

## Mech 2421

### *Chapter 2421: Glow Crusher*

The Glow Crusher was very effective at its job!

As a lancer mech, the mech was already good in regular combat. It didn't require a lot of time to build up speed, allowing it to exert its strength in many different situations. It could even function in cramped environments!

Though the mech was too cheap and barebones to incorporate other functions, it didn't need to incorporate any additional bells and whistles.

This was a mech with a very narrow scope. Against enemies that lacked glows, the Glow Crusher didn't function any differently from comparable lancer mechs.

It was only when the Glow Crusher was employed against an LMC mech that it showcased its true value.

When Gloriana showed him other footage of the Glow Crusher at work, Ves began to understand the most important aspect of its operation.

"The Glow Crusher isn't attacking the Blessed Squire. It's attacking the glow."

Ves equated glows to auras. They were spherical fields that influenced anyone that entered its effective range. Glows were most effective up close but weakened considerably further away.

At a certain distance, glows weakened to the point where humans no longer came under their effect.

When Ves carefully studied how close to the Blessed Squires the Glow Crushers needed to be in order to pop the glows, he noted that the exact distance varied considerably.

All of them had to get very close, but those that had to get dangerously close were either outnumbered by Blessed Squires or hadn't gained the opportunity to build up a lot of momentum.

"I see now." He said and closed his eyes.

Gloriana curiously looked up at him as her physical projection leaned on his shoulder. She knew that the footage had dealt a considerable blow to his confidence in his work. He needed time to process this new development.

The footage she displayed to Ves showcased the performance of the Glow Crusher in many different situations.

What Ves paid attention to the most was the distances, the speeds and the quantities. He sensed that these three variables played a key role in determining the effectiveness of the Glow Crusher's main function.

If the footage of the early usage of the Glow Crusher model was representative enough, then he pretty much figured out its conditions.

"The closer the Glow Crusher gets to the Blessed Squire, the more likely the latter's glow will collapse."

"The greater the momentum of the Glow Crusher, the easier it becomes to collapse a glow."

"The more the Glow Crushers outnumber the Blessed Squires, the further away they can disable all of the glows."

These were the three characteristics that both the Fridaymen and Hexers needed to take into account when Glow Crushers fought against Blessed Squires.

It didn't matter whether the Glow Crushers were able to physically down the Blessed Squires. That wasn't necessary when they only had to get within a certain distance to accomplish their main job. This was the part about the new mech model that Ves really couldn't accept for some time!

"How many Masters participated in this design project?" He asked.

"Just two. Master Carmin Olson partnered up with Master Meredith Katzenberg to design this mech. That's why the Glow Crusher's design is fairly basic. I'm still amazed it is so effective, though. I thought it would take more Masters to defeat your glows."

Both Masters taught at the Leemar Institute of Technology, though Ves wasn't sure whether that was still the cause. With the fall of the Crestfallen Stars, the Leemar System should be vulnerable to Hexer attacks. The LIT should have certainly evacuated its students and personnel some time ago. This must have given the two Masters a very powerful motivation to design an effective counter against his mechs!

Ves already knew plenty about Master Olson. He also knew a fair bit about Master Katzenberg because she took in Tristan Wesseling as one of her direct disciples.

Whereas Master Olson specialized in enhancing a mech's mobility, Master Katzenberg specialized in developing better materials. More specifically, Ves heard that she was famed for developing new formulas that substituted the effects of more expensive exotics.

He couldn't quite see how these two Masters were able to grant such a ridiculous ability to the Glow Crusher design.

"Tell me how these two Masters managed to find a solution against my glows." He requested.

Gloriana did not string him along this time. She pointed at the mech engine of the Glow Crusher in the projected design schematic.

"There is something about the locomotion systems that causes it to transform some of its momentum into another form of energy. So far, the Hexer mech designers who have studied the design are temporarily calling it 'motion energy'. Generating this motion energy causes the lancer mechs to slow down to some extent because it isn't free."

"Why does motion energy have to be generated on the spot?"

"It disappears quickly if the Glow Crusher slows or stops. It's very fleeting and perishable and can't be stored in some kind of battery." Gloriana shrugged. "You'll have to ask Master Olson to learn more. I think this is one of the most advanced applications of her design philosophy. It involves so many advanced concepts that not even the Hexer Masters understand how it's made."

This wasn't actually rare. Many different kinds of energy existed in reality. Master Olson managed to touch upon one of the higher-level ones over the course of her career. Perhaps it was something that she could have only developed once she reached the rank of Master.

Whatever the case, this 'motion energy' ought to be the principal reason why the Glow Crusher was able to overwhelm a glow, for a lack of better word.

This wasn't the complete story, though. "What role does Master Katzenberg play?"

"Master Katzenberg has developed a new alloy that is able to contain motion energy." Gloriana answered. "If the Glow Crusher simply charges forward without incorporating any of the new alloy, then the motion energy will just drift away from the mech. The machine has to have something that can keep this motion energy together until it is ready to unleash it against the Blessed Squire's glow."

"Ah, I see. So that is what this odd material is for. It's built into the mech engine and the lance, among other parts."

The mech engine generated motion energy and also kept it around for a limited amount of time. If the Glow Crusher didn't expend this motion energy on an attack, then it would evaporate on its own after a time.

This meant that there wouldn't be any ridiculous situations where a Glow Crusher ran forward for several hundred kilometers, building up more and more momentum and motion energy along the way, enough to shatter the collective glows of a hundred Blessed Squires!

Nonetheless, despite the many limitations, Ves could already foresee that Master Katzenberg's latest invention might become a persistent thorn in his side!

Gloriana continued her explanation. "The special new material she developed for the Glow Crusher design is called Olson-Katzenberg alloy, or O-K alloy in short. It's an alloy made out of two valuable medium-grade exotics along with some other lesser materials."

"What are the key materials?"

"They're both metallic exotics with fairly mild effects by themselves. The first important material is Virma steel. It is notable for its ability to inhibit some higher-dimensional energies. The second important material is Fahae-33. It's also a medium-grade exotic and possesses a very weak ability to inhibit all kinds of energy. I don't know how Master Katzenberg managed to combine the two together to develop a vessel for motion energy, but some of my colleagues back home are very impressed."

"How widely available are the two exotics?"

"Not that much. The Fridaymen never specifically focused on mining these two exotics. While the Coalition has accumulated a sizable stockpile of both key materials, once that runs out, it will have to look elsewhere to obtain more. Trade will become the Friday Coalition's main source of Virma steel and Fahae-33 in the future."

It sounded as if the Friday Coalition truly couldn't pump out Glow Crushers as if they cost nothing. Certainly, the mech was already relatively cheap to the Friday Coalition. It was just that adding the crucial O-K alloy to the machine that would limit its production.

Still, for a first-generation counter to an LMC mech, the Glow Crusher should already be considered a success!

"Have the Fridaymen started using these Glow Crushers en masse?"

Gloriana nodded. "For months, We Hexers lorded it over to the Fridaymen. The constant losses must have truly infuriated our enemies to the point where they eagerly embraced any solution that worked! Already, hundreds of thousands of Glow Crushers have appeared on the battlefield. Its first variant has already debuted in space."

She waved her hand, causing hundreds of different footage to play at once.

He became fascinated by all of the sights. While most of the battles involving the Glow Crushers took place on land, a small but growing number of clashes happened in space!

Unlike the inelegant solutions the Hex Army resorted to in order to make the Blessed Squire fly, the two Masters designed a proper spaceborn variant of their Glow Crusher.

"The Glow Crusher OGC-1000 is the base model, and one that is intentionally designed to be adapted by different mech designers or organizations. The Glow Crusher OGC-1050 is a spaceborn variant that can serve the same purpose."

In other words, the basic incarnations of the works of the two Masters were just the start. In the future, the Fridaymen mech regiments and mech divisions that adopted the designs would develop their own variants of the Glow Crusher that excelled in certain aspects!

For example, an elite mech regiment might want to develop a higher-quality version of the lancer mech. Another mech regiment that specialized in aerial combat might take the OGC-1050 and turn it into a machine that was suited to fight in the skies.

The possibilities were endless!

Ves was a bit put off by this, but not too much. No matter how many variants the Fridaymen developed, they all abided by the same principles. Figuring out how to negate one Glow Crusher model meant that his solution should be equally as effective in negating the other models!

He already began to think how he could counteract the Glow Crusher with his designs. Though the work of Master Olson and Master Katzenberg was subject to many limitations, it nonetheless offered the Fridaymen a targeted means to negate one of the Hex Army's significant advantages in a fairly simple package.

"This cannot stand!"

Should he try to develop a means of reinforcing the glows of his mech designs? What if he focused on dispersing motion energy instead?

Many different ideas flitted through his mind. As long as there was a will, there was a way. Ves did not intend for his former Master to have the last laugh!

"Ahem." Gloriana gently interrupted his musings. "The Glow Crusher isn't the only mech the Fridaymen have designed to counteract our Blessed Squire. There are also several other mech designs that interfere with glows in different ways."

She began to exhibit another projection. An enemy spaceborn swordsman mech pushed through some Hexer mechs and managed to strike a Blessed Squire standing on top of a floater module!

Though the Blessed Squire easily managed to block the attack by putting up its shield, something happened that caused the glow to grow unstable!

The Hexer mechs surrounding the Blessed Squire exhibited the now-familiar reaction that signified that the glow was experiencing technical difficulties!

The more the swordsman mech struck the Blessed Squire, the greater this disturbance grew!

Unlike the Glow Crusher, the new model did not collapse the glow. Instead, it just disturbed it to the point it became a mess!

Ves could see from the reactions of both Fridayman and Hexer mechs that this chaos affected both sides without distinction. While the Fridaymen did not have it easy, the Hexers weren't feeling better either!

In this way, this unknown melee mech model managed to level the playing field!

#### *Chapter 2422: Old Routine*

Gloriana showed him some additional mech models that successfully interfered with the glow of the Blessed Squire.

The Glow Crusher was the unquestionable winner so far. It offered the Friday Coalition a strong, targeted counter against the unique Hexer mech model that had given them so much grief over the last few months!

The other mech models, such as the spaceborn swordsman mech called the Turbid Nightmare, sought to interfere with glows in different but more demanding ways. They were not as practical on the battlefield due to the simple fact that these mechs had to get very close to their targets.

So far, the Fridaymen mech designers failed to develop a solution that could disturb a glow at range. This was one of his greatest fears, because developing a new weapon that could counter the glows of his mechs would instantly decrease the added value of his products by half!

Ves wasn't sure whether his competitors were close to developing such a solution, but he couldn't underestimate their ability.

The Glow Crusher designed by Master Olson and Master Katzenberg already exceeded his expectations! As an early, first-generation counter, it unquestionably did its job without any superfluous elements.

He could already foresee other mech designers developing more specialized and tailored variants from this excellent base model. As long as they all incorporated Olson-Katzenberg alloy and generated motion energy, then the new derivative designs should all be capable of popping glows as easily as popping soap bubbles!

When Gloriana finished presenting the counters designed by their competitors, Ves fell silent for a time.

Seeing one of the selling points of his mechs neutralized in such a fashion inflicted a severe blow to his confidence. He hadn't expected his glows to be so easy to negate. The Glow Crusher did not even have to physically thrust its lance through a Blessed Squire. It only had to get close enough in order to accomplish its purpose!

This meant that the Hexers needed to widen their security perimeter to adequately guard a Blessed Squire. It was not enough to deploy a bunch of knight mechs and surround the crucial mech up close.

"How has the Hex Army responded?" He asked.

"Our military hasn't abandoned the Blessed Squire." She reassured him. "Sure, it has become more difficult to take advantage of our work, but it is still a great benefit to the Hexers fighting on behalf of the Hegemony. The Glow Crushers are difficult to mass-produce at the moment, so there are plenty of battles where our Blessed Squires only have to stay on guard against the lesser counters. Even if the Glow Crushers become more ubiquitous, the burden on the enemy is still greater. These mechs have to get dangerously close in order to overwhelm a glow, and that puts them in a dangerous position."

Just because the new lancer mechs did not have to reach point-blank range did not mean that they were spared from taking risks. The Glow Crushers still had to rush close enough to put them at risk of getting surrounded by other Hexer mechs. Ves could easily imagine that the likelihood of casualties among the mech pilots assigned to this new model should not be optimistic!

Gloriana mentioned another piece of news. "The Hex Army discovered another simple means to ensure the glows stay intact. Some units have already begun to deploy multiple Blessed Squires at the same. Sometimes, they like to put some in reserve. If a Blessed Squire ever loses its glow, the commander simply replaces them with a fresh and fully-functional copy. The Fridaymen always get angry when that happens."

Both of them chuckled. It took a considerable sacrifice to pop a glow. In many cases, deploying just one or two Glow Crushers wasn't sufficient. If the Hexers pushed forward another Blessed Squire, then the Fridaymen would probably scream with rage!

Of course, the Hexers could also deploy many Blessed Squires together. While superimposing identical glows did make them that much stronger, it became much harder to break them because they mutually supported each other.

Over the course of the Komodo War, both sides learned a lot more about the properties of glows. It operated similar to energy fields, but possessed distinct properties that made them different. As the Fridaymen and Hexers researched them further, they began to develop better ways of employing or negating them in battle.

Even Ves learned a lot of new nuances about his glows!

"Are you okay, now?" Gloriana softly asked.

"I'm fine." He hugged her physical projection. It was so lifelike that Ves truly felt he was touching the soft red fabric of her coat. He even felt the warmth of her body as he pressed his hand on her hip! "Lately, I've shifted away from developing glows. They're nice and all, but they don't entirely relate to my ambitions. If there is one good outcome about venturing into the Nyxian Gap, it's that I've been forced to develop radical new solutions in order to survive. Once I return, we can design some truly revolutionary new mechs."

"I am truly looking forward to that." She giggled. "It'll be especially great if you can truly get Master Willix to co-design our expert mechs for us! I have long admired her and her work. As a Master brought up by the MTA, she is much more skilled than the likes of Master Olson and Master Katzenberg. Getting her involved in our projects will ensure our expert mechs will become even closer to perfection!"

He could already see the stars in her eyes, but Ves did not entirely share her optimism.

"Let's not get too excited, Gloriana. Our expert mechs have to be designed by us for the most part. We can't let Master Willix do all of the work. We need to own the expert mechs we design in order to ensure we can continue to iterate on them in the future. Expert mechs require a lot of care and attention and I doubt Master Willix is willing to babysit them on our behalf."

Her smile died down a bit. She sighed. "You're right. We can't expect her to stick around forever. I just feel it is a wasted opportunity if we insist on keeping her involvement as minimal as possible. Sure, our expert mechs will reflect our strengths, but their designs will be a lot rougher than other expert mech designs."



"That is only temporary. If we want them to become better, then we have to work harder to improve ourselves. If we let Master Willix play a bigger role in the design process, then it will be difficult for us to implement any improvements years later."

The most important part about expert mechs was that they never remained the same for a long time. It was customary to improve them as new technologies became available. Many owners also tended to change their configuration to improve their performance under specific circumstances.

Even if the difference amounted to only 1 or 2 percent, this could still mean the difference between a total victory and a dead expert pilot!

Ves deeply valued the lives of his new expert pilots. Talents such as Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi were pretty much irreplaceable in his eyes. Their presence not only boosted the confidence of his men, but also enhanced the prestige and reputation of his clan!

He couldn't imagine what would happen if one of them died. He had to minimize this outcome as much as possible, and the best way to do that was to equip each of them with excellent expert mechs that could keep up with their evolution.

The two lovers talked a bit about what kind of expert mechs they should aim to design for their new expert pilots.

"You're not keeping the Quint for Joshua?"

Ves shook his head. "Our masterwork mech is a fine machine. However, I don't think it's a good choice to turn it into his exclusive machine. He's not like Venerable Jannzi who matches well with the Shield of Samar. The Quint is based on an adaptable, modular mech platform that is designed to fit to a wide variety of mech pilots."

"Venerable Joshua is a mech pilot that adapts well to nearly every LMC mech." His partner pointed out. "Doesn't that make them the same?"

"It's different. Joshua's excellent compatibility with my mechs is more a reflection of shared ideals. I believe it would be better if we design a mech from the ground up that specifically takes advantage to his unique traits."

It was difficult for him to explain his ideas to her without going into details he did not want to convey over the MTA's private network. Gloriana was used to that, so she did not ask for further clarification.

In any case, once they reunited in person, he could say anything he wanted to her without worrying about eavesdropping.

Before they ended their talk, Gloriana conveyed one more piece of good news.

"My sister Kellandra told me that the Wodin Warriors she sent to reinforce you and escort you back to civilized space has almost reached your position. You'll have to sit tight for five more days or so. Will your task force be able to fend for themselves before that?"

"No problem." Ves confidently grinned. "We just brought some of the systems of the surviving warships back online. We scared away most of the vultures by firing their main guns a couple of times. Nothing scares pirates away better than demolishing one of their carriers with a single volley!"

"That's great, but don't take any unnecessary risks. My sister dispatched roughly 5000 mechs to your position. Once they link up with you, I expect no further problems. I hope you appreciate how difficult it was for our dynasty to send so many troops into the Nyxian Gap."

"I know, Gloriana. I truly appreciate this gesture."

To be honest, he expected the Wodin Dynasty to be a lot more reluctant and act in a more self-serving manner. Yet just like Calabast, the dynasty at some point decided to commit to him in earnest. Hexers or not, that took courage.

Of course, that did not mean that Ves let down his vigilance towards the Hexer people. If Gloriana thought that he would be willing to become a citizen of the Hegemony or adopt more Hexer customs, she would be sorely disappointed!

When they ended their call, Ves closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"It's good to get back to normal."

He no longer spent as much time on thinking how to survive and how to defeat his next opponents.

Instead, he considered other matters such as his upcoming wedding, his mech design projects and the Larkinson Clan's impending migration. None of them entailed the sort of acute threats and dangers that continually haunted his thoughts in the last few months.

Ves embraced this change!

Perhaps the Battle against the Abyss succeeded in pushing him to the brink. After almost losing it all in his confrontation against the Allidus Alliance, he no longer felt so eager to repeat the experience. Some risks were too great for him to bear.

"That said, I did manage to progress my design philosophy by leaps and bounds." He muttered as he returned to his stateroom.

"Meowww.."

Lucky listlessly greeted him. So far, he still hadn't recovered yet from ingesting the B-stone.

"You look hungry. Fancy a meal?"

"Meow!"

"Wow. I still can't get used to the fact that you're not in the mood to eat."

Lucky looked indigently at Ves. How could a human ever understand his longing for minerals? It was torture for him to be unable to eat anything during this time!

Ves ignored his pet and sat down behind his desk. He activated his desk terminal and loaded up all of the messages and reports he had pushed aside for the last few weeks.

Work never ceased. "I missed this. It's good to be back."

#### *Chapter 2423: Worthy Deaths*

Ves took a seat in the conference room. Calabast and Major Verle followed suit and sat beside him. Both of them looked a little nervous due to the importance of the upcoming meeting.

"Relax. It will be fine." He attempted to project confidence. "Expert pilots can be unyielding if you confront them head-on, but they're easy to handle as long as you don't get affected by their force of personality."

"I really prefer not to be in the same room as them." Calabast grimaced.

"You need to become accustomed to their presence." Major Verle noted. "For better or worse, our new expert pilots have become the new fixtures of our clan. Even if they aren't interested in running the clan, they possess an outsized voice."

Calabast came from a pure intelligence background, which meant she mostly worked with regular people. Facing expert pilots was something reserved for the military.

As for Major Verle, he possessed experience with dealing with expert pilots. Just the Aeon Corona Mission alone forced him to deal with the likes of Venerable O'Callahan, Venerable Xie and Venerable Foster.

The Larkinson Clan may not be a military organization like the Bright Republic's Mech Corps, but it was still militaristic by nature. In an organization where martial strength earned great respect, expert pilots naturally commanded respect even when they didn't do anything special!

As a clan leader, Ves had to be wary of their motives. Every expert pilot possessed their own wants and needs, and sometimes they weren't above using their influence to support their cause!

This was one of the other reasons why many private forces and organizations were reluctant to employ expert pilots.

They not only demanded ludicrously expensive expert mechs which had to be designed by at least a Senior, but their existence alone also presented a latent threat to the leaders.

Instances where expert pilots became dissatisfied with their bosses and launched coups were not unheard of! It didn't help that the MTA's arbitrators often sided with them in disputes.

Only state militaries possessed the structure and legitimacy to keep expert pilots in line. The ability to pilot a mech was not correlated with the ability to command. Not everyone was as multi-talented as Colonel Ark Larkinson. Most expert pilots recognized that they should leave all of the complicated decision-making to their commanding officers and simply focus on improving their combat abilities.

Right now, Ves wasn't sure what roles his new expert pilots wanted to play, hence why he looked forward to talking to them. This would be the first time after the Battle against the Abyss where he could enter into a proper discussion with the new stars of the Larkinson Clan.

The hatch slid open. Five people entered. Each of them wore the uniforms of their respective troops. Three Avatars, one Flagrant Vandal and one Swordmaiden stepped inside.

None of them were average. Even before they entered the conference room, Ves already sensed their force of wills bumping into his mind, and from the faint reactions of his advisors, they felt it as well!

Neither Verle nor Calabast possessed spiritual potential. On one hand, that allowed them to escape the brunt of the effects. On the other hand, they possessed very weak defenses against this kind of influence. Both consequences pretty much balanced the other out, causing the two norms to experience changing moods.

It did not help that they were in the same room as multiple expert pilots, each of whom possessed different convictions.

Ves smiled as he came in touch with Venerable Joshua's life-oriented force of will. He felt slightly abrasive when he touched Venerable Jannzi's force of will. Both Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise felt prickly to him. As for Venerable Tusa, he hardly felt anything.

Once the newcomers took their seats, Ves gestured to Calabast. She promptly activated a jammer and some other security measures.

The air became charged with interference, giving both Calabast and Verle some relief. The sensation of jamming distracted them from the force of wills projected by the expert pilots.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I hope that all of you have recovered from the previous battle. Tusa, how is your body doing?"

The light mech specialist smiled sardonically. "I enjoyed the best of care from Miss Ranya Wodin-Larkinson, though I do not feel as if my body entirely belongs to me anymore."

"I understand the sensation. It will blow over after a few weeks."

Of the five, Tusa had been the worst off. In his duel against the Inexorable One, he fell short once the fog projection became occupied with the avian dark god's true body.

In fact, Ves feared that Tusa may have died after the huge bird simply rammed through the Blueshift, causing the heavily-modified mech to break into pieces!

Seeing that Tusa was recovering nicely, he fully put down his concerns on his continued ability to serve the clan.

"Let's move on the first item of the agenda. First, congratulations to the four of you. While Venerable Jannzi has moved ahead of you, each of you have performed admirably by stepping up against our opponents when we most needed it. Your help was indispensable."

Venerable Orfan interrupted his speech. "That's all well and good, but when are you going to tell me about what we just fought against and who helped us out in the end? I asked some of my men to do some digging for me. And you know what they found? That winged tiger mech that appeared through the portal belongs to the Oblivion Hand. What are your ties with the dark mercenaries? Why did they decide to help us, and what the hell was that big alien woman?!"

Ves did not feel flustered at her sudden inquiry. He already anticipated these questions beforehand. He briefly looked into the eyes of the other expert pilots and recognized that they all wanted answers as well.

"We don't share a relationship with the Oblivion Hand." He told them. "In fact, none of us expected the mech and that female alien god to appear out of nowhere to help us in our hour of need. While we did cooperate during the battle, they left shortly afterwards without expressing any other intentions."

"Why did they take the initiative to help us out?" Orfan narrowed her eyes.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Ves readily answered. "If you have studied the history of the Oblivion Hand, then you should know that it has become a growing thorn in the side of the pirates. For some reason, the Dark Cleaver is hell-bent on toppling as many pirates as possible. The Oblivion Hand became interested in our clash against the Allidus Alliance and its allies because the dark mercenaries wanted to end the existences of the dark gods."

"What are those three giant monsters, really?" Venerable Tusa skeptically asked. "Are they truly gods? Why did three of them emerge from the Gravada Knarlax, and who exactly is the god that defeated them in the end?"

Ves shrugged and decided to offer an ambiguous answer. "Who knows? Gods or not, the Unending One, the Blinding One and the Inexorable One are all old and powerful existences that can't be fought with normal means. As for the alien woman who defeated them, I know even less about her aside from the fact that she must have been pursuing a vendetta against the three monsters."

Throughout this entire meeting, he did not say anything that could tie him and his parents together.

Fortunately, nobody knew that the Dark Cleaver who piloted the Devil Tiger was actually his father, though Joshua was looking at him a little differently.

Nobody happened to recognize the giant energy projection of his mother. All of the alien mutations that warped her energy projection pretty much made her unrecognizable.

At best, she was a completely unrelated half-human. At worst, she was an alien that only vaguely resembled humans due to convergent evolution!

Another indication was that the Larkinson Network didn't seem to work properly on his parents. He could already guess that his mother had done something to sabotage the connections so that they wouldn't inadvertently expose their identities or locations. This wasn't actually difficult to do. Even Ves cut off the connections if he wished.

None of the expert pilots had any reason to doubt his lies. They all believed that the Oblivion Hand genuinely had nothing to do with Ves or the Larkinsons. To them, the Dark Cleaver and the alien female god simply wanted to take advantage of the situation to weaken the pirates.

Though Ves felt tempted to tell them the truth, it was too dangerous for him to do so. They possessed their own principles that did not necessarily align with the clan. In fact, Ves believed that the Larkinson Network was no longer effective in influencing their mindsets.

This effectively meant he had to be very careful with exposing any information to them in the future.

The meeting moved on. After answering a lot of questions about the battle, the expert pilots finally relented.

They still looked unsatisfied as a whole. Ves hadn't provided them with many clear answers.

"Alright, now that we are done with discussing the past, let's address our current and future situation. First, the Wodin Warriors will soon arrive and escort us out of the Nyxian Gap. We won't be risking any further battles. This means we can start focusing on rebuilding. We have suffered a lot of losses. A lot of our clansmen are hurting right now, and we need your help to restore everyone's morale."

"Too many Larkinsons have died." Jannzi spoke up in an accusatory tone. "Out of our entire mech roster, we have lost more than half of our mech pilots on this disastrous venture. What's even worse is that we lost thousands more when the pirates targeted our ships. Why did we fight so much?"

Some of the other expert pilots nodded, which was a bad sign to Ves. He knew this reckoning was coming.

"I don't understand what we were fighting for either." Tusa said. "Is it experience? Is it loot? While I am glad that I managed to break through, I would gladly give up the opportunity to become an expert pilot if all of our fallen brothers and sisters never met their end in this forsaken place."

"Their deaths were not worthy. We weren't fighting to defend the Bright Republic. We were just fighting to advance your goals. I don't know how to face the Vandals who fell because of your decisions." Commander Orfan added.

"Cut him some slack." Venerable Joshua said. "What happened was regrettable, but we became stronger in the end. Not just us, but nine other expert candidates rose up. This is proof that our patriarch is right. Only by going through hardship will we be able to rise above our current height. Once we return home and digest our gains, our clan will grow by leaps and bounds!"

Orfan and Dise nodded in agreement, though his girlfriend did not look pleased.

"Joshua, do you care nothing about the Larkinsons who have died?"

"Don't get me wrong, Jannzi!" He quickly defended himself. "I do care. It's just that I think our clan will ultimately become better because of it. If we hadn't entered the Nyxian Gap, our force would have remained brittle and untested. That would leave us in a dangerous position when our entire clan comes under attack one day."

Commander Dise agreed with Joshua. "We are warriors. Living well sounds nice, but I never believed in putting my safety into other people's hands. While I care for my remaining Swordmaidens, I never thought of coddling them. That will only turn them dependent on others. I don't want the Larkinson Clan to breed weakness and become unable to defend or take care of itself. Trust me, with the survivors we have today, we don't have to worry about any weakness in our ranks for the next fifty years!"

The expert pilots expressed different views. Ves listened and took note of each expert pilot's inclination.

#### *Chapter 2424: Questioning Leadership*

Ves made the right choice by gathering all of the expert pilots together. If he spoke to them on an individual basis, then it would be difficult for him to fend off their remarks.

Now, the expert pilots pretty much argued amongst themselves. Ves, Calabast and Major Verle turned into inanimate props as the expert pilots each expressed what they thought about the current campaign.

Just as Ves expected, Venerable Jannzi found the most fault with his decisions. To her, trading lives for training and plunder was a horrible deal.

It didn't matter whether the Larkinson Clan gained 5 expert pilots and 9 expert candidates in total. Each breakthrough came at the cost of at least several dozens of lives!

To Jannzi, this was no different from cutting off the necks of innocent Larkinsons in order to fuel a demonic ritual that directly enabled her to break through. It was a reprehensible trade that should have never taken place!

Joshua thought the opposite. Each Larkinson that took part in the expedition ultimately agreed to face the risks. They all volunteered except for the Avatars, but that was only because anyone who agreed to put on the yellow-and-white uniform already agreed to become the tip of the spear.

"Each of us had a choice, Jannzi. None of us are in the Larkinson Clan because we were forced into it. Both trueblood and adopted Larkinsons had to make several deliberate choices to end up here. Our clan patriarch has been very open about this. That many of our clansmen died in the end is not good at all, but... they all accepted the risks."

"You!"

The two may be in a relationship with each other, but they held different views. As Jannzi and Joshua continued to argue with each other, Ves found it increasingly difficult to imagine that they would stay together for long.



"You're not looking at it right, Joshua." Tusa shook his head. "Sure, the Larkinsons who joined the task force did so on their own volition. This was because they got the impression that we would only be mucking about a bit by honing our skills against a bunch of pirate outfits. This is what all of the Peacekeeper outfits do. None of us expected us to go so deep and crack open fortified pirate bases that are defended by thousands of mechs and an arsenal of illegal superweapons!"

That was indeed a bit difficult to defend. Joshua clearly didn't know how to respond to this argument.

Commander Orfan crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Tusa has it right. While I like Ves, that doesn't mean I agree with him on everything. This time he really bamboozled us. None of us signed up to attack heavily defended pirate bases, let alone alien gods and actual warships!"

"Glory cannot be earned without sacrifice." Commander Dise surprisingly opposed her buddy. "What we gained from this journey is something precious. Who in the galactic rim can boast of fighting against and winning against a real warship? This victory alone will send our reputation soaring."

"What is the use of that?"

"Reputation can save the lives of many more comrades than we have lost in the past few months! Just think about it! All of the potential enemies in our way will never think about waylaying us when they heard we fought warships and came out on top. Even if they don't believe we have earned this victory, all of us expert pilots and expert candidates are already enough to force many people to respect our strength."

"Civilized space isn't as bad as the Nyxian Gap." Jannzi insisted. "Once we get back to normal space, nobody will randomly decide to attack us because they are greedy for our possessions. We live in a decent, normal society."

"Tell that to the pirates."

"The pirates in civilized space are nowhere near as strong as brazen as their counterparts here, Joshua. What passes off for pirates are usually poor and desperate criminals who only pounce on individual cargo ships because they can only muster up a couple of dozen mechs at most. With our strength and numbers, we have already grown way past the threshold where we need to be concerned about pirate attacks."

"That doesn't mean the galaxy is safe! Even well-defended trade fleets are at risk of attacks. It's too difficult to ensure our clan will remain safe and sound as we travel to other areas where the locals aren't as familiar with our clan. I bet that having ten-thousand mech pilots is not scary as a single expert pilot!"

Ves raised his hand. "Alright! That's enough. I think you are all arguing in circles at this point. You have all voiced your opinions. I have listened carefully to each and every one of you. You have all brought up some good points."

Though he felt a bit nervous at facing five expert pilots at the same time, he already knew them before they reached their current rank. They weren't so different from their old selves. As long as he accommodated all of their views, he should be able to achieve his goals.

"Venerable Jannzi." He spoke as he turned to the most outspoken critic. "We have talked before about this. Each Larkinson who joined our clan did so with the expectation that they will have to work to rise above their current station. Do you know how many dispossessed Ylvainans, downtrodden Reinaldan citizens, oppressed Sentinel commoners and other hopeful people have joined our clan? Each of them signed up with us with the promise that we would lift them from the mud."

She glared at him. "Our children and the Larkinsons born after that won't have a choice!"

"The rules can be amended if the Larkinson Assembly believes it needs to change. There are good reasons why we expect total loyalty from our offspring, but if you think that's wrong, you are welcome to push an alternative." Ves brushed off her argument. "We are in a different situation right now. Yes, I took risks. Yes, I've made mistakes. Don't let their deaths be in vain by throwing away the gains that they have secured for us. We should honor their sacrifices instead."

"Honor! What does that have to do with this! I see no honor in this ill-thought adventure! At least back in the Mech Corps, we didn't question our mission! I think we need a change of leadership! You're a good mech designer, Ves, but that's all you are. Either make way for someone steadier or we will force you out of your position!"

Uh oh. That did not sound good! Perhaps Venerable Jannzi had already come in touch with the dissidents. He could not let her push this proposal any further!

"We have made some decisions that did not quite pan out, but as a whole we become far stronger and wealthier than just a few years ago. This kind of progress is astounding no matter who you compare us to. No clan or organization has grown so fast to the point where we are already wealthy enough to reach the standard of second-class citizens! You can't obtain this progress with your own efforts in any other way. Do you think that our clansmen will remain satisfied if we remain as poor and inconsequential as we were before?"

"You are trying to move too quickly, Ves. What is wrong with taking it slow? Whether we become equivalent to second-class citizens tomorrow or ten years from now shouldn't be too much of a difference. With all of the sales your mech company is making lately, I don't see a strong need to seek so much battle."

"You know nothing." Commander Dise shook her head.

Jannzi ignored Dise's remark. "The last time we talked, Ves, I thought it was already enough to share my opinion. Now I think I should have pushed you harder. Maybe you should share some of your power to us. In the past, you were the only prominent Larkinson in the clan, but that is no longer the case. With us, we can return to how the Larkinson Family ran itself."

"Our clan is different from the old family." Ves quickly responded. "We have rejected many traditions that have held the old family back, and this is no different. Expert pilots like you have better things to do than to govern our growing clan. Also, putting people who know nothing except how to fight is not a good way to prevent more deaths. Just look at Vicious Mountain."

"We don't have to run the clan ourselves! We can just let the Larkinson Assembly and Executive Council continue to govern in our stead. We can hold veto power and reject any decisions that go too far. Isn't that a better arrangement?"

Ves shook his head. "You are some of the greatest Larkinsons we have, but that does not mean you represent the clan in its entirety. Vetoing any decisions by the Larkinson Assembly means that you are in effect opposing what the majority wants. Look, during the founding of the clan, we have already formalized the powers you gain when you become expert pilots. Each of you already hold the position of judge in the Larkinson Court."

"Larkinson Court?"

"Huh?"

Ves smiled. "I am not surprised you forgot about it. So far, no Larkinson has committed any crimes serious enough to warrant the involvement of the Larkinson Court. It's basically the institution that presides over the trials of clansmen who are accused of serious crimes. It doesn't waste its time on trivial issues such as stealing someone's comm or skipping work."

"What is the rationale for this? We aren't trained in law." Tusa frowned.

"The Larkinson Court will be filled with actual judges that will take care of most of the processes. The problem is that as our clan grows larger, they may grow partial to a faction or go astray in some way. Expert pilots like you are known for your integrity and adherence to values. I can find no better person than you to preserve our moral fiber. By issuing judgement during serious cases brought before the Court, you can wield power without imposing yourselves too much in other people's lives."

Several people looked confused. They didn't quite know what he was getting at. All of this judging business did not sound too appealing.

While Ves meant what he said, he also had an ulterior motive in mind when he pushed to put expert candidates in the Larkinson Court.

In a typical divided power structure, the executive, legislative and legal branches were all supposed to stand apart from each other. Each of them wielded power, but only in a specific way.

Ves always feared that expert pilots would somehow use their huge influence to force some undesirable changes to his clan. Blocking them from gaining power didn't help.

This was why he had the bright idea of shoving them into the court! Of the three branches, the Larkinson Assembly possessed the most decision-making power while the Larkinson Court possessed the least!

The job of a judge was to judge, not to legislate. Not only that, but judges were also expected to be fair and impartial. It was unseemly for them to be prejudiced and take sides before a trial had begun!

By pushing the expert pilots into the role of judges, Ves effectively hoped to muzzle their outspokenness. If they took their new responsibilities seriously, then they should firmly stay away from the actual decision makers. After all, in a divided power structure, it was a great taboo for judges to be in cahoots with executives and lawmakers!

"You'll understand in the future." Ves shook his head. "In any case, our clan already has a structure in place that the Larkinson Assembly has agreed upon. If people think I should go, then 80 percent of the Assembly must vote me out. That is the rule. It is not proper for you to break the existing rules. You should instead think about your future role. While our clan has largely stayed harmonious up until now, that will doubtlessly change in the future. The power to pass judgement is a heavy responsibility."

The expert pilots all looked uncertain at each other. Was this supposed to be their new role?

#### *Chapter 2425: Blinding Carrot*

"As much as I fault Ves for killing a lot of Vandals, I don't think it's a good idea to put someone else in charge." Commander Orfan said. "We all depend on his mechs. Our clan wouldn't be as great as it is now without his ambitions. I'm fine with letting him run everything so long as he promises we won't throw ourselves in another senseless adventure like this one."

The air in the conference room had become charged, and not just due to the jamming that suffused the compartment. Venerable Jannzi's insistence on taking Ves to account sparked an argument where the expert pilots seriously discussed whether they should support the current clan patriarch.

Commander Dise spoke next. "Only power matters. Whether you're in the frontier or in the middle of a peaceful state, this rule has never changed. Spending resources on soft, weak and complacent troops is not only a waste, but will weaken us as a whole. Just look at the performance of the Living Sentinels in the Battle of Ulimo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss. It's not a surprise they died in droves."

"The Living Sentinels were never supposed to fight in offensive actions like the previous battle!" Venerable Jannzi objected to Dise. "Ves misrepresented his goals and sold a false narrative to the clan. The Sentinels are worse off by far because their mission is different from ours! All of the fiascos that took place since we entered the Gap reflect a failure in the leadership of our clan. The patriarch has too much power and the Executive Council hasn't done anything!"

Major Verle shook his head. "You can't have too many leaders in charge during wartime situations. The moment our task force entered the Nyxian Gap, we followed the command of one indisputable leader, as is proper. We put our faith in him, and he has delivered, more or less. With multiple people in charge, any differences in opinion during battle can prove fatal. During critical moments, it is better to make a bad decision than no decision at all. In that respect, Ves has proven to be more than qualified due to his decisiveness and ability to maintain his wits under fire."

"I agree." Venerable Joshua enthusiastically nodded. "The clan patriarch is the sole person who is propping up the clan. Let's face it. He's responsible for everything and the entire reason why people like me have been able to transform our lives. I knew what I was getting into when I was signing up for the Larkinson instead of enlisting in the Mech Corps. If I chose differently back then, then I would have remained a worthless, normal mech pilot in a devastated state controlled by its neighbors. I'm truly grateful for Patriarch Ves for brightening my future. We all knew that the opportunity to increase our status wasn't going to be easy."

The tension between Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi had steadily risen throughout the contentious meeting. Neither of them showed any inkling of affection between the two. Ves already guessed that a breakup might happen as soon as today.

Everyone looked at Venerable Tusa. He had mostly sided with Jannzi so far, but he didn't sound as strident.

"I think both sides have a point." Tusa stated. "There are plenty of clansmen who remained safe and sound at home. The Larkinsons who joined our task force did so knowingly that they might die. Yet they did so anyway because Ves dangled a juicy carrot in front of them, only for them to miss the minefield they were walking into. I think this entire sequence of events has exposed many shortcomings in how we run our clan. We need to implement some reforms to make sure that we won't ever suffer losses as severe again."

The expert pilots did not manage to come to a consensus. Ves tentatively figured he could count on the support of Venerable Orfan, Venerable Dise and Venerable Joshua.

Venerable Jannzi sounded as if she would be happy to see Ves resign from his position, while Venerable Tusa also wanted to see some change.

Seeing that the other expert pilots failed to nudge the two dissenters, Ves knew that it was time for him to step in and resolve this situation.

He abruptly stood up. Every expert pilot looked at him with expectation.

It was difficult for normal people to face so many expert pilots, but Ves did so with a domineering posture.

"I built each of you." He began as he stared in all of their eyes. "None of you could have reached your current level of strength without my mechs, my funding, my clan and other arrangements. As far as I'm concerned, your rise and the emergence of another batch of expert candidates vindicates my approach!"

Not everyone agreed with that, but Ves continued to speak.

"Do you know how much blood, sweat and tears other people shed in order to achieve this result? Trillions of mech pilots fight and die in order to better their circumstances and reach a higher rank. There are many people who are content to remain average throughout their lives, but the members of our clan are different!"

Ves activated his comm and projected some footage from the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy. A panorama of strange new planets, boundless resource deposits and pioneering fleets dazzled everyone's eyes.

"This is our future and our ticket to greatness!" He claimed. "This is where the Larkinson Clan shall truly rise. Everything we did up until now has brought us closer to this goal. If we did not push ourselves so hard, we would have never made enough progress. We needed to go above and beyond to earn the merits needed to pass through the intergalactic gate, and we did that. We needed to accumulate strength in order to tackle our current and future challenges, and we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

He manipulated his comm and displayed a different set of footage. This time, his comm projected some footage of expert mechs in action.

Whether in space or on land, these dazzling machines unleashed powerful attacks or moved faster than the fastest light mechs. None of the expert pilots were able to resist the allure of obtaining such a powerful machine. Jannzi was no exception!

"Let me inform you of a fantastic new development." Ves smirked. "As you know, it is not easy to obtain an expert mech. Not even I can design such an advanced machine. It

is for this reason that I have been in talks with Master Moira Willix of the Mech Trade Association. She has shown interest in co-designing your expert mechs. As long as I leverage my good relationship with her, I might be able to gain her help!"

"Really?!" Joshua burst out. "Will the MTA really design our expert mechs?!"

The reputation of the MTA was stellar. Everyone knew that the MTA employed the best mech designers and designed the best mechs. There was no way that any average mech pilot would be able to remain calm if what Ves said was true!

"Nothing is definitive yet." Ves cautiously said. "Friendly or not, it isn't easy to convince an MTA Master Mech Designer. However, we have contributed significantly to the security of the Komodo Star Sector with our deeds. Knocking out Ulimo Citadel and ridding the Nyxian Gap of some very dangerous warships has allowed us to earn a lot of merits and favors from the Association!"

Everyone began to dream about their future expert mechs. Ves paid special attention to Venerable Tusa, who happened to show the greatest longing.

Of all the expert pilots at the table, he was the only one who completely lost his mech. The Inexorable One smashed his converted light mech into pieces, and so far the search and rescue parties were still combing over the battlefield to recover some of the debris!

In that battle, Tusa experienced the helplessness of piloting a weak mech. While there was nothing egregious about the Blueshift, the pared-down Bright Warrior mech simply failed to meet his demands. It was too slow, too sluggish and too fragile!

Ves could already see the wheels turning in his male cousin's head.

As expected!

Nothing attracted an expert pilot more than obtaining a suitable expert mech!

When he shifted his gaze to Venerable Jannzi, he could see she was also tempted.

"Venerable Jannzi, the Shield of Samar deserves the best." He softly spoke. "Don't you want your personal mech to enjoy the best treatment? I made your mech. I know what it wants. The Shield of Samar wishes to become as great as Qilanxo. Together with Master Willix, I can fulfill its wish. Once it passes through the MTA Master's hands, your mech will become so strong that you can use your own strength to prevent future tragedies!"

He could see his words having an effect on her mind. Expert pilots such as Jannzi believed in their own strength. They wouldn't be so willful if that was the case. Having a

good expert mech that complemented and enhanced their piloting ability was one of their persistent obsessions!

"What expert mech would you like to pilot? Think about it. With Master Willix presiding over their designs, the possibilities are endless."

Ten minutes later, the expert pilots left the conference room in a daze. Each of them were too preoccupied with dreaming about their expert mechs to think about the meeting.

Only Venerable Jannzi managed to hold back her urges. She glowered at Ves. "Well played."

"This isn't a game, Jannzi." Ves gently pushed back. "I have always tried to better the clan in one way or another. The sacrifices we made have pleased the MTA. Cleansing the Nyxian Gap of so many evil and destructive elements has effectively earned us the support of Master Willix. This alone will bring numerous benefits to our clan."

She glared at him for some time before she wordlessly rose from her seat and exited the conference room.

"Well, you survived, more or less." Major Verle finally sighed as the force of wills impacting his mind moved away.

Calabast did not look as optimistic. "Venerable Jannzi will remain a thorn at your side. She likes your mechs but despises you as a leader. She's struggling inside. She knows that you are the best, and only mech designer who can keep improving the Shield of Samar. That traps her."

That sounded bad to Ves. "Expert pilots perform the best when they are free to pursue their ideals. If she is struggling with her conscience, then her development might stall. That is bad for our clan."

"Is it, sir?" Major Verle questioned. "The way I see it, Venerable Jannzi will always be opposed to your agenda. There is no reason to go out of your way to accommodate her. She's not indispensable anymore now that we have four other expert pilots. Don't forget about our new expert candidates either. Each of them can replace her one day."

Calabast looked concerned. "Venerable Jannzi has earned a lot of renown in the clan. It's not wise to attack her directly. We should employ subtler means to diminish her influence. For example, we can raise the status of compliant expert pilots. Train them. Show them that they will be rewarded if they stand behind your back. You can give them priority on expert mechs, allowing them to improve faster than the naysayers."

This was a way of leveraging his power to compel the expert pilots to follow his lead. As the main mech designer of the Larkinson Clan, Ves pretty much controlled every mech



his clansmen used. This was especially the case for expert mechs, as they each required his involvement in order to be designed and built at great expense.

"These are good methods. I'll think about it. Thank you for your advice. In any case, Venerable Jannzi failed to gain the support of her fellow expert pilots. This is a pretty good outcome."

#### *Chapter 2426: Honorable Clan*

It turned out that expert pilots weren't completely single-minded. Aside from obsessing about their principles, they also obsessed over their expert mechs.

It was hard not to! Expert pilots weren't philosophers. They were warriors first. Their entire existence revolved around their ability to pilot mechs.

Each of them knew that stronger mechs allowed them to exert more strength. With greater strength, they gained more influence, allowing them to spread their values more effectively.

This meant that if Ves wanted to remain in charge, he should manipulate these circumstances in his favor.

Promoting his backers and suppressing his critics was a classic way to remain in power. As long as he amplified the voice of Venerable Joshua and diminished the voice of Venerable Jannzi, the balance would slowly tip in his favor.

This was what Ves wanted to see. While he liked Venerable Jannzi as a person, her strong views threatened his ambitions. For this reason alone, he did not mind suppressing her in various ways.

The simplest method to do so was to simply hold off on providing her with an expert mech. In any case, Ves still had to exert a lot of effort in order to obtain any expert mech. If Venerable Jannzi was too ungrateful to appreciate his efforts, then he had no reason to amplify her voice.

Expert pilots each possessed an exalted status in society, but it was very hard for them to remain influential if they continually lacked an expert mech!

In the Mech Corps, no expert pilot worried about lacking a suitable machine. Each of them fought on behalf of the state, so it was extremely rare for them to dissent. Even if they had a problem with their mech regiments, they could simply request a transfer.

It was different in the Larkinson Clan. No matter what, Ves was in charge of everything, so Jannzi had no way of avoiding him in any way. This was especially so if he effectively controlled her access to an expert mech!

Calabast pushed Ves to take advantage of his position of power. "While Venerable Jannzi enjoys the distinct honor of becoming the first expert pilot of the clan, stars fade when others rise. As long as a more pliable expert pilot such as Venerable Joshua continues to astonish our clansmen, who will remember Venerable Jannzi after a few years?"

Though Ves recognized that her approach had a lot of merit, a part of him felt uneasy. There was something distinctly distasteful about engaging in such murky acts. It reeked of politics.

Major Verle happened to feel the same way. "The Larkinson Clan values honor and integrity. Sir, think very carefully about the repercussions of your actions. Once you scheme against your own people, our clan will change into something different. Others will follow your example and hatch their own schemes. Any notion about treating every Larkinson fairly will disappear, and it is all because you taught everyone that it is acceptable to abuse your power for your own gain."

"Everyone abuses their power for their own gain. That's what makes it worth pursuing." Calabast sneered.

"The Larkinson Clan is not a Hexer organization! My fellow Vandals and I initially joined the clan for two reasons. One, we believe in Ves. Two, we believe in the uprightness of the Larkinsons. Many other hopeful people have applied to join the Larkinson Clan because they are attracted to our fair and equitable culture. We are a brotherhood. However, just like any big organization, we have people who have different ideas. The proper way to handle them is to allow them to continue to voice their opinions freely. If Ves and his supporters are right, then they will naturally be able to remain in charge."

"Naive! Dissent must be managed, lest it fester and spread. You cannot imagine how malcontents can manipulate the majority by driving hysteria and spreading misinformation. The way I see it, Venerable Jannzi must be choked out of the clan. It's not worth it anymore to keep her around!"

Ves shot a glance at both of his advisors, forcing them to halt their argument.

"That's enough. I have contemplated both your suggestions. While I am tempted by your suggestion, Calabast, I cannot bring myself to do as you say. Major Verle has said it correctly. The Larkinsons must act honorably and with integrity. I do not want to preside over a clan that is rife with backstabbing and suspicion. Larkinsons shouldn't have to climb over each other's corpses in order to fulfill their ambitions. Kinship is one of our most important values. That means we should respect each clansmen even if they hold opposing viewpoints."

His words caused Calabast to look glum. Major Verle briefly gloated over his victory.

"I'm glad you made the right decision, sir."

This was the end of the matter.

While Ves had not discussed with his expert pilots to comfort the grieving survivors, it could wait. He ordered Calabast and Major Verle to lay the groundwork. He planned to address his men when they were ready to move out of the Nyxian Gap.

In the next couple of days, Ves remained in thought as he slowly began to pick up his regular work.

With his task force still busy salvaging the battlefield and restoring their damaged and captured ship, there was no need for him to pay attention to these chores.

This left him free to return to the design lab in order to resume his design work.

In the month that he and his Braves were occupied with preparing for the battle, Gloriana and her Erudites had achieved remarkable progress on every project.

The Valkyrie Redeemer, the Cat's Paw, the Chiron, the Ferocious Piranha, the Sanctuary and the Crystal Lord Mark II all came closer to completion.

Of the six projects, the Cat's Paw Project still required a lot of work while the Ferocious Piranha was very close to completion.

At least, that was before he lost one of his design spirits.

A major complication had arisen after the Battle against the Abyss. One of the repercussions directly affected the LMC's business operations!

"Benny! Long time no see!" Ves grinned as he finally greeted his personal assistant after more than a month of neglect.

"Boss." Gavin greeted while trying to stay as professional as possible. "A lot has happened over the past month. I've prepared an extensive report for you to peruse. In short, while our clan is doing better than ever due to your astounding victory against the Nyxian pirates, the LMC has suffered some setbacks."

"What's wrong?"

"Our sales are slowing down, boss. We are still selling more mechs each month, but our expansion has stalled. The local mech markets are beginning to lose confidence in our offerings."

"Why?"

"There are two reasons for this. The introduction of targeted counters has shown our customers that our glows aren't as infallible as they once assumed. When the

Fridaymen developed the Olson-Katzenberg alloy, they did not keep the alloy formula for themselves. Instead, they put it up for licensing. While we can't count how many mech designers and mech companies have licensed the O-K alloy, it is sure to be considerable."

That sounded bad, but Ves did not panic. "O-K alloy is only part of the equation why the Glow Crusher works. Master Olson's ingenuity in generating motion energy and discharging it as an attack is the true brilliance of her design. That is not what others can replicate."

Ves truly admired his former Master for harnessing such a potent form of energy! It far exceeded his imagination of what her specialty entailed. It showed him that he should never underestimate any Master no matter how boring their design philosophies sounded.

"Well, from what we have heard from other sources, O-K alloy somehow makes it easy to generate at least some motion energy. This gives other mech designers a chance to target glows even if they have to put more effort into generating it. As long as the mech industry improves and refines the application of O-K alloy, our products won't be able to take advantage of their glows with impunity."

Ves remained stoic as he listened to Gavin's pessimistic assessment.

"This day would have come sooner or later. Nothing is infallible. Not even glows. Hell, this is why I pushed to design the Sanctuary. I don't believe that other mech designers can leverage the properties of O-K alloy as well as the two Masters. If you ask me, let these competitors of ours invest in developing their pathetic counters for our products. Once we publish the Sanctuary, the effectiveness of our solution will instantly conquer the market. We will be able to control our counter by that time!"

"Uhm, that sounds great, but what about the Fridaymen? What stops them from buying our Sanctuaries before employing them against the Blessed Squire?"

"That won't be a problem." Ves grinned. "It's hard coded not to suppress the glow of superior mechs. That's the greatest benefit to publishing our own counter!"

Gavin looked shocked. "If that is the case, then I have no complaints!"

So far, the Design Department had kept most of the details about the ongoing projects close to its chest. None of the assistant mech designers had leaked any information, which was good.

"You mentioned another issue that's slowing our growth. What's the problem?"

"Ah, it's about the Doom Guard. The mech has.. changed, boss."

"Oh. Yeah. That's my fault."

Ves quickly recalled that he had lost one of his design spirits in the Battle against the Abyss. He felt quite pained at the loss of Nyxie!

In hindsight, Nyxie had probably turned into a dark god. Unlike the Unending One and the other powerful spirits, Nyxie failed to join their club because his coffin trapped him in place.

If not for that, Ves might not have gained so many benefits from harvesting his spiritual fragments!

Ves personally witnessed the power of a dark god. Whether it was the Unending One, the Inexorable One or the Blinding One, each of them possessed enough power to wipe out his fleet by themselves!

This was because of the insane pressure they emanated. Their sheer presence was so heavy that most people couldn't even stay awake. Only those with at least some spiritual strength would be able to muster up some resistance, but even then none of his expert pilots were able to put up a fight because they lacked expert mechs!

Now that his expert pilots had already broken through, there was no way they could exert as much strength as before.

It didn't matter if his surviving forces managed to take over control of some of the captured warships. Their main cannons probably did little to deter a fully-descended dark god!

For this reason, a part of Ves was quite happy that he got rid of Nyxie while he could. Who knew when the powerful dark god would break out of his prison.

That said, Nyxie's death did present a considerable problem to Ves. In his haste, he filled up the void in the Doom Guard's design with Lufa. At the time, he did not have the time to check how this hasty solution affected one of his best-selling models.

From the look of Gavin's face, the consequences shouldn't be good.

"The Doom Guard mechs have become weird. They are still disturbing, but in a different way. It's like you are getting beaten by a stick one day, only to get splashed by boiling water the next day."

"In what way?"

"Well.. they're still uncomfortable, but they don't induce a sense of terror anymore. Instead, they're disturbing because anyone who enters within the range of their glows is subject to two conflicting influences. One of them is aggressive, and the other one is

calm. Strange things happen when both of them are affecting people at the same time. Our customers are still trying to cope with the changes, but it is very different from what they are used to before. The mech pilots assigned to the Doom Guards have to learn how to cope with their glows all over again!"

### *Chapter 2427: Bipolar Guard*

It was better for Gavin to show Ves what had changed. Words could not fully convey how differently the Doom Guard behaved.

The first footage showed a Doom Guard in the base of the Larkinson Clan back on Cinach VI. A dozen Larkinson mech pilots stared up at the mech with apprehension.

After receiving some sort of signal, they stepped forward and approached the mech.

Their faces contorted a bit as they got close. Some looked like they were about to punch someone. Others looked as if they were ready to sit down and relax.

The problem was that these conditions only lasted a short time. Just a few seconds later, the people who looked excited had abruptly calmed down, and the people who appeared to be relaxed suddenly became alarmed.

Their progress forward slowed. The closer they approached, the more their emotions became subject to rapid flips. The mood swings also grew stronger at close range, which meant that the mech pilots experienced greater difficulties in maintaining a sober mind!

Everyone had a limit.

The weakest ones stopped halfway or so. They switched from battle excitement to unnatural calm like pendulums. The changes were so extreme that they simply did not dare to move any closer towards the Doom Guards for fear of losing their wits!

The people who possessed better control of themselves managed to go further. Ves noticed that the group of stronger mech pilots should probably be identical to the sort of individuals who were able to approach the old Doom Guard.

A strong mind and will allowed anyone to resist external impacts on their minds.

The next footage showed how the altered Doom Guard might affect the battlefield. In a live practice battle, a number of mechs attempted to swarm the lone striker mech.

The Doom Guard allowed the enemy mechs to approach without activating its flamethrower.

When the enemy mechs came close, their formation suddenly became ragged.

As the mechs neared, the machines seemed to lose control!

"This is different!" Ves widened his eyes.

He became intrigued by the changes. A simple change of design spirits caused one of his existing products to exhibit a substantially different effect.

As Ves continued to track what happened to the mechs that went out of control, he noted that they never recovered until the mechs automatically floated out of the range of the Doom Guard!

At that point, the stricken mech pilots managed to escape the field that induced artificial mood swings.

"Very interesting." Ves turned to Gavin's projection. "The mech pilots were unable to control their mechs?"

"They quite literally lost their minds at the time. The way they describe it, they were turning their heads from left to right and back again so many times that they were unable to look straight ahead."

"I see."

This was a different way of debilitating enemy mech pilots in battle. Rather than scaring them away, it rendered them helpless instead.

This was very fatal in a mech battle! Mech pilots controlled their machines through their minds.

The neural interface enabled mechs to transmit a lot of data to the minds of their mech pilots. In turn, if a mech pilot wanted a mech to do something, they had to transmit a mental signal that the neural interface picked up and conveyed to the mech.

If the mind of the mech pilot became compromised to such a degree that they were no longer able to think straight, then the mech no longer received any proper commands!

"While it has only been a few days since the Doom Guards have changed, the implications are staggering." Gavin said. "First, the mech no longer causes people to turn around and run. This is good because any enemies that get caught in the Doom Guard's glow will likely turn into sitting ducks. It's also bad because in space, the mechs will simply continue to soar into the direction of the enemy. Once the enemy mechs reach the other side, their mech pilots will not only be able to regain their wits, but also wreak a lot of havoc in the middle of the defending formation!"

The old Doom Guard excelled at deterring swarms of mechs piloted by weak-willed criminals.

The new Doom Guard was able to affect entire swarms of mechs as well, but the nature of its effects meant that the pirates were better able to overwhelm an outnumbered opponent!

As Gavin explained all of these repercussions, he did mention a beneficial change.

"Strangely enough, the new Doom Guard is more suited to mental resilience training. Some of the Avatars have already started to subject themselves to the new Doom Guard's glow. They all say that trying to maintain lucidity under these conditions is more effective training."

Ves could see how this was the case. The old Doom Guard's glow possessed a creeping and fluctuating sense of terror that was both inexplicable and unblockable. It was very hard for anyone to wrap their minds around it. This disturbing sense of the unknown was very difficult to cope with, even for the mech pilots assigned to pilot these fearsome machines!

In contrast, the new Doom Guard relied on different emotions to debilitate mech pilots. Instead of trying to unnerve and scare them away, the new glow instead forced them to cope with two familiar but rapidly-changing emotions.

Aggression and calm were two emotions that every mech pilot dealt with on a daily basis.

"Each mech pilot has to exhibit at least some aggression in order to fight better. A mech pilot who isn't aggressive won't be able to commit as much to a battle. That is usually detrimental to their ability to immerse and synchronize with their mechs." Ves noted. "Mech pilots also have to be able to remain calm on and off the battlefield."

Gavin nodded. "That's what the other Larkinsons who studied the changes think as well. There are already plans from our side to put all of our mech pilots through special training sessions."

"Hehe. They're in for a treat."

The news was not all good, though. Even though the new Doom Guard was still useful, if in different ways, the abrupt and unannounced changes in performance had deep implications for the LMC.

"We sold a product to more than a million customers with the promise that they get what they paid for." Gavin explained with a grave voice. "Right now, that's not the case anymore. Every Doom Guard has changed, resulting in a lot of disruption. The owners who aren't in a position to fight anyone have to change their plans for their copies, so the problem isn't as critical to them. It's the owners who have employed them in battle recently that have incurred many problems."



The assistant transmitted a few angry letters and official complaints to the LMC. Some of the buyers of the Doom Guards had made use of them in battle when their glows abruptly weakened before changing. The changes affected both enemies and friendlies alike, but because they came so suddenly, the damage was very serious to the side that deployed the new mechs!

The disasters sparked by these unannounced changes already resulted in a lot of inquiries. Angry customers wanted to know why their products changed in specification. The mech market became a lot more suspicious about the Doom Guard and other LMC offerings. What if their glows changed too one day?

The emerging scandal presented the LMC with a severe confidence crisis! If the company didn't do anything soon, its stellar reputation for reliability might take a heavy blow!

Ves frowned. This was a serious problem indeed. It was very taboo for mechs to alter so drastically without any reasonable explanation. None of the manuals or documentation ever mentioned that the glows of his products might be subject to change. This was a severe oversight.

"What do you think, Benny?"

"Our mechs are too useful for the mech market to drop. It's just that our customers will become a lot more reluctant to buy our products if this scandal continues to blow up in the news. Our competitors are grasping at this new development with enthusiasm! While it is only a few days, the shift in perception is already permanent. We'll never be able to restore the confidence of our customers to where it was before."

This was a great shame, but Ves accepted it with a stoic expression.

He did not regret flinging Nyxie to one of the pirate warships. Nyxie's outbreak pretty much demolished the Mortis Greyson, thereby weakening the pirates and sparing many lives. The freed spiritual entity also kept the Unending One busy for a time.

All of this was worth the repercussions! No matter how badly the scandal affected the LMC's reputation, his products would always hold some value. Even if people questioned their reliability, at most his mech company might drop prices in order to make up for lost demand.

"Why aren't you worried, boss? This is a serious problem! It's the greatest threat to the company since those worries about brainwashing crept up. Some of the more alarming scenarios even predict that our current sales will be halved as a result of lower confidence in our mech models!"

Ves grinned and waved his hand. All of the projections that illustrated the LMC's difficulties disappeared. "What is lost can be regained. Before, we already earned an

astounding amount of money each month. What's the big deal if we earn half that amount? It's still an astonishing number that we can use to invest in our clan. Besides, the public hasn't heard about what happened in the Nyxian Gap. We can use that to force the news cycles to change their reporting."

He began to discuss a new plan with Gavin. The assistant slowly lost his concerns. He became excited instead.

"This can actually work! No, it's already a given that it will work. We just have to package the announcement in the right way." His smile dropped a bit. "Still, that doesn't solve the issue with our current customers. Unlike the public that don't have a chance of buying our mechs, the people who already bought and used our mechs all have legitimate complaints towards us. If we don't do anything, then the first ones who bring their complaints to the MTA will have a very good case against us. You should know how the MTA deals with these matters!"

The MTA disapproved of mechs changing midway for whatever reason. While not every mech had to be extremely reliable, for them to be so poorly-conceived that they transformed into something else was not a positive development.

If it happened too often, then mech buyers throughout the galaxy would become a lot hesitant about purchasing a mech!

This was what the MTA least wanted to see. Anything that caused mechs to be sold less often posed a serious threat to the supremacy of mechs in modern society.

This was why Gavin thought that Ves should be very concerned.

"If you ask me, boss, we should outright compensate the customers who have suffered real losses as a result of this incident. We can make them shut up if we offer them money up to the full price of a Doom Guard depending on how much losses they suffered. For the few cases where the accusers actively deployed a Doom Guard in the middle of a battle, we can selectively buy them off so that they won't take us to the MTA's court."

"How much will this cost?" Ves asked.

Gavin winced. "We sold more than a million Doom Guards, you know. While not every customer has suffered major damage, the ones that did usually demand a lot of money. As for the rest, they need some compensation as well because they are stuck with a product that no longer performs as expected. It doesn't matter if the new Doom Guard is just as useful as the old one. It's different, and it's not the mech we initially sold."

"How. Much?"

"Uhm.. at least 500 billion hex credits?"

*Chapter 2428: New Candidates*

The matter of compensation was a thorny issue. The LMC had to pay something in order to preserve as much reputation as possible, but paying the equivalent of half the price of a second-class capital ship sounded far too much!

Ves glowered as he dismissed Gavin with an angry wave.

"Don't make any decisions. Let me think about it. Prepare more data for me. I want to know exactly how many people are affected badly enough that they can raise a stink in court or in public."

"We should try and buy them out if possible." Gavin suggested. "Most of the seriously-affected complainers consists of regular mercenary corps who just happened to have deployed the Doom Guard in battle at the time of the incident. The numbers are fairly small, so we can easily deal with them in many ways before they can exert influence. In fact, one of the reasons why the total cost of handling this situation is so high is because we need to step in before our competitors have the bright idea of doing so instead."

"What?"

"We'll be in trouble if the Friday Coalition buys out or obtains control over the damaged parties. There's no way to compromise with them then as they drag their case all the way to the MTA."

This was indeed something his enemies would do. "Move quickly, then. You have my permission to do whatever it is necessary to prevent the situation from going worse. As for the large group of customers who haven't suffered as much, I have something different in mind. I'll get back in touch with you after I flesh out my plan."

Ves issued some instructions to Gavin. He knew that time was of the essence and that they couldn't let the press report on the scandal without any input from the LMC.

"Before you go, is there anything you would like to add about the Hexers who have come?"

"Uhm, they're remarkably well-behaved, boss."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, when the first waves of Hexers arrived in Cinach, they looked down on us Larkinsons. They didn't stir up any trouble or anything, but they did little to conceal their contempt. That started to change once the Blessed Squire delivered them victory after victory. Now that we have all just heard about how you managed to smash a powerful

fleet of pirates, the Wodins are actually starting to treat us with grudging respect. Of course, they're a lot friendlier towards our women."

Ves did not find this change of heart surprising. In any case, he was about to marry Gloriana soon, and that meant that his gains would partially become the Wodin Dynasty's gains as well. Mutual interest alone ensured that the Wodins would definitely support him as long as he continued to show promise.

"Has Gloriana been up to anything special?"

Gavin shook his head. "No. These days, she spends most of her time in the design lab. She is pushing her Erudites hard in order to make up for the absence of you and your Braves. She used to pay a lot of attention to the wedding planning before her mother arrived."

"Madame Constance Wodin has arrived as well?"

"Yes.." Gavin hesitantly replied. "She is.. quite a forceful individual. I can barely raise my head in her presence."

Anyone who could raise a daughter like Gloriana was bound to be strict. Ves had already heard enough to know that Madame Constance was not a woman to be trifled with. She may not be a matriarch, but she was pretty much the next best thing!

Seeing that his assistant was reluctant to talk about Madame Constance behind her back, Ves did not push any further. In any case, he would be meeting her in person in a month.

"What does the wedding venue look like?"

"It's big, and the Wodins recently decided to make it even grander. They're shipping sculptors and hiring a lot of local artists and craftsmen to enhance the visual impact of the giant space platform. They say it's needed to reflect your greater stature."

"I hope it doesn't look too Hexer-ish."

"Don't worry. Madame Constance may have her own ideas, but she isn't entirely inconsiderate towards us. The wedding shouldn't be a complete Hexer spectacle. If there is anything about the wedding that suggests that the groom is in any way inferior or subordinate to the bride, I'll bring it up to you. We all know how much you care about that. None of us want to become Hexers."

One of the points that Ves heavily emphasized to Gloriana was that he was in no way marrying into the Wodin Dynasty. She was instead marrying into the Larkinson Clan. Otherwise, he would hear no end of her trying to introduce more Hexer customs into their married life.

Hopefully, the wedding would be the first and last time he came in touch with so many Hexers. Once he left the Komodo Star Sector, he only had to deal with his newly-wedded wife and her Glory Seekers.

Though Ves felt slightly disgusted about the latter, they did bring 2000 powerful second-class mechs to the table. Perhaps these numbers might not mean much ten years from now, but in this early stage, he could use all the help he could get. The Battle against the Abyss had already taught him that his clan's foundation was still too weak.

Some time passed as Ves continued to think over his various issues. The Living Sentinels, the expert pilots, the Doom Guard scandal and his upcoming wedding continued to weigh on his shoulders.

Despite all of these troubles, Ves did not feel too encumbered. After confronting immensely powerful warships and dark gods, he didn't feel that any of his current challenges were too much for him to cope.

"Really. These problems are nothing compared to what I've faced on the battlefield."

He even felt as if his life was becoming more hollow now that he was about to return to a semblance of normality.

This was strange. During and after the Battle against the Abyss, he had clearly reached his limit. He wanted nothing more than to get out of the Nyxian Gap and escape all of the danger associated with this cursed region.

Yet now that he began to tackle the mundane problems of his regular life, some part of him wanted to stay.

As much as all of the dangers had pushed him to the brink, he didn't break in the end. Instead, he harvested enormous gains. From developing new methods of empowering his mechs and mech pilots to obtaining a large quantity of irreplaceable Unending alloy, it was clear that the Nyxian Gap still contained a lot of hidden treasures!

"No!"

He furiously shook his head!

He could not let his greed and desire for advancement warp his thinking. While he had gained much, he lost a lot as well. There was no way the survivors of his task force would support any further ventures in the Nyxian Gap!

Thinking about his gains also caused him to think about his losses.

They weren't trivial.

First, his task force had lost a lot of valuable mech pilots. A little over 1300 Larkinson mech pilots entered the Nyxian Gap in high spirits, but only around 530 of them made it to the end.

In other words, 60 percent of his mech pilots perished under his command! These were earnest, loyal and decent clansmen who all entrusted their lives to him. Ves failed his responsibilities, not that he would admit it to anyone.

He could not afford to feel guilty when doing so only disadvantaged him. He still had many ambitions, and he couldn't let a couple of missteps stop him from reaching Master!

"Besides, we can easily replace the slain mech pilots."

It sounded callous, but it was true. While it was still difficult for the Larkinson Clan to hire second-raters, it was not a problem to recruit thousands of third-raters. Unfortunately, it took a lot of time and effort to upgrade them into second-raters.

"Maybe I should just skip them and hire proper second-class citizens instead."

If he wanted to do so, the Larkinson Clan needed to leave the Komodo Star Sector first. There was no way he wanted any Fridaymen or Hexers into his clan. He only made an exception for the Penitent Sisters because of their meritorious service and their willingness to change.

Time passed as he continued to mull over these issues. After taking care of some matters, he finally met with the expert candidates.

Before his clan obtained any expert pilots, Ves cared a lot about expert candidates. Yet when the nine newly-advanced Larkinsons filed into the conference room and took their seats, his heart hardly moved.

He had better toys now. Why should he go back to playing with inferior ones?

"Welcome, everyone." He commenced the meeting while keeping his true feelings in check. "I hope that each of you have recovered from the previous battle. Let me thank you for stepping up in the previous battle. Fifteen of you managed to stall the Inexorable One long enough for help to come. Let us take a moment of silence for the six comrades that are not here with us today."

Ves waved his hand, causing the table projection to display the portraits of the six fallen expert candidates.

Each of the expert candidates looked solemn as they looked at the portraits. Each of them had looked them up already. A bit of guilt, regret and other complex feelings overtook the survivors.

They could have been among the casualties. When the Inexorable One used her innate advantages to torment the expert candidates, she could have picked off any one of them. That was one of the most fearsome moments of their lives. None of them enjoyed the feeling of letting others control their own fate!

Ves studied the expert candidates carefully. He sensed a burning desire to grow stronger from each of them. That was good. No one who advanced to expert candidates lacked ambition!

"Alright. We have paid our respects. Let us proceed." He waved his hand, causing the portraits to disappear. "Please introduce yourselves to each other."

It was all well and good to mourn for the dead, but he didn't want his men to obsess over them every day!

The new expert candidates proceeded to call out their names.

"Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson. Avatars of Myth."

"Imon Ingvar-Larkinson. Avatars of Myth."

"Tamarin Larkinson. Avatars of Myth."

"Isobel Kotin-Larkinson. Avatars of Myth."

"Percival Larkinson. Living Sentinels."

"Hector Larkinson. Living Sentinels."

"Trinity Larkinson. Living Sentinels."

"Avi Case-Larkinson. Flagrant Vandals."

"Zimro Belson-Larkinson. Black Cats."

The expert candidates had already gotten in touch with each other for the most part. This was the first time they met each other in person, though. They curiously studied each other and tried to see whether they should spend more time with each other.

Ves studied his new expert candidates as well. He could already see some interesting patterns.

It didn't surprise him that the Avatars boasted the greatest number of expert candidates. In fact, it should have been more, but the Inexorable One frequently targeted the gold-coated mechs in the previous battle.

What surprised him quite a bit was that the Living Sentinels still retained as much as three expert candidates!

This was an astonishing number considering the heavy attrition.

He supposed that the Sentinels who survived up to this point represented the very best. Ves had no doubt that the quality and skill of these Sentinels had already caught up to the Avatars for the most part!

Ves was still a bit wary towards this group, though. None of the Sentinel expert candidates looked at him fondly. Only twenty-four percent of their fellow mech pilots were left.

The last expert pilot was a bit of a surprise to him. According to the records, Zimra Belson-Larkinson used to be a Xona Stalker before the Black Cats absorbed the pirate defectors.

The final observation he made was that four out of nine expert candidates consisted of trueblood Larkinsons. This was a remarkable ratio considering how few of them were left.

It did not surprise Ves in the least that all the Sentinel expert candidates were completely made up of truebloods!

#### *Chapter 2429: Dangerous Controls*

Ves did not talk too much with the new expert candidates. He only held a perfunctory speech and began to detail some of their new rights and responsibilities in the clan.

They needed a lot of time to develop into their newfound power. While expert candidates weren't as reality-defying as expert pilots, they still stood head and shoulders above regular mech pilots. This was already enough to warrant special treatment.

Of course, Ves didn't have to sort out all of the details. Commander Melkor, Commander Magdalena and so on all took responsibility for nurturing the expert candidates.

As soon as they advanced, the nine Larkinsons had already turned into investments of the clan. The value of an expert pilot was at least a hundred if not a thousand times more valuable. There was no way his mech forces would let their potential remain buried!

Since Ves was already swamped with responsibilities, he did not intend to track the progress of his expert candidates too closely. He was only willing to spend some time on customizing and improving their mechs so that they enjoyed smoother growth.



The only problem was that Ves did not have any suitable mechs to pass on to them aside from the Bright Warriors.

Now that the Larkinson Clan was transitioning to a second-class organization, it did not make much sense to invest in this mech model. It had already served its role for the most part.

The only problem was that he hadn't prepared an alternative. Ves either had to design a second-class version of the Bright Warrior or design a set of new second-class mechs.

Either way, it was likely going to take years before he equipped all of his mech pilots with proper mechs!

After providing the expert candidates with some helpful advice, he dismissed them. Aside from providing them with improved mechs, they shouldn't need any further help from him. If they couldn't advance to the rank of expert pilot after this effort, then perhaps they weren't cut out to become demigods.

"Too many expert pilots is not necessarily good. I already have my hands full from managing five of them. It's going to be an enormous chore to design all of their expert mechs."

Ves could not borrow Master Willix every time one of his expert candidates broke through. She was not some kind of design bot that emerged out of its resting place and dutifully provided him with the assistance he needed on command.

Just thinking about all of the trouble he had to go through to design more expert mechs in the future gave him a headache. He felt it was even more important to design a lot of mechs in order to accumulate enough DP to exchange for valuable knowledge about expert mechs.

As the reinforcements dispatched by Kellandra Wodin was only a day away from reaching the surviving fleet, Ves decided to hold a press conference.

News and rumors about the Battle against the Abyss already started to generate a lot of interest.

At the same time, the scandal surrounding the Doom Guard was still growing unabated.

Even if the LMC acted quickly and bribed or outright bought the damaged parties, there were still plenty of opponents who wanted to take advantage of the situation. The LMC was already eating up a lot of market share in the market for spaceborn rifleman mechs and spaceborn striker mechs.

Once the Miracle Couple published some additional mech designs, even more mech companies were going to bleed market share!

Due to the magnitude of the planned announcements, the Larkinson Clan put a lot of effort into preparing a suitable venue.

Many people offered different suggestions.

Some wanted to build an opulent hall on the surface of Cinach VI that reflected the Larkinson Clan's splendor.

Gloriana wanted to hold the press conference aboard the flagship of the Wodin Warriors.

Suffice to say, every Larkinson shot down her suggestion.

In the end, Ves came up with a novel idea. When he shared it with his inner circle, most of them immediately approved!

The only people who disapproved were Gloriana and a couple of old fogeys like Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson. They thought that holding a press conference in such an unusual setting was highly inappropriate, but it was too bad they were horribly outnumbered.

Symbolism mattered. Every decision affected the impression they made to the public. Even if it was mostly theater, Ves needed every advantage he could get to solve his various problems.

Just before the press conference was about to begin, preparations took place in two different places.

On Cinach VI, hundreds of invited journalists entered a hall specifically prepared for the occasion. While the clan spent some effort to decorate it with the clan's developing architectural style, the broadcast wouldn't show any of it. This was because the Larkinsons would soon project a different setting around the journalists!

At some point, Gloriana entered the hall from the side. A number of Glory Seeker bodyguards accompanied her as she stepped to the podium.

She wore her customized clan uniform this time. Though she considered wearing a dress or something more elegant, she knew it was important to emphasize her association with the Larkinsons.

As Gloriana approached the empty stage, the environment changed.

A large number of projectors borrowed from the Hexers began to surround the journalists with an entirely different view!

Cold metal, broken control consoles, savage banners and various other crude markings came into view.

The people invited to the press conference each discovered that their slightly-unusual seating arrangement caused them to sit right behind one of the projected work stations!

When some of them curiously touched the controls, some sort of system recorded their movements and began to pass them to the consoles.

"It's turning on!"

Various menus and technical settings came into view. The journalists momentarily forgot about what was in front in order to satisfy their curiosity.

"Sensor system integrity has dropped to 35 percent." Someone read out.

"Catastrophic hull breaches in the bow and starboard sections... urgent repairs needed."

"Main aft cannons have locked target coordinates and are standing by. Please press to proceed..."

As soon as the unwitting journalist pressed the button to proceed, the setting minutely shook.

A large projection appeared in front of their faces that showed a large asteroid getting pounded by three successive cannon strikes!

The huge exploding shells blasted the huge asteroids into pieces!

The reporters all jolted at the sight! Even if everything appeared to be a projection, the setting was so realistic that they truly felt that everything was real.

"We're on the bridge of the Gravada Knarlax!" Someone shouted with shock!

A huge wave of awe and wonder spread from the invited guests. None of them could have imagined that the Larkinson Clan would opt to hold a remote press conference on the bridge of the infamous Nyxian pirate warship!

While some people wondered whether the Larkinsons were just putting up an elaborate virtual illusion, once Ves came into view, they weren't so sure anymore.

Ves wore his new Unending Regalia complete with a dashing red cape this time. He looked nothing like the stereotypical mech designer who looked like he would fit right into a peaceful lab.

He walked down the middle aisle of the large bridge and stood next to Gloriana.

Instead, his combat gear made it seem as if he had just concluded a battle!

Five figures garbed in piloting suits emerged from the entrance to the bridge. They strode through the middle of the bridge and stepped behind Ves with straightened backs and firm faces.

Nine more figures in piloting suits appeared and strode forward until they stood at the back.

Nobody said a word as Ves and the mech pilots took their place. Every journalist had already researched the circumstances beforehand and knew that none of the people who showed up were normal.

Even though the projected setting could not convey the force of wills of the expert pilots, just their appearance was alone to make the journalists more honest!

Ves swept his gaze across the large crowds. Despite inviting several hundred people, the bridge of the Gravada Knarlax was so large and expansive that there was still plenty of room left.

While the journalists were still taking in the new expert pilots, Ves decided to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard the Gravada Knarlax. Yes, this projection reflects the actual bridge of the pirate-built warship that has fallen into our hands. I advise you not to touch anything. While we have locked some critical systems, we have left many of them open so that each of you can feel how much power this heavy cruiser contains. With one press of a button, you can fire shells that can crack open combat carriers. With another press of a button, the Gravada Knarlax can blanket a region in space with a rain of rapid-fire laser beams!"

After hearing this, none of the attendees dared to touch anything. Their awe and fear towards warships was considerable, and just thinking about activating something catastrophic was enough to give them nightmares!

In fact, the unwitting reporter who accidentally fired the aft primary turret cannons was already in tears!

Ves sneered as he saw the bubbling man. It was just a simple weapon discharge. Only a worthless asteroid got blown apart. What was the big deal?

"As you know, our Larkinson Clan has decided to dispatch a task force into the Nyxian Gap. I decided to personally lead this task force into this pirate-infested region in order fulfill the demands of the Mech Trade Association..."

He began to summarize the journey, including the various battles his men had fought. He did not really provide much details, but he did project some carefully-chosen footage to impress the crowd how valiantly the Larkinsons had fought!

Perhaps normally, the journalists would be a little more discerning about the presentation. They might ask questions or point out some undesirable details in the background.

However, changing the venue of the press conference to the bridge of the Gravada Knarlax had turned them all speechless. They did not dare to talk in such a dangerous place.

The battle footage became increasingly more action-packed. Unfortunately, the Larkinsons did not reveal anything sensitive!

Most of the footage merely consisted of mechs clashing against mechs. Only a small amount of footage at the end displayed how the Larkinsons fought against the Allidus Alliance's warships.

When Ves summarized through the final battle, he left out any mention of anomalies or dark gods. He only mentioned the expert pilots and expert candidates briefly and did not state how they contributed to the battle. The footage that accompanied his words solely depicted the first half of the battle. Nobody needed to know that the second half even took place!

Even with all of this editing, the footage already looked incredibly grand!

Sure, the public battle footage of the Komodo War was hundreds if not thousands of times more massive in scale. Yet rarely did anyone see mechs fighting against actual warships.

Seeing the huge amount of losses that both sides suffered gave them all the impression that the Allidus Alliance was incredibly powerful! If the Gravada Knarlax ever managed to reach a planet, her primary cannons alone could bombard every major city into ruins from orbit!

To them, it was a miracle the Larkinson Clan managed to overcome such powerful vessels with mechs alone!

Ves grinned and gestured to his rear. "To be honest, we couldn't have won the battle without the assistance of our expert pilots and expert candidates. This battle has pushed many of our mech pilots beyond their limits. Our Larkinson Clan is proud to announce that we have gained five expert pilots and nine expert candidates! Except for one, each of them achieved their breakthroughs during the final battle!"

Though the journalists already expected this answer, hearing it from Ves himself meant that the rumors were definitely true!

A huge amount of uproar emerged from the people tuning in to the broadcast! How many mech pilots did the Larkinsons field? How come they managed to achieve so many breakthroughs in a single battle? Something astounding must have happened to Larkinsons!

#### *Chapter 2430: Contrition*

An inquisitive journalist with a great amount of admiration towards expert pilots couldn't hold himself in any longer.

"How many breakthroughs took place?"

Ves looked sharply at the fellow. This was quite a clever question!

"Nineteen breakthroughs in total. Unfortunately, six expert candidates sacrificed their lives to obtain this victory. We still mourn for their loss."

The deaths of six expert candidates was an incredibly painful price! Each of them were potential expert pilots, so not even military mech regiments dared to deploy them casually into battle.

For six of them to die in a single battle was enough to make the brass worried!

What was surprising that the Larkinson Clan still had plenty of expert candidates to spare. They gained so many of them that they could afford to lose a few here and there. This was an extravagant luxury that hardly any unit or organization enjoyed!

As the wheels started to turn in the minds of some of the journalists and the public, they suddenly became heated. Something very remarkable had happened. No one paid as much attention anymore to the astounding feat of defeating the Allidus Alliance or capturing most of its warships intact.

The only matter of importance to them was finding out why the Larkinsons managed to gain so many powerful mech pilots in such a short amount of time!

Even if the confrontation against the pirates was intensive enough to push many mech pilots beyond their limits, it just didn't seem possible for nineteen breakthroughs to happen out of less than a thousand mech pilots.

This ratio was too high! Anyone who followed expert pilots and learned about their circumstances could make this conclusion. They could tolerate three breakthroughs at most before the figure began to strain their ability to accept the news.

There was definitely something more to this battle than Ves had exposed.

Someone raised his hand. "Mr. Larkinson, how come so many of your mech pilots have broken through!? What is the secret behind their success?"

All of the journalists leaned forward. More and more people who heard about the astounding news began to tune into the broadcast. Throughout the Komodo Star Sector and beyond, an increasing quantity of mech pilots and other people watched carefully in order to find out the secret.

Ves briefly exchanged a glance with Gloriana. Both of them knew that they had attracted an unprecedented amount of viewers. Not just the Yeina Star Cluster, but also the neighboring star clusters began to pay attention!

With trillions of people hanging onto his every word, Ves knew that he could exert an untold amount of influence. He also knew that he needed to consider his words carefully. A single mistake might easily land him in a lot of hot water!

"Let me introduce myself to you and everyone else who is just tuning in." Ves did not directly answer the question. "I am Ves Larkinson, a Journeyman Mech Designer. Aside from founding and leading the Larkinson Clan in battle, I also design mechs. Perhaps you may have heard about the LMC's best selling mechs. Together with Miss Gloriana Wodin, my partner, we have pooled our efforts to design revolutionary new mechs."

He waves his hand. Some marketing footage appeared above his head that silently displayed several of his mechs in action. From the valiant Desolate Soldiers trying to resist the invading sandmen to the Doom Guards managing to repel hundreds of mechs at a time, the selected battle footage showcased the unique properties of the LMC's products!

While many viewers from the Komodo Star Sector were already familiar with his work, this was not the case for many people who were tuning elsewhere.

Since so many new people became exposed to him and his work for the very first time, he might as well take advantage of the occasion to promote his work!

"My mech company is called the Living Mech Corporation." He continued. "The name reflects my ambition to design mechs that are so responsive and helpful to their mech pilots that they are actually alive. Since the start of my career, I have worked hard to find new ways to refine the piloting experience."

He grinned. "I'm not only trying to improve the relationship between mech and mech pilot. I'm trying to transform it! By redefining this relationship, I believe my work has the potential to unlock the potential of both mech and mech pilot!"

Ves swept his arm over the partially-damaged bridge.

"To that end, I did not hesitate to enter the Nyxian Gap and enter into the thick of battle. It is only by studying the performance of my mechs and my men up close that I have managed to develop several novel solutions."

Gloriana stepped forward at this point. "My beloved and I have vowed to accomplish several goals that many of our colleagues attempted to achieve. Different from them, we succeeded. We designed several masterwork mechs, each of which are certified by the MTA. Our understanding of mechs and how they meld with mech pilots has reached a level where we can already redefine their roles."

Ves took over from here. "While we have already succeeded in becoming masterwork mech designers, our ambitions don't end there. One of our ultimate goals is to be able to design mechs that can turn any mech pilot into an expert pilot!"

Normally, any mech designer who made this delusion claim would have been ridiculed until they ran away. How many people tried to develop a solution that could make any mech pilot advance?

Too many mech designers and researchers had tried and failed!

Nobody was laughing right now. The brutal setting, the valor displayed by Ves and the astounding accomplishments of the Larkinson Clan somehow supported those claims.

Very few people cast doubt on the mech pilots standing stoically behind the Miracle Couple. While it was not obvious that they were expert pilots or expert candidates, there was no way that the Larkinson Clan would lie about it. Its reputation would suffer a fatal blow if it turned out that the Larkinsons never gained so many potent mech pilots.

He knew it was useless to hide this detail. It was better to announce it to the public so that he could take full advantage of the situation.

Of course, he knew he was also playing with fire. If he showed too much promise, he would probably attract an immense amount of scrutiny from the MTA. Not even Master Willix would be able to shield him if someone powerful enough took an interest in his work.

Therefore, he knew he had to dial everyone's expectations back.

"In truth, our progress towards this goal is still marginal." He said. "The nature of mech pilot breakthroughs are very mysterious. The best researchers of the MTA are much further ahead in this field than us. Our approach is different and more unique. We have made serious gains over the years."

"Do any of your solutions affect the chances of breakthrough?" The same journalist asked.



"I was getting to that." He replied and tried to look serious. "Our research is still at a preliminary stage. We are not even close to attaining our goal. Even so, we have tried out a lot of different possibilities that might or might not have the desired results. I simply can't tell you. We only resorted to some very desperate circumstances in the runup to the previous battle. During the testing process, several of our mech pilots incurred serious injuries. That will tell you how immature our ongoing research is at the moment. Our existing mech models do not feature the innovations that we have implemented to our internal mechs."

"They were successful, right?"

"The circumstances of our final battle were exceptional, and I cannot guarantee the safety and reliability of our new innovations." He perfunctory replied. "The MTA is already in the process of performing an investigation. I am not at liberty to say any more."

It was a huge risk to tell the public this much, but Ves reasoned that people would just continue to ask questions if he didn't address everyone's questions. Mentioning the MTA at the end was a nice way to shield him from any further inquiries. Since the MTA was on the case, it would publish a statement when it completed its investigation. That was how the Association usually handled these kinds of situations.

That said, Ves did not want to close off every door.

"Perhaps our subsequent products may incorporate some new solutions." He vaguely said. "The Living Mech Corporation is constantly striving to design livelier mechs. Each mech we release after another provides an increasing amount of assistance towards its users."

Though he hadn't said anything solid, imaginations were already beginning to run wild. A lot of people would definitely begin to look up the LMC after this press conference was over!

Seeing that Ves successfully dazzled his audience and deflected the matter of the abnormal frequency of breakthroughs, he moved on to his final point.

"Now, before I answer your questions, let me make an important announcement."

He waved his hand. The promotional footage disappeared. A bit of calm returned to the bridge.

"Recently, an incident has occurred that has affected one of our best-selling mech models. Its performance and properties have changed abruptly without warning. While the mech is still capable of performing the same role as before, its altered characteristics has led to considerable upheaval."

Ves lowered his head a bit as if he was contrite. "I'm sorry."

His current impression looked completely incongruous to the current setting. Just a moment ago, he announced some impressive accomplishments. Now he was saying sorry. The audience simply couldn't get used to such an abrupt switch.

Of course, he wasn't truly sorry. He just had to appear this way in order to earn some sympathy points from the ignorant crowd.

Not once did he mention the Doom Guard model by name. This was so that nobody could use his words to amplify and perpetuate the controversy. As long as he showed enough 'sincerity', the scandal would likely blow over after a time!

"The LMC did not intend for this mech model to change in such an abrupt fashion." He continued. "We are aware that many customers have suffered real and material damage as a result of this incident."

Ves took a deep breath. He thought long and hard about his response. "To that end, we are willing to offer generous compensation to any owner. Those who suffered damages and those who are merely stuck with a mech that is different from their expectations can readily contact the LMC to request compensation. Depending on whether you want to keep your changed mech or turn it in, you can choose to receive a cash refund or gain another opportunity."

"What is this opportunity, sir?"

"I'm glad you asked." Ves slowly began to smile. "In light of all of these recent developments, we wanted to do something special for those who are affected."

He snapped his fingers, causing a projection of a giant golden star to appear above his head!

The stylized six-pointed star bore the face of the Golden Cat, similar to the emblem of the Larkinson Clan.

"Instead of asking for compensation, those who are eligible for compensation can instead opt to join the Living Star Club!"

Living Star Club?

"The Living Star Club is an exclusive membership program of the LMC." Ves stated. "Any customer who becomes a member is entitled to receive various benefits. These benefits range from discounts, free mechs and the opportunity to order customized or limited edition mechs."

This did not sound very different from the membership programs offered by other companies, not just ones that sold mechs.

Ves knew he had to offer something else in order to make the Living Star Club stand out from the crowd.

He grinned. "Of course, that is not the most important benefit. Depending on their engagement in the club, members may be eligible to purchase some of our most desirable mechs that will never be sold on the open market. The reason why they are desirable is because they may incorporate some common elements to the mechs piloted by the fine men and women who are standing behind my back."

Everyone looked at the silent rows of expert pilots and expert candidates.

A lot of people widened their eyes.

"WE HAVE TO JOIN THIS CLUB!"