

## Mech 2061

### *Chapter 2061 We Are Brothers*

As the day of the product reveal arrived, Ves woke up to something very different.

Once he finished breakfast and got ready to hear his daily briefing, a few extra guests arrived at his office.

One of them brought a smile to his face. "Raella! You're back as well!"

The other caused his smile to disappear. "And I see you have brought.. Vincent Ricklin."

"Not anymore." The man wearing the red-and-white uniform of the Larkinson proudly patted his chest. "Since recently, I converted to the Larkinson Clan! Ever since I took the oath, I now go by Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson! Isn't that great? We're all relatives to each other now! You are my brother, if not in blood, then in heart!"

Ves wanted to puke. Those were his own words!

"Vincent.. How the hell did you get in the clan in the first place?! The recruiters were supposed to filter people with a criminal track record!"

"He's not that bad anymore, Ves." Raella explained for her boyfriend.

"He used to be a terrorist!"

"He was a freedom fighter! There's a difference! He wasn't killing people to get his jollies off! He was fighting for a worthy, if misguided cause! Besides, the Bright Republic officially pardoned him, which meant that the track record you were talking about no longer existed! I personally vouched for his good behavior!"

"I had to deal with a lot of crap when I grew up." Vincent added with a hint of sincerity, which Ves found rare! "The stuff I had to deal with in the Ricklin Family would make any Vesian noble house look tame! My own sister painted a target on my back! All of that is in the past now. The Ricklin Corporation is in ruins and Catelyn can do whatever she wants with the ashes that remain. My future is here now, alongside Raella and with my fellow Larkinsons!"

The smile on his face was dazzling enough to blind someone with the glint of light bouncing off his stark-white teeth!

When Ves departed from the Bright Republic for the final time, he thought he left most of his local troubles behind! No longer would he be beholden to the Bright Republic, The Tovar Family, Flashlight or any other inconsequential local power!

Yet for some reason, this damn barnacle managed to attach himself to his ship! Not only that, but this barnacle somehow managed to bamboozle the recruiters into joining the clan!

The truth was there for Ves to see and feel. In his spiritual vision, he spotted the newly-established bond between Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson and the Larkinson Mandate!

The Golden Cat personally approved of his entry in the clan!

"Goddammit!"

He didn't waste his time with the troublesome duo any further. Instead, he turned around, approached his bodyguard, and grabbed the Larkinson Mandate braced to her armor.

Ves shook the heavy book up and down a few times!

"Goldie! What is up with you!? Do you really think that bastard standing over there is worthy enough to become a clansman?!"

While everyone looked at him as if he had gone crazy, the ancestral spirit resting inside the book curiously looked up to her progenitor.

Nyaaaaa?

"Yeah, I'm talking to you! Don't act all cute with me with your big eyes! What is up with Vincent?!"

Nya nya nya. Nyaa!

"What?! He's actually committed?"

Nyaaa!

Ves threw the book away, causing its antigrav brace to arrest its fall.

He wanted to scream! He wanted to palm his face! He wanted to kick Vincent in the butt so hard that the flamboyant fellow soared straight into the air at escape velocity!

Yet as much as he wanted to get rid of Vincent, it was not so easy to unilaterally tell a clansman to sod off. He needed to follow a procedure and come up with a legitimate reason to kick Vincent out of the clan. He set this rule himself, which meant he shouldn't undermine his authority by breaking it shortly afterwards!

He looked at the offending Larkinson in question and called up the man's record since he joined the clan.

There were scant details because Vincent didn't really do anything so far! The Larkinson Clan hadn't registered anything that Ves could use as a viable excuse!

Not only that, but his treacherous ancestral spirit saw nothing wrong with Vincent! According to her, the man was already much closely aligned to the ideals of the Larkinson Clan than many other new recruits!

If one discounted his past sins, there were several reasons for his high fit. He was a mech pilot, he was a Brighter and he was a veteran of the Sand War. Not only that, but he managed to hook up with Raella Larkinson for several months and also piloted one of Ves' custom mechs!

With so many connections to the Larkinsons, it shouldn't be any wonder that Vincent came to admire the clan and everything it stood for! Ves even guessed that the Larkinsons likely served as the warm and cozy family that Vincent had always yearned for but enjoyed when he used to be a member of the Ricklin Family!

"Whatever!" Ves threw up his hands. "Go screw around somewhere else! I don't want to see you two anymore!"

That caused Raella to jump! "Wait a minute, Ves! Before you get rid of us, can you fund the establishment of a dueling circuit within the clan? Hundreds of Larkinson mech pilots have already backed my proposal!"

"GET OUT! I won't give you a single hex credit! Go beg someone else like Major Verle or the Larkinson Assembly!"

The two clansmen dejectedly left the office. Gavin, who had been standing at the side, strode to the desk.

"As much as you would rather like to leave Vincent behind, the venture he is planning to organize with Raella doesn't sound all that bad. A dueling circuit would do much to keep the mech pilots in our clan from getting bored."

"It's wasteful, Benny!" Ves growled. "All of those mechs bashing each other in will need to be repaired, all of which costs time and money!"

"We can go months, if not years without seeing action. Unless we are participating in a campaign or heading into something dangerous like the Nyxian Gap, I think we can afford to let the mech pilots have some fun. Besides, if you are so worried about the cost, let the mech pilots play around with cheaper mechs built specifically for competition."

"I've already washed my hands off Vincent. Let someone else deal with his nonsense."

As the leader of a clan numbering more than ten-thousand members and counting, Ves had better things to do than decide upon frivolous matters.

Right now, his entire attention shifted back to the upcoming product reveal! The Doom Guard design's unveiling had to go absolutely perfectly, especially because he would be holding his presentation in front of a very important guest!

"Is everything ready?"

"The preparations are on track." Gavin confirmed and referenced his data pad. "Not every outfit we've contracted or invitee that we have reserved a seat for has managed to arrive at Cinach VI in time. Fortunately, we've already accounted for that. We have a backup waiting list that stretches across the entire planet. We have already held a highly-anticipated lottery to fill the empty seats with some lucky winners."

The amount of mech insiders who wanted to take part in the overhyped product reveal was incredible! Ves didn't even bother to glance at all of the messages he received that begged him for a spot at the venue. He had other people to deal with these kinds of errands!

"Are there any notable people attending the product reveal?"

"Plenty. A lot of nobles and dignitaries from the Sentinel Kingdom will be attending this product reveal in person, so you should make sure you tailor your message to their needs. We expect our Doom Guard model to become a really hot seller in this state due to the persistent pirate threat it faces!"

"I have already taken that into account, though I didn't expect so many nobles to travel all the way to Cinach VI on short notice. I guess I shouldn't pressure the audience too much in that case."

They proceeded to go over the other aspects of the announcement. They already planned for everything, but they hadn't anticipated the sudden insertion of a Master from the MTA! The LMC had been trying to adapt to the changing circumstances ever since!

"The security of the venue has been beefed up considerably." Gavin told him. "In addition to the Avatars, Glory Battalion and the Penitent Sisters, the MTA itself will also be in charge of security. The local branch has already sent their personnel to Trillion Hall in order to upgrade its defenses. The MTA has also promised to dispatch some mechs and armored soldiers to augment our patrols. I have even received a message that the Ubiquitous Force will be present in the vicinity to provide backup if needed!"

That formidable frigate alone was enough to scare any potential troublemakers to run as far away as possible! No one wanted to challenge a modern, armed warship whose guns were powerful enough to chew through an entire mech division while flying fast enough to remain out of reach of any effective counterattacks!

"Well, at least I don't have to worry about any terrorist attacks." Ves ruefully shook his head.

He spent the rest of the morning going over his preparations before boarding a shuttle that would take him to orbit.

Gavin, Gloriana, Nitaa, the cats and a couple of other guards and personnel all crammed in the armored shuttle as it ascended into the air and beyond.

Lucky and Clixie both crawled over the Larkinson Mandate which had been placed on a small table.

"Meow."

With his phasing powers, Lucky eagerly attempted to jump on the Golden Cat, only to be repelled when he was pushed away by a golden spiritual wave!

Nyaaaaa!

The Golden Cat had enough of Lucky's baths! She was old enough to groom her intangible coat by herself!

"Miaow?" Clixie approached and sniffed the dazed-looking gem cat.

Sitting further away, Ves ignored their antics. Instead, he was simulating his speech several times inside the confines of his implant. Due to Master Willix's inclusion in the audience, he had to pare back some of his antics and rely on other methods to sell his Doom Guard.

Even if he wasn't able to make use of his spiritual manipulation, he still had many other theatrical tricks in store to emphasize his message.

This was not going to be one of those boring, generic product announcements where he would read off the list of specifications!

In order to emphasize the defining traits of his Doom Guard design, he had to go further!

Not all of his intentions sat well with his advisors. Gavin tentatively voiced his concern.

"I'm not sure the MTA will take it well." He warned. "What if you cause the Master to speak out against your methods? That will be a huge hit to your credibility!"

Ves smirked. "I'm pretty sure she won't. I'm merely pushing my limits. As long as I don't break them, it'll be fine."

"Master Willix probably favors us, so she won't do anything to harm our reputation." Gloriana helpfully added. "However, that is still contingent on our good behavior. We won't be able to get away with anything that harms the interests of the MTA."

That had been a bit of a mystery to Ves. So far, he didn't fully understand why Master Willix took so much interest in their work. Was she paying attention to him as an individual or was the rest of the MTA expressing an interest in him as well?

The former was somewhat tolerable, but the latter was unacceptable!

A warm hand rested on his own.

"It'll be fine, Ves." His girlfriend smiled and leaned in to peck his smooth-shaven cheek. "All of your previous product reveals went fine. I'm sure you'll be able to succeed again!"

"It's not that simple, Gloriana. A lot more people are paying attention this time, and there are a huge amount of bigshots among them! To many, this will be their first intimate encounter with me and my products!"

"You should celebrate that! This is a great accomplishment that you could have never dreamt of a few years ago! For the first time in our lives, we have transcended from our star sector and entered a greater stage! For Journeymen like us, that is a supreme honor! Don't fear it. Cherish it for what it is worth, and do your best to use your expanded podium to expand our brand!"

She was right!

### *Chapter 2062 MTA Warning*

Cordoba Station was a typical Sentinel trade hub. It orbited high above Cinach VI and mostly dealt with passenger transport and material shipments.

Much like any space station, its initial size used to be modest, but expanded over time in order to accommodate a greater amount of commerce.

These days, her sheer volume surpassed that of a capital ship, though it wasn't nearly as tough and defensible as a warship!

A continuous but very orderly stream of trade vessels and passenger vessels constantly approached and departed from one of its extended arms.

Many vessels were not allowed to approach under their own power. Instead, they had to shut their engines and lock most of their systems while various tugs slowly towed them to their assigned positions.

The only vessels allowed to approach under their own power were authorized shuttles and smaller transports. Most of them belonged to one of the established transit and logistic companies native to Cinach VI.

Predictably, House Evenson owned or held a large amount of shares in most of these companies! In-system logistics might be one of the most boring business sectors of an economy, but it was an incredibly stable money maker.

Even in a recession, goods and people still needed transportation!

Though Cordoba Station was often a site of intense activity, the huge amount of traffic that converged upon its coordination exceeded anything Cinach VI had seen before!

Grand passenger lines, swift corvettes and a generous amount of formidable combat carriers all tried to reach Cordoba Station first!

The crush of incoming vessels almost overwhelmed traffic control if not for the impeccable order the vessels abided by. Not a single Sentinel noble of foreign business magnate attempted to cut in line.

The reason for that was very obvious, and it was not because they respected House Evenson that held sway over Cinach VI!

Ves peered out of the window and used his implant to amplify his vision until he got a very good look at the only warship in the star system.

"So that is the Ubiquitous Force." He uttered. "She's beautiful and deadly in a way my Scarlet Rose can never be. How sublime."

The formidable warship anchored right above the space station, thereby imposing her presence on anyone who approached!

The MTA markings and the handful of first-class multipurpose mechs that patrolled around her made it clear that she was not to be trifled!

And if anyone was blind to the threat those visual cues represented, that the visible warship-grade gun turrets were enough to stifle any complaints!

Powered or supplied by the internal systems of the entire ship, the power those gun turrets was able to unleash was simply an order of magnitude more powerful than the MTA's very own mechs!

Ves wasn't even sure that a first-class expert mech would be able to contend against the Ubiquitous Force, and she was merely a frigate, one of the lightest ship classes in its war arsenal!

Suffice to say, no matter the rank or pedigree of the visitor, everyone behaved as obediently as possible as they arrived at the space station.

Once they passed through the numerous thorough security checks, the visitors had to traverse to a specific arm where a large hall-like space structure was docked.

This was Trillion Hall, one of the dozens of space-based convention centers.

Though it wasn't capable of lifting off into space from the ground like the old Grand Skyward Convention Center at Bentheim, it was still one of the best venues to introduce a new mech to the public.

Its capacity was enormous and its construction was sturdy enough to withstand incidental mech fire, and that was before all of the security and defensive upgrades.

What Ves valued a lot was the configurable interior. Almost everything could be raised or lowered or moved around at his leisure. He could precisely control the light and sound that propagated through the main hall.

This control was essential to a good show!

A large number of mechs from various groups including the MTA were already patrolling around it. Not only that, but a large number of mercenary mechs grouped up by corps had already taken up position a large distance away.

As the hosts of the upcoming event, Ves and Gloriana as well as their entourage were able to cut the line and head straight to the site without obstruction.

They stopped a bit when they reached the large, bold letters that proclaimed the name of the structure.

"Trillion Hall, huh?" Ves mused while he was holding Lucky.

"Meow."

"It's supposedly called that way because its owner envisions his hall introducing a trillion different mech models to the public."

"Meow."

"Yeah, I think it sounds ridiculous as well, but who knows. Maybe it will last long enough to make this wish come true."

The important procession moved backstage where Ves and Gloriana immediately inspected the newly-fabricated Doom Guards. Each of them had been switched off so that they didn't frighten the surrounding staffers.

A handful of strong-willed veterans of the Sand War had already suited up. They stood in front of Commander Melkor, who wore an identical pilot.

Ves gave the privilege of piloting the first production model to the Avatar Commander.

Though Melkor was probably not the most steel-hearted mech pilot in the clan, Ves trusted that his cousin would be able to handle the pressure.

"Are you ready for the big show?" Ves asked.

"I have already spent hours acclimatizing to its glow." Melkor said, his visor reflecting the light off its shiny surface. "While I am still at the point of shaking in my boots, I'll be fine as long as I don't have to make any complicated maneuvers."

"Don't worry. Just follow the plan."

The Avatars that Melkor selected to pilot the other Doom Guards all consisted older and more experienced mech pilots. Not even Joshua was present, but that was mostly because he already had the Quint.

A few hours passed as the hall gradually filled up. Just like his previous presentations, most of the visitors would be taking their seats along the entire hall in front of the podium.

The only difference now was that there was a remarkable large buffer area between the front seats and the podium. No one was allowed to sit too close.

One of the most eye-catching anomalies of the main hall was the private box floating above everyone's heads. Though it didn't exhibit any markings, everyone already guessed that it held the mysterious Master Mech Designer of the MTA!

With such an incredibly powerful presence looming over everyone's heads like a Sword of Damocles, no one dared to speak casually. Even the most pampered nobles of the Sentinel Kingdom meekly retracted their arrogant bearing!

Soon enough, every seat was filled. While the hall could accommodate even more people by making use of multi-level seating arrangements, Ves and the LMC had already rejected this option.

It wasn't safe. Ves feared what might happen if someone reacted badly at the Doom Guard despite all of the mandatory health inspections they had gone through.

By restricting the audience to a certain size, it was a lot easier for the staff to monitor everyone's physical conditions.

Due to the Doom Guard's special properties, this was not an ordinary concern that Ves could ignore this time.

The chance of someone in the audience suffering a heart attack or something during the show was a very real possibility!

"You know, didn't the MTA attach a warning advisory to our mech design?" Gloriana questioned him. "She even told us in no certain terms that our Doom Guard shouldn't be utilized against unarmed civilians!"

Ves dismissively waved away her concerns. "It's okay. Master Willix specifically told us that our mech shouldn't be used to terrorize the population. I'm not planning to terrorize my guests. I'm merely giving them a taste of the potential of our product! How can I possibly sell my Doom Guards to them without demonstrating their power? As long as the Master doesn't say anything, it'll be fine!"

"It's your fault if anything goes wrong!"

Shortly after that, the time of the presentation was about to begin. A handful of makeup bots smoothed out his face, groomed his hair and straightened out his Larkinson Clan uniform.

He turned to Lucky. "You stay in the back with Clixie and Goldie."

"Meow."

He then turned to Gloriana and held out her hand. "Let's go."

"Alright." She smiled.

They both walked forward and entered the raised podium. The lights of the hall had already turned dark. Only a weak spotlight that generated plenty of shadows descended upon the two figures.

Despite the incredible number of important guests in the hall, Ves managed to retain his calm. He had already planned this show extensively and was confident that it would proceed smoothly. There was nothing to worry about as long as everything went according to plan.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I am Ves Larkinson, the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan and the CEO and lead designer of the Living Mech Corporation."

"And I am Gloriana Wodin, Ves' girlfriend and his fellow lead designer!" His partner cheerfully announced!

"We have invited you here to experience a revolutionary new mech that both of us have recently designed." Ves continued. "It's successful development and realization represents both an evolution and a revolution of mech design. While I am sure that a handful of mech designers in the galaxy are able to achieve similar results, none of them are as effective as our upcoming product at its price level! What we have managed to achieve is something that goes beyond technology!"

Ves had to issue this statement because he had already done his research. In the entire galactic mech industry, there were indeed a subset of mechs that were able to induce fear or form a deterrent against other people.

The difference between those machines and the Doom Guard was that the former relied on various technological means such as ultrasonic waves or disorienting gravitic waves!

No matter what the alternate mech designs utilized, they either cost a lot or were easily countered.

These shortcomings did not apply to his Doom Guard!

This was why he was confident that his latest product was unequaled in terms of its role and its value proposition!

Of course, before Ves could proceed any further, he had to issue the obligatory safety warning. A devious grin emerged on his face. The large projections that emerged from the sides conveyed his amused visage to the entire hall!

"Before everyone of you has entered this hall, you should have received a warning. Let me tell you that it is actually issued by the MTA!"

This revelation caused a shock to run through the crowd! No one thought that the MTA itself would issue a rare cautionary remark!

Perhaps this was part of the reason why the MTA expressed interest in the unannounced mech design!

"The MTA issues a stern warning to any purchasers or users of our mech its many risks." Ves paraphrased, taking many liberties of its exact phrasing for dramatic effect! "Those who are faint of heart, suffer from certain physical ailments or are diagnosed with a range of mental disorders must not approach or pilot it at any costs. The consequences of exposure to my mech can lead to physical illness, psychological distress, the triggering of post-traumatic stress disorder, mental breakdowns and possibly even DEATH!"

That final word encapsulated the momentum of his message! The people in the audience who expected something more normal were quickly forced to revise their expectations.

From what they heard, this new mech might truly be something that matched all of the hype!

Ves grinned wider. "Each of you have been vetted thoroughly before being allowed inside. Since you have listened to this warning and signed your agreement in writing, you should all be healthy enough to survive this show. Don't say I didn't warn you! If for some reason you deceived our inspectors or have second thoughts, you can still depart this hall in time. The exit is at the back. I will give you a few minutes to contemplate your choice."

A bit of unrest and uncertainty ran through the ignorant attendants. Numerous macabre guesses bandied about, fueling the spark of fear in their minds!

This was exactly what he wanted to see! The best part of it was that Ves did not employ any spiritual manipulation to prime his audience!

### *Chapter 2063 Imagine A Mech*

"Now, all of you might be asking, why would a single mech design warrant such a serious warning?"

Ves looked at the darkened area where the invited guests all clung to his words. From the start, he managed to capture their attention! Hardly any of them turned away from him in order to chat with each other!

"The reason for that is because it is more than a mech. Before I unveil it to you, let me begin with the necessity of such a machine."

He steadily began to explain the current condition in the star sector.

"Here in the Komodo Star Sector, war and chaos is rife. The explosive conflicts that erupted in recent times has broken the long pattern of peace that has reigned throughout our stars. The Sand War has pushed many states to the brink while annihilating dozens more. The Komodo War that is taking place between the two dominant states of our star sector is constantly threatening to spill over the lesser states. Even here, the Sentinel Kingdom's stability is threatened by the relentless Nyxian pirates!"

He momentarily closed his eyes.

"That is just a portion of the conflicts taking place in a single star sector. Other star sectors such as Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal are no doubt becoming more precarious as well. Wherever there are humans, there are fights. This has never changed throughout our long and bumpy history."

Ves smiled. "Our latest mech is designed to meet the needs of today. While it is useful in many different conflicts, it is particularly geared towards repelling raiders in space."

He lifted his arm, causing the large projections to showcase battle footage of numerous random pirate raids that had happened in recent times.

"Whenever there is conflict, there is chaos. Law and order breaks down as it becomes more and more difficult to keep the peace. Pirates and criminals in space who believe they can resort to force to rob legitimate trade convoys and sow destruction for no logical reason will always emerge from the darkest corners of human space!"

This was an especially pertinent remark towards the Sentinel nobles attending this event. Their faces turned ugly in the shadow as they recalled all of the death and destruction the Nyxian pirates had inflicted on their territories. The Friedmont Massacre was by far the most egregious atrocity the pirates had committed, and everyone feared a repeat!

"In my short but very eventful service in the Bright Republic's Mech Corps, I have learned an important. Pirates are scum. Criminals are scum. They are hooligans with mechs, relying almost entirely on the power of their equipment to do the heavy lifting! Honor, discipline, restraint and duty are foreign concepts to this kind of ilk! On an even playing field, they are no match to proper outfits or well-trained military troops!"

A few people in the audience chuckled in agreement. Others frowned a bit.

Most pirates were weak, but some of them stood above the rest! A top pirate organization could be just as formidable as an elite large-scale outfit!

Nonetheless, they were rather rare. Most pirates barely managed to keep their mechs and ships in working condition!

"Wouldn't it be great if battles were won by the quality of the mech pilot?" Ves rhetorically asked. "Wouldn't it be fair if an elite mech pilot who received a lot of investment can always vanquish against a wastrel who hasn't even graduated from a mech academy?"

Ves lowered his head. The projections shifted towards depictions of shameful defeats. The mercenary mechs depicted in the footage were all fine machines, but they were overwhelmed by three to ten times the number of mechs!

Most of them were grossly inferior to the machines piloted by the mercenaries.

"Sadly, the pirates never play fair. There are plenty of times where you bring a squad of mechs, only for a pirate foe to surround you with a company of mechs."

The footage switched to the rare cases where a regular mercenary corps confronted a smaller number of elite pirate mechs!

"The opposite may also be true! Perhaps you are able to field more mechs, but the pirates are able to bring out vastly-superior machines that can run rings around your outfit!"

All of these incidents were possible. In fact, they had already happened far too many times to count! The nobles and commoners of the Sentinel Kingdom were deeply aggrieved by the constant raiding of the Nyxian pirates! The scum never initiated a battle they could never win and only made a move when they were assured of their superiority!

Ves spread his arms. "None of this is fair. Yet this is the reality for too many people. Should we surrender against this injustice? Should we accept the inevitable and incur these losses without complaint? I say NO!"

His passion roused as he presented a portion of his vision!

"Pirates and criminals are not impervious! Just because they have the edge in numbers or quality of mechs doesn't mean you have to resort to economically unviable solutions to defeat them! There is a much better counter against these kinds of poorly-trained opponents, and it begins by targeting their mech pilots rather than their mechs!"

Ves clapped his hand. The impact rang loud throughout the hall, amplified by the speakers embedded in the walls, floor and ceiling! "Before I proceed any further, I would like to hold a little dare."

A portion of the dark hall lit up a bit. The wide and noticeable empty space before the podium began to shine with a gentle white light, giving it the illusion that it became a sanctuary!

"I would like to invite an invitation to all of you vetted guests. If you are confident in yourself and don't mind a challenge, I would like to dare you to stand in the illuminated zone for ten minutes starting from the moment I unveil our new mech design. Those who are able to stand straight for the entire duration will receive a handsome reward! As long as you pass this simple challenge, you will each receive a free silver label copy of the mech in question, courtesy of the Living Mech Company!"

A large commotion formed after he made this explosive announcement! While the people who were able to attend this highly-anticipated product reveal were no simple people, the reward was incredibly attractive to certain people!

The older and more established nobles in the audience all rested confidently in their seats. They had no intention of risking their reputation to take part in this unknown challenge. What if they failed? What if they humiliated themselves? Everyone present

knew that this entire announcement was being broadcasted live through the entire Yeina Star Cluster! Anyone who performed shamefully in front of such a huge audience could practically kiss their prestige goodbye!

Some of the younger nobles looked intrigued, though. Unlike the older generation, they weren't rulers of planets or commanders of legions. They still had to do much to prove themselves, and taking part in this interesting challenge sounded like a good way to stand out from their peers!

Even if they failed, it was no big deal. In their circle, regardless of the outcome, it was better to show bravery than cowardice!

Before the younger scions rose from their seats, a moderate group was already making their way to the front of the hall.

Many of them wore uniforms of all kinds. None of them matched the clean and tight aesthetic that was most common to military uniforms, but it was very evident that they were all warriors of sorts.

This group mostly consisted of mech commanders and owners of various armed organizations.

These individuals were not as wealthy as landed nobles, but valued mechs just as much! Their poorer finances and their higher sensitivity towards bargains made them much more willing to accept this mysterious challenge!

Soon enough, a large variety of people entered the lighted zone. Ves mentally kept track of the numbers through the information feed transmitted to his implant.

After fifteen minutes of discussion and shuffling, almost six-hundred attendants accepted the challenge.

Mech commanders, mech captains, veteran soldiers, ambitious nobles, adventurous businessmen, respected mech designers, foolhardy journalists and more all believed they had what it took or just wanted to obtain a free mech!

Even if they weren't mech pilots or didn't have a use for such a machine, they could always sell it and earn a handsome amount of money in the process!

All they had to do was to keep standing inside the lighted, rectangular zone!

Ves smiled like a shark. He chuckled under his breath for what these gullible people were about to face!

"Well, I applaud your courage! Any of you who have chosen to stand in this zone will receive a consolation prize if you happen to fail. You can approach the LMC later in order to obtain the right to order the first batches of our new product!"

That was a small reward in order to mollify any sort of awful feelings that might follow. Just as Ves moved on, he suddenly paused and looked upwards.

Everyone else who watched Ves turned their heads up as well, only to discover something shocking!

The private box had opened up! Its floating occupant, surrounded by a couple of heavily-armed bodyguards, slowly drifted down from the air, all the while approaching the podium.

Almost everyone in attendance recognized this famous figure! Her face had been all over the local news these past few days!

Master Moira Willix had descended in person!

The eminent dignitary of the MTA maintained a neutral expression as she slowly dropped to the very front and center of the lighted zone.

The eager daredevils who used to stand on that spot quickly vacated it when they recognized that the Master was heading in their direction! A very noticeable circle of people had formed around her position!

"Master Willix.." Ves spoke up with a remarkable amount of restraint. "I do not believe a mech designer of your stature would compete over a free mech."

The Master stared at Ves in the face. "There is nothing in the rules that prohibit me from taking part."

If the audience wasn't so afraid of attracting the powerful Master's ire, everyone would have shouted already!

This strange challenge had suddenly become ten times as interesting! If even a vaunted Master participated in it, then there must be definitely something special about it! A couple of hundred more people rose from their seats!

Ves patiently maintained a smile on his face as he allowed the late-comers to enter the zone. He did not expect Master Willix to accept this juvenile prank of his! Even Gloriana started to squeeze his hand in worry!

"It's okay." He covertly communicated to her through their implant. "You've already seen her standing in front of our Doom Guard without exhibiting any strain. It will be fine!"

"If you say so, Ves..."

Regardless of this unexpected occurrence, the plan was still on track!

Once the excitement died down, Ves snapped his fingers.

A large timer projected above his head. It already began to count down the ten minutes of time the challengers needed to remain in the zone.

"Image a mech." He spoke as the podium darkened entirely, causing Ves and Gloriana to disappear in the dark. "It is a hefty mech, but with wings. It can fly in space and withstand a considerable amount of punishment from enemy fire."

The main hall began to rumble as a mech gradually strode forward with its immense bulk. The loud footsteps of this giant machine deliberately rippled the floor, causing the challengers to feel the vibration of the approaching mech!

A mech emerged from the backstage and stepped onto the huge and spacious podium. No one except for those with high-quality ocular implants were able to see the mech in the dark!

To the rest, the unknown mech that took its time to go forward was already making an impression without revealing its true nature!

It was then that its glow gradually emerged. Melkor, who piloted the mech in question, stretched out his finger and flicked a special switch.

The mech in the dark seemed to come alive. A sense of oppression and discordancy began to emerge from the back of the podium.

The people standing within the lighted zone began to shift their weight around. They looked around with uncertainty and tried to question each other whether they weren't the only ones who felt uncomfortable!

The audience sitting in their seats further ahead weren't exempted from the glow either. Although the impact of the glow was weaker to those sitting in the back, even they couldn't escape the strange mental influence that gradually gained strength!

THUNK.

THUNK.

THUNK.

The metal feet of the mech slowly clanked against the surface of the podium as it gradually moved forward. Each step caused the floor to vibrate louder and louder. Even as the mech came closer, its fearsome glow began to gain more weight!

Ves grinned in the shadows. "Imagine a mech.. that is a monster!"

*Chapter 2064 Sanctuary In The Dark*

Product introductions were always so fun to Ves.

He loved designing mechs, but he also loved sharing them to an audience!

Though mech designers often acquired the stereotype of a science nerd, deep within their hearts, they craved for validation.

What was the point of pouring their hearts and souls into developing a great creation, only to stuff it inside a closet? What was the worth of a mech design that was never put to use and never saw the light of day?

Such scenarios deeply frightened Ves! If a time ever came when his mech designs no longer received the attention of at least a single person, his heart for his profession would die!

This was not an exaggeration!

Practically every artist and creator desired praise. Hardly anyone spent hours, days, weeks or even years to create something just so they could admire it in the comfort of their homes.

Deriving satisfaction from yourself only stretched so far. In order to make all of the blood, sweat and tears that mech designers like Ves poured into advancing their craft, they needed to find people around them who told them how great they were and how much they appreciated his work!

While it sounded rather crass, even the most powerful and successful people in human space were unable to ignore this urge!

Craving validation was as human as the desire to procreate! This was because these urges were baked in the human DNA!

Therefore, Ves was not surprised that he liked to show off his mech designs. The grander the show, the better! His vain design seed was lapping it all up, becoming more excited at the prospect of spreading his products to a much wider audience than he had ever reached before!

As a designer of mechs, he held an ardent desire to make as many people use his products as possible! Just words of appreciation weren't enough to placate him. Only when people forked over their hard-earned money in order to obtain a copy of his work would he feel truly validated at the highest level!

It was like partaking in the greatest stimulant in the galaxy! Not even Axelar enjoyed a high as the one that Ves enjoyed when his Desolate Soldier model surpassed 1 million sales!

Right now, as he held a dramatic presentation in a huge, darkened hall which was only selectively illuminated, Ves gained the confidence that he might exceed his previous high point!

Though his Doom Guard came with some very troublesome elements, he believed in its utility! He sincerely believed that countless customers would fare much better once they purchased his products.

He just had to do his best to convince his audience to feel the same way!

He gazed his eyes towards the unnerved members of the audience that accepted his challenge and stood in the lighted zone in front of the podium.

Each of them stood close enough to experience the approaching glow from the Doom Guard. Most of them weren't able to pierce through the darkness and see the striker mech in full glory.

All they could count on was the faint contours of light bouncing off its exterior, the sense of weight emanated by its heavy footsteps and the indescribably uncomfortable sensation radiating from this machine!

Sometimes, the unknown was much more frightening than the known. Practically anything could be hiding in the shadows, and the dramatic narration provided by Ves only pushed their imagination deeper!

"I have always propagated the principle that mechs are alive." He gently said, his deceptively soft voice caressing everyone's ears. "Everyone who is familiar with my work knows that I have poured my heart into creating works that earn admiration. From the Aurora Titan to the Desolate Soldier, each of these mechs are living paragons if put in a human society. However.. what if the mechs aren't as benevolent? What if a mech.. has succumbed to evil?"

The question sounded absurd, but the people in the hall didn't think so! Even the people tuning into a broadcast of the product reveal also felt a sliver of discomfort! No matter the distance, the unknown mech's glow still managed to reach them through the projection!

"There are monsters in the dark." Ves grinned as he became caught up in his own excitement. "Space is vast, limitless but also very dark. The sanctuary of light which humans like us take shelter in is very rare in space! Light represents safety. It is the only barrier that protects us against the monsters in the dark. Yet, what if a monster exists that has mastered the use of light? What if the protective sanctuary that you have always taken for granted suddenly becomes a spotlight that signals your vulnerability?"

A pregnant silence ensued.

People gulped.

Challengers fidgeted on their feet.

Yet nothing happened in the dark hall.

Just as the heightened tension started to fade, a sudden sound emerged from the mech in the darkness!

POOM.

An oval red light suddenly shone in the dark!

The third eye of the Doom Guard suddenly shone like an ominous beacon in the dark!

Unlike the third eye of his other mechs such as the Bright Warrior and the Deliverer, the Doom Guard's extra ocular decoration didn't shine in the pure and reassuring shade of white.

The third eye that came to life at this moment looked anything but benevolent! A small stretch of darkness suddenly lit up in ominous red! The pupil of the third eye seemed to have taken on the resemblance of the eye of a devil!

The red radiating from the third eye began to fall upon the challengers standing just in front of the podium, eliciting plenty of fright in response!

"Ahhh!"

"I give up!"

Several dozen challengers quickly withdrew. They rapidly pushed through every person in the way and fled desperately to the back of the hall! Their nerves had already started to fray when the Doom Guard's glow first set upon them, but the sudden emergence of this devil eye hovering in front and over their frail human bodies was too much for them to bear!

By far, these initial dropouts mostly consisted of civilians who only participated for the fun of it. Journalists, mid-level bureaucrats and other average people simply didn't possess the mettle to endure the threat of death!

No matter how faint, the glow of the Doom Guard always touched some of the deepest fears of people! Like a predator in the dark, the mech whose shape hadn't come to light yet was like a predator that regarded them all as snacks!

THUNK.

THUNK.

THUNK.

As the mech slowly resumed its march, the pressure on the challengers increased. Every second, at least one of the people standing in the light couldn't take it any longer! They screamed or yelped or simply dashed away as fast as their feeble human legs allowed!

Meanwhile, the mech began to expose a bit more of itself. A portion of its head became exposed as a blood-red hexagon surrounding the third eye came to life.

The appearance of this feature added an occult-like impression to the unknown mech! The monster in the dark became a lot more unfathomable in everyone's imagination!

The mech slowed its footsteps as it neared the front of the podium. The glow affecting the moods of the challengers became stronger, and the rate of dropouts increased by the second!

Hundreds had already left, and the trickle soon turned into a flood!

The sanctuary in the light turned more and more desolate as the density of people dropped. The thinning of the crowd made the remaining challengers feel uncertain.

Humans always took comfort in numbers. The presence of so many human comrades bolstered their courage as they took faith in their collective!

Yet now that the weak-hearted started to retreat in droves, the confidence of those who remained started to fray!

Only the most battle-hardened veterans and notable exceptions such as Master Willix remained unmoved! Everyone else started to feel stifled by the sheer sense of terror running through their minds!

The discordant ripples from the Doom Guard also disturbed their balance. The physical nausea produced by their bodies in response to the shifting frequency of spiritual vibrations nibbled at their confidence even further.

Hardly anyone experienced such discomfort before! Those who never stepped on the battlefield simply didn't know what to do in response to such unknown stimuli!

Though the mech in the dark had slowed its advance as it came to the front, hundreds of challengers still remained.

They represented the best, the most confident and the most disciplined individuals in the audience.

Ves studied them carefully. Just as expected, the majority consisted of military veterans or seasoned mercenaries.

Yet that wasn't all. A surprising amount of noble scions managed to put up a brave face under pressure. Ves may have underestimated the mettle of the aristocratic class. Each of these future leaders conveyed a sense of will and determination similar to that of Imon and Casella Ingvar!

Plenty of civilians managed to bear the pressure as well up until now. Each of them possessed some reason or trait that allowed them to withstand the proximity of the Doom Guard for one reason or another.

Though Ves somewhat expected that the Doom Guard's glow wasn't omnipotent, he was disappointed at the amount of challengers who remained.

Even if they gritted their teeth or shook on their feet, these brave individuals exhibited the courage that made humanity great!

This was not what Ves wanted to see!

If he passed so many people, he would have to meet his promise and provide all of them with Doom Guards for free!

While Ves may be charitable every now and then, he wasn't in the habit of donating so many machines! Mechs needed to cost something in order to make them valued.

He silently sent another signal with his implant, which activated one of his contingencies.

As the red third eye and hexagon shone behind and above his head, Ves resumed his speech.

"Space is dark. Space is endless. It is filled with both wonders and horror. The mech that you are sensing right now is just one of the examples that you can find in space."

The floor began to rumble again.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

The impacts sounded different from before. Though the footsteps landed almost simultaneously, the most discerning among the audience quickly realized the truth.

There were multiple mechs stepping onto the podium!

The rumbles grew louder as the darkness began to spawn more terrors!

As the distant glows began to overlap with the glow in the front, Ves began to feel the added pressure as well.

Aside from the mech pilots, Ves was exposed to the highest concentration of his own creation's glow! Whatever the challengers endured, he had to endure as well!

As the others mechs slowly advanced across the broad podium in a line, the mood in the hall descended even further.

The overlapping glows didn't outright magnify the resulting combination in a straightforward fashion, but the pressure on the challengers became undeniably stronger!

"The monsters in the dark... never tend to be alone."

Once the additional mechs stopped besides the initial Doom Guard that stepped forward, they no longer took another step.

POOM!

Instead, they lit up their scarlet eyes and hexagons in unison, causing the entire audience to cry out in shock!

"They come in a group!"

A wall of hellfire red flames suddenly came to life! Its brightness momentarily lit up the hall and blinded the audience! An incredible amount of heat washed over their bodies,

and the sound akin to the activation of several flamethrowers thrummed through everyone's ears!

The sanctuary of light suddenly turned into the most dangerous place in the hall to many challengers!

Uncaring of their dignity or determination, they turned around and fled the approaching rush of flames!

The huge, billowing wall of flames passed through Ves' lonesome body and slammed into the challengers that somehow remained!

"Ahhhh!"

*Chapter 2065 Courage Can Be Trained*

Screams of terror rang from every corner of the hall as the frightened audience lost their nerves!

Even those who sat further back had been frightened out of their wits as the huge wall of flames seemed to have enveloped the brave challengers in an instant!

Soon enough, the flames disappeared.

The wave of heat died down..

The crackling of fire faded away.

It was all an illusion.

Ves emerged from the thick of the projected flame with hardly any injury to his body.

He never exhibited any worry. Even if the flames were real, he would have escaped unscathed regardless with the help of his shield generators.

The people standing in the illuminated zone didn't know that. The guests sitting in the front seats didn't know that. The flames looked and felt so realistic that they never expected it to be fake!

The stupendous reaction from his guests amused Ves to no end!

All of it was part of the show from the start. The flames that spewed from the nozzles of the Enison Spreaders wielded by the Doom Guard were mostly virtual.

Trillion Hall's advanced projectors were very much capable of conjuring such a realistic illusion at such a grand scale. Other auxiliary tools just as a directional heat management system made it appear as if the entire place was about to burn!

It was as if the mechs had actually opened fire on the crowd!

In truth, the Doom Guards were heavily restricted. The formidable flamethrowers wielded by the mechs that stepped up to the podium didn't contain any propellant at all! Even if they did, the safeties locking their systems prevented them from doing any harm to people!

Just because Ves wanted to put on a show didn't mean he wanted to burn his customers!

He just wanted to scare them a bit!

Seeing as how a huge majority of the challengers withdrew en masse when they thought they were on fire, it seemed he succeeded quite well!

Only several dozen or so challengers remained. These represented the absolute best performers. They either possessed nerves of steel or were smart enough to realize that it was impossible for the LMC to commit an atrocity for no apparent reason.

Regardless, the deception succeeded in its purpose and forced the majority of challengers to give up. Those who remained truly earned their free mechs as far as Ves was concerned.

The hall began to brighten and the atmosphere no longer seemed so tense. As the squad of Doom Guards standing behind Ves became more visible, the audience no longer felt as threatened.

That said, the glows of the mechs still exerted a heavy pressure on their minds.

"There is no need to fear the monsters standing behind me." Ves smirked and raised his hand. "Not when they are on our side."

The hall brightened up until a warm, orange glow akin to an evening sun illuminated everything.

The Doom Guards came into view and revealed their huge red frames in full now that the darkness receded. Their glows slowly retracted as their mech pilots all flicked the off switch.

The mechs didn't seem so threatening anymore! Instead, their imposing appearances, formidable design and immense bulk drew a lot of admiration from the audience!

The temperature in the hall subtly rose by a couple of degrees. This warmth soothed everyone's nerves, giving them an immense feeling of relief and safety just as their eyes fell onto the mechs that used to be the source of terror!

This sudden transition caused the audience to make some very abrupt psychological associations.

In the dark, the striker mechs resembled the monsters in the dark!

In the light, the new machines suddenly turned into the strong weapons that Ves made them out to be! When the monsters were on their side, the guests felt much better about themselves!

Though what Ves had done was arguably torture and definitely not proper, his guests felt so relieved that none of them raised a word of complaint at this moment!

They had gone through far too much fright to think about anything else! Their rapidly-beating hearts needed to die down before the organs erupted from the strain!

Even though Ves bent the rules to the point of breaking them, he received no censure after a while.

The show he put on was just too good!

Though no one signed up to experience the scare of their lives, the people attending the product reveal all looked more alive and grateful than ever! They experienced such a rapid succession of contrasting emotions that the succor they gained at the end tasted all the more sweeter!

Ves had the illusion that he would probably be able to become a fantastic showman if he abandoned his mech design profession.

It was so fun to torture his audience!

Through the careful planning and use of words, environmental manipulation and various props, he was able to shape the thoughts and emotions of a large number of people in a uniform manner.

As long as he managed to hook the imaginations of a group, he could make them feel as scared as hopeful as he liked!

This was indoctrination in an entirely different way than he was accustomed to! Though resorting to his Devil Tongue was a lot more convenient, that didn't mean that Ves was incapable without it! There were so many tools to put up a good show that he would never run out of means to sway a crowd!

Now that Ves demonstrated the potency of the Doom Guard's glow to everyone, there was no more need to terrorize his audience any further.

He wanted to sell his mechs. Scaring his potential customers to the point of developing a trauma around his Doom Guard was detrimental to this goal!

The mechs fully receded their glows after a short while. Even the mech pilots themselves no longer felt any strain. Though the third eyes still shone in a bloody shade of red, the Doom Guards no longer threatened to break anyone's minds.

"Congratulations to those who have stood their ground. You have proven courage in front of this star sector, no star cluster beyond doubt!" Ves innocently smiled as if he didn't burn them to death! "Each of your identities have been registered by the monitoring system of this hall. The LMC will contact you afterwards to arrange the shipment of your free silver label Doom Guard. Congratulations for your prize!"

The thirty-odd winners who made it through the end all loosened some of their tension. Just because they managed to make it all the way through the end didn't mean that they were immune to fear! They just held on through sheer grit and confidence a little better than the others!

The only exceptions were the people from the MTA. As the surviving challengers gradually returned to their seats, Master Moira Willix and her two armed guards remained in their places at the very front.

None of three ever exhibited signs of discomfort. There had been plenty of people who kept an eye on the great Master, and each of them found to their astonishment that they never showed any tension!

The awe and majesty that people felt towards the MTA grew stronger. The people who were a part of the Big Two truly deserved to be regarded as the strongest specimens of humanity!

Ves' smile momentarily ticked when he noticed this reaction.

Did Master Willix take part in this little play because she wanted to show off the prestige of the MTA?

Well, she sure succeeded! With the debacle of the Battle of Bentheim still strong in everyone's minds, a simple showing like this instantly restored many people's reverence towards the might Association!

To Ves, it seemed that this thieving Master simply couldn't resist the opportunity to hijack a portion of his show!

Her eyes suddenly darted to Ves, giving him the illusion that this great figure in the mech industry was pinning him in place!

"Good performance." She stated simply.

After uttering this curt remark, she wordlessly turned around and floated back to the private box hovering high above the audience. Her bodyguards followed as well, making sure to flank her sides while keeping their intimidatingly bulky rifles ready to respond to any threat.

The gravity of the entire space seemed to have lightened up a bit as the Master Mech Designer finally disappeared from everyone's view.

Though she was still very much present in the hall, now that she isolated themselves, the people sitting below couldn't help but sigh in relief!

Ves didn't think too much about Master Willix's deliberate conduct. The product reveal was far from over!

"What you have just experienced in your hearts is the most remarkable property of an LMC mech. The glows that characterize our products are utterly unique to our designs and cannot be found anywhere else. Its effects on mechs is hardly evident, but the true value of those glows lies in affecting the people that take part in the battlefield!"

Ves partially turned around and swept his arm over the Doom Guards that loomed behind him like a row of infernal protectors!

"When certain glows are combined with certain mechs, an remarkable amount of synergy takes place. There is no better example of that than the machines that have just demonstrated their power! These premium spaceborn striker mechs are designed for area denial. Their potent flames excel at dealing with hordes of charging mechs. Combining the deadly power of their flamethrowers with their distinct glows, these striker mechs have become extraordinarily good at fending off assaults!"

Plenty of people in the audience were smart enough to know what that meant!

Ves grinned. "The LMC's new Doom Guard design is explicitly designed to cater towards the growing needs of outfits that are tasked with tackling the consequences of chaos and anarchy. While the deterrence of a Doom Guard is effective against nearly every opponent, they are remarkably more effective against lower-quality mech pilots!"

The members of the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association practically shot up from their seats! Out of everyone in the audience, they clashed against the Nyxian pirates the most! A mech that was specifically tailored to fight against pirates always attracted their interest!

"You have felt it yourself." Ves continued. "You have seen how many trained and capable people failed to withstand the pressure. Let alone moving closer, they couldn't even stand in place! If even veteran mech pilots succumbed to the urge to flee, how do you think that pirates will react in response to this unblockable phenomenon?"

Dreams of driving pirates away began to descend on many people's minds!

"Our new Doom Guard is designed to deny and deter. While I am obliged to warn you that it is a weapon that influences friendlies as well as foes, as long as you turn off its glow or train your troops to withstand its pressure, you will be able to gain an inestimable advantage in any battle in space!"

"Do not be afraid of the Doom Guard. Despite its fearsome glow, its value to your outfit or organization is inestimable as long as it is on your side!" Ves gestured his arm forward. "An eminent MTA Master as well as a small group of brave individuals have managed to withstand its incredible pressure. They are true elites as far as I'm concerned!"

There was no doubt in this statement. None of the people who won the challenge were average in the slightest!

"What if I tell you that you can join their ranks as well?" Ves threw out with a confident grin. "If they can do it, so can you. It is just a matter of training! While the main purpose of the Doom Guard is to deter a lot of enemies, it can also be used to toughen up your own men! Courage can be trained, and there is no better tool to facilitate this than our Doom Guard!"

His latest product wasn't just a scary mech! Ves tried his best and put a positive spin on his mech design, because relying on a single gimmick wasn't enough to turn it into an enduring seller!

He needed to convince his audience that his Doom Guard held a lot of value. He needed to grasp onto every potential use of his mech in order to justify its premium price tag!

### *Chapter 2066 Enveloping Sphere*

Once Ves thoroughly demonstrated the Doom Guard's glow and expounded on its main uses, he ceded the stage to Gloriana.

She smiled as she stepped to the center. "Hello, everyone. I am Gloriana Wodin and I am proud to present the specifications of our new Doom Guard design!"

A projection depicting a simplified schematic of the Doom Guard came into view. Gloriana soon proceeded to highlight and boast about the various performance parameters of specific components.

Though she did her best to make her speech understandable to laymen, her narration failed to attract as much interest from the crowd as before.

This was fine. A product reveal wasn't a theater show. Entertainment wasn't the objective. The overriding goal of this day was to generate as much demand for the Doom Guard as possible.

The main reason why Ves resorted to so much drama was because he needed to introduce the glow of his new design in a memorable way.

Simply providing a description of its effects was not even close as effective as making his audience experience its bone-freezing terror in person!

Mech buyers weren't as impulsive as regular consumers. Though he hadn't revealed the price of the Doom Guard, it was bound to cost a fortune to many people!

Getting someone to cough up so much money for a mech was far from easy. Though there were plenty of people who bought mechs impulsively, most potential buyers tended to be more critical and discerning!

This was because the choice of mechs literally affected the lives of those who depended upon them! Adding a good mech to the roster would increase an outfit's chances of completing a mission, while a bad mech could easily cost precious lives!

This was why Ves let Gloriana handle the rest. She was a lot more passionate about the technical design of the mech and eagerly wanted to show off her latest innovations!

Most of the laymen only vaguely followed her explanations or simply tuned her out entirely.

It didn't matter. Gloriana mainly addressed her words to the groups of people who could truly make use of the Doom Guard. Mech buyers, mech commanders, mech procurement officers and more people with the power to purchase the new product keenly paid attention to the detailed strengths of the striker mech design.

Naturally, Gloriana's pleasant voice did not mention any of the less flattering aspects about their design. Its limited capacity, its relatively ordinary strengths, its lackluster mobility and so on never came up once during her entire spiel.

It didn't matter. This was a day of celebration as far as the LMC was concerned.

Despite the generous amount of mech designers seated in the hall, none of them was in the mood to heckle this time.

A greater mech designer loomed over their heads? Who would possibly have the courage to criticize the work of a pair of mech designers that the Master obviously favored?

They would just be making fools of themselves!

Of course, it also helped that the Doom Guard didn't present a threat to their interests.

Striker mechs was one of the less common mech types on the market. The most popular models tended to fall in the budget and midrange market category. The Doom Guard obviously looked a lot more expensive than the norm, so despite its various features, it was simply too expensive to capture the lion's share of the market.

No matter how good a mech performed, price was still a heavy limitation to many wallet-conscious customers!

While there were some mech designers who published a premium spaceborn striker mech design of their own, that was still not a reason to speak out and defend their work.

No matter the special features and properties of their work, how could it equal the fantastic glow that Ves demonstrated earlier?

From an area denial standpoint, the Doom Guard was truly revolutionary in its design! Its glow clearly disregarded the quantity and quality of mechs, and instead tested the resolve of the mech pilots directly!

The demonstration that ensued after Gloriana finished her presentation couldn't make this any clearer.

"Let us proceed with showing our new product in action!"

The walls of Trillion Hall turned transparent. The occupants of the hall suddenly gained the illusion that they were sitting in the middle of space!

The squad of Doom Guards that had stood on the podium had already withdrawn a moment earlier.

Now, they spread their wings and flew into space. The identical Doom Guards formed an echelon formation as they flew out until they stopped at a healthy distance away from the hall.

The transparent walls began to project some feeds that allowed every spectator to observe several magnified feeds of the mechs in question.

In the distance, a huge number of mechs approached. The surprised attendants began to count the number of mechs that approached the Doom Guards.

They soon gave up! There were simply too many mechs for any baseline human to keep track of!

"There are more than a thousand mechs in that massive group! It's as if an entire mech regiment is approaching!" Someone with an ocular implant yelled!

The shock in the crowd grew greater. What kind of demonstration demanded a thousand mechs?

Usually, it was sufficient to utilize half-a-dozen mechs as sparring partners for the new design! There was no practical reason to involve such an immense number of mechs for a simple demonstration!

Ves walked back up to the center of the podium again.

"What you are witnessing are the mechs of numerous famed and reputable outfits. Both mercenary corps and security companies have agreed to take part in this exhibition. Just like the previous challenge, each of them have been informed that they are entitled to a progressively greater bonus should they last long enough!"

The crowd suddenly realized that a good show was about to ensue!

After the attendants personally experienced the terror of the Doom Guard, most of them developed an eager anticipation of inflicting this pain on others!

Noticing this reaction, Ves grinned wider.

Devils weren't feared for their power!

Instead, it was their ability to twist people's hearts that truly made them notorious!

Numerous potential customers had already started to imagine employing the Doom Guards to terrorize their opponents. Nothing made them feel better than to spread the suffering that had thoroughly shamed them earlier!

This was human nature. Ves knew what dwelled inside their hearts, so he prepared something that would allow them to bring it to the surface!

Out in space, almost two-dozen outfits worth of mechs flew to their assigned coordinates. Despite the sheer variety of mech models, it was still possible to distinguish who they belonged to by matching their coating and markings.

The Doom Guards didn't stick together. Instead, they all began to separate and spread out in a long line. They finally stopped after several kilometers of distance stood between each mech!

The reason for that soon became evident. The huge amount of hired mechs began to envelop the individual Doom Guards.

Ten spheres consisting of at least a hundred mechs surrounded a Doom Guard from each direction!

The spheres slowly contracted. The mechs began to crowd a little closer to each other as the ball of mechs shrank in size. They eventually stopped their contraction when it became too dangerous to reduce the distance any further!

The audience patiently waited for something to happen.

Ves spoke up again.

"As I have stated previously, our Doom Guards excel at fending off assaults and denying an entire area. Due to the special properties of the characteristic glows of our mechs, they are effective no matter how many opponents they affect! This means that no matter how outnumbered you are, the Doom Guard is one of the effective equalizers as long as you make good use of its strengths! Behold what you can do as long as the monsters are on your side!"

The third eyes of the Doom Guards flickered back to life. Their crimson glows looked extraordinarily compelling between the gaps of all of the mechs.

As their recently-activated glows ramped up, the spherical formation of mechs already started to exhibit some changes.

Despite the orders the mech pilots received, they couldn't help but feel increasingly more unnerved as they remain in formation!

Those with frailer nerves and weaker hearts soon began to have second thoughts all of a sudden.

Though the Doom Guards they surrounded never lifted their weapons or made any offensive moves, the onset of terror and the threat of death still wormed their way into their minds!

"What is this?"

"Why is this mech so strange?"

None of the mercenaries had been informed about the nature of the mech. They had strictly been instructed to close off all communications, so they shouldn't have witnessed the initial demonstration of the Doom Guard!

Even if they disobeyed orders and sneakily watched a feed of the product reveal, it didn't matter.

The fearsome glow of the Doom Guard worked best against unprepared opponents, but it remained effective regardless if its opponents were aware!

When the glow reached its full strength, the spheres visibly shook!

The weaker mercenaries already started to lose their confidence, while the older and more experienced mech pilots managed to hang on to an extent.

It was too bad that the Doom Guard didn't carry its name for nothing. The sense of doom it heralded was so pernicious and multifaceted that hardly anyone could remain immune for long!

"They're breaking!"

The spheres of mech suddenly lost its aesthetically round shapes as some of the mercenaries couldn't take it any longer! Their courage was too shallow for them to persist! The cowards seemed to have succumbed to their baser instincts and mindlessly commanded their mechs to turn around and fly away as fast as possible!

Impressively, over half of the mercenary mechs exhibited this shameful behavior! No matter how much their bosses shouted at the mech pilots, the irrational fear that tipped them over was not so easy to resist!

It took at least half a minute and a generous distance for these frightened mech pilots to regain their wits.

"That.. that was scary!"

"I can't believe what has happened to me just now!"

"Did someone drug my coffee?!"

The five-hundred or so mechs that remained didn't reform the broken spheres. The majority of the mech pilots were too busy trying to resist the pressure radiating from the Doom Guards!

The tenuous movements of the mechs were in full display to the audience. While it was admirable that this group of mech pilots managed to hang on this far, it was obvious that the mentalities of these mech pilots had obviously dropped!

The capability to induce this state of mind was already valuable in itself! Shaking, hesitant mech pilots were much more easy to break than high-spirited mech pilots!

Soon enough, the remaining mech pilots received orders to close in and reform the spheres. They reluctantly obeyed this order and tried to fly closer.

This was difficult! The mechs hesitantly flew closer to the Doom Guards while doing their best to form more compact spheres.

They failed. The closer they came, the more their mech pilots experienced the glows of the mechs!

It became drastically more difficult for these regular mech pilots to maintain their nerves!

Over two-hundred mechs dropped out.

Just a fifth of the original group of mechs remained! The spheres of mechs that surrounded the Doom Guard seemed so thin and fragile that it looked as if a single punch could break them into pieces!

Ves waited for the right moment to pass on his next command to the mech pilots of the Doom Guards.

"Show them a taste of hell."

The ten striker mechs simultaneously cocked their massive flamethrowers and began to spew a sea of flames all of a sudden!

The Doom Guards rapidly spun around its axis in order to spew flames in practically every direction!

Though the eruption of omni-directional hellfire looked frightening up close, they didn't traverse very far! The billowing flames only traversed a modest distance of fifty meters before losing momentum.

There was plenty of distance between these flames and the surrounding mechs!

Yet despite the lack of threat, the intimidating sight triggered the build-up of fear that mounted in every mercenary's imagination!

The spheres disintegrated as a considerable number of remaining mechs broke formation!

As the Doom Guards ceased to spew their flames, they suddenly became a lot more visible.

There weren't enough mechs in the way anymore to block the views of the feeds!

Ves wrapped up the demonstration.

"No matter how powerful the mech, the pilot is always the weakest link!"

"No matter how many opponents show up, a single Doom Guard can topple them all!"

"No matter how bad your mech pilots are, a Doom Guard can turn any of them into elites!"

"Order a Doom Guard today to be the first to have a monster at your side!"

### *Chapter 2067 Turned Around*

The Doom Guard's product reveal came at an end. As soon as Ves and Gloriana finished the introduction of the striker mech they spent months on fleshing out, the LMC officially opened up the model for sale.

The demand for the Doom Guard spiked! Orders from all over the star sector poured in from almost every corner of the Komodo Star Sector!

Not only that, orders from other star clusters started arriving as well! An uncountable amount of interested people wanted to see what the fuss was about. They had become charmed by the previous presentation and felt the huge urge to purchase their own 'monsters'!

It was too bad that the LMC didn't possess an effective reach beyond the Komodo Star Sector right now. The LMC could only reluctantly reject these orders, forcing most customers away. The handful of disappointed mech buyers could only import the mech across star sectors at a considerable expense.

Even so, the explosive demand from the Hegemony-aligned side of the star sector had spiked beyond the LMC's most optimistic projection!

The fantastic presentation along with Master Willix's implicit endorsement caused many mech buyers who didn't necessarily need a striker mech to purchase a Doom Guard anyway!

The incredible demonstration of hundreds of people drawing back from the Doom Guard's fearsome glow was already striking enough.

To witness ten Doom Guards repelling more than a thousand mechs through intimidation alone was practically unheard of! Normally, only expert mechs achieved such lopsided results!

Of course, plenty of skeptics cast doubt on the authenticity of these exaggerated demonstrations.

Could a single mech really repel hundreds of people?

Could a single mech truly scare away a hundred mechs?

Those from other star sectors voiced far more doubts due to their unfamiliarity with LMC products. They never experienced a glow in person and weren't well-versed in the achievements of older LMC mech models.

To many of them, glows sounded like outright magic!

Perhaps the only reason why these skeptics restrained themselves a bit was due to one, important reason.

The presence of an MTA Master Mech Designer.

Master Moira Willix may not be a household name in the Yeina Star Cluster, but her status alone was inviolable in human space! For her to go out of her way to attend a product reveal held by a pair of Journeymen was very unusual and very meaningful.

She personally participated in one of the demonstrations and won a free copy of the Doom Guard. Though she didn't exhibit the same reactions as the other challengers, the fact that she didn't expose any falsehoods meant that the challenge was probably authentic!

A Master would never stoop to scamming people! The mere idea of it was an affront to the profession of mech designers! This was even more so if the Master was part of the MTA's hierarchy!

In effect, by her mere presence, Master Willix generously lent her considerable credibility to the Doom Guard! This was an incredibly important boost for Ves, Gloriana, the LMC and their newly-released mech design!

With her help, the doubts and questions that the LMC expected to face did not materialize. The market largely accepted the claims made by the LMC!

Once these doubts went away, only value remained.

The mech design was already a pretty fine premium striker mech. It only got better when its glow was put into consideration!

The public not only recognized the Doom Guard's deterrence factor, but also its utility in training the resolve of friendly mech pilots!

Though no one was sure what to make of this claim, the sight of just a few dozen true warriors remaining side-by-side with an eminent Master Mech Designer was too astounding for people to ignore!

A vast amount of challengers attempted to brave the glow, but only a minute portion remained!

Every mech pilot and soldier wanted to pass this seemingly-challenging test!

Ves suggested that people could train their courage and steadfastness in the face of difficulties with the help of his new mech. As long as they frequently exposed themselves to the pressure of a Doom Guard, they would eventually be able to whet their courage and harden their resolve!

Though not everybody bought into this fantastic claim, enough far-sighted leaders and mech commanders realized the great value of this training method.

Many forces expended a huge amount of money and effort to improve their mech pilots. These methods were very demanding and led to very high attrition if pushed to their limits.

This was the only way to train elite mech pilots!

The best mech pilots not only needed to possess excellent mech piloting skills. They also had to develop a heart that knew no fear and a mind that was as strong as steel!

There were even people who were more knowledgeable than others that saw an even greater potential in the dreadful glow of the Doom Guard.

What if.. exposure to its glow could polish the willpower of a mech pilot?

This was an incredible possibility! Though high willpower did not guarantee a mech pilot's promotion to expert candidate, it was one of the most essential requirements!

No expert candidate or expert pilot possessed a brittle will! They were some of the most fearless and determined warriors of humanity!

Such exceptional individuals should never exhibit any weakness in the presence of a Doom Guard!

Once this idea passed around in certain circles, the demand for the Doom Guard exploded yet again!

A single day later, Ves and Gloriana had just finished their breakfast and entered a private lounge at the Larkinson Clan's base.

Both of them had done their best to convey the great potential of the Doom Guard. After they finished their presentation, they lingered for many hours to talk to various potential customers and dignitaries.

Though Ves hated every second of it, he recognized that it was necessary for him to talk to the various high-ranked Vesian nobles and other major customers.

Almost everyone he chatted with expressed a high amount of interest in the Doom Guard! Some customers were so convinced by the incredible value proposition of his new mech model that they ordered hundreds of copies at once!

For a mech that was priced at 2 million hex credits, this was a very significant accomplishment

The Doom Guard was 15 percent more expensive than a generic mech of the same type and performance level, which meant that the LMC successfully convinced a lot of people that it was still a good deal!

As Ves and Gloriana played and cuddled with their cats, Gavin soon arrived to present his initial report.

"How hot is our product selling?"

The brilliant smile on Gavin's face spoke it all. "It's a smashing success! Our initial orders have flooded our sales channels! In fact, we've received so many orders that it's impossible to fulfill them all in a timely fashion! Our Sales Department had to implement some limits to restrict the initial sales. We have instituted a waiting list that will stretch on for a couple of months by our estimates. We have even decided to accept no further orders until this backlog is dealt with. Even so, interest in our new product is still growing!"

"That.. is fantastic news, Benny."

"It's all thanks to you!" The assistant unabashedly praised his boss! "Describing the Doom Guard as the 'monster at your side' is a brilliant marketing tool! It succinctly described the potential danger of the Doom Guard but frames it in a more positive light!"

Ves felt an incredible amount of relief.

One of the biggest worries he had for his new product was whether he overdid its fearsome glow. He had set its strength level at a point where scarcely any person wanted to be near the machine! Even if he added an off switch to the Doom Guard, it would still be incredibly difficult to find a mech pilot who was resilient enough to pilot it in battle!

Yet despite this huge downside, he succeeded in portraying this liability as an asset!

While the downsides still remained, his customers could derive a lot of value out of them if they made creative use of them! This was one of the most important messages he

tried to convey to his audience, and it seemed that the market bought it hook, line and sinker!

"How many units do you expect us to ship in the first month?"

Gavin frowned a bit. "It's difficult to form an accurate assessment, boss. We are outsourcing most of our production to a large number of third-party manufacturers spread across the star sector. We have chosen to work with most of our existing partners who are already accustomed to producing our Desolate Soldier mechs, so their reliability isn't in question."

"What's the problem, Benny?"

"According to the Production Department, there are two complications. First, it's quite challenging for the workers of the manufacturing complexes to build a mech that slowly turns an entire production hall into a no-go zone as the mech is being assembled."

This was a problem that Ves had already foreseen. The only suggestion he could offer was to establish a new and isolated production site where the Doom Guards would be assembled largely with bots and machines.

"Are the partnering mech companies willing to invest in altered production facilities?" Ves asked.

"There was a bit of doubt and foot-dragging at first, but all of that changed once you held your product reveal." Gavin grinned. "It seems you even managed to persuade all of those industrialists to commit to our new product! The mech companies all smell profit, and they are climbing over themselves to fabricate the Doom Guards on our behalf!"

"That sounds good. What is the second problem?"

"It's a bit more mundane. The manufacturers who are used to producing the cheap and simple Desolate Soldier all have to step up their game in order to fabricate the Doom Guard. Combined with the earlier issue I've mentioned, the initial yield won't look good. There will be a lot of screwups, delays and inconsistencies. Our Production Department is doing its best to guarantee the quality of the first batches of Doom Guards, but it will take months for the mech companies to sort out their issues. The Doom Guard is also a rather massive mech that demands a lot of exotics, so the supply of resources will also constrain the output to an extent."

"That's fine." Ves nodded in acknowledgement. "The Doom Guard may have become hot, but I don't expect it to sell as easily as the Desolate Soldier. You can buy three-and-a-half Desolate Soldiers for the price of a single Doom Guard. This price disparity isn't something that can be made up very easily."

"That's what we think as well. We expect our initial sales to amount to just 10,000 to 20,000 units in the first month. We project that it will ramp up considerably in the following months as the first reviews and actual battle reports pour in and some of the production kinks are worked out at the production sites."

"What about the profit?"

"Our financial outlook has finally turned around. As long as sales remain as good as they are, our clan and mech company will finally be bringing in more money than we are losing. The product margins of our premium mechs have always been rather compared to the industry standard, and the Doom Guard is no different. The cost to produce a copy is around 1.5 million hex credits, though the actual figure differs from state to state due to the differences in tax rates and the regional price variations of raw materials and so on. Since our new product is priced at 2 million hex credits, that means that we are earning a generous amount of profit!"

Even with all of the overhead and other miscellaneous expenses deducted from this profit, the LMC still stood to amass a huge fortune!

The profits of the Desolate Soldier paled in comparison! Even though its sales was still projected to be larger than the sales of the Doom Guard, its cheap price and inferior performance meant that the LMC didn't actually earn that much hex credits at the end of the day.

This was different! As long as the LMC was able to sustain the popularity of the Doom Guard, it wasn't impossible for Ves and the Larkinson Clan to earn enough money to acquire a second-class ship!

And this was just the start! Ves had a lot more commercial mech designs in store!

#### *Chapter 2068 1 Trillion Hex Credits*

It was difficult to fathom what it meant to sell over 50,000 Doom guards a month. This was what the Sales Department projected in the following months.

No one was sure whether it was possible to drive up the sales even further without expanding the reach of the mech company. It might even be possible for the sales volume to drop after half a year due to meeting most of the initial demand.

Unlike the more common mech types such as rifleman mechs which was always in demand, the market for striker mechs was considerably smaller in scale.

Not every mech company boasted a striker mech. Those that did only added one or two the mech roster in order to cover their bases.

It made no sense to field an entire squad or company of striker mechs!

They were similar to knight mechs in that they only showed their value in specific situations and when grouped together with other mech types.

In contrast, a rifleman mech could fit in practically any mech company. Not only that, but they could be fielded in as many numbers as needed and still be viable in combat.

All of this meant that the typical customer only ordered one or two Doom Guards at most. Their outfits didn't have any room for more, and it was financially prohibitive to buy too many premium mechs.

Under these set of circumstances, it was already good if the LMC was able to persist in selling 50,000 Doom Guards a month!

Combined with the relatively high product margins of the Doom Guard model, the money the LMC expected to earn had reached a level where even Gloriana took notice!

As soon as Gavin left to check on the initial reaction to the Doom Guard resign, Gloriana smiled and playfully rubbed Clixie's belly.

"Miaow!"

"It sounds like we'll be earning enough money to cover the upkeep of the Penitent Sisters." She began. "We can even start replacing their worn-out mechs with newer machines at this rate!"

Ves, who was idly scratching Lucky's head, let out a sigh. "Let's not be too hasty. I still have to design worthy machines for them to pilot. That will take a lot of time. In addition, we still have a lot more investments to make. Upgrading our third-class ships and mechs to their second-class equivalent requires a mountain of hex credits! In our conservative estimates, we will probably have to spend at least 300 billion hex credits! Not only that, but the most basic second-class factory ship costs at least that much money as well!"

And that was just the barebones option. If Ves wanted to amass a strong and resilient expeditionary fleet, he would have to invest at least 1 trillion hex credits!

A single successful mech model would never be able to cover this huge sum in a short amount of time!

"We can't stop here and rest on our laurels." Gloriana nodded seriously. "We have to keep designing more mechs and hope that they become successful as well. The incredible reception of our Doom Guard model and all of the publicity that we have attracted has probably opened a lot of new markets for us! Even if our subsequent products won't be as popular, we can still earn a lot of profit due to all of the places they are sold!"

Even she hadn't expected their rather problematic mech design to generate so much appeal. She was quite aware of how the mech's mediocre capacity limited its battle performance!

Her remark reflected the current strategy of the LMC. It had divorced itself from the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate, which meant it didn't possess a primary market anymore which served as the bedrock of its sales.

Instead, the LMC dipped its toes in a lot of foreign states, some more so than others.

For example, the LMC was rapidly expanding its presence in the Sentinel Kingdom due to its large mech market and relative openness to Ves and the LMC.

In addition, the Sentinels were some of the most enthusiastic buyers of his new Doom Guard! Their effectiveness against lower-quality mech pilots meant that they would probably work well against Nyxian pirates!

A lot of activity took place. Ves tried his best to stay on top of the developments, though he left most of the decisions to Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and the other executives of the company.

His input largely didn't matter at this point. The company was very capable of running most of its operations by itself. Ves only needed to direct his attention to the Design Department these days.

The road to accumulating 1 trillion hex credits sounded stupendously difficult. This sum amounted to 35 trillion pre-inflation bright credits!

"What an incredible sum!"

This kind of fortune far surpassed the net worth of the Tovar Family and other third-rate power players! Most noble houses in the Sentinel Kingdom weren't even capable of generating this much money!

Even in the Hexadric Hegemony, Ves would still be richer than the vast majority of Hexers!

One of the reasons that the Wodin Dynasty invested so much money in Gloriana's upbringing was the hope of earning it all back in this fashion!

"The Doom Guard is just a third-class mech design. Think of what we can do with a second-class mech design."

The standards were a lot higher, but so were the profits! A single premium Hexer mech sold for as much as 200 million hex credits! In fact, the prices often ran higher as the market put a much greater premium on its unique strengths and special features!

The road to amassing 1 trillion hex credits would be so much easier if the LMC started publishing second-class mech designs.

Still, Ves knew how important it was to make a good start. He didn't want to be too overly hasty and ruin his reputation. He needed to finish his Hexer mech design project first before he could judge whether he was good enough to compete in the big leagues!

It was safe to say that his current level of success far out-paced the standard of a Journeyman. Not even some Seniors were able to earn so much money!

It was all thanks to his design philosophy. Unlike most mech designers, Ves didn't have to worry about competition coming to eat his market share!

Those who specialized in designing better melee mechs such as Gloriana had to compete against countless other colleagues who specialized in something similar.

Someone with a more unusual design philosophy like Gloriana generally didn't face as much direct competition.

However, the more unique the design philosophy, the harder it was to realize it! Mech designers with radical ideas paid for their innovation by the increased amount of effort they had to put into their research.

Right now, Ves and Gloriana shouldn't have made as much progress as they did. Both of them subverted the normal development pattern of Journeymen due to their inherent advantages.

They were practically freaks among Journeymen. As far as the mech industry was concerned, they no longer belonged to the same species!

As the initial customers received the first batch of Doom Guards, the mech community soon knew that most of the hype was justified!

The Doom Guard was truly a monster!

This was the first time that the impulse buyers experienced the mech model's indiscriminate glow. A lot of initial purchasers started to regret their choice of buying a copy of the Doom Guard right away!

A lot of outfits didn't feature any mech pilots who were mentally resilient enough to pilot the mech! They all became far too frightened when they interfaced with the mech! They just wanted to leave the cockpit as fast as possible!

A large amount of complaints flooded the LMC, but the controversy wasn't as big as Ves feared.

There were plenty of success stories. Most notably, many of the challengers who persisted to the end and received a free silver label Doom Guard all demonstrated what they could do with their new prize!

The winners not only showed off their incredible mental fortitude, but also tested its glow in live practice sessions, to great effect!

Hardly any other mech pilot wanted to remain within the influence of the Doom Guard's maddening glow!

The hope that mech commanders would be able to train their mental strength to the point of being able to pilot one of these dreadful machines gave a lot of customers hope.

They might not be able to harness the Doom Guard right away, but as long as they used it as a training prop, their mech pilots would eventually reach the necessary standard!

"The Doom Guard is the monster at your side. As long as you master it, you can harness its power against your enemies!"

Many mech buyers harbored this hope. A lot of training programs centered around the Doom Guard's glow quickly emerged!

Even the Larkinson Clan took advantage of this application!

Commander Melkor Larkinson stood in front of the entire body of Avatars. After several months of expansion, the Avatars now numbered 400 proven mech pilots.

That wasn't all. In the last two months, the Avatars picked up a lot of prospective new members!

Right now, over 800 Avatar candidates were being put through some of the most rigorous training the Larkinson instructors devised!

Within the clan, only the Swordmaidens surpassed the Avatars in terms of training intensity!

Right now, the newly-recruited Avatars represented a lot of headaches for Commander Melkor.

Compared to the small amount of battle-hardened members who fought and lived through the Sand War, most of the new additions didn't live through the same hell.

Due to various reasons, the Larkinson Clan disproportionately favored recruiting younger people with a lot of talent. The growth potential of these new clansmen was high, but their spirit for battle was not as firm!

Adding them blindly to the battle ranks of the Avatars would only drag them all down. In order to determine which Avatar candidate had what it took to become a fully-fledged, each needed to prove their mettle in some way!

The candidates could forget about earning the acknowledgement of the veteran Avatars if they weren't able to showcase their guts!

The introduction of the Doom Guard presented a solution to this problem. Melkor had personally consulted Ves about the various properties and possible uses of the Doom Guard.

Now that the Avatars finally obtained an early copy, Melkor was practically filled with glee!

He grinned viciously at the Avatars standing at attention in front of him. The mech pilots, both veteran and prospective, each looked utterly serious as they faced their commander!

Discipline was one of the most essential traits of the Avatars! Commander Melkor expected no less when his soldiers were on duty!

"Fellow Avatars, both old and new. I am sure you have heard about the new mech our clan patriarch has designed. The Doom Guard that is standing behind me possesses the ability to separate the worthy from the unworthy. While I am certain that our old hands will be able to endure this little pressure, I am not so sure about the rookies in your midst. An Avatar has to be fearless in the face of adversity no matter the odds! Let me see whether you have what it takes to be elite!"

The Doom Guard suddenly activated. Not only that, its glow was also turned on. Soon enough, the entire assembly of Avatar mech pilots began to feel all kinds of negative sensations!

Despite being ordered to stay put, a large number of prospective Avatars couldn't take the pressure. They exited ranks and fled to the back in order to decrease their proximity to the scary Doom Guard mech!

This went on for ten minutes or so. Each second, at least one Avatar candidate lost their nerves for whatever reason. At the end of this impromptu test, only twenty percent of their group remained!

Melkor's cheeks turned red. This was an absolutely shameful result! He thought his recruiters had done a better job at identifying promising mech pilots, but it turned out that it was mostly an illusion!

The only consolation was that none of the old guard showed much more than moderate discomfort. He himself managed to bear the pressure despite standing closer to the mech than others.

Yet out of every Avatar, the reaction of Joshua Larkinson was the most noteworthy of them all! Whereas other people showed some signs of distress towards the Doom Guard, the kid actually seemed as if he couldn't wait to enter its cockpit!

#### *Chapter 2069 Pillar of Faith*

The Doom Guard became a very hot product after its entry into the regional mech markets.

The hype hadn't faded after the product reveal. In fact, much of the early feedback generated even more demand!

Those lucky enough to obtain a copy early gleefully showed off their expensive new toy while devising ways to make good use of it. Repulsive glow or not, humans always liked to overcome a challenge!

Since the LMC was closely tied to the Larkinson Clan, the Avatars, Sentinels, Swordmaidens and other forces all received a bunch of early copies.

Ves did design the Doom Guard with the aim of strengthening his clan. He didn't want his forces to fall into a passive state again when confronted by a numerically superior foe!

Soon enough, every Larkinsons mech pilot began to experience a new kind of torture!

In the name of improving their mental resilience, every active Larkinson mech pilot had to undergo special training!

Each of them were tasked with maintaining their composure within varying ranges from an active Doom Guard.

The closer they stood, the greater their performance!

Different units maintained different standards. The Avatars of Myth and the Swordmaidens set the highest bars, while the Battle Criers and the Living Sentinels weren't as strict.

That didn't mean the mech pilots of the latter two troops were all weak. Outliers and exceptions always existed. Hundreds of Living Sentinels, particularly the trueblood Larkinsons, all exhibited resolve that wasn't inferior to the standard of the Avatars!

Some of the Battle Criers showed almost no fear at all. Certain Kinners valued their loyalty and dedication to their buyer so much that they were willing to go through hell to fulfill their orders!

All in all, the introduction of the Doom Guard meant that no one was able to bluster about their courage within the clan. Everyone's true grit could finally be quantified in an objective test!

At this moment, it was too early to determine whether someone could be trained to withstand the glow.

Even Ves wasn't aware of the effectiveness of this new training method!

If it turned out to be ineffective, then the value of his Doom Guard model would instantly plummet!

Ves didn't show any concern. He expected the training to work because he already went through something similar in the past. All of the spiritual entities he made contact with had constantly exercised his mind. If the same happened to others, then they would surely become tougher in time!

Of course, the long-term effects of continuous exposure to a highly-disconcerting glow hadn't been tested yet. All kinds of maladies and side effects might emerge among the people subjected to this new form of training, but Ves didn't worry about it. In his opinion, those who failed simply weren't cut out to be warriors!

Perhaps the most surprising response to the Doom Guards didn't come from the Swordmaidens, who by far showed the most resilience against its intimidating glow.

Each and every Swordmaiden hunted fearsome exobeasts with their bare hands as their graduation ceremony! They endured a huge amount of hardships and challenges during their long training, some of which posed a considerable risk to their lives!

The women all showed their mettle with pride, standing ramrod straight in the presence of an active Doom Guard for hours!

Yet their performance was not as eye-catching as that of the True Believers!

Lately, the former Ylvainans hadn't attracted a lot of attention. They diligently integrated into the Larkinson Clan while doing their best to adapt to their altered beliefs. Their creepy custom of praying to statues of Ves notwithstanding, they had become a lot less obnoxious about pushing their beliefs onto other people!

When Ves occasionally checked up on the True Believers, he thought that they were making a sincere effort into becoming Larkinsons.

Yet no matter how well they blended in, they were still abnormal in many ways!

At this time, Melkor sent an urgent notification for Ves to come to one of the open grounds of the rented base.

Ves immediately paused his rest and exited one of the buildings. With Lucky floating at his side, he briskly walked across the base until he reached his destination.

He walked up to Melkor. "What is the matter?"

The visored commander waved his hand to the neat ranks of clansmen sitting calmly in front of an active Doom Guard. "Look at their performance."

When Ves studied the crowd, he was shocked at what he saw! Thousands of clansmen from various groups had gathered together to whet their minds and spirits against the Doom Guard!

It wasn't only the amount of people that stood out. It was the variety of the color of their uniforms that stood out!

Far more than just mech pilots and support personnel resisted the pressure of the Doom Guard. Ves even spotted plenty of civilians wearing the blue-and-white uniforms of the LMC and the red-and-white uniforms belonging to ordinary clansmen!

As Ves narrowed his eyes, his implant-enhanced vision soon picked out the figure facing the crowd!

"James! What is this clone up to now?!"

"It appears he is teaching his followers how to withstand the glow of the Doom Guard. Have you noticed how well they are able to resist the glow?"

Now that Melkor mentioned it, the former Ylvainans held up remarkably well! While he expected the elite Kronons among them to show at least that much resolve, the huge crowd encompassed more than highly-trained mech pilots!

As Ves carefully scanned the crowd, he noticed plenty of mothers, grandparents, teenagers and even children!

Though the weakest among them had been placed in the rear of the procession, they still exhibited a remarkable degree of resistance!

"This.. how?" Ves asked in confusion.

"I've been studying them for an hour, and I can't really say." Melkor shrugged. "The best I can come up with is that the Ylvainans are depending on their fanaticism to stave off the Doom Guard's glow. I think they are hypnotizing themselves into believing that the Great Prophet or the Bright Martyr will shield them from adversity!"

The mere mention of the word 'Bright Martyr' elicited a cough from Ves!

"I have nothing to do with this admittedly-impressive spectacle!"

"Regardless, it is very odd that thousands of True Believers can collectively perform better than my Avatars! There are seven-year olds in that crowd who are doing better than some of my boys! It doesn't make any sense!"

"Faith never abides by logic." Ves shook his head.

He began to grow curious how the True Believers were able to fare so well. He activated his spiritual vision and tried to see what happened on a spiritual level.

He didn't learn as much as he expected. He could see the ripples and lively aura of the Doom Guard spreading out in every direction.

When they washed over their minds, the glow should have exerted some effects on them. It was very hard for norms to muster up an active defense against this strange influence.

Yet somehow, the former Ylvainans managed to do so. When Ves peered very closely at them, he saw that they were all locked in prayer. Their minds were fully concentrated in the beliefs they regarded as truth!

In essence, they were truly using their faith as a shield against the unknown!

During all this time, James Ylvaine-Larkinson, which unfortunately happened to be his new name, continually preached to his flock!

"...Our advent approaches! We must all prepare for our future ascension and ready ourselves to transcend to a higher state! Do not regard the life locked within this red mech as threats! Hostile while they may be, they are hardly the menace they appear to be! Just in my prophecies and put your faith into the benevolence of the Bright Martyr! He did not design this mech to doom us all, but instead warn us about the dangers that we might face! If you are able to resist an evil god while you are still mortal, then you shall become unparalleled when you are finally elevated into godhood!"

Ves really couldn't stand this superstition anymore. He left Melkor's side and stormed over to James.

The crowd soon noticed his presence and looked awed! They deferentially bowed at him while parting to form an unobstructed path to the front!

Scowling even further, Ves sped up until he finally reached the Living Proophet!

"What the hell do you think you are doing?!" He hissed.

James displayed his charismatic smile at Ves. "I am instructing your sheep on how to resist the wolves that are preying on their souls."

"How the hell are they resisting the Doom Guard so well?!"

Ves looked up at the active Doom Guard that was pumping its glow at full blast! Even Ves experienced some discomfort at this close distance!

"We have faith."

"...That's all? Can't you be more specific?"

"It is difficult to explain the profundity of our faith and conviction to someone unfamiliar with them." James casually raised his palms. "For centuries, our people have leaned on our faith to stave off nihilism, depression, shipboard isolation and a host of negative conditions. Since they were young, my followers have built a pillar of faith in their minds! It is this pillar which sustains us against the storms and winds of life!"

Ves did not look amused. It all sounded like nonsense to him! He thoroughly inspected the minds of the Ylvainans and didn't see anything that resembled a pillar or unusual spiritual construct!

There was no way that something as nebulous as 'faith' could make people immune against the glow of his mechs!

According to the initial reports, the Doom Guard's fearsome glow proved to be effective on both secularists and believers!

There had to be something more about the Ylvainans. Ves narrowed his eyes at James. "Cut the crap, please. Just tell me directly. How can our followers resist the glow of my Doom Guard design?"

James composed himself and looked at Ves in the eye with an incredible solemn expression.

"The answer is simple. Faith."

"...Okay. That's enough crazy for me one day."

Ves simply gave up and walked away. He really didn't have the patience to deal with the antics of a bunch of cultists. The only way he would be able to interact with them normally was if he dumped his logic!

He returned to Melkor. The two subsequently left the grounds after Ves jerked his head away.

"So.. did you figure out what was going on?" The Avatar Commander asked.

"Nope. These Ylvainans continue to confound me." Ves grumbled. "I'm not sure how they are doing it, but.. maybe it is not a bad thing that they are able to resist the Doom Guard to such an extent. I think we can use this remarkable property of theirs..."

As Ves and Melkor started to swap ideas, the Living Prophet watched the two trueblood Larkinson walking away with a gentle smile.

He swept his eyes over the thousands of the True Believers who were sitting calmly on the ground. Despite the discordant air, everyone felt as if they were praying in a church!

Melkor wasn't the only clansmen who noticed the remarkable performance of the True Believers. A growing crowd of onlookers started to gather in the vicinity. They all gawked at the seemingly-comfortable Ylvainans with incredulity!

Some of the more curious clansmen walked closer. James smiled wider and left his spot at the front to approach these curious new Larkinsons.

"Hello there, clansmen. What brings you here?" James asked in his smooth and attractive voice.

"How come you are all so strong?" One of them asked.

"Could you teach us how to withstand the glow?" An off-duty Avatar suddenly begged. "The Avatar Commander has threatened to kick me out if I can't get close enough to a Doom Guard!"

The smile on the Living Prophet's face grew warmer. "Why certainly. We are all Larkinsons. We are all kin to each other. My secrets are yours. Simply listen to my words and you shall fear no longer."

The group of clansmen all looked hopeful!

*Chapter 2070 Expensive Girl*

As the new Doom Guard model rapidly rose to prominence, Master Moira Willix quietly left the Cinach System.

There was nothing at Cinach that interested her any further. The Ubiquitous Force simply generated a portal and zipped straight back to Centerpoint without any notification.

Ves was extremely glad to see her gone. He had felt a bit constrained ever since she arrived. With the MTA frigate looming over Cinach VI, he felt constrained in many ways.

He knew quite well that an advanced MTA warship not only possessed formidable weapons and near-impervious armor, but also amazing scanning and observation capabilities!

Sure, anyone could easily detect a powerful active scan that peered straight through kilometers of soil and structures. However, Ves suspected that the MTA developed plenty of ways to spy on people without eliciting their notice!

He wasn't sure whether the Ubiquitous Force possessed such means or if she even activated it while she orbited about Cinach VI.

Just to be sure, Ves tried to act as normal as possible. He spent a lot of time discussing regular business topics with Gavin and Raymond. He also refrained from interacting with any spiritual entities or engaging in spiritual manipulation. He also kept himself as far away from the vault as possible, hoping that all of the sensor-blocking materials built around it provided at least some measure of resistance against powerful passive scanning.

Still, he was very glad for the ship to be finally gone. With no one powerful enough remaining in the Cinach System, he finally transmitted a signal that caused a single vessel to return.

Soon enough, the ship that went on an unknown errand landed at the base rented by the Larkinson Clan. A number of Vandals including Captain Rosa Orfan-Larkinson exited from the vessel.

Aside from shipping in a couple of rare trade goods, the Vandals also brought a very special container.

The large container was the size of a room and had to be lifted to the Scarlet Rose that was parked a small distance ahead.

As soon as the container reached its final destination, Ves calmly went about his day. He waited all the way until he finished his work before paying a visit to his personal ship.

Along the way, he invited Major Verle-Larkinson and Dr. Ranya Wodin of all people.

They gathered inside an enclosed and isolated chamber within the vessel's mech workshop. It was one of the most secure and bug-free places on the Scarlet Rose other than Compartment G-13.

After passing on a command, Lucky diligently scoured around the compartment and tried to sniff out any errant spy bugs and microscopic observation equipment that had made its way inside.

Meanwhile, Ves calmly received the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa. The book thrummed with warmth, bringing a smile to his face.

He turned to Major Verle, who stood right next to the container. It actually resembled a prison cell of sorts by how thick and strong it looked.

Ves had cobbled it up himself some time ago! It not only consisted of thick and highly-resilient Breyer alloy, but also contained layers of sensor-blocking and sensor-dampening materials that he bought from various material suppliers on Cinach VI.

The big advantage of staying on an industrial hub planet was the large availability of raw materials! Resource providers throughout the Sentinel Kingdom and beyond all funneled valuable ores and processed metals to Cinach VI without pause!

"Are you ready?"

The major and newly-appointed mech coordinator nodded. "I have brought my codes and keys. When Rosa retrieved the package, she reported no signs of intrusions or tampering. No one should have touched it while it remained hidden."

"Good." Ves nodded at Verle before turning to Ranya, who slowly understood that something very significant was taking place. "Doctor, I've invited you here for a reason. I have recently come into the possession of something of incredible value."

"What is it?" She asked.

"I can't tell you exactly." He responded slowly. "Suffice to say, it is something extremely valuable, and it is more related to your profession than mine. The object that is hidden inside this container is of such great value that it is easily more valuable than all of the ships of the Larkinson Clan and the Penitent Sisters put together!"

Ranya widened her eyes. Though she used to believe in the absolute superiority of Hexers, now that she was perennially begging for money, she no longer dismissed the worth of Ves and the Larkinsons any longer.

Gloriana didn't hitch her wagon onto Ves for nothing!

Aside from that, even Ranya knew that the Penitent Sisters made use of some very valuable hardware! If she could sell them all off and use the proceeds to fund her research, she'd be able to make some incredible gains in the next few years!

She grew curious at what was stored inside, but the situation in this enclosed compartment made her feel a little apprehensive.

"If you don't want to tell me, why am I here?"

Ves stretched out his hand. "I need your help. You are the best biotech expert in my orbit. While there are plenty of adopted Larkinsons in my fleet who are exobiologists and geneticists, their qualifications pale in comparison to yours. It is troublesome for me to obtain the services of someone like you. Before I search for someone suited to research what I've obtained, I thought I might as well invite you first. Would you like to study what's inside?"

Dr. Ranya frowned. "You're not being very clear with me. I can't even determine whether the valuable sample you are talking about even falls within my research field. Mind you, I'm a specialist in plant-based organisms. I'm not an all-knowing biotech expert."

"Even if you aren't well-versed in this specific topic, I'm sure you can learn what you need. With the success of the Doom Guard, I have much more leeway now. Whatever you need, I can buy it for you as long as your requests are within reason."

That sounded very attractive to the Wodin, but that only caused her to grow more reluctant.

She had learned a very important lesson while she was staying with the Larkinson Clan.

Nothing came for free!

"What do you really want from me?" She crossed her arms. "Gloriana told me that you offer favors to someone without getting something in return. I also don't believe you would let me access something that is purportedly more valuable than all of your tangible assets put together!"

Well, she was certainly clever, Ves supposed.

He held out the book in his hands. "You're right. The truth is that I require some.. guarantees. What I have just obtained is of extreme value, which means that I'll attract a lot of unwelcome attention should the news leak out. I can't afford you opening your mouth to anyone, including Gloriana or your relatives back in the Hegemony. This is of extreme importance to me, and I cannot trust you to remain discrete if you are not a part of the Larkinson Clan!"

She widened her eyes. "You... you want me to become a Larkinson? Are you serious?"

She was an honored descendant of the Wodins! While her dynasty was subordinate to the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty, she was still a part of one of the ruling powers of a mighty second-rate state!

To pledge herself to an upstart clan with third-class origins made no sense! Even if Ves and Gloriana were able to sustain their current growth trajectory, she did not believe she shared much in common with the Larkinsons!

They were a clan which treated boys as men! As a Hexer, she still couldn't accept this false notion!

Ves understood that his offer didn't sound very attractive to Ranya, but he wasn't done yet.

"You've been with us for a while. You have received sufficient funding to keep yourself busy, right? Has the Wodin Dynasty ever given you the same regard? How well did your own dynasty treat you? Have they ever given you as much money as I did in these past few months?"

"The Wodins raised me!" She defiantly placed her hands on her hips. "I may not belong to a prominent branch, but that doesn't mean I'm worse off than most Hexers!"

"Yet the fact remains that the Wodins don't seem to see any promise in your work. With their means, they can easily hire a team of senior professors to research a new product or something. It will take decades, if not centuries for you to reach the level where you can actually provide more value to your dynasty."

"And you're different?"

"Our clan is not as good in obtaining talent, at least for now. While I'm confident that we'll be able to surpass a local dynasty like yours in the future, I need someone of your capabilities today. All I need is for you to pledge your loyalty to the Larkinson Clan. You may still call yourself a Wodin, but I expect you to put the needs of the clan first."

This was a very serious demand, one that would affect Ranya's life in a permanent fashion!

She knew that she would instantly become something of a pariah if she became a part of a clan that wasn't ruled by a woman! She could effectively kiss her future in the Hegemony goodbye!

Yet.. was that really so bad?

Ves studied the Hexer carefully and smiled. "Think about it. While I admit that the Wodin Dynasty is large, it has pretty much remained stagnant after it gained control over the Scimitar System. Our clan may be smaller, but our growth trajectory is unconstrained. You have seen how well the market has received the Doom Guard that your cousin and I designed! The amount of money we are able to earn will keep growing over time. I can easily afford to expand your budget every year so long as you provide me with good results."

"I'm an expensive girl." Ranya defiantly remarked. "Just like Gloriana and you, I have very big ambitions!"

"2 billion hex credits."

"Pardon?"

"As long as you sincerely join the Larkinson Clan, I will immediately increase your annual budget to 2 billion hex credits." Ves continued. "You have almost complete discretion on how to spend this money. You can purchase any advanced lab equipment you want or you can spend it all on rare lifeforms. In fact, this is just the start. As long as the LMC earns more money, there will always be room to expand your budget!"

The sum of money that Ves mentioned temporarily stunned Ranya. Even in the Hexadric Hegemony, hardly any researcher could play with that much money! If she followed a regular career trajectory in the Hegemony, then she would have to join a company and start off as a junior researcher while earning less than a million hex credits a year.

To a young graduate like her, obtaining 2 billion hex credits at once was a massive windfall! She could research the integration of various exoplants with the human physique to a much greater degree, especially if she could get her hands on some of the astounding exoplants she observed at the Peacekeeper trading halls!

She knew that she would never be able to obtain such a generous budget back at home. The Wodins may be wealthy, but ordinary descendants like her were a dime in a dozen in the dynasty!

From an objective standpoint, she stood to gain much more benefits if she attached herself to the Larkinson Clan.

Just like how Gloriana unhesitantly inserted herself into Ves' life, perhaps it might not be bad for her to follow suit!

"What.. do I need to do?" She cautiously asked.

Ves smiled wider. "Just put your hand on this book and make an oath. Once you commit, you'll become family to me. I have great plans in store for my clan, and your role is indispensable to some of them. A magnificent future awaits."

Ranya placed her palm on the cover of the book and felt a sensation that warmed her heart like nothing else!