

Mech 2051

Chapter 2051 Self-Harm Mech

Ves felt as if he was reenacting a conflict akin to the Komodo War on a spiritual level.

On one side was Zeigra. As a former Crown Cat of Felixia, this genetically-engineered beast had long ruled over his stretch of Felixia I as the king of the jungle! A large number of mechs grouped up into hunting teams attempted to challenge his might, but failed to fell their target as the supposed predators turned into Zeigra's prey!

On the other side was Nyxie. A long-dead alien tyrant who possessed an exceptionally powerful spirit, Nyxie was a future concern to Ves as his prodigious strength only grew stronger over time! Though Ves was confident he could keep the ancient alien spiritual entity contained within the Ancient Sarcophagus for the time being, what happened when that wasn't enough anymore?

On the surface, a matchup between the two entities was highly lopsided.

There was no way that Zeigra should be able to come out on top. In life, he was just an exobeast. A sentient exobeast, but one that mostly relied on his artificial genetics to dominate his jungle.

How could a mere beast, one that hadn't lived very long no less, compete against a spiritual tyrant who managed to cling to life for at least several millennia!?

A crude analogy would be to field a third-class mech against a first-class mech!

There was no way a Blackbeak or a Desolate Soldier could harm an ultra-modern, supremely powerful multipurpose mech!

Yet Ves still went through with putting Zeigra and Nyxie in the same imaginary space as if it was a dueling arena.

How could he prevent Zeigra from collapsing after experiencing Nyxie's might?

The answer was simple.

Cheating!

An unfair fight could be made fair by sabotaging the stronger side and assisting the weaker side!

Ves had already laid most of the groundwork by neutering Nyxie's strength. He had already weakened his spiritual fragment by cutting away most attributes. He further pared down the fragment's effective power by downsizing it even further.

The result was a purified spiritual fragment that was only a shadow of its progenitor.

Even so, when Ves finally performed his spiritual counterbalancing, he discovered that he hadn't been thorough enough.

"Zeigra is losing!"

The ferocious Crown Cat was taken aback by the ominous Nyxie! What Ves hadn't anticipated was that Zeigra became affected by Nyxie's ability to induce fear!

A sense of terror and panic exuded from Zeigra! For a moment, his confidence faltered, causing him to withdraw his predatory instincts!

"Damnit!" Ves cursed as he observed the impending debacle. "You stupid scaredy cat! How can you wear a crown if you can't even muster up some resistance? Nyxie isn't as scary as you think! His purified fragment is weak enough for you to contend against it! Man up and fight back like your pride is at stake!"

Ves had many methods at his disposal to equalize the power disparity.

He employed various images to boost Zeigra and make him more resistant to the fear-inducing effects of his opponent.

He chopped off extra portions from Nyxie's purified fragment.

He asked the Golden Cat to lend a hand.

Through these simple means, he quickly managed to take the wind out of Nyxie's sails. The alien tyrant's momentum stalled and Zeigra gained a bit more confidence in his strength!

Slowly but surely, the ripples emanating from their clashes subsided. Eventually, their strength came close enough that they began to achieve a stable equilibrium!

Still, just like with Silent William, the equilibrium wasn't completely equal. So far, Nyxie occupied 75 percent of the Doom Guard's space while Zeigra managed to cling onto just 25 percent.

While Ves was reasonably confident that this divide could persist, it was not ideal.

This was because the Doom Guard's glow currently retained far too much of Nyxie's unpleasant qualities!

As Ves closed his eyes in order to judge the properties of his mech design's current glow, he immediately frowned.

"It's too creepy!"

This was partially what he wanted out of his Doom Guard, but not to this extent!

The interaction between a design spirit and a mech was multifaceted and complex. The design spirit not only affected the people around the mech, but also the person piloting the machine!

What Ves sought was to retain the deterrence power of the Doom Guard while scaring away as little customers as possible!

"This is truly a double-edged sword!"

To put it in other terms, this was a self-harming mech. It inflicted much of the harm it tried to impose to others on its own mech pilot!

Certainly, Ves tried his best to mitigate the latter interaction.

He introduced several images that would hopefully make the design spirits exhibit less hostility to the mech pilot.

He also made sure to add a standard neural interface model in the Doom Guard design as opposed to the newly-licensed high-capacity model!

The latter was just a disaster in the making for a mech like this! Ves did not wish to wake up to an article from a sensational mech publication that screamed that his new Doom Guard model caused a dozen mech pilots to die from fright!

As someone who personally experienced Nyxie's deeply unsettling aura, Ves immediately knew he had to cripple the purified fragment even more.

"He's far too strong! Even after all of the previous cuts, he is still able to overpower Zeigra!"

Ves ruthlessly cut at the fragment and implemented some other measures to tilt the balance further in the favor of the beleaguered Crown Cat.

He paused his efforts when the equilibrium shifted at the midpoint. Both Zeigra and Nyxie occupied an equal amount of space in the Doom Guard.

Was this the balance that he should settle upon?

Ves still maintained his frown. "I don't know."

The constant cutting gradually reduced the intensity of Nyxie's fear-inducing glow to a more reasonable level. The problem was that it was still strong enough to frighten the mech pilots of the Doom Guard.

While he could just proceed with crippling the purified fragment even further, at this point the Doom Guard would begin to lose its intrinsic advantage.

If its glow grew weak to the point that enemies were able to shrug it off, what was the point of introducing Nyxie into the Doom Guard in the first place?

Ves felt incredibly conflicted. He had to make a very difficult choice.

If he retained Nyxie's current strength, then he predicted that his customer base would probably narrow by a very significant margin. While he would be able to retain the value of the mech, its hostility towards its own mech pilots would limit its sales potential!

"In this case, the only customers who can make good use of the Doom Guard are the mech pilots who possess the most fearless hearts! Anyone whose will is weak will doubtlessly be scared to the point of freezing in place!"

On the other hand, if he weakened Nyxie even further, then he would directly expand the pool of customers who were able to field the Doom Guard. If the design spirits imposed less pressure onto the mech pilots, the Doom Guards turned into a more controllable and reliable mech.

The major downside to this measure was the reduction in fear factor. If Ves weakened the Doom Guard's glow in order to expand its accessibility, he would directly reduce the mech's ability to deter enemies as well!

As a result, his Doom Guard came one step closer to becoming a generic striker mech model.

Without a technical edge and only a modest benefit derived from its glow, why would anyone buy a Doom Guard? The reduced effectiveness of its glow directly impacted its value proposition, which eventually depressed its sales!

"No matter which solution I choose, the money I stand to gain from selling this mech will drop regardless!" Ves cursed.

This was not good news for Ves, who sought to relieve the financial pressure of his clan by developing another cash cow.

After contemplating the pros and cons of each choice, he slowly drew out a breath.

In the end, he chose to maintain the strength of Nyxie's purified fragment.

There were several reasons that caused him to settle on this impactful choice.

First, a perfect balance where the power disparity had been equalized was the most stable outcome. Ves didn't have to worry too much about the stronger side overrunning the weaker side.

Just because it never happened in Silent William's mind didn't mean it could happen in the future!

Second, Ves wanted his Doom Guard to live up to his name and reputation. Many of the mech designs he published so far exhibited pronounced strengths at the cost of applicability. Extreme mechs like the Aurora Titan and the Deliverer were very strong when used as intended, but they were also liabilities in situations outside of their mission profile!

Since his existing customers already knew what to expect of him, he believed the backlash to Doom Guard would not be as bad as he feared. As long as the LMC carefully informed the public of the risks of piloting the mech, the customers who valued the notable strengths of his mech would still buy his product en masse!

With a glow this useful, his customers would be fools to pass it off! Anyone who needed to buy a striker mech to round out their mech rosters would definitely take a good look at the LMC's latest offering!

A third reason why he opted to take a risk by maintaining Nyxie's potency was his belief that his customers would rise up to the occasion.

Unlike his Holy Soldier and Deliverer mechs, the design spirits of the Doom Guard weren't strong enough to outright reject a mech pilot.

Sure, they could make things uncomfortable, but as long as the mech pilot learned to endure the unpleasantness, the Doom Guard would still be able to unleash its might onto the battlefield!

Ves wouldn't make this decision if it wasn't so easy and simple to pilot.

Rifleman mechs and melee mechs usually demanded a lot of attention from their mech pilots. A single discordant element could ruin their concentration and mess up their moves! This was because these fast-moving mechs possessed a high amount of skill expression.

A striker mech was the polar opposite. It was even simpler to pilot than a knight mech.

Its ponderous mass slowed down its movements, which meant the mech pilot didn't have to plan out every move in advance.

Its armor provided it with a generous buffer for mistakes. Even if the mech pilot got distracted by Nyxie, the Doom Guard would still be able to bull through an unfavorable situation!

Its flamethrower in a wide-area configuration was one of the easiest weapon to aim. While the mech pilot still had to input the right settings for the situation, its use was extremely simple. The pilot didn't even have to be skilled in marksmanship!

All of these factors meant that it was fine if the mech pilot of a Doom Guard got a little scared. As long as the mech commander saw the value in this mech, there would always be place for it on the battlefield!

Ves tried his best to put a positive spin on his decision.

"Only the bravest and most fearless individuals will be able to pilot the Doom Guard! The weak and cowardly need not apply!"

Once he slowly wrapped up this process, the bestowal process came at an end. The Doom Guard design, long empty, now gained its final component, thereby completing the design in full!

As Ves projected the mech design once again, it gained an entirely connotation.

"Is this.. what you meant by inducing fear?" Gloriana quivered a bit before she stiffened up. She was a Wodin and a proud Hexer! She was better than this! "The proto-gods you put into the design are quite.. effective."

Ves grinned and snapped his fingers, causing the projection to switch off. "This is just a depiction of its schematics. Let's wait until we fabricate an actual mech!"

Chapter 2052 Overlooked Function

The Doom Guard design finally reached its final form as far as Ves was concerned.

As soon as Ves employed spiritual counterbalancing to formulate an unusual new way to impart a glow to his design, the mech ascended into something different than the competition.

Pitting Zeigra and Nyxie together with the mech design as their dueling arena was very different from what he had done before.

In previous mech designs, one design spirit was always the top dog. While Ves had blended multiple influences in a single design before, he mostly just added a small amount of foreign influence in order to change the flavor of the glow.

This time was different. By weakening Nyxie to the point where his crippled, purified spiritual fragment could only go even with Zeigra, a lot of tension took place as the two jostled for dominance!

The balance they achieved was deceptively stable. While neither of the two grew weaker, they weren't able to make much progress either.

Regardless, the fight never ceased. As Ves carefully studied the spiritual activity taking place inside the Doom Guard, it was as if the two design spirits never knew peace!

Like two stones grinding against each other, they constantly bumped and pushed against the entity they regarded as their challenger!

While this activity didn't change the balance, it did cause some fluctuations to emerge. The discordant spiritual ripples emanating from the design were very disconcerting, so much so that Ves had to reduce his spiritual sensitivity lest he grew nauseous!

What delighted him however was that these ripples complimented the effects of Zeigra and Nyxie's glows!

Ves chose to involve Zeigra because the former Crown Cat possessed a very predatory and intimidating character.

He chose to add Nyxie to the mix because the ancient alien tyrant possessed a very inexplicable ability to induce existential terror.

Combining these two effects and piling up the body-sickening ripples generated by the conflict between the two design spirits all added up into a very uncomfortable glow!

The eventual outcome was noticeably stronger than he anticipated. He didn't expect the tension arising from the conflict to be this effective!

It didn't take long for Gloriana to grow queasy. "I don't know, Ves.. I think.. you overdid it a little."

She shivered, causing Ves to realize that his resilience was different from hers!

Ves was used to facing uncomfortable spiritual sensations. His strong Spirituality and his frequent interactions with spiritual entities such as Nyxie had not only increased his mental resilience, but also desensitized him to different kinds of spiritual pressure.

The same could not be said for Gloriana. She rarely experienced any unusual spiritual phenomena or did much with them. She never confronted the demons that Ves did on a frequent basis.

When Ves compared his sensitivity to hers, he judged that the general public would likely exhibit the same reaction as hers, thereby causing most of them to grow very uncomfortable, to say the least!

While those effects were all boons to the purpose of their Doom Guard design, the practical difficulties they introduced also made it harder to use them! How could an outfit expect to use a Doom Guard against its opponent when the striker mech already scared their own crew out of their wits?!

What Ves could figure out, so could his collaborator. Gloriana quickly pointed out a very fatal flaw about their completed design.

"I have no doubt our Doom Guard can deter a lot of enemies, particularly the less disciplined ones." She started and pointed at the projected design schematic. "However.. I doubt any outfit wants to keep this mech around in their own mech roster. Since it's a spaceborn mech, it will mostly be stored in carrier vessels. Can you imagine how the Doom Guard will be squeezed into a cramped ship designed to fit as many mechs inside their hulls as possible?"

His face dropped. Gloriana raised a very good point!

While light carriers and combat carriers were fairly large vessels, their internal volume was not as big as most people thought! A lot of space was taken up by ship components and structural elements. Ship designers had to allocate the space inside a vessel as efficiently as possible while still adhering to other priorities such as redundancy and compartmentalization.

As a result, there was hardly any redundant space for mechs. When it came to storing them, the mechs were usually placed in several areas.

If the machines needed to be deployed in an instant, then they would be put in a crowded hangar bay where a lot of mech technicians and mech pilots congregated.

If the mechs didn't need to be deployed at any time, then they were put into very secure mech stables. These were basically mech-sized storage areas which clamped a mech in place so that it wouldn't jostle around or get thrown around in case of accidents.

In any case, no matter where a mech was being put on a ship, there were always a lot of other mechs and people around!

How would they feel if they had to spend an entire work shift in the vicinity of fearsome Doom Guard? While the mech's glow was not as strong if not booted up, it still couldn't be ignored!

There was no way to block the influence of its glow. It went right through solid materials so the people working in the decks below and above the location of the Doom Guard would still experience its terror!

Who would want to incur all of this trouble if it led to these problems?

If the Doom Guard was a landbound mech, then at least the buyer would be able to erect an isolated facility placed away from the main base to store the problematic machines.

Yet this was not an option in space! Regardless if they were stored in carrier vessels or space stations, there wasn't as much room to work with, which meant that the mech would constantly be subjecting the people around it with friendly fire!

"This is indeed a very serious problem!" Ves admitted. He was in a serious dilemma! "I don't want to weaken its glow any further. The fact that it will likely have a strong effect on the crew of a carrier means it will be even more effective against its opponents! I really don't want to weaken this effect because it will directly decrease its battle effectiveness."

As Ves tried to figure out a way to overcome this issue, his girlfriend offered a very simple suggestion.

"Why not add an off switch?"

"Huh?" He stopped his thoughts.

"An off switch." Gloriana reiterated. "When a mech isn't needed, we turn it off to conserve its energy and to preserve its lifespan, among other reasons. Why not add the same functionality to its glow? As long as it's possible, the owners of our product can safely store them in their carriers without negatively affecting the people around them. In fact, since our Doom Guard is so disturbing, its mech pilots can save its glow until it is necessary!"

"That.. why didn't I think of that!?" Ves gasped!

He wanted to bonk his own head for overlooking such a basic but very useful feature!

His previous mech designs all contained supportive glows. Ves never really thought about how unwanted they were because his customers wouldn't buy them if they disliked their effects.

The Doom Guard broke this paradigm. As his first mech with an unquestionably negative glow, the buyers of this product had to subject their own forces to the same harm as they intended to inflict on their opponents!

This self-harm trait of the Doom Guard design was something unprecedented to Ves. For the first time in his career, the ability to deactivate the glow on command was very essential! Without this function, his mech would scare away a lot of customers who would have found its glow to be useful!

"I'll have to patch this function in really quickly." He announced.

Gloriana smiled. "What are you waiting for, then? Even if we finalized our design, it's not as if we have submitted it to the MTA. We can still add some last-minute tweaks to our design. A minor change like this won't require any testing."

She was right. There was no need to ask for approval or file a lengthy submission request because Ves was his own boss!

He proceeded to add several ways to activate and deactivate the glow of his Doom Guard design. While he had never made something like this before, it wasn't a very difficult problem.

He added a physical button in the interior of the cockpit. This was mainly an emergency measure if the mech pilot somehow couldn't flick the virtual switch in the operating system of the Doom Guard through the neural interface.

As an added precaution, Ves also added a multi-step hardware switch just beneath the exterior of mech. This was a switch intended for rescue parties if the mech ever go downed. The last thing Ves wanted to do was to scare an approaching rescue shuttle away when the mech pilot inside the Doom Guard was trapped!

In the design schematic, the switches didn't actually connect to any meaningful physical component. They just activated an electrical pulse that seemingly led to nowhere.

What really happened was that this electrical pulse triggered a command that Ves had to program into the spiritual foundation of the Doom Guard. Upon detecting this specific pulse, the Doom Guard would prevent its aura and the spiritual ripples from leaking outwards.

Just like the Devil Tiger, the mech would instead contain these spiritual overflows into the mech itself, thereby causing it to soak them all in. While Ves never really knew what might result from this process over time, at the very least it wouldn't scare away other people!

Though it was highly irresponsible to publish a mech with an unknown long-term side effect, Ves didn't care at this moment! He just wanted to wrap his mech design up and introduce it to the market as quickly as possible!

"I think this is fine." He declared as he clapped his hands. "Let's proceed with our fabrication session!"

Though Gloriana looked a bit uncertain, she still followed suit.

Once they emerged back into the mech workshop, Ves gathered every assistant and student in a circle.

"What Gloriana and I are about to embark upon is a rare moment for all of us. It will stretch over several days without any rest. Remember, don't look at what we are doing on the surface. Try to feel it instead. Your heart will probably experience a lot of.. unusual sensations, but don't be startled. You have all contributed to the design of the Doom Guard in some fashion or another. Don't be scared of your own work."

The reason why he warned the other mech designers was because Ves intended to fabricate the mech while its glow was unblocked!

This was the best way to build a mech that fully conformed to his vision!

While this was never a detriment when he fabricated a mech with a supportive glow like the Bright Warrior, it was not so simple when it came to the Doom Guard!

Ves had to steel his heart and muster up his Spirituality in order to withstand its terror.

He was confident he could endure the pressure. How could he call himself a mech designer when he wasn't even brave enough to confront his own work?!

However, this decision didn't sit well with Gloriana. Unlike him, she didn't relish spending multiple days around a glow that made her want to flee the mech workshop!

Before she could object any further, Ves provided her with a solution. Two, in fact.

"I have two ways to shield you from the glow of our mech." He raised an empty, thick black lockbox. "You can take my B-stone lockbox and put it over your head. While you won't be able to see out of it, you can use your implant to link up with external sensors to see what you are doing."

His girlfriend did not look amused. "I'm not going to put an ugly box over my head, especially when it's heavy! At least build a proper helmet!"

He coughed and quickly put down the box. "The other choice is to wear the Larkinson Mandate on your body."

"That sounds much better! You should have started with that first!"

Ves passed on the thick book to Gloriana, who placed it on the back of her workshop outfit. The antigrav brace that Ves installed on the heirloom automatically locked onto her clothes, making it seem as if Gloriana was wearing a school backpack of some sorts.

"I already feel better!" She smiled as the warmth of the Golden Cat began to spread around her body.

The direct contact did wonders in allowing her to benefit from the ancestral spirit's protection!

With this solution, both of them were finally to begin fabricating the very first Doom Guard in existence!

Chapter 2053 The Birth of Doom

Each time Ves fabricated a copy of a new design, he felt as if he was exploring his own work from a fresh perspective.

There was a difference between designing something and building it with your own hands.

The latter was distant and impartial.

At many times, Ves felt as if he was a god creating a new life out of nothing. While he still had to abide by the laws and constraints of reality, he had countless options at his disposal.

Such an approach easily caused Ves to develop a warped perspective towards his own work.

This wasn't necessarily bad as his design work was often better if he became engaged. His passion and enthusiasm fueled his imagination, causing him to develop all kinds of novel and interesting solutions to the problems at hand.

However, Ves didn't truly know his mech design from inside-out until he actually built it for real.

There was always something.. missing.. in his understanding of his own work. No matter how many virtual mechs he simulated, the fakeness of it all prevented him from fully realizing what he actually birthed into reality.

Not even crafting scaled-down copies of the design fully did the job. It helped, but Ves still had to rely far too much on his imagination to fill in the blanks.

Only when a mech design stopped being something that existed purely in the virtual realm would Ves be able to make a definitive judgement on his efforts.

Had he designed a mech that matched his vision or did he inadvertently create an uncontrollable abomination?

Never had this question become relevant until today. While the Devil Tiger featured some self-harm aspects, the Doom Guard practically centered around it! Due to its two hostile design spirits, the mech's glow was completely indiscriminate in who it affected!

The one person who the mech should harm the least was the mech pilot. Yet Ves envisioned that this individual would likely incur the most pressure!

Even with an off switch, Ves still worried a bit whether he had overdone the glow.

Fortunately, he could still adjust his design after he evaluated the finished product. Unlike modifying an existing mech, which would require a lot of troublesome recalls if he put it out for sale, modifying its glow was pretty much hassle-free.

It was like pushing a software update on the operating system of his products. He didn't even have to convince his customers to download and apply the update to their mechs. He could just directly tweak the design spirits and have the changes take effect on the entire design and all of its copies in an instant!

Ves bet that countless programmers and software developers would likely strangle him to death if they found out about this convenience!

"Are you ready?" Gloriana asked with a lukewarm smile.

Though she was still a bit apprehensive at the decision to fabricate the mech while immersing themselves in its glow, she could at least lean on the Golden Cat. The Larkinson Mandate attached to her back did wonders in shoring up her mental defenses!

Ves didn't enjoy this luxury. He had to brave the storm without shelter, but this was exactly what he wanted!

The closer he experienced the raw intensity of his mech, the better he would be able to reproduce its glory! Whether a glow was helpful or harmful, much of his specialty revolved around their use, so Ves could not afford to shield himself from them if he wanted to progress his design philosophy!

The pair of Journeymen finally began the process. Ves had already arranged the shipment of materials while Gloriana had spent a lot of time in setting the mech workshop.

They used the same fabrication equipment as before. By now, Ves was well-versed in the use of Gloriana's high-quality production machines, so he didn't exhibit the mistakes and lack of fluency he demonstrated the first time laid hands on them. The 3D printer and other advanced devices practically purred under his ministrations.

Even if Ves was flummoxed by a small, unknown function, he could rapidly read through the manuals he downloaded into his implant. As long as he didn't interrupt his workflow, he didn't lose any momentum.

In the beginning, he entered into a good groove. He produced the components and subcomponents with hardly any issues, and most of them only mattered because Gloriana kicked a fuss whenever she saw that something exceeded her personal tolerance levels.

"This is our first Doom Guard! We better make it as perfect as possible!"

Despite the slight delays, the fabrication session proceeded briskly over one-and-a-half continuous days. As Ves and Gloriana finished producing and checking over the parts, they began the laborious process of assembling the mech.

This was where the situation began to grow a little tricky. When the parts were still by themselves, they didn't really exude a glow on their own. The only sensations Ves and Gloriana had to deal with emerged from the intangible design itself whenever they referred to it. The pressure was very manageable for them both.

Yet as they began to erect the internal frame and add the various core components such as the power reactor and the cockpit to it, the mech began to exude more life.

This was normally a cause for celebration to Ves. The gradual emergence of a glow proved that the mech he was building fully conformed to his intended design and vision.

Yet.. this was different. The more the mech came alive, the more it posed a threat to its own makers!

Nyxie's terror was enough to drive anyone insane if they remained in proximity! Though Ves drastically weakened the alien tyrant's aura in the Doom Guard design, it still retained the pervasive quality that made it seem that there was no way to avoid this threat!

Ves began to grit his teeth at times as his remarkably high spiritual perception worked against him this time. His resilience could barely keep up with the various spiritual ripples and other influences hammering against his mind.

In order to make sure he was in tune in his own design, he didn't dare to erect a strong spiritual barrier around his mind. He made it very permeable, thereby letting through most of the spiritual pressure exerted by the incomplete mech.

"Are you holding, Ves?" Gloriana asked with concern at the other side of the mech.

"Don't worry about me. I'm strong. You should worry about yourself."

"This book is pretty handy so far." She smiled, though the tension in her voice betrayed her strain.

Even with Goldie protecting her less resilient mind, she too needed to subject herself in the sensations emanating from the mech.

The most thorny aspect about the Doom Guard's pervasive glow was how it possessed multiple attack vectors.

Nyxie and Zeigra both exerted a different kind of harmful pressure on the mind. While the former was the most poisonous, the latter couldn't be disregarded!

On top of that, their endless conflict generated a constant frequency of very disturbing spiritual ripples that mostly induced nausea and other uncomfortable effects on the body.

Those with stronger bodies such as well-trained mech pilots might be able to endure the spiritual ripples, but they probably wouldn't fare as well with one of the former!

The Doom Guard tested both the mind and body of those who fell under its sway!

In fact, this condition reminded Ves of the old mental resilience training program he once set up on the surface of Aeon Corona VII.

Affectionately called the Mind Blender by the Vandals and Swordmaidens, it slowly trained their mental resilience by hooking them up their minds with the minds of the indigenous dwarves.

Though it was a rather sordid invention that slowly wore out the captive dwarves they used as an expendable resource of this training program, it was nonetheless effective in strengthening the mech pilots!

Could Ves employ the Doom Guard in a similar fashion? Perhaps he should try it out once he finished this project. Mental resilience was not only useful in resisting spiritual pressure, but also prevented mech pilots from breaking down during a harrowing battle!

Mental resilience could be built through training, diligence and discipline. Yet by making use of an external prop like his Doom Guard, Ves could accelerate the improvement of the mental resilience of his clansmen, thereby raising their effective performance in battle!

The vast potential of this use inflamed his passion and boosted his motivation for his work. It became a bit easier for him to endure the pressure emanated by his own mech whenever he thought about all of the utility he could derive from his creation!

Gloriana.. didn't hang on as well as him. The fact that she had to rely on a helper like the Golden Cat for support did not bode well.

As much as she was a fantastic young Journeyman, she was not someone who responded well to certain types of adversity.

"You can do it, Gloriana." He encouraged her. "The mech may be uncomfortable, but it is well worth it once we complete it. Just like any childbirth, joy often follows after pain!"

She threw an angry look at him. "Don't talk about something you are clueless about!"

At least she regained some of her fire when she snapped back at Ves! She endured the pressure a little easier when she became prickly!

Three days passed in total. After all of their constant and steady labor, Ves and Gloriana finally walked back with sweat pouring out of their brows.

The mech they built had finally reached completion.

"It's too bad.." Gloriana spoke as she rubbed her tired eyes. "The quality of our mech is fine, but..."

She didn't voice the rest of her sentence, but she didn't have to. Ves knew as well as her that their efforts fell short of reaching masterwork quality.

Not by a little, but by a lot.

Perhaps it wasn't to be. Perhaps the constant pressure exerted by the mech sabotaged their opportunity. Perhaps they fabricated the mech at the wrong time.

Whatever the reason, they expended this precious opportunity. The next time they fabricated a mech, the chance was still there, but it would be vastly smaller now that it wasn't as meaningful

Ves had already taken the failure into account. He didn't look surprised at all. It would have been ludicrous if all of the stars aligned this time.

"This isn't the easiest mech to turn into a masterwork, and besides, it's just a third-class mech. A masterwork version of it would never be as impressive as the Quint."

That was not much consolation to Gloriana, who always got her hopes up whenever they reached this point.

By now, Ves basically ignored her glumness. She would get over it in a day anyway. Instead of wasting his time on cheering her up, he gazed at his imposing striker mech and beheld its formidable bulk in the flesh for the very first time!

The dark red coating of the mech set the tone of the Doom Guard. Large and heavily armored, the slightly-fat mech was easily able to withstand a barrage of lasers!

Though it could barely fly circles in space, as long as an enemy mech entered within reach, its large Enison Spreader would be able to block an entire approach!

Ves was very familiar with the complex glow of the mech at this point. What came as a surprise to him was how well it worked together with the appearance of the mech.

The striker mech gave off a sense that it was able to doom anyone who entered its reach! The customized red third eye that Ves added to the forehead of the Doom Guard seemed to magnify the terror to anyone who stared at it for an extended time!

"Our Doom Guard.. is finally complete!" Ves officially announced!

No one clapped. No one cheered. The assistant mech designers who witnessed most of the fabrication session all stayed as silent as a mouse.

Chapter 2054 New Risk Factor

The reaction from the design teams lightened up considerably when Ves climbed up to the cockpit of the mech and switched off its glow.

Now that its spiritual pressure was blocked from leaking out of the mech, the mech designers could finally breathe easily and evaluate it without feeling as if they were approaching a bottomless cliff!

Ves first turned his attention to Miles. "As our resident aerial mech specialist, what do you think about the flight characteristics of our mech?"

"It is pretty bad, in my opinion." The former Tovar admitted. "I don't prefer immobile mechs, so its hard for me to like it. I do recognize that the tradeoffs are probably worth it. Looking at the mech right now.. I can very much believe it can deny an entire area around it. Let alone enemies, it is probably more effective against friendlies!"

That was a very oblique indictment against his design choices. Ves supposed he did overdo it with regard to the strength of the Doom Guard's glow.

Even so, he abided by his decisions! With the addition of an off switch, the users of the Doom Guard were able to employ its full might on demand! Whenever they didn't need it, they could just turn it off and put the mech in a corner or something.

After quizzing Miles, Ves went down the line and asked for the opinions of the others.

"The mech is rather extreme. I still can't believe it's possible to design a machine that can break people's minds."

"Are you sure this mech is even legal? It has to break some of the MTA's rules, I think! If it didn't come with the ability to turn off its glow, then it's really difficult to argue that it is safe for the market!"

Ves listened to each and everyone of them before promptly throwing most of their feedback out of his head. Their comments were largely superfluous. He either already thought about their arguments or didn't think they were important enough for him to pay attention to them. They were mostly Apprentices after all. What could they say about his design that Ves didn't already know?

Of course, Ves still had to bear a polite smile on his face and respond with some nice-sounding platitudes. As their superior and mentor, he had to make sure he acted in a way that brought the best out of them. If he pretended to care about their input, they would have the illusion that their voices mattered, thereby raising their motivation for the next design projects!

Since it didn't cost Ves much by playing nice, he might as well put some effort into his act!

When he came to the two Larkinson seeds, they looked as if they had just watched an entire horror drama!

His face faltered a bit. On second thought, perhaps it would have been better to keep them away. Unlike a hopeful and positive mech like the Bright Warrior, the Doom Guard genuinely held the potential to threaten people's sanity!

Nonetheless, this was an important test for them as well. Ves wanted to see which one of the adolescents held up better under the pressure.

After inspecting them carefully, he judged that Maikel was a bit more enthusiastic about the Doom Guard than Zanthar. Ves had already noticed that the former admired him and his work considerably greater than his fellow seed.

Of course, that didn't mean Maikel was suited to follow in Ves' footsteps.

"The mech is very effective." Maikel commented. "I think it will sell very well once people see it in action. I think everyone needs proof before they are willing to invest in this machine."

"That's a very insightful point." Ves smiled. "That has been the case of several of my products. Sure, the reputation my mech company and I have built up has generated a lot of trust, but my products are so weird that the mech community doesn't know what to do with them at first. I'll take this issue into account."

Zanthar couldn't fall behind either. "I think the usefulness of this mech shouldn't be constrained to operations in space! You could easily design a landbound variant of this

mech that is optimized for ground battles and capture an entirely different segment of the market!"

Both Ves and Gloriana looked at each other and laughed.

"Why are you laughing, teacher?"

"A landbound mech is not equivalent to a spaceborn mech with its flight systems ripped off. Conversely, a spaceborn mech is very different from a landbound or aerial mech. Atmospheric combat imposes very different demands than space combat. We would have to revise many more systems than you think in order to develop a landbound variant of the Doom Guard."

"It would still be possible, right? I mean, you already did it before when you derived the Peaceful Soldier from the Desolate Soldier!" Zanthar insisted.

Ves shook his head. "It took almost as much effort as designing a brand new mech to develop that landbound variant. What I'm trying to say is that you have to make a very careful consideration whether the time and effort you put into a variant is worth it. While that doesn't discount what you say, right now I am more interested in designing new mechs than retreading my existing ones."

He had to move forward. He didn't gain as much as a mech designer when he worked with familiar concepts. A true creator always pushed their boundaries and pursued the unknown!

Did that mean that Ves would never design a landbound variant of his Doom Guard design? Not necessarily. It depended on many factors, most pertinently the pent-up demand for this kind of machine.

What was usually the case was that the mech community usually didn't wait for the original mech designers to develop the variant.

Instead, some savvy colleagues and competitors would just licence the recently-published design and develop their own variants!

Most of the time, these opportunists consisted of low-ranking mech designers.

Why would a high-ranking mech designer borrow someone else's work when they were more than capable enough to innovate something on their own? There was rarely a good reason to license another design and subsequently pass off a considerable chunk of profit to the original mech designer!

While the low-ranking mech designers engaged in developing variants fulfilled a very important niche in the mech industry, they often butchered the essence of the base model to varying degrees.

Some design philosophies were more resilient to this treatment than others. Normally, the unique strengths of the base model would mostly be retained in a variant as long as the mech designer didn't mess with the portions beyond their understanding.

The problem was that this was very difficult to accomplish when a mech designer's specialty encompassed the entire mech!

Many Class I design philosophies were prone to this when an ignorant mech designer bulldozed through a design.

For various reasons, his own design philosophy was even more sensitive than this! His mech designs were always prone to spiritual pollution imparted by the careless, chaotic thoughts of his competitors.

As a result, the entire mech industry soon learned that trying to design a worthwhile variant of his products was an exercise in futility!

Certainly, if someone wanted to design a landbound variant of the Doom Guard, they could go ahead as long as they bought the appropriate license.

They would just have to accept that whatever they came up with would likely not possess the glows that made them so unique!

Certainly, there was a possibility that a high-ranking mech designer with their own specialty could simply compensate by adding their own strengths to the variant, but what was the point?

Those Journeymen and Seniors were better off designing their own landbound mechs! At least their work aligned perfectly with their design philosophies!

This was also why Ves didn't even think about designing variants of other people's products these days.

In the best-case scenario, it would be like collaborating with another mech designer, but in sequence rather than at the same time.

In practice, without the active input of the original mech designer, Ves would certainly screw something up that weakened the unique strengths of the base model.

This was also why Ves and Gloriana often worked on their mech design projects at the same time rather in rotation. The latter was arguably more efficient, but both of them wouldn't be able to achieve synergy if that was the case!

"Are we done now, Ves?" Gloriana impatiently asked as he fell into his usual spirals of thought. "I want to take a very long rest now. I've been staying awake for three days straight!"

"Oh. Sure. I'll make sure to wrap this mech up so that it can be handed over to the MTA for validation."

His girlfriend picked up her cat and tiredly walked out of the mech workshop. The rest soon followed suit.

Ves lingered a bit longer in order to make sure it was being properly stored in a specialized container before being loaded onto a transport.

"Head straight to the MTA branch in downtown Torze!" He yelled to the transport vessel as it was about to take off under heavy escort. "Also, don't bump into anything along the way!"

There was no chance the transport vessel would do something as idiotic as crashing into something. Ves was just a bit frayed due to all of the pressure he endured over the past three days.

One advantage about designing a mech on Cinach VI was that the planet possessed an extensive infrastructure around its primary industry. The MTA set up an extensive branch that was capable of validating thousands of mech designs a day and certifying even more through an expedited process!

Of course, Bentheim offered even better facilities before it got drowned in sand, but that wasn't relevant at this time.

Ves eventually exited the mech workshop and returned to his temporary abode.

No more action took place that night. Gloriana had already fallen asleep by the time he slipped into bed.

Besides, Ves hadn't been very good lately, so she wouldn't have been receptive to his advances anyway.

He frowned as he laid his head on his pillow.

"There's something wrong about this arrangement. I need to act like a man and assert myself!"

"Meow?"

Lucky, who curled up on a pillow next to him, curiously poked his head at his owner.

"I mean it! Us men have rights too, you know!"

"Meow."

Lucky curled his body around. His tail flicked disdainfully at Ves!

"Whatever."

The next morning, Ves caught up with Gavin and discussed the upcoming product release.

"Will you go ahead with holding a reveal event?"

Ves nodded. "My mech needs as much publicity as possible. It's an.. unusual product that requires a bit of clarification in order to catch fire in the market. I'm afraid that the initial reaction to my Doom Guard design will be less than possible due to preventable misunderstandings. We have to make sure to convey the message that it is designed to harm enemies, not friendlies!"

Though Gavin hadn't attended the fabrication session in person, he already heard what was in store.

"I've already instructed the Marketing Department to tweak their messaging to take this complication into account. However, you can't compensate for stupid. There will doubtless be customers who flip that switch at the wrong time and cause a lot of harm around themselves."

Ves shrugged. "That's their fault, not mine."

"The public might not see it that way." Gavin carefully warned.

"Come on!" Ves threw up his hands! "Mechs are giant war machines capable of killing hundreds of people and demolishing an entire street in a matter of minutes! People, especially those who work with mechs on a daily basis, should know better!"

"It's different this time, boss. The mech community is already familiar with all of the risks and dangers associated with mechs. What you have just done is introducing a new and unfamiliar risk factor. Don't underestimate the amount of people who don't read the documentation and subsequently trip over themselves!"

Ves looked incredulously at his assistant? Were people really that stupid?

He recalled all of the pirates he encountered in the frontier.

"Perhaps you're right."

Chapter 2055 Specialty Premium

The LMC went into overdrive to prepare for the upcoming product reveal. The Doom Guard was a mech that put a new spin on striker mechs.

Though its nature as a double-edged sword was rather troublesome, Ves hoped that his audience would clearly determine that the benefits outweighed the costs.

Due to time constraints, Ves spent most of his time after fabricating the first production model back in the design lab to drag the Hexer mech design project to the finish line.

After spending so much time in the Cinach System, Ves felt a little restless! Staying too long in a single place didn't satisfy his itch for exploration at all. How was he supposed to gain inspiration for new mech designs if he didn't experience new sights?

His MTA merit account also hadn't moved for a while. That was really bad for his ambitions.

Due to the stronger-than-anticipated glow of the Doom Guard, Ves suggested a number of alterations and additions to the upcoming product reveal.

"We have reached out to more outfits and specific individuals. So far, the majority has accepted our invitation." Gavin dutifully reported as he glanced at his data pad. "We have also contacted the authorities of Cinach VI and received permission to hold our expanded demonstration in space. We have to hold it further away from the planet, though."

"That's fine. Are there any costs?"

"Nothing beyond the usual. While we are paying the outfits a nominal fee for their cooperation, they haven't demanded anything else except for the right to buy the first batch of our new product at a slight discount."

"That's a reasonable demand. I don't really care who gets to buy my mech first. As long as they get sold at all, I'm happy." Ves smiled.

These kinds of arrangements aren't unusual. The more successful mercenary commanders like Commander Cinnabar tended to be rather business savvy. Mechs and starships were expensive to procure and maintain. Regular work barely made ends meet for most of them, so the leaders of private outfits often had to find whatever bargains they could uncover.

A rather common business activity was to cooperate with a mech company in order to obtain privileged access to new mechs.

If the new product turned out to be excellent, then the outfit would be eager to make use of it, especially when they paid a bit less for it than the recommended market price!

Of course, there was also the risk that the new product received a lukewarm welcome or outright flopped on the market. The outfit essentially obtained an overpriced and underperforming mech!

This was why outfits always exhibited a lot of care in selecting who they cooperated with. The greater the reputation of the mech company and mech designer, the easier it was for them to find willing participants for their product reveal!

In that, Ves and the LMC possessed an immense advantage! Not only was he backed by the Hexers, his modest mech catalog was already filled with remarkable mech designs!

With the LMC already hyping up their upcoming product as its next big mech model, a lot of mech insiders began to pay attention.

The combination of Ves Larkinson and Gloriana Wodin had already made a name for itself in the mech community!

"By the way, Benny, what is the price the Marketing Department has set for the bronze label Doom Guard?"

"2 million hex credits. In the Sentinel Kingdom, the model will be priced at 22 million sents."

These price levels were roughly equivalent to 70 million pre-inflation bright credits. Of course, this figure was many times bigger if Ves didn't add the word 'pre-inflation'. These days, the currency was pretty much worthless.

The point was that the Doom Guard was priced significantly higher than his older premium mechs such as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. Ves also noted that its price level also exceeded the price tags of comparable striker mech models!

"We're taking quite a risk." He asked with concern.

Gavin smiled. "It makes too much sense to hike the price. Just like your other mechs, their technical performance might not exceed that of the competition, but the unique value that you have added to them is unrivaled! Every mech designer's specialty deserves to receive a premium. Isn't that the custom in the mech market? Yours happens to be rather difficult to price. There are a lot of arguments in favor of hiking it further or tamping it down. Right now, we believe the potential utility of the Doom Guard is worthy of being priced at 2.2 million hex credits, but.."

"It will be an even more difficult sell to the market." Ves concluded.

The greater the premium of his product, the harder it was to justify its purchase. Mech buyers would have to be really sure to spend 2.2 million hex credits on a Doom Guard as opposed to 1.8 million hex credits on a competing model!

This was especially relevant to bulk buyers as the price differences could easily mean that they would obtain more mechs for the same amount of money!

Even so, Ves quickly came around at the price his company had settled upon. He didn't need to read the elaborate market research reports that justified this decision.

"How many states will we sell the Doom Guard at launch?"

"Over twenty, with dozens to follow quickly after." Gavin replied. "It's not easy to begin product immediately. In order to ensure there aren't any leaks, we haven't dared to expose the existence of the Doom Guard outside of our clan. The most we have been able to do was to order our foreign partners and subsidiaries to stock up on materials and prepare a lot of production capacity starting from the date of the product reveal. After that, the production facilities in some states can begin production immediately while the other sites have to wait for administrative or legal reasons."

There wasn't any way to change this. Some states were just more difficult to conduct business than others. There was no point for Ves to get angry about something uncontrollable.

"What are the initial sales projections?"

Gavin grimaced. "It's very difficult to estimate the initial interest in the Doom Guard. While we have conducted studies, personally I wouldn't put much stock in the results. Compared to other striker mechs, our product is too innovative and different. While that is good in our perspective, it remains to be seen whether the rest of the market adopts our viewpoint as well. Marketing will play a vital role in convincing potential customers that our new mech model truly stands above the rest!"

It didn't need to be said that the much-anticipated product reveal event would play the most pivotal role in shaping market perception. The LMC already invited a huge amount of press to attend the Doom Guard's introduction to the public. This time, Ves would be presenting his new mech design to journalists whose reach spanned across the star sector and beyond!

Ves recognized that this would be his best opportunity to take advantage of free publicity. Not only did high-profile announcements draw a lot of attention, but it was also under his control!

Every aspect about the upcoming product reveal event was meticulously planned or controlled. While it wasn't possible to exert complete control over every single variable, Ves was already satisfied with how thorough his staff had accounted for every conceivable possibility.

Even hecklers and party poopers had been taken into consideration!

He grinned. "I hope someone comes to challenge me. It's always more fun this way!"

Sadly, his people predicted that no one in the Sentinel Kingdom would have the guts to heckle him this time. With the Penitent Sisters literally looming over him, many people had the illusion that criticizing him was the same as criticizing the Hexers!

No sane citizen of the Sentinel Kingdom possessed the courage to attack their patron state!

Of course, this didn't count if the heckler was a Hexer or a citizen of another second-rate state. While the Cinach System held little attraction to second-raters, it was still considered a possible transit point to the Nyxian Gap, so it sometimes attracted some powerful figures.

After he concluded his daily briefing with Gavin, he spent some time to follow up on the preparations of the upcoming announcement.

Sometime later, he visited the mech workshop. Gloriana was already there to supervise the work performed by their assistant mech designers.

After fabricating the first production copy, Ves had the bright idea of commanding his assistant mech designers to produce the next copies.

The Apprentices hadn't expected it. They reluctantly began to operate the production machines with only a single example to guide their efforts!

Only Ketis and Miles were exempted from this responsibility. Both of them not only possessed a lot of practical experience, their time was also better spent on designing their own mechs.

"How are the assistants doing?" Ves asked.

"Their fabrication and assembly skills could use a lot of work." Gloriana mildly replied. Her lips quivered as if she tried her best not to show her displeasure! "It doesn't help that they're operating my own personal production equipment. While they are more powerful and more precise than any other machine they have worked with, they can barely maintain control over their processes."

"They will eventually have to learn how to operate this grade of machinery. They'll get better once they get used to the expanded capabilities."

His girlfriend snorted. "They are still apes pounding their fists at buttons in my eyes!"

To Ves, the performance of the assistants wasn't as bad as Gloriana described. Sure, they lost a bit of control every now and then, but at least they didn't outright spark a calamity or something. The amount of rejected parts they produced hadn't exceeded to the level where he needed to show concern.

"The Doom Guard is a fairly easy mech to produce, all considered." Ves noted. "It is large and contains a lot of parts, but most of them are fairly simple in nature. The only piece of equipment that is truly challenging to fabricate is the Enison Spreader. The flamethrower is the most sophisticated aspect of our mech, and it isn't even that bad compared to some of the other components I've added to my mechs."

"The mech may not be hard to produce, but its glow is proving to be a real challenge to work around with! Just look at how much they are quivering!" Gloriana swept her arm at the assistant!

Nothing was wrong when the mech designers were just churning out parts. It was the assembly process that proved to be a challenge.

The more the mech reached completion, the greater its glow! Even in a dormant state, the mech always exuded a sense of intimidation and terror that was very difficult for anyone to endure!

Mech pilots trained to endure stress and the threat of death already exhibited a lot of difficulties with the Doom Guard's glow. Pure civilians such as mech technicians and mech designers fared much worse in comparison!

What was even worse was that the off switch didn't work until the assembly of the mech had already reached an advanced stage!

"I see that the assistants have already found ways to mitigate the damage." Ves noted.

Mech designers were not only creators, but also problem solvers.

When the design teams discovered that the glow became less intense over a distance, they largely switched to operating the machinery from a very healthy distance. The further, the better! They also increased their reliance on bots and automation as a consequence.

On top of that, they also maintained a rotation schedule, ensuring that no one worked on the mechs long enough!

While all of these solutions looked reasonable to Ves, he nonetheless disapproved of some of the practices.

"Every mech deserves to be worked on by humans." He remarked. "I dislike relying too much on automation. You can already tell the glow of this copy is weaker than the one we made with our own hands."

"That's not a bad thing, Ves. I think this level is already adequate for bronze label mechs."

That was true. The glow of the first copy was still a bit too intense for most people! Toning it down even further was not necessarily bad!

Chapter 2056 Persistent Interes

As the date of the upcoming product reveal of the Doom Guard approached, something completely unexpected occurred.

One day, the boisterous Cinach System welcomed another august visitor.

If the arrival of Ves Larkinson and his formidable Hexer escort already sent tongues wagging, this time the new arrival attracted attention from the highest level of the Sentinel Kingdom!

As Ves was in the middle of an intensive mental design session with Gloriana, an external alarm caused the pair to quickly retract their implants from each other!

The quick withdrawal and the abrupt return to normal time caused Ves to suffer a minor headache. He groaned and held his palm against his forehead.

"Meow?"

Lucky, who was huddled against Clixie, looked up at him with a curious expression.

"Something is up." Ves frowned. "I just received an emergency notification from Benny."

Soon enough, his executive assistant barged into his design lab. He looked so alarmed that Ves was convinced that something serious had happened!

"Boss! You won't believe what happened! A ship called the Ubiquitous Force just entered the Cinach System! She's on her way to Cinach VI right now!"

"...What?"

Was there a reason for Ves to take note of the arrival of a random starship? The Cinach System was one of the Sentinel Kingdom's many trade hubs. Hundreds, if not thousands of ships entered and exited the star system every day!

"The Ubiquitous Force is not an ordinary ship! She's an armed MTA frigate!"

"What?!"

The unscheduled arrival of a genuine warship was truly unusual! As far as he was aware of, the MTA didn't maintain any notable military bases at Cinach. The large branch on Cinach VI mostly serviced the local mech industry. It held relatively little defensive value compared to the fortresses the Association erected elsewhere.

Ves didn't bother to ask Gavin any questions. Instead, he connected his implant to the galactic net and rapidly scanned the latest news.

It only took a few seconds for Ves to understand his assistant's alarm.

The Ubiquitous Force was not a regular frigate! She was a vessel that was personally assigned to one of the Master Mech Designers stationed at Centerpoint!

The name of this Master sounded very familiar to Ves. His face instantly darkened.

"What is it, Ves?" His girlfriend asked as she stroked Clixie's back. "Who arrived in this star system?"

"It seems Master Moira Willix of the MTA has decided to visit Cinach VI. Her personal frigate portal jumped over at the best possible speed according to the starship watchers."

What took at least a month for Scarlet Rose to traverse only took a day or two at best!

If Master Willix embarked on a trip to Cinach the regular way, then Ves and his Larkinson Fleet would have been gone by then. He wouldn't have to deal with her thieving presence in that case!

Sadly, not everything went his way.

"Has Master Willix announced the reason for her visit?" Gloriana asked with a hopeful smile.

"No, Miss Gloriana." Gavin meekly responded as if he worked for her instead of Ves! "The people of the MTA have no obligation to explain themselves. What few inquiries the locals have sent to the Ubiquitous Force have gone unanswered. We do know that the MTA branch at downtown Torze has exhibited a lot of activity since yesterday. We can now conclude that the local mechers have been getting ready to receive an august figure."

"Ugh." Ves groaned and palmed his face. "And I'm sure the great master's visit has NOTHING to do with the validation of our latest mech design."

There was no way a revered Master Mech Designer portal jumped straight into the Cinach System to lay her eyes on the mechs designed by the local mech industry. The only reasonable explanation was that she came to take a peek at the work of a mech designer she had already expressed interest beforehand!

What a nightmare!

For a moment, Ves darted his eyes at Lucky. He began to contemplate the feasibility of sending off on an impromptu assassination mission.

"Meow?"

"Yeah, bad idea."

He quickly shelved his impulsive thoughts. Even if Lucky's stealth and phasing abilities turned him into a top-notch assassin, there was no way a higher up of the MTA was that easy to kill!

Ves already knew that senior CFA officers gained access to fancy toys such as personal teleporters, high-grade shields, life-saving augmentations and more.

If that wasn't enough, her bodyguards, whether they came in the form of mechs or accompanied her on foot, were incredibly formidable! Before Lucky could even rake his claws into Willix's flesh, the bodyguards would have already moved into action!

High technology was both miraculous and unfathomable to Ves. The MTA was one of the two most powerful organizations in human space, and utilized the best tech at humanity's disposal. Underestimating the survival abilities of a high official of the Association was a quick way to ruin his life!

"Have we received any message from the MTA, Benny?"

"We are watching our channels around the clock. So far, we have received nothing but routine notifications. The validation process of the Doom Guard design is still ongoing, though the MTA branch has unexpectedly extended it by a couple of days."

Ves' face frowned. "That means our design won't be validated until after its product reveal! I can't introduce a product and provide the assurance that it will go on sale very soon!"

What if the MTA withheld its validation on the design? What if they knocked on his doors in order to request some modifications? The delays would stall the momentum of his product release!

"Can we postpone our announcement?"

"We can't delay the product reveal, boss." Gavin shook his head. "We have already invited a lot of journalists, outfits and other people. A significant chunk of them have specifically booked passage to our star system. These are professionals who are on a very tight schedule. They'll be departing Cinach the next day!"

In short, Ves would piss off a lot of people who he was desperate to impress. Even if a delay wasn't a big deal for them, they would still attend his product reveal with a worse outlook than before!

"It's not a big problem as long as the MTA validates the Doom Guard design in the end, boss. The brief delay is meaningless since it will take at least a week for the first batch of mechs to be produced and undergo certification. Besides, if Master Willix has truly gone out of her way to travel to Cinach to inspect your latest work, it shouldn't be anything bad, right?"

Both Ves and Gloriana bought this argument. They were supremely confident of their work! They both knew that their striker mech had the potential to upend the entire market for striker mechs!

Certain mechs designed by other competitors might spew hotter flames, possess more capacity, resist more damage or accelerate faster.

Yet none of them fulfilled the area denial role as well as the Doom Guard!

When the shock at the news finally faded, Ves and Gloriana tried their best to resume their work in refining the first iteration of their Hexer mech design.

They didn't get much done for the rest of the day.

Ves didn't mind too much. The project had already reached a fairly advanced stage. The mech was already in a fully functional state and only required a lot of optimization from this point.

He was pretty proud of what he achieved. The unnamed Hexer mech design was not only an adequate knight mech that could provide basic but meaningful defensive support, but also possessed a range of powerful energy transmission capabilities!

The latter demanded most of his time. Even with Gloriana's expertise, it had been exceptionally troublesome to fit all of the functionality in a single mech frame!

He spent way more time than necessary on the energy siphoning mechanisms alone. He continually strengthened the extra appendages in order to ensure they were sharp and strong enough to breach through various kinds of mech armor. He even consulted Ketis, though at her current level she was of little help to a project of this magnitude.

The inordinate amount of time that Ves spent on sharpening the breaching components attracted Gloriana's attention time and time again.

"Aren't you overdoing it, Ves? It's as if you are trying to make it sharp enough to pierce through the chest armor of a mech!"

He chuckled in response. "I'm not aiming that high. I'm just afraid that it won't be able to pierce through the weak points of a mech. While every machine exhibits vulnerabilities, it still takes a certain amount of force to exploit them. The extra appendages are already fairly weak by themselves, so I have to make sure they won't fail during a critical moment on the battlefield! Many lives are at stake!"

What he conveniently left out of his explanation was that the extra appendages weren't limited to breaching downed machines. They could also be used to penetrate through the armor of active mech as long as it exposed its weak points!

While Ves did not expect that boys would make use of it in ordinary circumstances due to the indoctrination the women imposed on them, in desperate situations it could make all the difference!

A day after Master Moira Willix's unexpected arrival at Cinach, Ves and Gloriana were just about to start another design session. Before they could do so, their comms chimed at the same time.

They finally received an official notice from the MTA.

"Great news, Ves!" She spoke with a widening grin. "Master Willix has personally summoned us to the MTA branch at Torze! She's definitely impressed with our latest mech design, I'm sure of it! This is our chance to learn from her again!"

Ves did not share Gloriana's enthusiasm. Instead, fear and suspicion clouded his mind. Unlike her, Ves didn't value Master Willix's teaching that much. He was already doing fine by himself!

While the guidance of a Master was of inestimable value to any lesser mech designer, Ves would rather push it away if he had to expose his core secrets!

He coughed. "Our current design project still requires our attention. Gloriana, why don't you go ahead and meet this appointment while I go and complete the first iteration of our remaining mech design?"

His girlfriend froze and turned around. "You dare to reject an invitation from a Master? YOU DARE?! In addition, it's one thing to ignore the entreaties of a Master from the Friday Coalition, it's another thing to ignore a Master who belongs to the MTA! Master Willix is one of the greatest mech designers that I have the privilege of meeting and I am not about to let you ruin this reunion! Our Hexer mech design can wait! Besides, the official notice mentioned you specifically by name, so you can't skip it even if you are sick!"

"Goddammit."

Ves and his gleeful girlfriend quickly boarded a shuttle that flew them to their destination.

As the surface of Cinach VI swept underneath the vehicle, Ves began to build up his mental and spiritual defenses. When he finally met Master Willix again, he wanted to give away as little clues as possible!

He would be damned if Master Willix succeeded in imitating his design philosophy!

During the flight, he missed the company of their cats. The official notice didn't mention them and Ves thought it was best for their pets to stay as far away from a Master as possible.

They didn't even bring that many bodyguards, because the MTA would be taking care of all the security arrangements at the premises. Not even Nitaa was allowed to go any further than the shuttle once they landed at the site!

"You don't have to be so nervous, Ves." His girlfriend offered a reassuring smile at him. She completely misunderstood his concerns! "Master Willix probably didn't come to invalidate our mech design. While our Doom Guard contains a few alarming elements, I'm sure we'll be able to account for ourselves to the great master!"

"That's the least of my worries..."

Chapter 2057 Honored Summons

The MTA branch took up an entire city district in the capital city of Cinach VI. Stretching on for several kilometers in each direction, it was a piece of territory that was completely outside of the control of House Evenson!

No one objected to this arrangement. While the MTA took over a lot of valuable land, the presence of its branch massively enriched the surrounding territories!

Not only did the branch provide a lot of safety, but it also offered a lot of valuable services to the local mech designers and mech companies.

Transport vessels arrived and departed from its expansive landing zone every day. The vigorous mech industry of Cinach VI sent all of their mechs and mech design to this branch in order to receive the MTA's stamp of approval.

Despite the huge crush of mechs passing through the branch, the MTA employed enough advanced technology and experts to keep up with the workload.

Ves admired the productivity on display. If Ves or anyone else in the star sector attempted to test and inspect so many mechs, they would quickly be drowned by the growing backlog!

"It makes sense for the MTA to be good at this kind of work." Gloriana commented. "At the heart of it, it still holds true to its name. As a trade association for mechs, how could the MTA focus all of its resources on mechs and warships? Unlike the CFA, the MTA actually bothers to participate in society!"

"We're almost there. Let's compose ourselves and make sure we present ourselves at our best."

Since Master Willix's summons couldn't be ignored, Ves might as well try his best to make a good impression.

Both of them decided to wear their new clan outfits instead of something fancier. They both wore their red-and-white Larkinson Clan uniforms. Though Ves had prudently left the Larkinson Mandate behind, the emblem of the Golden Cat still marked their backs, giving him a bit of reassurance.

His uniform was devoid of any frills such as medals or ribbons. Ves purposefully wanted to come across as modest, diligent and dutiful. He wanted to convince Master Willix that he was a man who was burdened with responsibilities!

As for Gloriana, she wore her slimmer uniform because she wanted to use this opportunity as an impromptu publicity stunt. Significant portions of the MTA branch was accessible to the public, and she was sure there would be lots of people around to record their appearances.

What better way to build up the prestige and legitimacy of the Larkinson Clan than to wear its uniform to an upcoming meeting with a great Master?

The fact that this was not their first, but second meeting with Master Willix should be all the more significant to the public! The amount of attention that others directed towards Cinach VI must have reached an explosive height!

The pair of Journeymen weren't the only people in the clan who recognize the golden opportunities that Master Willix presented!

Gavin also rode on the shuttle. Half of the time, his attention was spent on communicating with the headquarters of the LMC. A lot of new developments took place ever since the Ubiquitous Force arrived at Cinach, and the mech industry already suspected that Ves and Gloriana were involved!

"Our company has been flooded with requests to attend our upcoming product reveal! We can't figure out how to respond to them. What are your instructions?"

"Trillion Hall can fit more people, right?"

"Yes, though we'll have to talk to its operators."

"I'm sure that they will acquiesce to our expanded demands. As for who to accept, make sure to pull in as many bigshots as possible. Those with money and those with power are the primary buyers of my products!"

"If I may suggest, we should also invite some influencers. While they aren't our target audience, there are still plenty of people who can spread the word about our Doom Guard!"

"Do that. I'll leave it up to you guys to decide who to invite. Make sure that they meet all of the requirements. Don't let in anyone who is too young, too old, too unhealthy or mentally unstable. No pets or animals either!"

Ves didn't want to risk anyone in his audience dropping dead due to a heart attack or something! Even if Ves had already specifically ordered extra medical services to be on standby at Trillion Hall, he didn't want to take the risk at all!

As Gavin buzzed like a busy bee, Ves mused that Master Willix's unanticipated visit wasn't entirely detrimental.

Her involvement in the Doom Guard design would likely drive up its interest to a stratospheric height! Though Master Mech Designers would never do something as crass as endorsing an individual mech design, it was already obvious she expressed a lot of interest in his upcoming product.

If the people of the mech community weren't stupid, they would definitely conclude that the LMC had developed something exceptional! Anything that gained the illusion of attracting interest from the MTA would definitely be a product to watch!

Ves didn't need to ask Gavin how much free publicity they stood to gain from these developments. Master Willix possessed a very great reputation in the industry, and by visiting Cinach VI in order to inspect his latest work, she was in effect rubbing some of her considerable fame off to the pair of Journeymen!

To the LMC, this was a dream come true! Though his mech company wasn't bold enough to use Master Willix as a marketing prop, there were plenty of ways to build up hype without breaking any boundaries!

As the shuttle finally neared the MTA branch, the escorting mechs of the Avatars and Glory Battalion slowly halted. They weren't allowed to proceed any further.

The shuttle arrived at the designated landing zone by itself. When Ves and Gloriana stepped out, they left everyone else inside.

Ves knew that even before they reached this site, they were already under intense observation. He had made sure to put on a mask and exert as much control over his body as possible!

The two stepped forward and followed the projected directions entering their view.

As the two slowly walked to another section of the base, they walked past plenty of people. Most of them wore various work uniforms. Ves and Gloriana didn't stand out too much from them despite their different origins.

There were also plenty of visitors who wore all kinds of fashion. The Sentinel Kingdom's predominant fashion was highly segregated by rank and class, so it was easy for Ves to figure out the origins of these people.

At least some of them paid a lot of scrutiny to the pair. They didn't even hide their attempts to record footage of them with their comms and dedicated recording devices.

"Smile for the recorders." Gloriana linked her arm with his. "All of the industry publications will see us like this! I hope Master Willix meets us at one of the public areas of this base. We'll definitely show up in the general news portals if we are seen in the presence of a great master!"

The public wouldn't pay so much attention if Ves and Gloriana were visiting a regular Master. People like Master Olson and Master Huron may be great figures, but they only made up the upper echelon of a second-rate state.

In contrast, Master Willix was a truly influential individual on the galactic scale! She could change the course of history of several star clusters with the power and knowledge she had at her disposal!

And right now, two young Journeymen were about to meet her once again!

They slowly entered the entrance of an enclosed section of the base. Once they passed through the mandatory security checks, they finally encountered the powerful woman right inside!

The Master maintained a polite expression on her face. Ves was aware that she was a rational mech designer, but one that made sure to exhibit at least some emotion to abide by social norms.

How much of her smile was authentic and how much of it was simulated, Ves didn't know. He would be a fool to let her disarm his suspicions just because she came across as polite!

This was an individual who not only specialized in gravity systems, but also mastered an untold amount of other design philosophies!

And now, she apparently set her sights on his secrets.

Both Ves and Gloriana bowed. "We are honored to enter your presence, Master Willix."

The older woman's smile grew wider. "The two of you are pretty remarkable. While our MTA possesses plenty of Journeymen who are more talented than you, none of them can arouse my interest quite like your combination!"

Gloriana immediately transformed into an eager puppy who yearned for her owner's approval. "We have taken your lessons to heart and applied our new insights on our latest work! Our Doom Guard design wouldn't have been so good without your helpful advice!"

"Oh, don't discount your own contributions. It is your effort and dedication towards our profession that has enabled you to design such a remarkable mech. I have taught plenty of bright mech designers who are smarter than you, but their works aren't nearly as inspiring!"

As Gloriana gladly babbled with Master Willix, Ves tried his best to maintain a bland smile and blend into the background as much as possible.

Just like last time, Ves wanted to interact with the great Master as little as possible. The more he spoke, the more he gave away!

Sadly, his plan completely failed. Master Willix wasn't the kind of person who exhibited too much favoritism. As soon as her piercing eyes turned to Ves, his entire body seemed to be pinned into place.

"Ves Larkinson. You are quite a surprise. I was already intrigued with what I have observed from the Quint and your other works, but your latest mech design is very different in several ways. Did you know that your sample mech has alarmed the mech evaluators of our base? They have never encountered a mech like it before!"

That meant the MTA branch probably contacted headquarters for help. As soon as Master Willix caught wind of it, she probably volunteered to inspect the Doom Guard design in person!

Ves tried his best not to show any irritation. Did this Master set an alarm or something that notified her whenever he or his girlfriend did something notable?!

How would he ever get rid of her if that was true!? Perhaps his only chance of shaking her off would be to flee to the Red Ocean!

With the Master's attention squarely focused on himself, Ves had to offer a response.

It was time to put on his crazy hat yet again!

"I am honored to receive your acknowledgement. Our Doom Guard design incorporates an innovative new application of my design. Through divine inspiration, I have conceived of a new method of soliciting multiple proto-gods at the same time! The

principal reason why our latest mech possesses such a disconcerting presence is because I have managed to transform it into a battlefield where two rivalling proto-gods are locked into an eternal struggle!"

Before Ves could disgorge more nonsense from his mouth, Master Willix calmly raised a palm.

"While I am very interested in the mechanics behind your unique design, let us discuss this further at the testing facility. The Doom Guard you have developed is far too interesting to explore it at a distance."

With that, she gestured for them to proceed forward. They walked for a time until they reached a large, indoor hall that contained a very lab-like atmosphere.

It wasn't long before Ves felt the familiar pressure impacting on his mind. His mech gradually came into view.

Outside of his expectation, his mech attracted quite a lot of mechers!

Off-duty mech pilots, scores of mech technicians and a host of researchers who had probably been brought by Master Willix all surrounded the Doom Guard at varying distances!

Despite the mech's active glow, a considerable amount of people withstood the glow without any sign of fear or discomfort!

Naturally, Master Willix was also among them. She steadily strode forward as if the mech's fearsome glow was nothing more than a gentle breeze!

This magnitude of spiritual pressure was nothing to a Master Mech Designer!

Chapter 2058 Inheriting the Mantle

The MTA branch on Cinach VI might not be as impressive as Centerpoint, but it was filled with advanced technology.

Wherever Ves turned his corner, he spotted advanced devices that might easily be worth as much as a factory ship!

Of course, there was no way Ves would ever think about grabbing them and smuggling them away. The security arrangements inside the base must be incredibly ridiculous as well, so much so that he was sure that his speech, body language, mannerisms and other aspects about him were under constant scrutiny!

Fortunately for a habitual liar like him, he possessed a trump card that hopefully fooled all of those AIs analyzing all of his micro-expressions.

The 'crazy hat' that Ves put on his head was so convincing that it changed his behavior down to the root! Whether it was his facial tics, his posture, the emotion in his voice or his argumentation, he truly did appear to believe in the utter nonsense he spewed whenever prompted!

"So let me reiterate your theory." Master Moira Willix gazed up at the Doom Guard mech that rested just a couple of steps away. "You have somehow managed to beseech two 'proto-gods' to enter your mech design and thereby provoke a 'divine' struggle for supremacy?"

Despite her extremely close proximity to the mech, she showed no hint of discomfort at all! While Ves and Gloriana both experienced a wave of terror that cut straight to bone, the Master Mech Designer acted as if a gentle breeze caressed her skin!

What was even worse in Ves' opinion was that Master Willix wasn't the only one who showed immunity to the Doom Guard's composite terror glow. At least a dozen other mech designers floated around the mech without showing any signs of growing crazy!

This was impossible! While Ves could accept that a Master Mech Designer possessed the sheer spiritual strength to withstand all of that pressure, what about those other people? Were they Masters as well? No way! Their uniforms and behavior suggested that they were all subordinate to Master Willix!

Was it because they were rational mech designers? Perhaps. Ves didn't dare to concentrate his mind and perform any spiritual manipulation in front of Willix, but it might be that the people crawling all over the Doom Guard might have drained all of their passion!

Rational mech designers were extremely good at ignoring their emotions. This might also include emotions induced by external factors!

Of course, an alternate and more simpler answer would be that these elite specimens of humanity had trained their mental resilience attributes to ridiculous levels. They faced much worse horrors and learned to deal with them! A mere Doom Guard might be child's play in their eyes!

Whatever the case, Ves was deeply uncomfortable at how the MTA took so much interest in his mech designs.

Sure, they contained something intrinsic that probably no other mech designer in the galaxy managed to accomplish, but was it interesting enough to attract the repeated attention of a vaunted Master?

Ves felt persecuted by the MTA! Why couldn't this powerful organization that was tasked with defending the entire human race spend its time on huge, galaxy-wide affairs? Why must a powerful Master whose time was literally worth more than the net

worth of the Larkinson Clan travel all the way to Cinach VI to inspect a single Doom Guard?

Had he become Moira Willix's latest toy? Was this a Master Mech Designer's form of twisted entertainment?

He hated every second of this situation!

Of course, he buried his seething emotions deep in his mind. Outwardly, he looked as pleasant and honored as ever to be in the presence of a revered Master.

"What you have just described is not a theory. It is the truth!" He raised his hands in imitation of all of those True Believers that had recently joined his clan! "The proto-gods that I have created or enticed for my mech designs are all powerful in their own way! However, even mortals can harness the gods! Within my Doom Guard design, I have enticed a great predator and an unknown enigma to enter, only for them to subsequently get locked in a struggle for supremacy! A mountain can never contain two tigers!"

The Master looked intrigued.

"That sounds very precarious, Mr. Larkinson. How is it possible that you have managed to fool these unfathomable beings whose powers are reportedly beyond mortal ken?"

Ves grinned with absolute confidence! "Because I only abuse the weakest gods! Do you think I'm crazy enough to challenge the greater gods? Hell no! While my ambition is to turn my mechs into gods, I am far from reaching this point. I can only take a step back and create flawed imitations through earnest prayer and sacrifice, or I lure existing divinities to my mech designs. Regardless of their origins, these beings are hardly invincible, hence why my partner and I refer to them as proto-gods."

His girlfriend helpfully concurred with his explanation. "Ves is always in control. Every mech we design, we become more proficient at harnessing the power of proto-gods. It won't be long before we are able to play in the big leagues and turn our mechs into true gods! At that point, our mechs will finally ascend and be capable of challenging the greatest battleships of the CFA!"

What the hell!?! Ves tried his best not to sputter! It was one thing to claim that they were trying to create 'living gods', but to claim that their work would be able to surpass the strongest weapon platforms of humanity was entirely different!

Fortunately, Gloriana uttered her claims inside an MTA base instead of a CFA base!

Master Willix and some of the people around them chuckled in a good-natured manner.

"Designing mechs that are capable of making battleships obsolete is the common mission of every mech designer." She spoke in an encouraging manner. "I envy your optimism. The courage and ambition you youngsters possess makes me hopeful for the future of our profession. I look forward to seeing how far you can take your unconventional ideas."

They continued to discuss the mech while various people scoured the Doom Guard from top to bottom. Ves recognized that they performed very thorough scans, for what purpose he didn't know.

At the very least, material scanners wouldn't pick up anything special about their mech. Leaving aside the spiritual shenanigans, the Doom Guard was a relatively clean and simple striker mech. It was practically a toy compared to a modern first-class multipurpose mech!

However, from the way the mechers performed their inspection with utmost seriousness, it didn't seem they were looking down on the mech. That seemed strange to Ves. Where was the elite condescension that superior humans held towards inferior creations?

Soon enough, they proceeded with conducting some advanced tests. Just like the trials conducted by the Rim Guardians, the facility they were in was capable of generating a physical projection setting that simulated reality to a very accurate degree!

The testing site even negated gravity entirely while sucking out all of the air in order to simulate a space environment!

Paired with an MTA mech pilot who appeared to be minimally-affected by the glow, the Doom Guard mech performed quite well.

Gloriana frequently narrated the mech's technical performance aspects while the mech demonstrated its mobility and firepower in a simulated obstacle course.

Nothing about the technical performance of the mech was impressive. Nonetheless, the relatively high degree of optimization and lack of flaws still earned Willix's appreciation.

"I can tell that you have made good use of the gains you have made to refine your work." Master Willix complimented Gloriana. "I can sense the total dedication of your design philosophy in this mech. The pursuit of perfection is one of the most difficult paths to pursue, but nothing is impossible. You will need to do your best to hold on your conviction no matter how difficult it is for you to progress. I know many colleagues who developed similar ambitions, but faced too many obstacles along the way."

"What happened to them, Master?"

"They either adapted or died." Willix bluntly answered, emphasizing the great difficulties they faced. "The weaker ones compromised their design philosophies, making them less absolute and contingent on surpassing insurmountable barriers. Once they made this adjustment, a portion of them have managed to advance to Master and enjoy long and successful careers."

Gloriana frowned. "In exchange, they gave up on their original dream. They turned their back on their mission!"

"There are plenty of mech designers who held the same stance as you. They showed true sincerity and dedication in their work. Sadly, I don't believe that any of them has managed to realize their design philosophies and advance to Master. They all died sooner than the colleagues they consider cowards."

In other words, as long as Gloriana kept advancing, she would eventually bump into a bottleneck and face the same dilemma!

If gaining power and living a few centuries longer mattered more to her, then she could always 'sell out' and hollow out her design philosophy with some effort.

However, if her goal and ambition as a mech designer was more important than everything else, then she should never doubt herself and keep trying to accomplish the impossible!

No matter how many setbacks she suffered, she had to keep struggling even if there was no end in sight!

Though Gloriana understood her chances, she still believed that she would be able to succeed where others failed!

She proudly raised her chin. "Everyone around me advised me to pursue a different specialty, but I was never raised to accept defeat! My mother wanted me to become perfect in as many ways as possible, and I did my best to meet her expectations! When I became a mech designer, I harbored the intention to do the same as my mother, but apply her mission to my work! Designing the perfect vessel for any mech pilot is my way of honoring my mother's love and legacy!"

The pure passion and emotion radiating from her voice and body left no doubt to the truth of her statement. Even Ves looked surprised as he never really heard her explain her exact motivation for pursuing such a difficult path!

"We humans are shaped by our parents and predecessors." Master Willix reflected. "Each generation passes on their accumulations to the next generation. That has been the rule for humanity and many other alien races. In fact, I can even state that out of all of the races of the galaxy, we humans have become the most successful of them all

because of how much we emphasize the passing of knowledge and wisdom to our children."

Ves looked confused. "How so?"

"Humans aren't the most remarkable race in the galaxy, at least in the earlier ages. Before the advent of widespread genetic modification, before the development of safe and highly capable implants, most of us had to settle with our baseline capabilities. How could our meager strength and intelligence ever match against the Seven Apex Races?"

"We cheated. We swindled. We betrayed."

"That is what the history books will tell you, Mr. Larkinson, but the truth.. is not so simple." Willix shook her head. "Regardless of the details, there is one trait that has allowed humans like us to become the dominant race in the galaxy while the Seven Apex Races have either gone extinct or been driven out of their former empires."

"And that is..?"

The Master smiled wider. "Our willingness to teach. It takes a certain amount of altruism to stop hoarding knowledge. We humans may be selfish most of the time, but we also hold the capacity to see beyond our individual needs and do what is right for the entire group. Innovation was and still is one of the keys to our ascension to power. The problem is that a single human can exhibit only so much ingenuity. If we truly wish to prosper, then we must be willing to pass on our knowledge to those who can inherit our mantle in the future."

Ves supposed that Master Willix's parable must be conveying some profound life lesson. It was too bad he couldn't figure out the underlying message!

Chapter 2059 MTA Advisory

The examinations only lasted half a day.

Unlike the instance where Master Willix and her subordinates inspected the Quint for an entire week, the Doom Guard evidently didn't present as much value.

The only noteworthy aspect about the mech was its spiritual properties. The Doom Guard design was the first time Ves employed spiritual counterbalancing to impart a discordant, dynamic glow.

How much the MTA picked up and what they exactly saw in his mech design, he had no idea. Deep within his mind, he constantly prayed that Master Willix and her subordinates uncovered as little as possible!

Sadly, Master Willix didn't share the gains. She didn't spend much time inspecting the mech in person either. After inspecting it up close for thirty minutes, she eventually withdrew and began to spend the rest of her time chatting with Ves and Gloriana!

Sometimes, she queried their theories, some of which hit very close to their core secrets. At other times, she adopted the role of a mentor and taught them all sorts of lessons.

She didn't bring up any specific subjects related to mech design. Instead, she mostly spent her time on discussing the more philosophical aspects of mech design. It was as if she was preparing the two young Journeymen for something greater in the future!

"Innovation is one of the greatest strengths of our race." She noted. "However, don't underestimate the ingenuity of competing races. The more we push them, the greater their desperation. The greater their desperation, the harder they work towards a solution. Once, we were the underdogs and the Seven Apex Races ruled the galaxy. Now, humanity has become the dominant power in the Milky Way while the Seven Apex Races have become the underdogs. Doesn't that sound familiar to you in any way?"

"Are the aliens making a comeback?" Gloriana looked concerned.

As a child of the Age of Mechs, she had always grown up with the belief that human civilization was the strongest power of the galaxy! It successfully vanquished over older, more sophisticated alien empires through a combination of trickery, innovation and daring!

It was very hard to imagine humanity losing their edge while the aliens were patiently sharpening their blades in the shadows.

"We are not as complacent as the old alien rulers, Miss Wodin. Though we have struck an armistice with the remaining alien empires of the Milky Way, we are under no illusion that we have returned to peace. Some day, the golden age we enjoy will come at an end. Perhaps I will be able to live long enough to contribute my abilities towards this galactic conflict, but if that is not the case, I hope that younger mech designers such as you will be able to inherit the mantle of my generation and fight on our behalf."

Ves blinked. "Um, okay."

In truth, he wanted to ask why the Big Two didn't go on the offensive and resume the conquest of the Milky Way. While he understood that the infighting of the latter half of the Age of Conquest turned humanity's attention inward, the insanity of that period already ended centuries ago!

In this day and age, humanity not only recovered from the ravages of this dark period, but also grew considerably stronger! If Ves was in charge of human civilization, he

would have commanded everyone to invade the territories that remained out of its grasp!

Instead, the Big Two seemingly ignored their hostile neighbors and initiated an expensive extragalactic invasion. Even if the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy contained a lot of phasewater, couldn't the Big Two clean up their backyard first? Humanity risked diluting its strength at this rate!

As much as he wanted to pick Master Willix's head, he prudently refrained from voicing his doubts. There was no reason for a small, local Journeyman like him to involve himself in galactic affairs. The galactic mech councilors of the MTA and the grand admirals of the CFA probably knew exactly what they were doing!

At least Ves hoped so.

Fortunately, Master Willix didn't always talk about abstract matters all the time. She also turned to more specific topics.

"Your choice of venturing to the Sentinel Kingdom is an interesting decision." She stated. "Are you aiming to perform a mission in the Nyxian Gap to earn merits, perhaps?"

"Yup." Gloriana eagerly nodded. "We need to earn lots of merits very quickly in order to earn passage to the Red Ocean!"

"This option is under consideration." Ves responded more modestly.

The older mech designer regarded them with a stern expression. "The Nyxian Gap is a very dangerous region that has even managed to confound our researchers. There are ancient secrets hidden there, many of which are of no concern to people at your level. Even if you stumble upon something, there is a substantial chance that you will immediately meet your end shortly afterwards. We have sent our own expeditions in the Nyxian Gap before, with some of them never coming back. No matter how strong you think you are, there are always greater threats that can swallow you up if you are unlucky."

Both Ves and Gloriana gulped. If what she said was true, then even the MTA suffered substantial losses in the Nyxian Gap! How could the two of them do any better?

"That said, the Nyxian Gap is also a valuable region and a source of considerable wealth. There is a reason why we take great interest in it. While I don't advise you to accept any missions that take place in the Gap, if you do, I commend your courage for doing so. For people like you who are expected to blaze a trail with your design philosophies, it is not enough to follow an ordinary trajectory. The more impossible your ambition sounds, the more you need to step out of your comfort zone and find answers

elsewhere. Anything that is outside of the established norm is a potential source for inspiration."

Ves wasn't sure whether Master Willix was trying to encourage or discourage them to explore the Nyxian Gap. While it sounded as if she was in favor, she didn't mince any words about the danger either!

"Do you have any advice for us if we choose to accept such a mission?" He asked.

"Hmm.." Master Willix fell into thought. "No matter how greedy you are for merits, don't accept any of the missions that send you deeper into the Nyxian Gap. Absolutely do not venture to the center, for only death awaits those who barge into this pool of madness! Stick to the periphery where most of the Nyxians and Peacekeepers struggle for dominance. You'll only face human threats in these parts, and that is something that your mechs can confidently defeat!"

Though Ves disliked her immensely, that didn't mean he automatically discounted all of her advice. He took her warning very seriously and vowed not to go too deep into the Nyxian Gap.

It took too much time to get in and out anyway. Ves didn't have the time to muck about in the depths of the Gap for so many years.

"Can you tell us anything more specific?"

The Master shook her head. "Don't push your luck. I am bound from telling you anything confidential, and I'm sorry to say that most of what we know about the Nyxian Gap must stay within our halls."

"I see."

"Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. As long as you remain in the periphery, there is no need to know that much."

Time passed. As Ves gained a lot of relevant and less relevant information, the visit finally came to an end. As Ves and Gloriana were about to return to their shuttle, they received one more notice.

"I have thoroughly studied your Doom Guard and deem it sufficient for public sale, with caveats." Master Willix announced. "Unfortunately, I can't validate your mech design right away. The proper steps still need to be followed. The evaluators of this base will likely concur with my recommendation."

"What are the caveats you've mentioned?"

"Your mech will be allowed to go on sale, but your mech company and any vendor must mention the potential dangers and risks of using this mech to your customers. In addition, we will also publish an advisory that strongly discourages the use of this mech to terrorize the local populace on a massive scale. Your Doom Guard is designed to fight against other mechs, and it should stay that way."

Ves looked dismayed. While these conditions sounded reasonable, it was very hard for him to prevent abuse! He didn't control his mechs once they got sold!

"How can we possibly enforce this rule?"

"There are already existing rules concerning the use of mechs against unarmed civilians. That is why we are simply reminding everyone not to pretend as if they don't apply anymore. We will be watching the conduct of your customers very closely."

Great. No one wants to be stared at by the LMC all the time, least of all Ves!

"Is there anything else, Master?"

"I will be staying in Cinach VI for a few more days in order to attend your upcoming product reveal. My assistant will be in touch in order to reserve a place for myself. Mind you, I will only be attending as a member of the audience."

Both Ves and Gloriana looked shocked at her declaration! For someone like Master Willix to attend their product reveal was a shocking turn of events!

Neither of them were ready to hold a presentation in front of such an august figure!

Gloriana recovered the fastest. She broke out into a brilliant smile. "We would be honored to present our latest work in your presence! You are welcome to attend our product reveal!"

Ves wanted to cough. "I'm afraid that our announcement won't present anything you haven't already seen today. We are just holding a simple marketing event aimed towards the masses. I'm sure you have witnessed much better at the MTA."

"While you are correct, that is no reason for me to look down on your means. I am not attending your announcement in order to judge you, so don't be afraid to run your show."

With that, they bid goodbye and separated from each other.

Ves tried his best not to shake as he briskly walked back to the shuttle. He would have sprinted to the vehicle if it wouldn't attract so much attention!

Once they reached the shuttle, Ves waited until the vehicle lifted off and flew all the way back to the base occupied by the Larkinson to vent his frustrations!

"GODDAMMIT!"

His girlfriend threw a curious look at him. "What's wrong, Ves?"

"Master Willix is going to attend our product reveal! Why can't she portal jump back to Centerpoint and return to her research straight away?!"

"I think she's interested in our work."

"That's no reason for her to linger around so long!"

Gloriana smiled and crossed her arms. "Not necessarily, but I think there's more to her actions than you realize, Ves. How do you think the public has reacted to her arrival in this star system? How do you think everyone will respond once they learn that Master Willix will attend our upcoming product reveal?"

It didn't take long to connect the dots now that Gloriana pointed him in the right direction.

His eyes widened. "Our work will attract a lot more attention from the public! Our reputation will probably receive a substantial boost!"

"I think this is Master Willix's way of bestowing a favor to us." Gloriana guessed. "The MTA prohibits its members from interfering with local affairs or providing assistance to specific individuals without cause. I think she likes us or finds our work promising, though, and wants to give us a hand. This is one of the ways she can help her out without blatantly breaking her own rules! At most, she is merely bending them a little!"

Ves was very familiar with bending rules. He could easily see Gloriana's point.

While Master Willix might have good intentions in mind, she was always a thieving wretch to him! He didn't want to receive her favor at all!

If she attended his presentation, then Ves wouldn't be able to employ his spiritual manipulation to drug his audience!

Chapter 2060 New Initiative

The news about a 'special guest' attending the LMC's upcoming product reveal soon went public.

Ves passed on what he knew to Gavin while Gloriana probably blabbed about attracting a Master to attend their product reveal to her own circle.

Naturally, the LMC went into another frenzy. They had to make sure that the venue properly accommodated a high dignitary from the MTA. Not only that, the company also had to make sure the agenda didn't contain any elements that the MTA would disapprove of! It would be fatal for the sales prospects of the Doom Guard if the Master was forced to rebuke the mech design during the event!

During these hasty preparations, the Marketing Department cleverly made some noise and published a statement informing the attendants of the product reveal about some 'unanticipated changes'.

The statement contained plenty of innocuous sentences that only vaguely hinted that someone from a powerful organization might possibly attend as an observer.

All of the journalists who watched the LMC like a hawk immediately connected the dots. It wasn't long before they all published the explosive news!

The entire mech community of the Sentinel Kingdom and beyond reacted with surprise! Interest in the LMC's latest mech design practically doubled! By now, everyone wanted to know what the fuss was all about. What mech design was so great to attract the attention of one of the leaders of her profession?

The publicity surrounding Ves, Gloriana, the LMC and their as-of-yet-unannounced mech design skyrocketed all the way up to space! It had gained a life of its own as hundreds of unfounded rumors fueled the hype until it burned as hot as the sun!

Ves reacted with a lot of concern about the crush of attention that he and his work received. The interest from the public wasn't constrained to the star sector anymore. Interested parties from the rest of the star cluster all the way up to Winged Serenade were all shifting their views to a single mech designed by a couple of Journeyman!

This statement sounded ridiculous if it concerned anyone else, but Ves and Gloriana earned enough fame with their previous accomplishment to earn some credibility to the greater mech community.

At the very least, the mech industry did not believe that Master Willix was fooling around!

"Great news, boss! We have already made some very huge gains!" Gavin announced. "A lot of bureaucratic obstacles that have prevented us from beginning the production and sale of our Doom Guard model in a lot of foreign states have suddenly been overcome! The various state authorities think that since a Master is indirectly vouching for our product, they don't want to appear as if they oppose her judgement!"

Ves groaned as he hugged Lucky to his chest. "That's not my intention!"

"Meow."

"It's not so simple, Lucky! Just because we can sell more mechs doesn't mean I can buy more expensive exotics to fill your stomach! I have lots of other expenses to cover before I can upgrade your diet."

"Meow!"

Lucky resentfully phased out of his arms and floated out of his reach.

"Why are you not as enthused?" Gavin asked with a perplexed expression. "The support of a highly reputable authority is one of the greatest boons we could have asked for! Just the suggestion that our Doom Guard has gained a Master's approval is ten times more effective than the most expensive marketing campaign that we could mount!"

"You're not wrong, Benny. However, have you ever wondered whether too much is not a good thing? The expectation of my new striker mech is probably sky-high! Despite its unique properties, it is just a third-class premium striker mech! Not every spaceborn outfit has room for such a mech! Our Doom Guard is only useful in defensive scenarios where the mech isn't expected to fly around a lot! The lethality of its primary armament is highly dependent on the quality of its propellant, which can ramp up very quickly!"

Gavin shook his head. "I would take that in a heartbeat. Overhyping our product and building up too many expectations is dangerous, I admit. Normally, it's best to be a little modest and stick closer to the truth, only to delight our customers with some pleasant surprises later on, but we have gone past this point. Right now, it's best to ride the starship to her destination even if she has gone out of control! Wherever we crash at the end, at least we made it farther than if we boarded a safer vessel!"

What a lovely analogy. Ves glared at his attention. "This is going to mar our brand! Don't you realize how much effort I put into developing a reputation for excellence? Once we crash, it is a lot harder to earn back trust!"

"Your mech design isn't that bad, right? I think you should be more confident in your own product. Sure, a lot of people have begun to make increasingly wilder guesses about our upcoming mech design, but they won't react as bad as you fear when you finally pop their bubbles. As long as our Doom Guard is still a great product, they can easily be convinced to appreciate its value! We just have to do our best to sell the mech design in the upcoming product reveal."

In the end, it all came down to the presentation. Ves had to make sure to do his best to turn his scary mech into a desirable addition to his target audience's mech roster!

The problem to him was that the stakes were raised to such a height that even a risk-taking bastard like Ves wanted to withdraw!

Sadly, he didn't have a choice this time!

He sighed. "I guess I'll manage. I better spend the rest of my time practicing my speech."

"That's a good idea."

As Ves despairingly prepared for his presentation as if he was about to attend his own execution, elsewhere in the base, a bunch of mech pilots gathered together.

A handful of them wore the yellow-and-white uniforms of the Avatars. Others wore the less flamboyant grey-and-white uniforms of the Sentinels. There were even some who wore the new brown-and-white uniforms of the Battle Criers and the mostly black uniforms of the Black Cats!

They had all gathered around the most notable new additions to the Larkinson Clan. Initially, they were attracted to the eye-catchingly large mech that stood dormant in the open!

"Is this the Adonis Colossus?" Imon Ingvar raised his eyebrow as he experienced the very masculine glow of the custom mech. "What was the clan patriarch thinking when he designed this mech? Was he trying to impress his Hexer girlfriend or something?"

His sister chuckled. "I would argue that he may have been rebelling against her instead. Hexers probably aren't used to mechs that are proudly male like this one. Just look at the size and thickness of that 'belt'! Doesn't it look like the mech is hiding something dangerous?"

While an increasingly larger crowd of off-duty Larkinsons gathered around one of the clan patriarch's rare custom mechs, two figures emerged from the cockpit of the mech.

They used an antigrav rappel to float down to the ground. Both of them were clad in red-and-white uniforms, which signified that they were general members of the Larkinson Clan.

This was rather odd. Practically every mech pilot, even the new recruits, had already joined one of the mech forces operating under the clan!

"Good day, fellow Larkinsons!" Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson grinned and spread his arms. "I see that you are having a great time admiring my Adonis Colossus! Before you ask, he's original! You can practically feel it from this mech!"

While Vincent basked in the looks of envy and admiration from the crowd, Raella Larkinson jabbed her elbow against his side and coughed.

"Vincent and I would like to have your attention. When we initially joined the clan, we wanted to see what mech pilots like us could do. While I am impressed by the amount of fighting forces we can join, I noticed that there was a distinct lack of.. fun. Don't get

me wrong. I'm sure you have plenty to do in the Avatars and whatnot, but there are hardly any activities for us to mingle together and enjoy ourselves in a more organized setting."

"What is it you want to do?" A Sentinel mech pilot asked.

Vincent grinned wider. "Why, that's a good question, brother! After discussing this deplorable lack of entertainment with my babe, we have decided to introduce a brand-new initiative! We want to establish an internal competition circuit in our clan!"

"What?"

"Competition circuit?"

"Can we even do this?"

Most of the mech pilots among the crowds possessed a military or private sector background. They always treated their profession as a serious duty.

There were scant few people in the clan who possessed a connection with the entertainment side of the mech piloting profession!

"Who are you guys, anyway?! What makes you think you can set this up from scratch?"

"I am Raella Larkinson, a trueblood member of the clan!" She listed out her qualifications. "In the past, I was a former mech athlete and competed in an amateur mech games circuit. After that, I transitioned to the underground dueling circuit at Bentheim, where I earned my chops and became a champion! After that, I was promoted to the rank of captain in my organization where I led an entire mech company of mech duelists and mech athletes. While I can't say that I have organized a competitive circuit before, I have competed often enough to know how they are run! If anyone disagrees, we can hash it out in a duel!"

Her bearing exuded the confidence of a mech champion! Raella not only dueled hundreds of opponents, but also fought in the Sand War in the Bentheim System! All of this made it clear that she wasn't a regular member of the clan!

Even so, not many believed she could pull off her plan.

Captain Casella Ingvar strode forward. "I heard about you, Raella. You used to be with the so-called Blood Claws, did you not?"

"That's true. So what?"

"Our clan isn't anything like your gang in Bentheim."

Raella growled. "Well, if you don't want to help, then piss off!"

Imon quickly strode forward and pulled her sister back by the shoulder. "What do you need to set up this circuit?"

Though his sister looked scandalized, Imon didn't care! He was getting rather bored with the months of practice. There was only so much he could maintain his interest while whacking his opponents to death in simulated combat!

Recognizing that she managed to hook someone, Raella grinned. "I plan to start with something simple from the start. We'll organize a simple dueling circuit at first. We'll accept applications from any able mech pilot of the clan for a time before we draw up a schedule. We'll start by holding yearly seasons where every participant can earn points by competing against each other in 1 against 1 duels. After that, the best-performing participants will be seeded in the playoff format that will truly determine who will become the champion duelist of the Larkinson Clan!"

Though it sounded rather basic compared to the more elaborate mech games circuits that attracted the most viewership, this was something the Larkinsons could participate in themselves!

At least half of the mech pilots in the gathering crowd already looked interested at signing up! Such a competition sounded incredibly interesting!

Casella noted something problematic, however. "Where will you hold these duels? Will these duels take place in a virtual or a real arena?"

"A real one, of course! We want none of that simulated crap! A fight isn't real unless there's the possibility of drawing blood!"

A surprised murmur ran through the crowd! A real mech duel was very different from a simulated one! While it was ten times more exciting, it was countless times more dangerous and expensive!

"Impossible! It costs way too much! We can't afford to waste so many mechs!"

"Heh, that's what you think!" Vincent pounded his muscled chest with fist. "Don't worry about approval, brothers. I'm Ves Larkinson's best buddy and Raella is his favorite cousin! As long as we have enough clansmen backing up our proposal, he'll surely agree to this suggestion. Now what do you say? Are you ready to duel?!"

"YEAAAAAH!"