trusting in his instincts that it was better to acquire them now than later.

Since he had the DP to spare, Ves skipped over the cheaper Sub-Skills and started to consider the more exotic ones. One particular Sub-Skill for Battle Mechatronics stood out like a torch in the dark.

[Knight Mech Mastery I]: 40,000 DP

The extravagant price tag already hinted at its value despite its entry-level status. Every Sub-Skill that possessed the word Mastery came with a correspondingly high price. Ves had the sense that only Journeyman Mech Designers embarked on the road to developing their Masteries.

"There's got to be something special about a Mastery if the System feels obliged to demand so much DP."

What did Masteries entail to make them so valuable?

Chapter 246 Mastery

The System declined to provide an explanation on the nature of Masteries. The lack of description surrounding the various Mastery Sub-Skills roused his interests, especially since they seem to be advanced skills. The amount of DP required to learn the subsequent levels of a particular Mastery rose to a ridiculous figure.

Ves found it prudent to take a step back and find out more about this mysterious set of Sub-Skills. He browsed the galactic net, finding plenty of references, but nothing solid. It appeared the mech industry treated it like a trade secret that should only be kept within their circle.

"Interesting."

Fortunately, he found an introduction on the matter when he logged into the Clifford Society's online portal. He played a brief recording of a Star Designer lecturing in front of a conference of Masters over a hundred-and-fifty years ago.

"Mechs. We design them. We build them. We sell them. But do we understand them?" The elderly woman started. Despite her frail stature, her identity as one of the best mech designers in the galaxy shone through the brilliance of her eyes.

The audience remained silent. Despite their eminent status, the woman standing on the podium in front of them could easily beat them black and blue in any direct comparison.

"How many of you have ever piloted a mech? Simulations don't count."

A few hands rose up, but by and large, over ninety percent of the crowd had never truly piloted a real mech.

The old lady smirked. "Ah, you may think it doesn't matter. It certainly hasn't stopped me from reaching this height. It is a common understanding among our profession that you can only fully dedicate your life to pilot a mech or design them. No one among us has managed to advance to a Master Mech Designer while simultaneously becoming an ace pilot. It can't be done."

Everyone nodded in agreement at that statement. It took an extraordinary effort for professional mech pilots to progress from advanced pilot to expert pilot, from expert pilot to ace pilot, and from ace pilot to the exalted rank of god pilot. The latter of which enjoyed so much worship that they even exceeded the status of Star Designer.

"Yet how can we design mechs for the best pilots in the galaxy if we don't understand their perspective? Our individual design process is riddled with our own biases that we've formed through our own studies. Perhaps at the start of our careers, our shallow understanding of the piloting profession won't affect our designs that much, since our customer base is largely composed of regular pilots or advanced pilots at most. Yet will that superficial understanding of what mech pilots are going through be sufficient when you become a Journeyman or a Senior?"

Among the crowd, a hand rose up. "In my entire career of designing mechs, I've never stepped foot inside a cockpit. But I've always listened closely to my customers and my in-house test pilots. I've never received any complaints about incompatibilities or severe discomforts about my products."

"Ah, but these are ignorant pilots who don't know any better. Just because they are unable to perceive any flaws doesn't mean they don't exist. If you compare a mech designed by you to a similar mech designed by someone who understands, the difference will be very apparent."

Everyone looked confused. What did she mean by understanding?

"Understanding means knowing what a mech pilot is going through when he pilots your mechs!" She exclaimed as she clapped her hands. "It is not enough to read a memoir or two. You need to understand their thought processes, their reflexes, their skills, their reaction time and more! The best way to understand a mech pilot is to become one!"

"But we just found out that most of us lack the aptitude to become a mech pilot."

"I just told you it's the best way, not the only way!" The lady snapped back. "Think outside the box for a moment! To design better mechs, we must understand the people who will use them. So your neural aptitude makes you unsuitable to pilot a mech, big deal. If we can't interface with a machine, why not interface with the mech pilots themselves?"

The revelation came as a bombshell. The neural interface had been developed many years ago as a way for neurologists to investigate the minds of their patients. Mind-to-mind connections quickly proved exceedingly dangerous as many instances of improper use led to permanent brain damage among the observer and the recipient.

The technology had only been salvaged four-hundred years ago when a genius had the bright idea of connecting a person to a mech to solve its complicated control issues. The dangers proved much less substantial as the mind of a mech was nonexistent compared to the mind of a person.

"It is not the Age of Stars or the Age of Conquest! Technology has advanced! We understand much more about the neural interface now that it has proliferated with the help of our profession. There are many experts in the field of neurology who have taken the neural interface and made it into a safer device to connect with another human's mind."

"Have you... have you actually interfaced with a pilot?"

"I did." She smiled, to the stupefaction of the crowd. Even if she claimed that the technology had become safer, the Masters hadn't gotten rid of their doubts. "I am still alive, as you can see. I can count to ten without stuttering and I can still go to the toilet without assistance. As long as you take the necessary precautions, there are many benefits to be gained by interfacing with a skilled mech pilot!"

"What do you get out of interfacing with a mech pilot? Is this a way to become a mech pilot ourselves?"

"Don't talk nonsense." The Star Designer shook her head. "Interfacing is not a way to copy another person's efforts the way you can copy a file from one data pad to another. Each human is unique. It's impossible for us to copy a mech pilot's skills, as much of it is embedded in his reflexes, muscle memory and other properties that are exclusive to his body."

Then what benefits did she obtain to make the risky venture pay off?

"I can't explain to you how wondrous it feels to connect your mind with another. The connection goes both ways, and while it is possible to block sensitive memories from your partner, it will destabilize the connection if you go too far. So up to a certain extent, it is best to interface with someone you trust."

She went on to describe the advantage of interfacing with a pilot. The Star Designer did not set out to steal a mech pilot's memories, but merely wanted to experience the sensations of piloting a mech first-hand.

"There are many tiny aspects about piloting mechs that escape your grasp. I have learned so many new things and corrected so many misperceptions after I embarked on this exploration. As mech designers, we often receive second-hand or third-hand information on what a mech pilot is going through. Neural interfacing enables us to blur the boundaries between yourself and your

partner, allowing you to perceive the piloting experience first-hand from the best."

Someone realized the significance of her wording. "That sounds like as if you interfaced with a mech pilot who interfaced with a mech!"

"Exactly! The best possible moment to understand a mech pilot is when he actively pilots a mech! The brain activities that goes on in his mind can never be fully expressed if he lays down in a clinical lab with a device stuck onto his head."

No one had ever thought such a mad idea could work. If interfacing a pair was already fraught with risk, then connecting three people at once always ended in disaster. Researchers who pushed the boundaries always ended off in jail after turning all of their test subjects into brain-dead idiots.

"I'm still alive and well, as you can see, so don't look too surprised! The risks are great, but the potential gains more than makes up it. My designs have improved remarkably to the point where ace pilots and god pilots have formed a decades-long waiting list for me to design a personal mech for them! It is because out of all my competitors, only I can fully tailor a mech that can bring out their full potential."

Once the crowd of Masters got over their shock, they started to see the advantages of understanding the minds of elite pilots.

The few potentates among them had never advanced beyond the rank of advanced pilot. To push themselves to expert pilots required a complete dedication to the warrior profession. No one had any delusions of advancing any further, so they never held any ambitions of understanding the perspective of ace pilots and god pilots.

Yet what they learned today opened the door to greater understanding. Comprehending the mindset of elite pilots finally became possible through the use of neural interfacing.

The Star Designer proceeded to explain her setup and the many technical challenges she faced. Much of it must be grossly outdated by now, but Ves still found it useful as the old lady explained the concepts that made the process work.

"Human-to-human neural interfacing can be used beyond getting into the minds of a mech pilot. Currently, I've partnered up with the MTA to research ways in which a mech designer can interface with a variety of soldiers and athletes to achieve a greater understanding on how to exploit the humanoid form, and thus achieve complete Mastery over a particular type of mech."

"Are there any dangers besides the obvious?"

"Good question!" The old woman praised. "Neural interfacing can go wrong even if you have the perfect setup with the right hardware. Think about what you are embarking on when you put on the neural interface. You are connecting your mind with another person. To illustrate how dangerous this can be, imagine if any of you, each with over a hundred years of life experience, would interface with a baby barely a day old."

Everyone who surpassed the age of hundred possessed a formidable mind, and that went double for Master Mech Designers.

"We've never tried it, of course, but the neurologists and researchers all project utter disaster for the baby. In order to insure the interfacing won't overwhelm one mind or the other, it is important to balance them out in terms of mental strength. A simple old farmer who barely reached his hundredth year possesses the same strength of will as a child barely into his teens."

That meant that age was not the only factor. This basically meant that mech designers had to interface with mech pilots who closely matched their age, intelligence, life experience and career development.

For example, a Master Mech Designer should only interface with an ace pilot, while a Star Designer should only interface with a god pilot. Any mismatch on either side could lead to the weaker side sustaining permanent brain damage.

"What about interfacing with an animal?"

Everyone laughed at that question. The notion sounded so dangerous it was comical for someone to even entertain the suggestion.

"Even I'm not that crazy." The woman replied with a rueful smile. "Despite the many strides we've made to minimize the risks, the neural interface technology is still immature. It will take many decades before we can even begin to interface with felines and canids."

Once the recording came at an end, Ves sat back and digested what he learned. "So that's a thing."

After a hundred-and-fifty years, the state of neural interfacing must have made a lot of strides. Ves checked the Clifford Society on any other mentions of Mastery, and found a few oblique references.

It turned out that only major institutions like the Leemar Institute of Technology offered the facilities to conduct human-to-human neural interfacing. One document stated that only direct disciples of Masters would be eligible to take part in this tightly controlled process.

This explicitly left out someone like Ves with only a loose connection to Master Olson. He felt a little indignant at missing out on goodies like developing your Masteries. If the System didn't offer it with a huge amount of DP, Ves would never know what he lacked compared to other mech designers.

"Seeing it's like this, it's no wonder that the System charges 40,000 DP for the first level of a Mastery."

Despite the painfully high price, Ves became enamored by the idea of skipping out the risky process of interfacing with a bunch of strangers. Besides the difficulty of getting access to this exclusive process, Ves did not wish to let anyone rummage through his mind as he rummaged through theirs.

"The price is high, but the benefits and the convenience must be huge as well. I'd be a fool to miss out on a Mastery."

Despite the uncertainty swirling around this new and explosive field of knowledge, Ves pulled the trigger and bought the Mastery from the System.

A flood of scorching heat suddenly emitted from his comm. After a long period of dormancy, the System roused its might for the first time in a very long time.

Chapter 247 Barley

[Engaging dimensional and temporal neuro-translocation. Please rest in a comfortable position. Initiating in 10... 9... 8...]

"What the hell?"

[6... 5... 4...]

"What is neuro-trans-"

[1... 0... Initiating transfer!]

The world changed as if his mind had been sucked into a wormhole. He clearly felt his body being left behind as if a giant scoop pulled out his consciousness and dragged it along a distance that Ves could not even begin to describe.

Longer than expected but shorter than he thought, the wild ride suddenly ended when his mind abruptly crashed into a body.

A different body.

"Barley!" A strong smack thumped on his back. "Get your head back in gear! I know we're up in an avalanche of dirtbags, but we can make it through! Persevere!"

Ves instinctively turned around and straightened his back. "We'll get 'em, Captain!"

"Glad to hear it." Captain Osprey smiled at him, though he couldn't hide the glint of bone-dragging weariness from his eyes. "Make sure your Cepth-S is in shape to deploy in the next shift. Intelligence think the dirtbags are cooking up an assault, I want to make sure my best knight is raring to go."

"Will do, sir!"

Once the captain walked away, Ves took stock of his surroundings while he nursed his aching head. Ves somehow ended up in the body of an average advanced mech pilot named Ivan Barley in the Chittering Cicada Star Sector.

"It's over fifty years ago!"

From the memories Ves had access to, everyone fought with mechs that were two or three generations older than the modern norm. The System not only stuffed him inside a body halfway across the galaxy, it also sent him back in time, all without destroying Ves or Barley's minds!

To say that Ves had complete control over Barley's body would be wrong. Ves likened his current situation as a pair of images being superimposed upon each other. Barley was still Barley. Ves was still Ves. The joint entity they made up comprised of both.

"I am still Barley!" He uttered to himself. "No matter what kind of weirdness is going on, I still have a battle to fight!"

Both of them agreed to push aside their existential crisis in favor of addressing the bigger threat to their lives. The invasion of dirtbags onto their current planet.

From what Ves understood from Barley's memories, he fought for a fairly strong third-rate state called the Exilis Domain. While it couldn't match any of the second-rate states of the Chittering Cicada Star Sector, its relatively abundant territory transformed it into a regional bully among the other third-rate states.

Owing to its size and its wealth, the Exilis Domain frequently threw their weight around. It didn't help that its neighboring states all consisted of piddling petty republics. The citizens often considered their territory to be the palace among the wilderness, with the surrounding states making up the dirt that borders it. Hence why everyone from the Exilis Domain called them dirtbags.

Quite predictably, the neighboring states had enough of being bullied around by the Domain and decided to form an Alliance. Faster than the Domain thought possible, the Lokis Alliance united their armed forces and formed a vast Mech Legion to hit back against their regional aggressor.

The war had dragged on for two years now. Barley fought in the war from the start, but the constant battle slowly took a toll on his mind and his mech. Currently, he'd been tasked with defending the local underground headquarters on a low priority rural planet.

Neither side committed a lot of mechs to this war zone. This slowed down the pace of battles and broke them up into smaller skirmishes as both sides wanted to preserve their mechs and supplies.

"Right now, I should check my mech."

Ves navigated the sturdy alloy corridors of the underground base. Like every other pilot, he constantly wore his piloting suit in case he needed to be

deployed immediately. His suit's climate controls already started to fail from constant use and lack of maintenance.

No one minded his odor because everyone else radiated their own stink. Besides, once he reached the mech stables, the harsh smell of metals and fuel overpowered any human scent.

"Chief!" He called out to the burly man overlooking his mech technicians from a ramp. "How's it going?"

"It's been better, Barley." Chief Jackson shook his head as he chewed on a stimulant. "We've already exhausted the supply shipment we received last week. I did the best I could to fix up your Jimmy, but I prioritized the shield arm over the sword arm."

That sounded kind of bad. His Jimenez had dueled against a swordsman mech in his last engagement. His knight received a lot of cuts trying to block the tricky sword strikes from the much more agile mech.

"I'll take a look myself." Ves replied with a tone of resignation. "Don't work yourself to death, chief!"

"Hah! I'd rather die from exhaustion than let the dirtbags shoot me in the head." Jackson laughed and strolled away.

From his experience on Groening IV, he knew that the maintenance department was straining its time and resources to the breaking point. They had to triage the mechs in order of importance and rank. The more expensive machines piloted by the officers got their turn first before the average mechs like his Jimenez received some attention.

When Ves reached his Jimenez, his enthusiasm deflated like a pricked balloon. Its design was bog-standard for its time, featuring the maximum amount of armor that a medium knight could carry. Along with its plain but

serviceable sword and kite shield, the Jimenez had obviously been designed as a defensive knight.

"It's a slow, lumbering moving shield."

Strangely enough, the insights of Ves the mech designer and Barley the mech pilot combined in an unprecedented clear perspective on the merits of the Jimenez. Even if its designer lacked boldness and inspiration, he did a good job in designing a capable workhorse. Barley had piloted his Jimenez through dozens of battles and skirmishes over the last two years and the machine hadn't let him down.

Barley had developed a bond with his mech. Even if the machine had been mass-produced without any love, his irrational affection for his mech pulled him through the constant fighting. While Barley hardly ever thought about the significance of his feeling, Ves found it to be a curious phenomenon.

If someone like Barley piloted a gold label mech fabricated by Ves, he'd be able to achieve a much greater synergy with his machine.

The way Barley approached his routine check relied on feeling rather than a solid understanding of the physical makeup of his mech. He mainly tapped against the worn-out armor plating of his mech and stepped inside the cockpit without it on, preferring to breathe in the smells in the dark.

To be frank, he wasn't inspecting his mech for flaws so much as to distract him from his worries about the war. All of that stress and worry faded away once he stepped inside the sanctuary of his mech.

Still, the addition of Ves prompted a change in routine. He turned on the console and checked the diagnostics of his Jimenez. Most of the technical readouts should mean gibberish to Barley, but Ves gained a good understanding of the state of his mech.

"Goddamnit. How many corners have been cut?"

A knight should be durable, and a defensive knight should be even sturdier. What Ves gleaned from the diagnostics was that the design incorporated sub-standard materials and the manufacturer didn't pay much attention to quality control.

Ves pulled up a hidden setting buried beneath the operating system of the mech. It summarized the complicated data into a color-shaded schematic of the Jimenez.

"No need to thank me, Barley."

Half of the components went from green condition to yellow condition. While that sounded mild, a mech should only reach this stage after ten years of regular use or five years of intensive fighting. A few critical areas such as the sword arm blinked in an alarming shade of orange with a smattering of red.

The overall picture looked discouraging, but it could have been worse. He suppressed the urge to pick up a multitool and perform some easy fixes to his mech. It would have been out of character for a musclehead like Barley to gain any form of technical competence.

It still ached his teeth to let those faults remain in place. "It's like boarding a shuttle with sputtering thrusters. You just know it will kill you one day."

A few hours went by as Ves and Barley re-familiarized themselves with their mech. The marrying of Barley's intuitive understanding of his machine with Ves' extensive technical background resulted in a lot of new insights for both.

"Ah, so that's why the arms are so frail despite their thick construction. The alloys that make up the internal frame are great at absorbing sudden impacts, but is prone to erosion if subjected to a constant level of low-impact shocks."

"The power reactor is the best part of this mech. It's obviously licensed from a major trans-galactic corporation. I don't have to worry about power supply as long as the internals hold up."

"Enduring constant attacks has shifted the dimensions of the Jimenez. It's asymmetrical now, with the shield half being pushed back half a centimeter compared to the sword half. All of that caused the frame to deform and open up more fault lines.

"What kind of grease monkey had the bright idea to fix the transceiver coupling with a copper wire?!"

A lack of personnel along with the need to work as fast and frugal as possible led to a lot of inevitable screwups. The lackluster longevity of the Jimenez also didn't help, as its design had been pitched to the Exilis Domain as a knight that could deliver a burst of peak performance whenever they decided to bully one of their formerly weak neighbors.

Ves learned a lesson from this realization. "Assumptions don't always pan out. You can plan ahead for your design, but that doesn't mean they're subjected to their intended use."

The Domain had no other choice but to stretch out the service lives of their mechs. The conflict raging at its borders had dragged on for so long because the hatred had grown too deep to settle with a couple of set piece battles.

Ves didn't care too much about the war but Barley felt otherwise. His disdain for the so-called dirtbags had turned into blind hatred after losing so many friends and colleagues to their stubborn aggression.

An alarm suddenly rang from the speakers. "Alert! Long-range sensors have detected scouts approaching our position!"

Everyone dropped their routine and entered into a frenzy. The mech technicians hastily put the half-repaired mechs back together while the mech pilots gathered up in front of their officers.

Captain Osprey paced back and forth in front of his diminished platoon of eleven pilots. There used to be thirty among their number.

"It's not likely the dirtbags sniffed us out, but their scouts are ranging closer than we're comfortable with. Given time, their scouting systems will be able to read the traces that our mechs have inevitably left behind and follow them straight to our base. Our job is to stop them before they make it that far!"

"Won't they know we're close if we show up out of the blue?" Shaundra asked as she scratched her head. Her hair had already started greying.

"That's why we're taking our mechs through a backup tunnel and emerge from the other side. We'll pretend we've been conducting a long-ranged patrol and happened to have stumbled upon the scouts. If all goes well, we can fool them into thinking that our base is on the other side of this sector."

"How many mechs are we facing?"

"Seven or nine, the scanners aren't very clear about that. We're mainly dealing with light mechs, so we should be able to smash them apart with force. Any further questions?"

They boarded their mechs once everyone understood the stakes. Ves entered his own Jimenez and roused it from its slumber. For Barley, one battle was like any other, but for Ves it was an entirely novel experience.

"This is my first time stepping into battle as a mech pilot."

Barley's constant reassurance lessened the fear that threatened to overwhelm Ves. He wondered if he would die for real if Barley happened to meet an unfortunate end. Would the System pull back his consciousness in time, or leave him to die as a consequence of his failure?

He couldn't afford to take the risk. "I have to survive."

Barley's lust of battle pushed aside his fear. He became eager to experience how a real mech pilot fought.

Chapter 248 The Knigh

Barley deployed on the field with his Jimenez along with Captain Osprey and ten other pilots. If anyone looked at their mechs, they'd shake their heads and say what a sad sight they represented. Every mech featured scratches, scuff marks and even pockets of rust. The melee mechs had it worse than the rifleman mechs..

Captain Osprey commanded only two medium knights, one of them being Barley's mech. The success of the upcoming engagement rested largely on Barley's ability to endure under pressure.

For a seasoned mech pilot who already went through this slog for two years, Barley shouldn't feel worried. For a young mech designer who mainly ran away when faced with threats to his life, Ves felt as if he entered the women's bathroom.

"I don't really belong here."

He kept those words to himself. No need to worry his comrades and his superior officer that their reliable knight pilot suddenly shared his mindspace with a mech designer from the future.

"Is this even the past? I don't believe that's even possible! This must be an elaborate simulation or an alternate universe at most!"

The implications of actual time travel frightened him beyond belief. Who knew how many entities messed about the timelines if it actually became convenient for them to travel back and forth in time.

"Barley." The captain uttered over the secure channel. The Jimenez's tranceiver was in a shoddy state, leading to a fair amount of static even if another mech stood right next to it. "I know your machine's sword arm is bad, so I won't let you take point this time. Johnson's Jimenez is in a decent shape

compared to yours, so I'm putting him up as the vanguard. You'll be taking the rear to keep an eye out for ambushes."

"Got it, sir."

"Be sure to stay on your feet. If Johnson has to back out early, we're going to need your shield arm at the front!"

Barley's pride as a knight pilot swelled at being given the role as a protector. With his stodgy attitude and unsophisticated mind, he excelled in enduring the rigors of piloting a knight.

To Ves, Barley's personality provided him with a valuable window into his clientele. He realized that someone who specialized in piloting defensive knights would not enjoy switching over to an offensive knight. They preferred slow, deliberate and reactive combat over faster maneuvers and taking the initiative.

"I don't want to be in charge." He reaffirmed his thoughts.

Before Ves could mull over the implications, Osprey alerted them that they neared the projected zone where the scouts had been nosing about. "It's showtime, lads. Everyone, slip into battle formation. Johnson, stick close to Eloise, she's our sharpest shot after Fitzgerald kicked the bucket."

Barley took up the rear as ordered. His mech continued forward while its sensors scanned the rear. At their current state, the enemy would likely detect them first, but Osprey's personal mech possessed some pretty good sensors as well, so they'd be able to force a fight regardless.

"Contact!" Osprey barked. Their screens updated with the positions of the enemy mechs. "They're spreading out, pursue!"

Their mechs huffed towards the closest enemy bogey as fast as possible while still keeping together. The presence of the two lumbering knights slowed

them down, making it impossible to catch the enemy scouts if they persisted in their flight.

"These cowardly dirtbags aren't even turning around to take a peek at us!" Osprey cursed as he decided whether to ditch his protection in order to catch up to the slower enemy scouts. Caution prevailed, however. "There's something funny about this. The dirtbags aren't splitting up. They aren't running closer to our base and into our trap either. It's as if... they're leading us into a trap of their own!"

Too late! The enemy scouts slowed their flight and turned around to close the net. From the sides, several more signatures emerged as mechs appeared from underneath their sensor-blocking camouflage.

"Two from the west, three from the east and three from the south!"

Along with the seven scouts that had been leading them on, that meant their unit faced a total of seventeen mechs! Several of his fellow pilots started to curse in the open channel. Someone even suggested that a traitor leaked the details of their deployment.

"Can it, folks! Traitor or not, there's enough enemies to go around, no need to look behind our backs!"

Captain Osprey eventually ordered them to make a stand while he hollared back to base to send some backup. Help would be on the way, but the chase had led them far away. The first wave of reinforcements was already on its way.

"Nine minutes! We have to hold our ground for nine minutes! That's all I'm asking for!"

Everyone became determined to last this long. Barley felt proud for being given the responsibility to help their unit endure the coming ambush. Ves did

not share his enthusiasm for turning to a sitting duck, but he had to make do with what he got.

With contact imminent, Ves relinquished much of the control of their body back to the original personality. He had no delusions that he could outperform Barley's expertise in handling the Jimenez.

His decision proved wise, as Barley's instincts prompted him to jump his mech to the left and catch an errant sniper round aimed for Eloise's mech.

"Thanks Barley!"

"No problem, sweetie!"

As Barley positioned his Jimenez to catch another volley of incoming fire, Ves grew fascinated with the way he fought. His perspective inside Barley's mind allowed him to witness up close how a knight pilot thought and acted.

"It's a lot more instinctive than I thought."

Many times, lasers and projectiles appeared too sudden to respond, yet Barley managed to anticipate at least a third of their fire. Much of it had to do with pooling his experience, instincts and his intimate knowledge on the armament of his enemies into his instinctive reactions. It was akin to a form of enhanced gut feeling that allowed him to block so many shots.

"Is this what an advanced pilot is capable of?" His impression of defensive knights had already gone up a notch so far.

Skirmishers are closing in! Don't let them take out our rifleman mechs!"

Osprey's men shifted gears. They stopped trading potshots at distant mechs and started firing their weapons in longer bursts at the incoming light mechs. Barley quickly noted that the enemy mechs wielded daggers, which meant that they felt confident they could get past Barley and knife the vulnerable ranged mechs.

"Not on my watch!" Barley uttered as he changed the footing of his knight. The Jimenez waited for the closest skirmisher to come within a hundred meters before springing his mech to the side. "Caught you!"

The weak sword arm held up for now as the Jimenez managed to rake one of the skirmisher's arm with his heavy knight sword. The weight of the blade did most of the work, successfully chunking the thin and fragile limb.

The Skirmisher lost its balance from the blow. A friendly spearman mech quickly capitalized on the vulnerability and punctured the unbalanced enemy with a stab through the chest.

The first blow was made in haste and without momentum, allowing the Skirmisher to sacrifice much of its armor to bounce away from the blow. Unfortunately for the enemy pilot, Captain Osprey slashed it from the other side with a single stroke from his swordsman mech. The enemy didn't stand a chance.

"Help out Blazer and Eloise!"

Barley had already dismissed the first skirmisher as soon as it skidded out of his range. The limited mobility of his knight didn't allow him to chase after his opponents. Instead, his responsibility was to defend a zone and make it difficult for enemies to approach his position from a certain angle.

The presence of the two knights at the front and the rear constrained the enemy by their presence alone. The light mechs possessed no wish to confront them directly, which forced them to approach the cornered Domain pilots from the sides.

In turn, the limited approach vectors allowed the defenders to concentrate their fire in only two directions instead of four. They already took out three foolhardy skirmishers who thought their speed and agility would make them impossible to hit.

The dirtbags learned their lesson and waited for the noose to tighten before they reengaged.

"The medium boys are here now!"

A handful of medium mechs that weighed on the lighter end of their weight class arrived to take point. Barley mainly had to deal with three swordsman mechs of different make. While he possessed a vague familiarity of their designs, he didn't know enough about their capabilities to prevail against three at once.

Sweat poured down from his head where the neural interface connected to his head. Barley had ended up in a number of tight spots over the course of the war, but never did he face such dire circumstances.

Ves found it admirable that Barley still maintained his duty towards the Domain and kinship towards his comrades. He never thought of flinching away. It betrayed the very core of the principles he held as a knight.

As the three enemy swordsman mechs closed in, Barley figured out their plans. They'd leave the middle mech to tie up his Jimenez while letting the other two mechs run roughshod over his unit's vulnerable ranged mechs.

The awful thing about their plan was that Barley could do nothing to stop them. Any decent pilot of a swordsman mech learned how to leverage its mobility to constrain a knight mech.

Even though Ves was shaking in his metaphorical boots, his considerable mind constantly studied the designs of the enemy mechs. He realized quickly that they didn't appear to be in tip-top shape either. The Alliance forces on this remote planet suffered from a lack of supplies as well.

The faded scars of battle damage told its own story. Ves possessed a decent amount of experience with repairing damaged mechs, so he was able to read the markings as clear as day.

"Target the middle mech's legs! It's been blown apart before, and whoever replaced them employed weaker alloys underneath the standard system!"

The mech technicians did a good job disguising the inferior patch job underneath a top layer of standard armor. Any regular mech pilot wouldn't know the difference, but Ves was different.

Upon his advice, Barley slammed the bottom edge of his mech's shield against the nearest leg of his immediate opponent.

CRUNCH!

The swordsman mech lost its footing as its right leg gave out. Barley spent an errant moment stepping his mech's foot against the other leg, which crippled the stricken mech.

Barley had no time to finish off his victim as he also had the other two mechs to contend. His comrades already had their hands full in fending off the remaining dirtbag mechs. If these other two mechs attacked them from the flank, then their unit would quickly be wiped out!

"Focus!" They both said to themselves as they turned their attention to the left.

Ves already analyzed its major weak point and relayed them to Barley with the speed of thought. Barley slammed the shield close and blocked the next sword strike before hitting back with his own thrust that slipped through the sloppily sealed gap between the lower left side of his opponent's torso.

The swordsman mech lost all power and dropped to the ground like a lumbering ox that got hit by a tranquilizer.

Having taken care of his second opponent, Barley strained his mech to turn around as fast as possible to hurl his shield high against the final swordsman mech's head.

The errant throw dislodged the head from the frame entirely, momentarily disorienting the pilot as he had to get used to a sudden shift in perspective as his mech's backup sensors took over his primary view. A sword thrust from the rear downed the bewildered mech before it could recover.

"I don't know who you are, but you're goddamn smart! Keep 'em coming!" Barley yelled as he shifted his mech towards Eloise to help her fend off a skirmisher mech.

The enemies closest to his Jimenez noticed his abnormal performance. They lessened the pressure on his comrades in order to deal with the greater threat.

Chapter 249 Power of Two

"Ves?" Jake knocked on the door of the office. He tried to contact his friend through the company channel but failed to get a response. "There's an issue regarding the board of directors I'd like to talk to you about. Are you in?"

Nothing happened. The door remained stubbornly shut like a high security vault.

He started getting worried. Ves had a habit of focusing on his work for days at a time, but he usually put down his work if someone needed his input. This was the first time Jake couldn't get a hold of his boss.

He considered calling security to force open the door, but called it off after Carlos noticed his concerns.

"Ves can get really intense sometimes. You haven't seen him when he designs a mech. He's obsessed to the point of being deaf to the rest of the universe."

"What if he's having a seizure or something?"

"Hey, what age are we living in right now? His comm will send out an alert if something's wrong. Nah, it's best to leave him alone while he's in the zone."

You don't want to ruin his mood when he's in the process of designing one of the most important mechs in his career."

As the COO of the LMC, Jake knew more than anyone else how much the company relied on the upcoming original design. The LMC could pump out variant after variant, but wouldn't be able to ascend and make significant progress simply by making cheap copies of other people's work.

Despite the healthy market for variants, it carried the stigma of too many bad designs. The mech market simply trusted original designs more.

Jake shook his head. "Well, if you get ahold of Ves, tell him his grandfather will nominate a number of people on the board of directors. A company of our size can't make do with two. The law mandates at least a headcount of five board members for companies that earn more than a billion credits a year. We also have to form a number of committees including a labor committee and an ethics committee."

"Sounds complicated." Carlos frowned. He felt sorry for Ves. "It's a lot different than the old days when it was just me and the boss. I kind of miss the simplicity of it. Now I have to fill a half-dozen forms just to use the Dortmund to fabricate a spare bolt."

"We're not adding those procedures just to make life miserable. Part of it is to comply with safety and tracking laws, but it also helps cut down any possible abuse."

The rapid expansion of the LMC left a lot of hiccups as the company didn't have a formal structure in place that scaled with its growth. Jake and the other managers had to develop solutions on the fly in order to maintain control over their increasingly complex hierarchy.

While Carlos and Jake talked about the changes that came with the professionalization of the LMC, Ves was having a desperate time keeping up with the fighting.

"Barley! We've got incoming from your left!"

"I know, but I have to fend off this bastard before he gets to Eloise!"

The hunt-turned-ambush reached a desperate stage as the attackers from the Alliance plowed past the defenses of the Domain mechs. Half of their rifleman mechs had already fallen, though Captain Osprey and his men gave as good as it got and disabled an equivalent number of opponents.

What caused the combatant to fight as if possessed by devils was the fact that many of the downed mechs could still be recovered. Some of the mech pilots managed to eject, but many more remained stuck in their disabled machines as the ejection system failed to launch due to battle damage.

The side who won would be able to salvage their mechs and the lives of their compatriots. As for the losers, they'd be captured or receive a summary execution.

With the fate of so many brothers and sisters on the line, no one thought of making a retreat.

In these circumstances, Barley's performance clearly made a difference. He had already disabled three complacent mechs before an officer of the dirtbags stepped up to contain his seemingly berserk Jimenez.

"I don't know who you are, but don't think of getting away from me while I'm here." The officer taunted as he flourished his curved sword for another tricky slash.

"Get out of my way!" Barley shouted over the open channel as he turned his mech in a position to bash the officer's mech with his shield. Unfortunately,

the officer easily anticipated the attack and danced around the Jimenez, taking the opportunity to leave another mark with his sword.

"What's this dirtbag mech's weak point?"

Ves had been trying to puzzle that out for a while. "I'm trying, I'm trying! His mech is clearly first in line when it comes to maintenance. Do you know how hard it is to spot its weak points when it's been lavished by a full shift of mech technicians?"

"I don't care! Get me a weak point now or we both die!"

There was nothing like the pressure of death to motivate his full potential. "I've got it! Target his wrists! They've received an aftermarket modification to make them nimbler. That's how the officer is making all of those tricky moves. You just need to compromise their structural integrity a little bit. Brute force will do the rest!"

Now that he finally received a target, Barley roared to life as he forcefully pushed his mech shield-first into his opponent's grip. The aggressive move caught the officer off-guard but failed to make impact due to the swordsman mech's quick reaction.

"Again!"

Barley kept going, targeting the wrists with both his sword and his shield. A satisfying crunching sound rang throughout the forest as one of the wrists couldn't handle the weight of Barley's shield.

"Eloise!"

"Got him!"

The female marksman turned her attention away from fending off the enemy ranged mechs to snap a quick laser volley at the officer's mech. While the laser beams didn't do much except some of its armor, the sudden attacks

succeeded in creating an opening which Barley ruthlessly exploited by thrusting forward with considerable momentum. The stab succeeded in punching through the waist, though the armor mitigated much of the damage.

That didn't matter for Barley, as the shock opened up his opponent to a quick triple combo that disabled the officer mech's engines and forced the officer to eject.

"I'm coming, Eloise!"

He was too late. The other mech that approached from his left had bypassed him entirely and went for the vulnerable rifleman mech. Eloise already lost her rifle as she held it sideways in order to fend off a heavy chop. Her mech drew out a pitiful backup knife that looked like a toy compared to the full-sized mech sword in the hands of the menacing Alliance mech.

"Leave her alone!" Barley roared as he urged his mech to close the distance. However, he realized he'd be far too late as the enemy pilot reared up his mech for a fatal slash that targeted squarely at the cockpit. "I got to go faster!"

"Give me control over one of your hands!" Ves suddenly urged. "I can make something happen!"

Barley didn't even doubt the other voice in his mind and relinquished a considerable amount of control to Ves. Some of the strong and intensive feedback of the mech ran through Ves, battering his consciousness for a split second. Despite the man upgrades to his mind, his neural aptitude still remained the same as a norm.

His mind simply couldn't handle the flood of foreign data. Barley quickly reined in his mind and spared Ves from any further agony.

The delay almost proved disastrous, but Ves managed to use Barley's co-opted arm to override the safety limits of the Jimenez.

With so much power running through its systems, Barley's mech gained a considerable amount of speed. He quickly lost his footing but not before he slashed the swordsman mech's back. The hasty attack bounced off the swordsman mech's armor, but the enemy pilot couldn't stop Barley from his follow-up attacks.

"Thanks, Barley!"

In the next couple of minutes, Barley completely turned the tide of the battle, having taken out a total of seven mechs! Each enemy that the knight pilot cut down was one less mech that could bother his comrades.

Soon enough, the numbers turned against the Alliance. Their flimsy mechs already held up poorly against their opposition, and the battle only turned worse when Barley the Destroyer chopped them down one by one by himself or with the help of his brothers.

Half of the Alliance pilots managed to eject, but some got stuck in the beginning stages before the process got stalled for various reasons.

"The sensor readings sent out an alert." Captain Osprey sounded grim over the comm. "Enemy reinforcements are coming. This time It's the big boys, likely the main force that's been trailing behind the scouts.

Their own reinforcements would still take three more minutes to arrive. Captain Osprey faced an increasingly difficult choice as the numbers of the enemy main force became clear.

They came with over thirty mechs. While much of them consisted of cheap frontline mechs, when they gathered in any significant numbers, his remaining mechs wouldn't last a minute under all of that firepower.

"Barley. Johnson. I hate to do this to you, but I'd like you to hold up the rear guard while we fall back."

"Sir! We can't." Eloise sternly objected. "That's leaving them to die!"

"We're all going to die if we stick to this location! We've got to rendez-vous with our own reinforcements, but the Jimenez models are too darn slow to bring along!"

"Don't argue any further." Johnson's cool voice emerged from the channel. "It's our job to hold the line."

"Why are you doing this?!"

"Because I'm a knight!"

"Because knights are meant to protect!" Barley echoed his fellow knight's conviction. "We're running out of time. Go now! Don't let our sacrifices be in vain!"

The surviving Domain pilots hesitated no longer and disengaged from the fight. They fell back straight towards the direction of the incoming reinforcements. While a number of enemy skirmishers sprang in pursuit, the two knights stubbornly stood their ground with their swords pointed to the ground littered with downed mechs.

The threat was implicit. If the Alliance soldiers chose to evade the slow and lumbering Jimenez mechs, they'd be consigning their fellow mech pilots to an early grave.

Four mechs stayed behind, all of them in the medium weight class.

"There's two to go around for both of us." Johnson mirthlessly joked. "I don't know how you turned into such a beast, Barley, but keep it up, because we'll need every bit of your magic!"

"It's coming right up!" Barley replied as his other hand took on a life of its own. It zoomed in on the readouts of the enemy mechs and rapidly pointed out a

series of vulnerabilities which it sent to Johnson's mech. "Aim for these vulnerabilities! I guarantee you they're the real deal!"

"Really?" His colleague sounded sceptical, but had no time to ponder how Barley figured out so many weak points as the enemy medium mechs simultaneously sprang forward.

Barley had a difficult time fending off his two attackers. One of them wielded a sword while another utilized a spear. While the pair showed little cooperation in their movements, the fact that they attacked from opposite angles made it difficult for Barley to finish off one opponent faster than the other.

His mech also suffered from the after-effects of the momentary boost in speed. This became most pronounced in the limp manner in which his Jimenez attacked with its sword.

Both Ves and Barley ran through countless of ideas, but none of them had any chance of success. His Jimenez had reached the tail end of its operational life and Barley could barely squeeze any more potential out of its beaten frame.

"Too slow! It's simply too slow!"

A knight served as a protector exactly because it could rely on its faster and more vulnerable allies to cover up its deficiencies. Without any backup except for another equally-slow knight mech, they had no chance to salvage their lives.

"It's been a good ride, Barley." Johnson said as his mech failed to parry another sword strike. The attack ruptured half the energy channels that supplied power from the power reactor to the engine. "We should have never underestimated the dirtbags."

"Johnson! No!"

His fellow knight pilot died when the other swordsman mech deliberately ran its sword through the cockpit. Such a move was not considered a war crime, though it did foster further hatred.

"You... stinking... dirtbags!"

Pure rage subsumed Barley's mind. As a hitchhiker, Ves remained a little more detached, but even he became affected by its overpowering influence.

"C'mon, you ghost! Work with me now! Even if I'm going down, I'm going to take all four of these dirtbags with me!"

Ves wordlessly agreed with the original host of their shared body. He lost much of his rationality after being infected by Barley's rage. Now he too wished to harvest the lives of as many dirtbags as possible!

After a moment's thought, Ves came up with the most effective way of accomplishing Barley's dying wish. "Give me control of your hand again. In the meantime, try to last ten more seconds! It's best if you can pull them all forward!"

Barley did this in the most direct fashion possible. He taunted his opponents, who had all started to relax once they realized how easy it was for four of them to take care of a single Domain knight.

"Hey, dirtbags! Why aren't you finishing the job? If you don't come forward now, I'll do this!"

With a callous couple of steps, his Jimenez mech crunched its foot down one of the enemy skirmishers that got taken out in the early stages of the ambush. The cockpit of the light mech didn't stand a chance.

"You'll pay for that!" The lone spearman mech among the group broadcasted as it led the charge. Meanwhile, the other three mechs approached from the sides and the rear, completely boxing Barley in. "This is your end!"

"Wrong! It's yours!' Barley grinned and ejected his cockpit from his mech just before it blew up in a conflagration of heat, flames and electrical discharge.

Since the mech ran on pure energy cells, it was impossible to achieve a massive explosion. Nevertheless, the simultaneous release of all of that energy battered the four complacent attackers severely.

A normal mech pilot wouldn't be able to achieve such a feat, but Ves had spent several hours digging through the guts of the Jimenez, so he knew exactly how to force a worst-case scenario.

As the cockpit flew through the air in a parabolic arc, Barley started to feel drowsy. All of the excess energy in his body left him now that his ability to fight had ceased.

Ves felt a pull on his consciousness. "It looks like my visit has come to an end."

"Before you go... tell me who you are."

"Ves... Ves Larkinson. Sorry for the intrusion. I can't explain how I ended up in your mind. I merely wanted to know how a knight pilot functioned."

"No problem... you helped me out of a hopeless fight. Will I ever see you again?"

"Probably not. I get the feeling this is a one-time deal."

"That's a shame."

Ves stayed silent for a few seconds as he tried to resist the pull calling him back to his own body. "Keep an eye on the Komodo Star Sector if it exists in this universe. If everything goes right, you might see me popping up in the news fifty years from now.

"That's a long time ahead. I don't know if I'll survive the war."

"It's up to fate if we can meet again."

Ves uncharacteristically revealed his identity to Barley. It couldn't be helped, as their psyches intertwined so much that they developed an instinctive bond with each other.

Still, Ves got more out of the melding than Barley as the System automatically closed off any portions of his mind that related directly to its existence. Even if Barley questioned how Ves managed to achieve this bond, he would never in his wildest dreams come up with something as miraculous as the Mech Designer System.

"It's the end now. I'm coming home."

"Farewell, Ves!"

"Goodbye, Barley!"

Chapter 250 Board of Directors

His consciousness descended back to his body with jarring force. Ves felt as if he rode a shuttle that made a forceful landing on the ground. His head spun like wheels and the entire world felt alien to his own senses.

Ves took a few minutes to recover from his ordeal. His breath shuddered with the aftershock of having his consciousness being pulled back and forth. The human mind wasn't supposed to endure such rigors, and if he hadn't upgraded his mental Attributes, he might have turned into an idiot.

"Heavens, System! Warn me before you pull another stunt like that!"

[The Mech Designer System is not meant to warn the user of any negligence on his part.]

In other words, Ves had only himself to blame.

"Fair enough, but I thought you'd do your usual schtick and dump a library of knowledge in my head."

[Mastery extends beyond pure theory. A mech designer cannot ever claim a Mastery without delving into the perspective of a mech pilot.]

Ves had to admit he benefited hugely from the experience. Even though Barley was nothing special in comparison to other knight pilots, his experience and earnestness in piloting his Jimenez taught Ves a lot.

He underestimated the value of a defensive knight. Lacking in mobility it might be, the Jimenez excelled in its narrow role.

"It almost makes up for the fact that I'm designing an offensive knight rather than a defensive one."

He understood the System's motive in selecting a defensive knight pilot to bond. The name of the Sub-Skill was called Knight Mastery I, and as an introduction to the archetype, Ves first had to master the basic model.

After he checked the logs, he found out he passed out for over half a day. That matched the amount of time he hitch-hiked Barley's head.

Thinking about him compelled Ves to look him up. He went to the galactic net and searched for the Chittering Cicada Star Sector.

"It actually exists!"

A further search turned up the existence of the Exilis Domain, which eked out a diminished existence after it lost the war against the Alliance over forty-five years ago.

His hands started to shake as he tried to search up the existence of a Domain pilot called Ivan Barley.

LORD IVAN BARLEY - ACE MECH PILOT - "THE DISCERNING EYE"

MISSING IN ACTION - EIGHT YEARS AGO

A mix of shock, excitement and disappointment ran through his mind. A couple of searches confirmed the battle that Ves experienced alongside Barley happened exactly as he remembered.

The implications were frightening. The seemingly omnipotent System proved its might once again by accomplishing actual time travel!

"It's too bad he's gone missing. It's also incredible he advanced to ace pilot!"

Nothing in his personality or talent suggested he could reach this exalted rank. Ves dug into his history and found out that his momentary presence had been a turning point in Barley's life.

Just as Ves gained a lot of insight into the mind of a mech pilot, so did Barley gain a lot from the perspective of a mech designer. He leveraged his gains by cross-training as a mech technician and then as a mech designer, all for the purpose of improving his ability to discover weak points in the mechs of his opponents!

Barley's skills and kill record rose up like a rocket at the latter stages of the war. By the time he advanced to expert pilot, the Domain finally threw in the towel and signed a humiliating peace treaty.

The heroic feats of a few exceptional pilots like Barley hardly affected the Domain's dire resource shortages. The downside of being surrounded by enemy states was that they could easily intercept their foreign shipments.

After being discharged from the Domain's armed forces, Barley started making his mark in the mercenary circles. That he managed to rise to the point of becoming a certified ace pilot while he worked in the private sector showcased his determination to exceed his failings.

"Barley must have felt guilty for the way the last battle ended up."

The Alliance reached the battle site first. Predictably, they rescues all their friendlies while executing their opponents.

Ves understood how Barley took his knight oath seriously. Not everyone who specialized in piloting knight mechs bought into this culture, but those that did often made for excellent partners.

His lessons from his first experience with Mastery led him to reconsider his phoenix knight's overall premise. Did its draft possess the right concepts to serve its duty as a knight?

"I still believe in an offensive knight." He reaffirmed to himself. "I just need to make some practical adjustments."

With his newly mastered ability to adopt the perspective of a knight pilot, Ves smoothed out many potential wrinkles in his design. Even though they seemed innocuous, a real knight pilot would feel a little bit hobbled by these bumps.

"It's the equivalent of wearing a pair of mismatched shoes. It won't affect your ability to walk, but it constantly nags at you."

He also adjusted his images, particularly the base role of a knight. The infusion of a genuine knight's conviction breathed new life in the stale image's existence. The noble vibes it gave off caused the phoenix and Jackknife Jake's images to raise their guards.

The modified draft of his original design hardly looked any different, but it gave off a completely different vibe.

"Those people raving about Masteries are right. Mech designers think they know more than the pilots they served. What they learn from books and hearsay won't ever match a single first-hand experience."

Ves already enjoyed a lead over many of his competitors due to his Mastery. While it mainly applied to knight mechs, his ability to design the other archetypes improved as well.

When Ves finally left his office, his impatient COO came up to him with a mirthless smile. "Did you make a lot of progress?"

"I've achieved a breakthrough in my development process. The end product should be much more appealing now."

That's great, Ves. Now, before you take the day off, you really need to read through these authorizations and sign them off.

Going over the documents painted an unpleasant picture to Ves. "Expanding the board? Establishing all these committees? That will weaken my grip on my own company!"

"It's true these changes will dilute the concentration of power in your hands, but that's exactly why the Republic mandates these demands. Your company is not just your personal property, not anymore. The livelihoods of hundreds and perhaps more will depend on its performance. The company has the responsibility to provide every stakeholder a voice, not just the shareholders."

"Ah." Ves said flatly. "Good old corporate social responsibility rearing its ugly head again. I thought CSR went out of vogue in the mech industry. It's hard to pretend you care about the poor and the environment when you are literally selling machines of death."

"Well, the Bright Republic is behind the times. Besides, the MTA encourages mech manufacturers to establish a healthy corporate governance structure in their internal hierarchy. There's an inherent risk in letting the founder and lead designer of a company to hold all the decision-making power in his hands."

The theory surrounding this subject could fill entire galactic libraries, but the short answer was that even brilliant founders got it wrong from time to time.

That said, ruling a company through committees also had its downsides. They usually prioritized their own interest groups over the overall needs of the company.

For example, a committee staffed by workshop employees never chose to cut back a plant's production lines, even though it had grown outdated and inefficient. Leaving aging equipment running all that time diminished the competitiveness of the company and could even run it into the ground.

Ves feared exactly such an occurrence, so he continuously objected to the measures, though he signed them all in the end.

"The law is the law. Brighten up, Ves. Many other mech manufacturers have adopted these kinds of measures and they haven't gone extinct. Mostly."

"Yeah, but their growth has also turned stagnant as they prioritize stability over risk-taking."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Good question. Ves didn't wish to rehash the same arguments over and over so, so he waved his hand and called it a day.

The next day, his new employees seethed with excitement at the news that the LMC would formally enact committees in its decision-making structure.

Much of it would turn out to be window dressing, but the idea that the lowest workers could have a say succeeded in igniting their passion. They truly felt they took part in something great.

Meanwhile, Ves chewed on the more substantial decision to choose the makeup board of directors.

As the absolute majority shareholder, Ves had the right to appoint whoever he wanted as a board member. He'd elevate Lucky to the chair if he could get away with it. Sadly, the LMC had to be seen as respectable and show some

proof to the Republic that some reliable old geezers kept his youthful enthusiasm in line.

His grandfather sent him a list of suggestions. Each of these grey-haired men and women already sat on the boards of a couple of other companies at once. Naturally, none of the companies in their portfolios competed with each other, that would go too far.

"How do these fat cats even keep track of all of the industry-specific data?"

The board of only came together a handful times per year, but they somehow earned a salary that an average worker had to toil for decades to earn the same.

"Haha, I see now. It's a scam!"

These serial board members made a career out of their ability to 'advise' and 'supervise' a corporation. It didn't matter if the company produced dog food or mechs, it was all a business to them. As long as they applied their considerable business acumen to the data at hand, they'd be able to give out sage advice for the low price of several millions of credits a year.

His grandfather gave him an earful over the comm when he expressed his opinion.

"Stupid! Do you really think you can make waves without consequence! The Larkinsons have enemies within the Republic that doesn't mind if your career is cut short!"

"Then why should my company take on these board members?"

"Because they're connected! Each nominee is intrinsically related to a powerful influence on Rittersberg. It's not in the rules and you can't find any of this in a book, but the board members act as the glue that will bind your company tighter to a power faction within the Republic."

So it all came down to politics in the end. Ves thought he could shove those worries to his relations department.

"Okay." Ves replied in resignation. "I'll go over the nominees and take a serious look at their profiles."

"Make sure you do. You're making a major decision here which will profoundly affect the LMC's future course. The quality of the board and the amount of help they provide is directly related to its makeup. If you approach them with your numbskull attitude that they don't have any use except for leeching your company's profits, then you will end up with an unproductive board."

"Okay, okay, I got it already. Cooperation is a two-way street."

What actually ended up happening was that Ves projected the busts of all twenty nominees. He then called over his trusty feline sidekick Lucky.

"C'mon buddy, who do you think has the ugliest face? Go bite his or her head off!"

Ves appointed five respectable men and women who got chewed over last by his pet. All of them turned out to be bastards, but Ves selected the least awful ones through this scientifically proven method.

With that chore done, Ves turned to the real meat in the game. Resuming his original design project.

"I've revised the draft design so its concepts are more compatible with its pilots. Now is the time to substantiate this draft into a functional design."