

## Mech 2591

### *Chapter 2591: Operation Head Crusher*

Both Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Foster carefully studied the expert pilots that had taken their seats around the conference room aboard the Eager Condemnation.

Every foreign expert pilot that had agreed to fight against the Hexers fought under the banner of the Coalition Reserve Corps.

At least, that was supposed to be the rule.

What surprised Ghanso and Relia was that the expert pilots dispatched by the four participating Coalition partners also appeared to be foreigners!

It was too easy to recognize the other six expert pilots as third-raters. Their uniforms didn't possess the usual badges and medals that denoted long and storied service.

The foreigners also lacked the arrogant swagger of Fridayman expert pilots. Unlike the foreigners, the demigods from the Coalition all attracted a lot of admiration from their soldiers.

This was not the case right now. While the Sunderers, Oni Guardsmen and so on did not show any disrespect towards their guest expert pilots, neither did they show too much respect.

In the end, the Friday Coalition was just using them. Even notable war heroes such as Venerable Ghanso did not receive the full recognition he deserved for slaying at least 10 Hexer expert pilots!

Venerable Foster was not shy about voicing her discontent.

"We fight, bleed and even die to defend the Friday Coalition. The least these folk can do is recognize our contribution."

"Heh. They'll never do that." Ghanso huffed. "The Komodo War has to be won by the Friday Coalition, not their hired help. Lady Aisling told me that we should be grateful that we are able to prevent the Hexers from taking over our home states."

Pretty much every foreign expert pilot who accepted the offer to fight on behalf of the Friday Coalition did so to do their duty to their respective states. They had little love for the Friday Coalition and its disdain towards the people they regarded as their lessers.

However, compared to the alternative, the Fridaymen were much more acceptable! At the very least, the Friday Coalition was run by a sensible group of people.

Once everyone arrived, the meeting commenced.

"First, let me thank you all for your courage." Brigadier-General Vander Pierce started with a surprisingly powerful voice despite his advanced age. "Due to the considerable risks of this operation, we cannot guarantee that we will ever be able to return to safety. We must go deeper into unfriendly territory than many of us have ever gone before. We will have to travel so far away Coalition space that safe harbor is many light-years away. Even with the long-range FTL drives of our deep strike fleet carriers, it is not that easy to return to safety, especially when the Hexers are aware of our position."

The operation had to take place in as much secrecy as possible. In fact, before the fleet carriers even departed from different parts of the Friday Coalition, they had already disabled all of their quantum entanglement nodes. The communication systems of the capital ships and the mechs were strictly locked down in order to minimize the propagation of any signal that could leak their whereabouts!

The CRC general swept his gaze across every gathered officer. "You must be eager to take part in our counterattack against the Hexers. As we speak, our fellow soldiers are liberating the star systems captured by the enemy at a record pace. Yet even if we are ready to give the Hexers a taste of their own medicine, our invasion into the Hegemony is not a done deal. No matter how much the female supremacists are panicking, their fortified star systems are still intact."

Just as the Hex Army suffered substantial losses in trying to topple the Crestfallen Stars, the Fridaymen might also incur substantial losses if they attempted to overrun the Hexer strongholds!

No one in the conference room knew whether their leaders would choose to sustain their current momentum. Not even the brigadier-general himself knew what his superiors were thinking, though he heard plenty of arguments through his own channels.

"Unlike what some of you may be guessing, our newly-formed task force is not meant to raid the hinterland of Hegemony space. Though our current fleet composition lends itself well to launching raids, the risks are too great. We did not concentrate five of our precious deep strike fleet carriers and filled them up with our elite mech detachments to do something so marginal. Even if we succeed in demolishing the industries of one or two highly-developed star systems, the Hegemony hardly loses any production capacity."

The general smirked. With a single mental command, he activated a large projection over head.

"Instead, Operation Head Crusher is meant to weaken the Hexadric Hegemony by performing a surgical strike on one of their most valuable war assets."

Both Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Foster gripped their fists as they stared at the face of Ves Larkinson, the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

The rest of the officers of the CRC did not show much reaction to the revelation. They had already been briefed beforehand.

In contrast, the officers and mech pilots from the four other fleet carriers reacted with considerable surprise.

They didn't expect this secretive operation to be a decapitation strike!

"I am sure I do not need to introduce the infamous mech designer of the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer to you." General Pierce drawled.

The man could easily sense their animosity towards the foreigner that had given their forces so much trouble.

"Mr. Larkinson is a Journeyman Mech Designer with a design philosophy that is uncommonly effective in war. The Hex Army performed well above our expectation in the beginning of the Komodo War, leading to a series of devastating miscalculations that caused our defensive lines to crumble ahead of time. If not for the fact that the conceited Hexers recklessly pushed forward and neglected to consolidate their gains, our state might have been even worse off at this time!"

Many of the Fridayman officers and soldiers gathered today had personally fought against the LMC Hexer mechs. Neither the Blessed Squire nor the Valkyrie Redeemer were easy to deal with! Even after the Fridaymen developed several countermeasures, the glows were just too powerful.

"This man cannot be allowed to facilitate the Hexers any further. The ultimate objective of Operation Head Crusher is very simple. We must remove Ves Larkinson from the board by any means necessary. Ideally, we would like to take him into custody. However, if that is not possible, do not hesitate to end his life. As long as he dies, his products will no longer be as terrifying."

A Sunderer commander raised his hand.

"General Pierce, is it wise to target the life of someone who is backed by the MTA? From what we know, Master Moira Willix of the MTA openly supports our target. Will we doom our state if we kill one of her pets?"

General Pierce smirked. "Ves Larkinson is not a part of the Big Two. As long as this remains true, he is fair game. Killing him will not implicate our state, at least on the surface. Never hesitate in pulling the trigger if you have the opportunity to complete our mission."

"Will Master Willix not retaliate regardless of the rules?"

"She is a powerful and well-connected dignitary, but the MTA is so much greater than any individual. Don't worry. Our state is rooted in the Komodo Star Sector for over four centuries. We have developed some very good relationships with the MTA Masters and directors at Centerpoint. Not all of them are friends with Master Willix. From what they tell us, the good Master has acted out of bonds. The rules of neutrality trump any personal agenda. She cannot blame us for attacking a legitimate war participant."

After reassuring the attendees that killing Ves Larkinson would not doom their entire state, the general moved on. He projected some star charts and briefly highlighted their upcoming maneuvers.

"According to our intelligence, the fleet of the Larkinson Clan is set to enter Majestic Teal together with its allies. While we are unable to ascertain the route of this combined fleet, our state has made ample preparations. We have ways to track their huge fleet and position ourselves to intercept them. Do not forget that deep strike fleet carriers excel at this purpose. Even if our predictions are wrong, we can jump ahead of the slower, larger fleet of our enemy and try again. If all goes well, we can intercept them before they venture into Majestic Teal. If we have missed the mark, then we will just follow suit and seek to confront the Larkinson Clan in a different star sector."

This was a very determined pursuit! A lot of Fridaymen officers looked uncertain about this plan.

The grand captain of the Amagi raised his hand. "Sir, to what extent must we pursue the Larkinson Clan? Majestic Teal is not our home ground. The local states will not take kindly to the intrusion of a significant force of foreign military fleet carriers."

"That's not necessarily the case, captain. We have good trading relations with some of the states in Majestic Teal. They may be able to lend a helping hand to us. Regardless, our mission does not have a time or distance limit. Once we set off from this star system, we are committed to Operation Head Crusher. That means that we will not turn back until we have neutralized the leader of the Larkinson Clan! This goal trumps every other consideration, including our survival and the survival of our fleet carriers! Even as we speak, Mr. Larkinson must be designing even more nefarious mechs for the Hexers. Unless we succeed, our state might never be able to win the Komodo War!"

In other words, the higher ups of the Friday Coalition already accounted for the possibility that Task Force Umbra, which they were officially a part of, might never be able to return home.

Venerable Ghanso frowned. While he didn't have a problem with making the ultimate sacrifice as long as he was able to blast Ves into pieces, he did not have much faith in their current strength.

He raised his hand.

"General, are you sure our strength is up to the task?" He questioned. "From what I have gathered, the Larkinson Clan is able to deploy more than 4000 mechs. There is also the Glory Seekers which is able to deploy around 2600 mechs if we include their new fleet carrier. The Cross Clan which the Larkinsons have recently allied with are no pushovers either. Though it's hard to determine how many mechs they are able to field, they should be able to field at least 4000 mechs as well."

The general confidently smirked. "The Cross Clan has sustained considerably more losses than you think. Our intelligence suggests the Vicious Mountainers are only able to field 3200 mechs at most."

"The Cross Clan are the remnants of a former militaristic faction. Despite their losses, their surviving mechs and mech pilots are just as strong as ours. Unless we can count on reinforcements, it is hard to see whether we can defeat their combined fleet."

A lot of other Fridaymen began to harbor some doubts as well. Nonetheless, General Pierce maintained his confident demeanor.

"I have two points." The general raised a finger. "First, you are misinterpreting our objective. We are not supposed to defeat the entire enemy fleet. As long as we assassinate the Larkinson Patriarch, there is no point in fighting the rest. Defeating them will not further tip the Komodo War in our favor. We must concentrate as many assets as possible to accomplish our sole objective, even if we open up our fleet to a fatal counterattack. Sacrificing our deep strike fleet carriers is a small price to pay to neutralize every possible glow in existence."

The general raised a second finger.

"Second, who says that we are alone? Operation Head Crusher consists of multiple elements. There will be other forces sharing the burden. We have already accounted for the strength of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan. However, even if our strength falls short for whatever reason, do not forget our overarching purpose. Killing the inventor of the glow is all that matters. Our fellow soldiers will not be able to fight the Hexers with confidence until we have accomplished this crucial feat!"

#### *Chapter 2592: Duty Above All*

General Pierce did not reveal too many details during the initial briefing. The main purpose of this meeting was to inform the members of Task Force Umbra of their singular goal. The CRC general also wanted to convey the possibility that this may very well be a one-way journey.

Once the five deep strike fleet carriers set off to intercept the Larkinson fleet, everyone aboard turned into dead men walking.

They were expected to die. The CRC and the four participating Coalition partners had unofficially written them all off. While the Friday Coalition would be delighted if some or all of the expensive fleet carriers limped their way back to friendly territory, none of the higher ups would shed a tear if Task Force Umbra disappeared from the face of the galaxy.

While the brigadier-general did not explicitly state all of this, the mech officers and mech pilots attending the meeting weren't stupid. Each of them were elites of their respective military branches. As the crack mech troops of the Friday Coalition, they possessed a greater awareness of the overall strategic situation. General Pierce had already given his men plenty of hints.

Despite the possibility that this might turn into a suicide mission, none of the Fridaymen showed any fear.

As some of the most well-trained soldiers of the Coalition, they knew what they were fighting for and were always ready to sacrifice their lives as long as it bettered the lives of their fellow Fridaymen.

Their cause was just. The members of Task Force Umbra could think of no better way to save their home state than to eliminate one of the most powerful sources of strength to the Hex Army.

Kill the mech designer, save the Friday Coalition! It was that simple!

Even if killing Ves Larkinson did not collapse the glows of the Blessed Squire model and the Valkyrie product line, his removal at least ensured the Hex Army did not gain any further dastardly glow mechs.

Almost a third of all Fridaymen military mech pilots were actually shivering in their boots at the prospect of facing other LMC mechs in battle!

It was ridiculous how much the Fridaymen feared the work of a single Journeyman Mech Designer, but the trauma that the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer managed to inflict was quite extensive!

As long as the Hex Army began to deploy three or four additional mechs with glows, the Fridaymen might become permanently suppressed on the battlefield.

One policy institute from the Gauge Dynasty predicted that in a year's time, the average morale and effective performance of every Fridayman combat unit was liable to drop by as much as 20 percent due to the devastating effects of glows!

This was a devastating drop that would permanently put the Fridaymen mech militaries at a disadvantage. No matter whether it was the Blue Legion, the Fortune Legion, the

Sundered Phalanx or even the Oni Guard, none of them were able to fight comfortably against a Hex Army that made extensive use of LMC mechs!

The variety, versatility and lack of adequate countermeasures against Hexer glows continually hampered the Friday Coalition. While there were plenty of Masters trying to develop the ultimate counter against this hated invention, none have truly succeeded up to this point.

Perhaps distinguished mech designers such as Master Olson and Master Katzenberg might be able to crack the code. However, their research had stalled. A successor to the Glow Crusher and an improved version of their O-K alloy was years away by their own estimates.

This was too long! The Komodo War developed rapidly and could change at any day. Rather than gambling on the faint hope that the befuddled Fridaymen Masters developed an effective counter against LMC mechs, the leaders of the Friday Coalition instead chose to take a more concrete course of action.

"The heads of every Coalition partner are paying attention to Operation Head Crusher." General Pierce generously said. "Our mission is noble beyond comparison. What we are about to embark upon is nothing less than eliminating the greatest enemy of men from this star sector. Do not think that Ves Larkinson is sympathetic towards the plight of his own gender. His wife has him by the balls. Despite his forceful public appearances, he is one of the most pathetic boys in existence. He is a traitor to his own gender and is complicit to all of the oppression the Hexers will unleash if they conquer our state."

No one doubted the necessity of their mission anymore. Each and every elite Fridayman servicemen was prepared to die in order to stop the infamous Devil Tongue!

As for whether they were supposed to capture him or kill him, General Pierce had made it clear that the former was not a priority.

As far as the Fridaymen were concerned, they should play it safe. It was a lot harder to capture someone alive than to kill them outright. Since the future of the Friday Coalition might be at stake, the soldiers simply couldn't afford to make any further gambles.

Everyone, including Venerable Ghanso Larkinson, intended to kill the hated mech designer at the first possible opportunity!

As the meeting dispersed and the personnel from the other fleet carriers left the Eager Condemnation, the fleet soon prepared to depart.

As soon as the FTL drives of the deep strike fleet carriers finished cycling, the capital ships retrieved their mechs and simultaneously transitioned into FTL.

Their destination? The border between Komodo and Majestic Teal. No matter what route the Larkinson Clan took, Task Force Umbra would always be able to overtake their prey!

As Venerable Ghanso and the rest of Unit L moved into their new living quarters aboard the CRC fleet carrier, Lady Aisling Curver paid a visit to the former Brighter expert pilot. She entered his cabin with a hesitant step.

"Hey, Ghanso." She greeted. "So this operation is actually going through?"

The expert pilot sat on his bunk. He looked up at the mech designer who was responsible for servicing the mechs of Unit L.

"Operation Head Crusher has officially started. The brigadier-general is very serious about our purpose. Even if all of us die and all of our fleet carriers fall into the hands of the Larkinsons, we cannot fail our mission. Are you willing to die to save the Friday Coalition?"

"Of course!" She immediately replied. "As a member of the mighty Gauge Dynasty, I have sworn an oath to defend it against any threat. While I regret the fact that Ves has turned against our state, I... cannot let my feelings override my duty."

It took a lot of effort for her to say that. Ghanso softened his expression and patted the side of the bed. "Come sit."

She did so. Her white lab coat contrasted sharply against Ghanso's crisp CRC uniform.

"Ves must die. This is a given. Killing him will not only save the Friday Coalition, but also liberate my trapped and brainwashed relatives. The Larkinson Family will never be able to return to its roots as long as my misguided cousin continued to spread his poisonous lies."

"Ghanso..."

"MY FAMILY IS AT STAKE!" He burst out! He quickly tried to calm himself down. "I thought you got over him already. You had your chance, but he chose differently. He even tied the knot with his Hexer girlfriend. Are you finally willing to accept reality?"

His words only caused Aisling to feel more and more conflicted.

"You don't understand, Ghanso. Have you ever loved someone with all your heart?"

"I love my family. Why do you think I am fighting so hard? Everything I do is to save my fellow Larkinsons from the darkness that has corrupted their purity!"

"At least you are able to get your way. I am not so lucky. Not only do I have to take part in an operation that is expressly designed to kill the object of my affection, but I may not even live long enough to see the outcome of my efforts. I'm not a soldier, Ghanso."

The expert pilot sighed and placed his hand on her hand. "There are better people out there than Ves. He has made his bed. Let him lie in it. As for you, it's okay to feel frightened. Everyone is afraid of death. Just remember what we are fighting for. We cannot allow our selfish desires trump the interests of trillions of innocent Fridaymen and other citizens in our star sector."

The Journeyman Mech Designer closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her blond hair swayed as she tried to reconcile her conflicting thoughts.

Under the influence of Venerable Ghanso's intense force of will, Aisling managed to find some peace in her roiling emotions.

Her eyes glinted with stoic determination when she opened them again.

"I.. understand. Thank you, Ghanso. I needed that. I know what I must do. I love Ves, but I love my home even more. I cannot allow the Hexers to harm my friends and family. If I have to accompany you all the way to the grave in order to save my state, I will do so as long as the Friday Coalition is saved."

"It sounds like you finally got your priorities straight. Have you truly managed to shed your feelings for Ves?"

She faintly shook her head. "I can't. I will always love Ves and his fantastic design philosophy. That will never change. The only difference is that I am prepared to bury these feelings in order to abide by my oaths. If I manage to survive, when all of this is over, I will dig my affections up again and mourn for a dream that has never come to pass."

Though Ghanso didn't understand why Aisling was being so difficult, at least she was moving in the right direction. He had grown incredibly tired of hearing her lament about her lost opportunity to shack up with Ves. As long as she shut up about that during this operation, he could prepare for the most important battle of his life in peace.

When Aisling finally left his quarters with a renewed sense of purpose, another guest dropped by half an hour later.

"What are you doing here, Baroness Foster?" Ghanso hissed.

The Vesian expert pilot leaned against the side of the hatch while crossing her arms. "I encountered Aisling earlier. She is very different from before. Was that your handiwork?"

He shrugged. "I don't claim any credit. I believe that Operation Head Crusher has finally forced her to confront reality. She's been losing herself in her dreams for more than a straight year. She can't sustain her fantasies forever, you know. Every illusion has an ending, but truth is always eternal."

"That's surprisingly deep, coming from you. You Brighters always try to act smart."

"You Vesians treat everyone but nobles as trash." Ghanso sneered.

She didn't even deign to reply to that. "Anyway, I just want to thank you for pulling that poor woman back to reality. Even though it doesn't look like you completed the job, I think she is doing better than before."

"If General Pierce is right, it's improbable for us to survive this operation. If Aisling suffers the same fate, at least she will be able to meet her end with open eyes."

They both fell silent for a time. As soldiers, they were both aware that they might never be able to return alive from a deployment. This was not the first time they faced very slim odds.

"If we ever managed to reach Ves, who gets to kill him?" Venerable Foster asked.

"I do. As my blood kin, it is up to me to end the threat to my family. Just because we are relatives doesn't mean I intend to be lenient to him. In fact, it's the opposite. Everything he has done to the Larkinsons is a travesty. I need to be the one that pulls the trigger in order to send a clear message to my relatives."

Venerable Foster frowned. "I can't allow you to do that, Ghanso. Ves Larkinson is responsible for the deaths of many comrades as mine. I vowed to avenge their deaths and eliminate any threat to the Hafner Duchy."

The two expert pilots glared at each other. Neither of them were willing to give in on this matter!

### *Chapter 2593: Training Progress*

Over a thousand mechs flew in space. They formed several dispersed formations and maneuvered in close coordination with each other.

Many mechs flew at least fifty meters apart from each other. Every element had to fly close enough to each other in order to make formations effective, but packing them too close left them vulnerable to powerful explosions.

The risk of collision also played a significant factor. If the mech pilots weren't skilled or disciplined enough, then a single mistake might lead to a chain collision that could tear an entire formation apart!

This was one of the reasons why pirates and poorly-trained mech pilots flew around in a chaotic swarm. The mech pilots did not even trust their own comrades to fly responsibly, so they only felt at ease if mechs were at least 100 or 200 meters away from their own machines.

Suffice to say, these loose groups conveyed no significant advantage other than minimizing collisions and making it harder for them to get taken out by a single powerful explosion.

As the silver-coated mechs of the Living Sentinels maneuvered in space in much tighter formations, the Larkinson Clan took a different route.

Every Larkinson mech force emphasized formations in their training regimes. Many of the mech pilots that the clan managed to recruit in recent months were all elites or highly-qualified rookies.

They possessed the skill, discipline and confidence to pilot their mechs in tight formations. However, due to their diverse backgrounds and origins, they were all used to different configurations.

The Sentinels and the other mech forces wished to integrate the new recruits into their own unique systems, then they needed to conduct a lot of drills.

The newcomers had to get accustomed to the new formations right away. They needed to become so familiar with the set of formations of their mech troop that it became instinct for them to find the right place!

As for the veterans, Commander Casella Ingvar did not keep them idle. She came up with a mentorship scheme whereby two different veterans assumed responsibility for at least 8 new recruits.

With two veterans working together, they could keep each other in check while offering multiple perspectives. The new recruits did not strictly have to obey or adopt the advice of the veterans, but it was generally a good idea to listen to the survivors of the grueling Nyxian Gap Campaign.

The Sentinel Commander oversaw the formation drills in the command center of the new flagship of Living Sentinels. Just like the Avatars' Purplefeather, the Steadfast Vigil was a larger combat carrier that held up to 60 mechs.

The Vigil also served as a command vessel. With her well-equipped command center, enhanced sensor and communication arrays and upgraded data processing capabilities, she was more than capable of commanding a mech regiment.

In fact, it would have been even better if Commander Casella could command her troops in a fleet carrier, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Compared to the flimsy third-

class light carrier the Sentinels had before, the Steadfast Vigil was at least twenty times better!

An ample amount of officers and specialists sat behind their work stations. They monitored various readings or communicated with the mech pilots deployed in space. The coordination between the command center and the soldiers in the field was not entirely seamless, but it was already better than what most outfits were able to accomplish.

To Commander Casella, coordination was essential to her mech force. Unlike the Avatars of Myth whose elite mech pilots could fight tacitly and with greater situational awareness, her Sentinels were not as good.

She wasn't disappointed with her mech pilots. The Sentinels adopted minimum recruitment standards as well. Even if their standards weren't as high as the Avatars, the mech pilots they recruited had to be good enough to become eligible to serve in the military.

They also had to be disciplined and obedient enough to follow instructions.

There were very few Larkinson mech pilots who didn't make the cut. The Larkinson Clan did not recruit useless people. If the mech pilots who applied to join the clan could not even satisfy the Living Sentinels, then there was no point to absorbing them into the clan!

Ever since she assumed command of the Sentinels, Commander Casella focused on fulfilling two important goals.

First, she needed to restore the morale of her men.

Second, she needed to integrate every Sentinel mech pilot in a single, cohesive group.

From how crisp the different mechs of the Living Sentinels were fighting against a larger force of projected practice targets, Casella believed she was close to completing those goals.

The main projections vividly depicted entire mech companies of Princess Jeckas moving in unison in aggressive wedge formations. The large groups of swordsman mechs resembled shark teeth as they sank into their practice targets from two different directions.

The new Vima Suns fired their laser rifles in coordinated volleys that limited the evasion opportunities of every target. What was notable about the new spaceborn rifleman mechs was that the Larkinsons had upgraded their weapon loadouts.

Each and every Vima Sun wielded modified laser rifles that each integrated a luminar crystal!

The augmented laser rifles allowed the Vima Suns to output a bit more damage while wasting less energy in the form of waste heat. This was a considerable improvement that allowed the rifleman mechs to punch above their weight!

It was too bad that their defensive capabilities remained just as poor.

In order to make sure that the Vima Suns could do their jobs without huddling behind an asteroid or a combat carrier, the new space knights hovered close to the ranged mechs.

The Tamris Stellar model possessed a lot of defensive power for its cost. As long as its tower shield was intact, the commercial space knight could withstand a decent barrage of attacks against second-class threats. It also possessed just enough mobility to participate in plenty of maneuvers.

While a formation that included the Tamris Stellars wasn't quick or agile, the defensive power it possessed was very considerable!

"What do you think, major?" Commander Casella asked the man standing by her side.

"I've seen better." Major Verle drawled as he keenly observed how well the Sentinel mech pilots fought in unison. "I think we need to add some spice to this drill. Can you disable a number of mechs in each formation? I need to see how they are able to adapt to losing their mech captains and a third of their brother-in-arms."

"Certainly, sir."

The Sentinel Commander issued some orders. A couple of officers immediately inputted some commands.

Within the span of a dozen seconds, at least a dozen mechs of each mech company suddenly lost power and drifted lifelessly away from the battlefield!

The sudden casualties alarmed many surviving Sentinel mech pilots. However, much to Casella's satisfaction, the mech lieutenants and veterans quickly assumed control over the ragged and diminished mech companies.

Every mech unit established a clear chain of command. Even if every officer and veteran disappeared, the rookies all knew precisely who they needed to answer to without needing to think!

The projections showed that it only took a minute for each formation to consolidate their gaps and continue to pressure the simulated enemies.

Soon enough, the last projected enemy mech succumbed as a pair of Princess Jeckas stabbed it from the front and the back.

"The exercise has ended, ma'am."

"Please summarize the results and forward the document to my inbox." Casella said as she turned away from the front. "Oh, and tell the men that they performed well. I am satisfied with how quickly they adjusted to the changing circumstances."

"Will do, ma'am!"

As Casella and Verle stepped out of the command center, they aimlessly walked through the well-lit hallways of the Steadfast Vigil.

"I'm satisfied with the progress you've accomplished." The highest-ranking officer began. "Compared to a couple of months ago, your Sentinels are almost unrecognizable. They have all closed the gap with the Avatars and Vandals. Even I didn't think you'd be able to make so much progress in just two months."

A faint smile appeared on Casella's face. "I had to push them hard and cut their leave in half. However, I don't think I'll be able to close the gap. Let alone catching up to coordination displayed by the Avatars, I don't think my Sentinels will ever come close to the tight-knit cooperation displayed by the Battle Criers, Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters. Seeing them in action is something else. I feel jealous whenever I witness their ferocious but impeccable maneuvers."

Major Verle shook his head. "You don't have to compare your Sentinels to them. They're different. They eat, sleep and fight together. They don't have much of a life outside of their service. We can't expect every Larkinson mech pilot to commit so much to their profession. In fact, it's better we established a troop like the Sentinels. We must be strong, but we must never lose touch with our humanity. Of all of our mech pilots, only your men retain a bit of normality that prevents them from getting alienated from the rest of the clan."

"Mhmm." Casella hummed. "I'd like my men to be a little better, though. Even though the Avatars, Vandals and other mech forces are piloting the same mech models, they can always exert more strength."

"I won't tell you that your Sentinels are already up to par. They need more time. However, you can't force them too much. Some lessons can only be learned through continuous repetition. Other lessons can only be learned on the battlefield. The rapid improvements you have accomplished so far has exhausted all of the low-hanging fruit. You and your men will need to put in serious effort in order to make further gains."

"Do you have any tips, sir?"

"Why, certainly."

The two leaders continued to discuss various training methods. Major Verle possessed a lot of relevant experience and knowledge.

Once the major finished giving Casella some useful tips, they moved on to a different topic.

"I can't say I am satisfied with the commercial mechs we've been issued with. While the Princess Jeckas, Vima Suns and Tamris Stellars are adequate for their purposes, they are on the weaker end of second-class mechs. With how much the clan is earning these days, can't we obtain some better machines? We don't have any mainstay mechs that can hold the line against tougher enemies."

Major Verle pressed his lips. "You're not the first mech commander to complain about this. My answer hasn't changed. The clan patriarch wants our mech pilots to make use of quality products that are designed in-house. Better mechs are already in development, but it will take months for the Design Department to complete their designs. Don't worry. In about four or so months, we can begin to roll out the second-class version of the Bright Warrior. That will be our baseline unit for the years to come."

Casella frowned. "That's not ideal. Our grand expedition is scheduled to commence in less than a month, right? This means that our main mech lineup will largely consist of budget mechs while travelling through Komodo and Majestic Teal."

"That is only a temporary condition." Major Verle sighed. "To be honest, I share some of your concerns as well, but the clan patriarch is adamant about leaving as soon as possible. He acts like this star sector is haunted and that a great threat might close in if he doesn't depart very soon. While it is difficult to determine whether there is any substance to his fears, there shouldn't be much harm in leaving early. While we can't issue better mechs to the majority of our men, we have already begun to produce Valkyrie Redeemers and Transcendent Punishers."

"Will my Sentinels receive the Punishers?"

"That's still up for debate. The Transcendent Punishers can only be piloted by Ylvainans, so we are still figuring out how to organize them. You'll have an answer within weeks."

*Chapter 2594: Controversial View*

"Where is Lucky?" Maikel curiously asked.

"He has a day job now. Don't worry about him." Ves dismissively answered. "Anyway, let's talk about your recent progress. I've studied your test results and looked at your practical performance. First, let me say I appreciate your progress. Your coursework is

very onerous. Compared to what I had to learn, your workload is at least eight times higher. According to Gloriana, a typical mech design student at Kelma University has to maintain a similar pace as yours."

"Does this mean I'm the best?"

Ves softly knocked his fist against Maikel's head.

"Ouch!"

"Don't be arrogant! Gloriana achieved much better scores and completed many more courses than you did in the same amount of time. There's a reason why she has managed to become a Journeyman so early. If you want to become just as good as her, you need to motivate yourself to work harder. I can't push you along. Do you understand?"

"Uhm, I'm already studying as hard as I can manage. If I increase my workload any further, I think I'll burn out. The other mech designers I've spoken to have told me that it's better for me to maintain my current balance."

Ves looked closely at his student. The adolescent Larkinson did appear a bit more frazzled than before.

He inwardly sighed. He was demanding way too much from his underlings. Ves was so used to working harder that it was hard for him to understand the limitations of those who didn't enjoy his advantages.

Ves remembered that he used to be much worse than Maikel at the same age. Back before he obtained the System, he was nothing more than a baseline human with average intelligence compared to his fellow classmates. He did not even come close to matching Patricia's brilliance.

It was different now. The Attribute Candies obtained from the System along with his Archimedes Rubal implant had completely transformed his learning ability. What took years for other mech designers to absorb only took a couple of weeks for Ves to internalize. This was not rote memorization, but true mastery.

If not for the fact that Ves had his hands full with his design projects, he would have reserved some time to supplement his knowledge base by reading some of Aisling's excellent textbooks.

For a moment, Ves thought about bestowing the same advantages to his students. While he boosted their Intelligence to 1.6 by feeding them some candies, he didn't want to improve their cognitive abilities too much for fear of distorting their personalities.

Already, Ves was able to ascertain that Maikel and his other student Zanthar experienced some personality changes. Their constant exposure to other mech designers along with all of the knowledge they learned had made them more eccentric. Already, they developed obsessions related to their chosen specializations.

That last part gave Ves a bit of a headache. While Zanthar's interest in maximizing firepower was easily satisfied by allowing him to observe a Transcendent Punisher up close, Maikel was not as easy to develop.

The Larkinson Clan possessed plenty of living mechs. Even though the various mech forces had retired all of their third-class mechs, they hadn't gotten rid of them all. There was ample space to store some obsolete mechs as backups or as future museum exhibits.

Ves even allowed Maikel to examine excellent living mechs such as the Quint and the Shield of Samar up close. Both mechs were spiritually enhanced to over 150 Ves, which meant that they possessed more life than any other machine that Ves had seen!

Despite exposing Maikel to mechs that were brimming with life, his student didn't seem to have gained much insight from these sessions.

Apparently, blindly showing Maikel around was not the right approach. If Ves wanted his protege to make some progress in his formative years, then he needed to find a more effective solution.

"Maikel, how much progress have you made on your personal framework?"

"Uhhh..."

Ves looked sharper. "I hope you haven't spent all of this time on your studies and on drooling over my products. No matter how much benefits you derive from the work of others, you are ultimately only copying someone else's work. A true mech designer can never be a true professional as long as he keeps admiring existing work. The whole point about our profession is to generate new work. We are creators, not gawkers."

"I-I-I'm aware of that, teacher, but it's hard to get started on this topic. I know what I want, but I don't have a starting point. I have spent hundreds of hours with your mechs, but I still haven't figured out why they are alive. When I compare any LMC mech to a comparable mech designed by a competitor, I haven't identified any components that instill any special qualities to your products."

"The applications of design philosophies transcend material reality. This is especially the case for a design philosophy as abnormal as mine. You are looking in the wrong places if you think that my mechs are alive because they possess a unique physical component or something."

The young student lowered his head. He looked frustrated. "Then what am I supposed to do? I have tried to study your work from multiple angles. I even borrowed some biology textbooks from Dr. Ranya in order to understand how traditional life is put together. None of it has worked so far. I'm just as clueless as before."

What a thorny issue. Ves had no choice but to take a step back and think about this situation.

Maikel wanted to design the same kind of living mechs as Ves, but that was not practical. Unlike Ves who possessed spiritual perception, Maikel was practically blind to spirituality, which meant he would never be able to manipulate spiritual energy with precision.

The reason why Ves allowed Maikel to grope in the dark was because he wanted his student to find a method that suited him most.

So far, the results were rather lacking.

While a mech design student did not necessarily have to develop a framework or a design philosophy before graduation, Ves expected better from his proteges. The earlier they found their own way, the sooner they could work towards becoming a Journeyman.

He began to think how he could accelerate Maikel's snail-like progress. He did not want the kid to waste years of his time on ineffectual explorations.

It seemed he needed to provide more targeted direction. In hindsight, he may have been asking too much from someone who wasn't even a fully-fledged mech designer.

"What do living mechs mean to you?" Ves asked.

"They're powerful. They have glows. They are responsive to their mech pilots. They are really magical and completely different from any other mech." Maikel instantly answered.

Unlike most mech pilots and mech designers, Maikel's obsession for LMC mechs rivaled that of Joshua's. Both of them were aware of the key traits of every mech designed by Ves!

"That's a good answer, but that's not entirely what I'm asking. You are just describing the properties of my work. What my question is truly about is your personal interpretation of what a living mech should be. Forget about what I think about living mechs. This is about you now. You can't keep referencing my work all the time. You are different from me, so you should hold some diverging opinions. Tell me what a living mech truly needs."

His inquiry caused Maikel to look uncomfortable. Compared to someone who practically invented living mechs, whatever Maikel thought about them was doubtlessly embarrassing!

"Are you ashamed?" Ves probed.

"Maybe..."

"Don't be. You're an aspiring mech designer. Not only that, you're my student. There is nothing shameful about exposing your own work and revealing your own thoughts to me. I can't adequately guide you if I don't know where you stand. As your teacher and mentor, I would never judge you if you say anything wrong."

After a bit more coaxing, Maikel finally voiced one of his views.

"Well, I have looked at a lot of living mechs. They're really good and all, but.. there's one area I don't really agree on. I've been reluctant to mention this to you because it's not an appropriate opinion. I'm afraid that others will think differently of me if I voice this view."

"Go on." Ves smiled as he tried to adopt a gentle persona. "You can trust me with your thoughts, no matter how controversial they might sound. Even if I don't agree with you, I won't interfere with your choices. Mech designers should have the confidence to pursue their own agenda even if everyone tells them they are wrong. It'll be harder to achieve success this way, but once you accomplish something, your impact will be as great as mine."

His encouraging words loosened Maikel's guard. After a bit of internal struggle, the younger Larkinson finally relaxed and spilled his view.

"According to you, a mech is alive when it is able to bond and be more responsible to the mech pilot. While I have heard plenty of stories about this, I think this effect is too subtle. In the symbiosis that you establish, the mech pilot acts as the brain while the machine acts as the brawn. The result is that the mech pilot is always in charge while the mech is mainly relegated to an assisting role."

"That is by design." Ves nodded. He appreciated how Maikel succinctly summarized the relationship between man and machine. "Mechs are products that humans use to fight their enemies and accomplish their goals. The MTA and much of humanity doesn't like it if mechs aren't subordinate anymore. Others don't consider mechs to be alive, so they are very reluctant to hand over any significant decision-making power to them. Just like AIs, mechs can go astray if their programming and design are faulty."

Maikel sat up straighter all of a sudden. "That rule doesn't apply anymore! Ordinary mechs may be as untrustworthy as AIs, but living mechs are different! Have you ever thought about entrusting them with more power? What if they can act on their own? What if they can cover for the areas that their mech pilots are weak at? With two

different living minds controlling the mech instead of one, the results should be much better!"

Of all of the views that Ves expected to hear, he never thought that Maikel would dig up the old autonomy debate.

Ves looked a bit more uncertain now. "I can see why you have been reluctant to voice this view. It goes against what is in your textbooks and what I have taught to you. Mechs aren't supposed to be autonomous, Maikel. Mechs aren't human and cannot be trusted to act in our best interests."

"Is that really true?" Maikel asked. Now that he exposed his thoughts, he no longer felt timid. "These rules and paradigms about keeping mechs subordinate to their human masters are outdated. While I admit they are still valid when it comes to other mechs, I don't think we need to be so careful anymore! Living mechs are intrinsically different. Isn't that what you say to me all the time? We can't cling to our old assumptions and blindly follow every rule. We need to rethink everything about living mechs in order to unearth their potential. As far as I'm concerned, not making use of their intelligence is a missed opportunity!"

What a controversial view! If Maikel voiced this exact opinion to Master Willix, she would probably smack his face until he lost all of his teeth!

The MTA never liked to allow mechs to think for themselves! Whether a mech designer aimed to grant partial or complete autonomy to their mech designs, the mech industry always pushed back against these products!

A proper mech must always answer to a mech pilot. That was the rule and custom in the mech industry. Ves really didn't know whether he should approve of Maikel's current train of thought!

#### *Chapter 2595: Sheep to Herder*

As a principled mech designer and teacher, Ves held an important responsibility. As an authority figure in the field of mech design, he had to guide his students correctly so that they could contribute to the mech industry once they matured.

A teacher not only had the obligation to transform students into useful and productive mech designers, but also make sure they followed correct paths.

There were many different directions that mech designers could take. Creation was boundless and infinite. As long as people possessed enough imagination, they could produce any product imaginable.

"Yet just because you can, doesn't mean you should."

Right now, Ves felt conflicted. The conundrum that Maikel presented to him was not that easy to solve.

On one hand, Ves wanted to encourage Maikel to pursue his passions. As long as he developed a strong interest on what a mech should be, it would be great if Maikel committed to it and developed a nascent design philosophy around his initial ideas.

In fact, this was how many mech designers got started. Everyone needed to make a choice. Not specializing in something meant they wouldn't even be able to develop their own style.

Indecisiveness was one of the worst traits a mech designer or any creator could have. Not being able to commit to a choice meant that they would always scatter their focus, thereby failing to develop any pronounced strengths.

What Ves just heard from Maikel was a potential way for his student to make move forward.

As long as his protege got off the starting line, Maikel would be able to achieve rapid progress as long as he worked hard enough.

This was a good opportunity to give him that initial push.

"Yet..."

The topic that Maikel was passionate about did not entirely fall in line with the prevailing sentiment and customs of the mech industry.

While designing and producing completely autonomous mechs or battle bots was not an unknown phenomena, they never caught on. Part of it was due to how easy it was to hack or tamper with their programming.

Since the Hexer intelligence agencies dared to tamper with the Spirit of Bentheim, they could easily tamper with the production of battle bots as well!

One of the more devious policies of the MTA was that they offered comprehensive consumer protection for any transactions involving traditional mechs. The Association actively regulated the mech industry and the mech market in order to ensure that mechs remained the dominant weapon of war throughout human space.

Yet the MTA never extended their care and protection towards autonomous mechs or bots.

What distinguished a mech from a bot?

The MTA never defined an exact dividing line. They applied their rulings according to their own judgement.

In truth, every mech possessed a certain degree of autonomy. Human minds simply couldn't pay attention to the millions if not billions of processes taking place within a tall and enormous war machine. From monitoring the temperature of individual parts to adjusting the power flow throughout the frame, the mech pilot did not need to devote any thought to these trivial actions.

What the Mech Trade Association was actually touchy about was when mechs gained the capability to fight by themselves. When AIs took over and began to make decisions that humans normally made, mech ceased to be tools that were actively harnessed by their human owners.

That was a dangerous development. Many incidents throughout human history highlighted the great peril of entrusting combat power to unthinking and unfeeling machines.

One of the risks of doing so was that these autonomous machines weren't capable of exercising human judgement. If their programming somehow subverted every safeguard and commanded them to attack friendly mechs, an AI would mindlessly execute this command no matter how wrong it sounded to humans!

Of course, human mech pilots were fallible as well. They could betray their oaths, turn their weapons against their comrades and slaughter thousands of innocent civilians in an instant.

Yet with proper training and management, these risks could be controlled to the greatest extent. Even if a deviant appeared, it would always be an isolated case.

It was much easier to subvert billions of identical battle bots than to subvert the same amount of mech pilots!

Ves glanced at Maikel as he continued to consider his response.

Though Maikel should have been aware of the minefield he was stepping into, now that he had opened his heart, he became more determined.

This was more than a passing interest to him. As much as he admired the living mechs designed by Ves, Maikel didn't entirely feel as if they were right!

In his opinion, a true living mech ought to be able to make decisions on its own! Anything less than that was akin to a crippled or incomplete creation.

Naturally, Ves did not agree with this stance. He believed his ideal of living mechs was already complete enough.

Of course, it was not as if Ves had dabbled a bit in this area himself. He had experimented with granting more autonomy to his products by developing the Devil Tiger.

Though Ves felt immensely proud of his first masterwork mech, he did not design it with his usual style in mind. He just wanted to perform some experiments at the time.

As a result, the Devil Tiger possessed several risky characteristics that he never intended to incorporate in his normal mech designs.

The time where he converted the four mechs of the Scarlet Rose into battle bots was also an exception. Back when he hijacked the mobile supply carrier, Ves had no one but Lucky to count on. Without any mech pilots, how was he supposed to make use of the Fridaymen mechs that Lady Curver had left behind?

Ves made an exception and configured the four mechs in a way that allowed them to fight on their own. As soon as he returned to the rest of the Larkinson Clan, he quickly converted the battle bots back into traditional mechs.

This incident showed that making mechs autonomous was not a universally bad outcome. Battle bots had their uses.

Of course, Maikel didn't profess to go that far. He simply thought that mechs should have more say in how it was being piloted. Yet that was already problematic enough.

As Ves struggled whether he should rein Maikel in, he thought about his own progression.

Just like Maikel, Ves went against the prevailing standards. He boldly carved out his own path and succeeded in fostering a productive design philosophy.

There were plenty of instances where he broke the rules and disrespected taboos. Why should Ves hold Maikel to a standard that he never seriously abided by? As his protege, Maikel should be taking after his mentor!

Ves had made his decision.

"Maikel."

"Yes, teacher?"

"If this is what you want to pursue, then you should do so. As long as you are able and willing to commit to this idea, then it can serve as your career direction. However, you must invest your entire heart and soul in this pursuit! You cannot change your mind once you have advanced beyond a certain stage. Every decision has its consequences.

At this moment, you are at a crucial junction. The decision you make here will define the rest of your life. Are you prepared?"

Maikel did not quake from his teacher's warning. His passion burned hotter as he thought about what he might accomplish as long as he followed his idea through!

His imagination generated a lot of compelling illusions. He envisioned a powerful first-class multipurpose mech that was packed with weapon systems and modules.

While its mech pilot directed the machine to fight against opponents up close, the ranged weapon modules fired at distant targets on their own! The mech pilot consciously gave up control over these dangerous weapons and entrusted their control to the living mech!

This was what Maikel wanted to achieve! His idea of symbiosis was different from that of Ves! To him, the man-machine connection was not a channel to achieve synergy, but an opportunity to divide responsibilities!

As Ves keenly observed the younger Larkinsons, he began to lose hope.

A part of him still hoped that Maikel would recognize the dangers of pursuing his idea and put it aside in order to adopt a safer alternative.

It seemed that none of his students were destined to be average.

"I have made my choice." Maikel spoke. There was much more steel in his voice than before. "I want to specialize in designing semi-autonomous living mechs. To me, a mech is simply not good enough if it can't assume some of the burdens of its mech pilot. As mechs continually grow more powerful and more complex, it becomes increasingly harder for humans to harness all of their strength. I believe the mechs that I am aiming for will be the future of the mech industry!"

What a bold claim! Ves was very impressed by Maikel's confidence.

Every successful mech designer that Ves had ever met possessed an abundance of confidence in their own ideas.

A good mech designer was always a thought leader rather than a thought follower.

Sheep could only follow their herders, while herders were always capable of forging their own path.

What Ves saw right now in Maikel was the transformation of a follower into a leader. Once a sheep transcended into a herder, their potential was unlocked and their future was unlimited!

Yet Ves did not entirely feel happy about this development. It would have been great if Maikel chose a less controversial pursuit, but this was not the case!

By choosing a path that was crooked from the start, Maikel would have a very hard time with progressing his design philosophy.

While his premise shared a lot of commonalities to his teacher design philosophy, Maikel could only rely on himself when it came to the areas in which he diverged from Ves and everyone else. These differences introduced enough deviances that Maikel might follow an entirely different direction from Ves at some point in the future.

Ves was both excited and afraid at the prospect!

He stretched out his hand and patted Maikel's head.

"Hey! I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Hehe, don't be so serious, Maikel. While I am glad you're more decisive than before, your choice isn't set right now. You're not even a Novice yet. So long as you are still a student, you have plenty of time to explore your options. Right now, you have selected a research direction which you wish to explore, but that does not mean you have formed the beginnings of your design philosophy. This means you can always change your mind and choose a different specialization."

"Oh." Maikel deflated a bit. "I thought.. I thought I would be able to move further."

"This is not a process that you can finish in an instant. It usually takes years for mech designers to flesh out their interests and form a definitive specialization. Since you seek to design semi-autonomous mechs, I suggest you enrich your knowledge on battle bots developed by others. You should also deepen your studies on mech programming and artificial intelligences. Even if you intend to give control of a mech to its living aspect, it is still vital for you to understand how regular artificial intelligences work. They're not truly alive, but they can come very close. Knowing how AIs are able to pilot mechs will definitely help you in developing a method that can make living mechs do the same."

With those instructions, Ves dismissed his excited student. Maikel was so eager to set foot on his chosen path that he raced off to his own terminal in the design lab. He was already calling up an introduction on AIs in mechs from the internal library!

Ves let out a deep sigh while pressing his palm against his face.

He really hoped that Maikel would not go overboard with pursuing his newfound passion. There was only a small difference between a semi-autonomous mech and a fully-autonomous mech!

### *Chapter 2596: New Sacred Mech*

A countdown took place.

After recruiting tens of thousands of adventurous people who yearned to explore the greater cosmos, after acquiring thousands of commercial mechs, after rebuilding an entire fleet, the Larkinson Clan was finally preparing to depart.

This was a massive operation.

A lot of new spacers only had weeks to get accustomed to controlling their powerful new second-class vessels.

The LMC had to implement a lot of measures in order to make sure its business operations remained operational with the departure of the core of the mech company.

The newly-adopted Larkinsons only had a short time left in their native star star sector before they left forever.

Not a single part of the clan remained idle. Shuttles flew back and forth while transports loaded an abundant amount of mechs, materials and supplies to the new fleet.

No ship drew more traffic than the Spirit of Bentheim. The brand-new factory ship had become the focal point of the Larkinson Clan.

Even though the ship had only entered operation for less than a week, a prodigious amount of raw and semi-processed materials entered her cargo holds.

Occasionally, mechs came out. The Valkyrie Redeemer which had captured the hearts of many Hexer military mech pilots became more and more common in the Cinach System.

The Penitent Sisters eagerly accepted the Valkyrie Redeemers produced by the Bentheim. Their belief in the Superior Mother caused them to embrace the Hexer mechs at an astoundingly rapid pace!

The Glory Seekers obtained their Valkyrie mechs from another source. Hexer trade ships regularly arrived at Cinach in order to supply the Glory Seekers with everything they needed to survive and thrive in the Red Ocean.

Unlike the Penitent Sisters, the former household troops of the Wodin Dynasty greatly preferred the variants of the Valkyrie Redeemers. Hundreds of Valkyrie Interceptors sortied in space around their powerful fleet and drilled alongside their other Hexer spaceborn mechs.

However, out of the two new second-class LMC mech models, it was not the Valkyrie mechs that drew everyone's attention.

Instead, it was the new artillery mech that became the talk of the town.

The Larkinson Clan did not publicize its exclusive new mech model. That did not stop every clansman from gossiping. Strictly speaking, the existence of the Transcendent Punisher was not a secret. It was impossible to hide such a huge and imposing heavy artillery mech. There simply wasn't any reason to make a big fuss about out of a mech model that would never be sold to the public.

Outside observers tried their best to catch a glimpse of this supposedly impressive mech. Yet despite all of the sensors they pointed at the Spirit of Bentheim, they only observed some vague shifts in the strange-shaped bunkers dotted on her surface.

They found enough clues that there were mechs moving in and out of the bunkers, but none of the fortified structures ever opened their gun ports in order to allow the artillery mechs to poke out their cannons.

Just the Spirit of Bentheim, an eclectic group of Avatar and Sentinel mech pilots emerged from the first batch of Transcendent Punishers produced by the Bentheim. The mech pilots had just moved their heavy mechs from a group of bunkers to the nearby mech stables.

The Kronon mech pilots that had followed the Living Prophet into the Larkinson Clan all lined up and saluted the two figures standing in front. Taon Melin, the Chosen of Zeal, looked particularly intense as two of his faith's most important figures had attended the demonstration!

One of them was the current incarnation of Prophet Ylvaine, the founder of the faith and the prophet that foretold their ascension!

The other was the Bright Martyr, the current object of their worship and the mech designer who illuminated the path to salvation!

Every Ylvainan in the Larkinson Clan considered it a supreme honor to live alongside two of their most holiest figures. Taon felt he was living a dream. For centuries, the Ylvainan Faith had come under the grip of three successor dynasties. With every year that passed, the Ylvainan followers had grown more and more distant from the true faith.

Even now, Taon and his fellow Ylvainans prayed for the souls of the citizens of the Protectorate. While he felt ashamed at the treacherous conduct of the rulers of his former state, he lamented the suffering subjected to the innocent civilians.

The Living Prophet had withdrawn his blessings from the Ylvaine Protectorate. The consequences were massive and life had changed forever over there. Many Ylvainans were living in a damned state while being governed by the very people that had betrayed their faith!

Nothing had changed ever since the True Believers fled the state. The Friday Coalition's brutal repression overcame any attempts to topple the damned regime.

The leaders of the Kronon, Poxco and Curin Dynasties shamelessly rewrote history. The heretical regime slandered the Living Prophet, calling him a defective clone and accusing him of being a puppet of a nefarious organization!

As for the Bright Martyr, the Protectorate's government painted him as a charlatan and a greedy profiteer. According to the government's official stance, Ves Larkinson was nothing more than a faithless mech designer who exploited the gullible Ylvainans for his own ends.

This was absurd!

As Taon and his fellow mech pilots faced the two important figures of his faith, he sensed nothing but sacredness from their bodies.

The Living Prophet was like a beacon of purity. Having just concluded a session with the Transcendent Punisher, Taon was still attuned to the unique signature of Prophet Ylvaine. The man whose current incarnation went by the name of James exuded the exact same presence.

As for the Bright Martyr, the holiness he exuded was not as obvious. In fact, the clan patriarch didn't appear to be Ylvainan at all. It was only in his heart that Taon recognized Ves for who he really was. He could never forget the instance when the Bright Martyr tore down the falsehoods of the three dynasties and attempted to bring the Ylvainans back to the light!

While Taon Melin and his fellow Ylvainans got caught up in their devotion, Ves felt more and more uncomfortable at being in their presence.

He regretted once again that he had taken in the refugees from the Protectorate. At the time, he had little choice but to rely on their help to flee from Fridaymen pursuit.

Nowadays, the huge influx of other foreigners vastly diminished the influence of the Ylvainans within his clan. The True Believers along with other defectors from the Protectorate no longer dominated the internal makeup of the clan as their growth simply couldn't keep pace.

The citizens of the Protectorate were trapped in their own state. The three dynasties had closed the borders yet again. Not a single citizen was able to travel all the way to the Sentinel Kingdom and seek asylum within the Larkinson Clan.

That made Ves happy. The less Ylvainans, the better. It was too bad that James was very skilled at converting other people. A steady amount of clansmen embraced the faith every month.

Ves knew it was only going to get worse now that he had made a powerful Ylvainan mech in the form of the Transcendent Punisher.

Still, considering the benefits he derived from Ylvaine's spirit, he considered the faith to be a necessary evil. As long as they remained useful, Ves was reluctantly willing to tolerate their shenanigans.

"So, what do you think of your new mechs?"

"Amazing! Its blessing is stronger than I have ever felt from your mechs!"

"It's a beacon of faith!"

"This mech has brought me closer to the Prophet. As expected of the Bright Martyr!"

Ves grimaced even more. He just wanted to know what they thought about the Transcendent Punisher's handling, performance characteristics and other mech-related characteristics.

Unfortunately, the only area the mech pilots cared about was the Transcendent Punisher's ostensibly sacred glow!

Compared to the Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer models, the fourth Ylvainan mech he designed was even more attuned to its design spirit!

It shouldn't have been a surprise that the Ylvainan mech pilots paid much less attention to the technical performance of the Transcendent Punisher. All they cared about was that they could get closer to the source of their faith!

Ves coughed. "Don't get distracted by your new mechs. I don't want your minds to wander when we are in the middle of battle. I'm relying on you to make good use out of all of the firepower out of your disposal. If you can't repel the enemy with your new Transcendent Punishers, then I might have to replace it with another artillery mech!"

That certainly introduced a lot of distress! Once Ves made his stance clear, the mech pilots began to offer more relevant feedback.

"The Transcendent Punisher is a fine artillery mech." Taon carefully voiced his opinion. "Still, from our simulated practice sessions, it's very hard for us to land a hit on distant opponents. I'm afraid that I and my fellow mech pilots are not yet worthy to pilot our new mechs by ourselves. The heavy gauss cannons excel at medium range, which is fairly short in spaceborn battles. The only way we can achieve consistent hits at distant and agile targets is if we can obtain the Prophet's blessing. So far, we have not yet tried this out as we are prohibited from conducting live sessions."

"Don't worry about it." Ves casually waved his hand. "The Transcendent Punisher is similar to the Deliverer. As long as you get along well with the Deliverer, you shouldn't have any problems with hitting targets with our new artillery mech. As for trying to raise your accuracy against distant targets, try changing your fire settings. Your heavy gauss cannons fire powerful and heavy slugs by default, but you can load Xcordon cannons with lighter rounds as well. If you do the latter, your firing rate is higher, so you have greater opportunities to achieve a hit, if not with as much force."

"Ah, I see!"

They discussed some other parameters. The mech pilots found the positron cannons to be much easier to work with. The beams they unleashed impacted their targets with relativistic speeds, which was basically instant under most battlefield circumstances.

While their accuracy was higher, their power consumption and heat generation was enormous. The latter turned out to be a very considerable problem during longer engagements.

"In the simulations, our Transcendent Punishers continue to build up heat as we fire our positron cannons." Taon explained. "The cannons themselves and some other related components can turn red hot. Unless we stop firing entirely, it's not that easy to cool them down. No matter how much heat my mech is able to transfer to the deck and bracing that holds it in place, there are still limits to how much flows through."

Ves nodded again. "This is a known problem. The heat transfer from your mech to the rest of the ship is not without its limits. The longer a battle goes on, the more difficult it becomes to siphon away excess heat. However, don't worry too much about this problem. In a real battle, I've implemented an additional measure that should mitigate this problem. Is there anything else?"

"The light pulse cannons are fast and efficient, but it's difficult to make effective use of them. At longer ranges, their power diminishes too much to threaten any serious enemies. At shorter ranges, their high-firing rate makes them good for intercepting missiles but they lack too much punch to threaten enemy mechs up close."

If enemy mechs ever got close to the Spirit of Bentheim, the role the Transcendent Punishers could play was very limited!

Their heavier weapons were large and powerful, but that also made them unwieldy at closer ranges. The secondary pulse cannons were their best option to repel enemies less than a kilometer away, but their lackluster firepower meant that they needed to achieve way too many hits to destroy a well-armored target!

"If enemies manage to get this close, we can only rely on our spaceborn mechs to fend them off." Ves stated with a shrug.

In fact, if any enemy managed to survive everything the Transcendent Punishers could throw at them, the Spirit of Bentheim was probably doomed!

## 2597 Imaginary Weight

After inspecting the first batch of Transcendent Punishers and their overly-fanatical mech pilots, Ves became somewhat reassured of the performance of the new mechs.

Despite the quirks and shortcomings of his first true heavy mech design, the Transcendent Punisher was a killer at range. Ves was especially satisfied with the great potential of its Xcordon cannons.

He could have licensed more accurate heavy gauss cannon models that boasted significantly greater muzzle velocity, but he disliked their lack of punch.

He much preferred to make use of heavier calibers that were capable of firing heavier rounds with an abundant amount of energy. While these rounds traveled at slower speeds as soon as they emerged from the barrel, their impact and armor piercing properties were much greater!

This was exactly what Ves needed in order to deal with powerful enemies. He did not fear swarms of weaker mechs as the Transcendent Punisher along with many of his other mechs could easily defeat a disorganized mob.

What Ves truly worried about was fighting against some of the stronger second-class pioneers in the Red Ocean. His fleet needed to project as much deterrence as possible to prevent opportunistic attacks, and the heavy cannons of the Transcendent Punishers should be able to do a good job at scaring away potential attackers!

Besides, the design spirit took care of the inherent accuracy problem at longer ranges. While there was definitely a price to this powerful ability, it could easily change the course of the battle when used correctly.

As Ves finally dismissed the Ylvainan mech pilots, he and James remained behind. They both approached the Prophet's Fist, the first production copy of the Transcendent Punisher. Its excellent quality along with the fact that Ves and his wife had personally put it together caused it to exude a greater presence than the other mechs of its kind.

"I must say you have chosen quite a violent name for this mech." James spoke with his smooth and calming voice. "Prophets generally aren't associated with using their fists to propagate their visions."

"Says the mech pilot who stole the prototype of my Transcendent Messenger and paraded it on Kesseling VIII."

"Mechs are more than weapons of wars. They can also serve as symbols of hope and sources of inspiration. You excel at making them, in fact. Even if war is ever extinguished throughout reality, you can be assured that your creations will still remain relevant."

Ves snorted. "What you speak of is an impossibility. War is eternal. War is an intrinsic part of life. So long as multiple people or aliens exist, there will always be conflict."

"Who knows." The Living Prophet smiled. "In any case, these fine machines should be more than up to the task of keeping our followers invigorated. The power and majesty exuded by these mechs are simply the best symbols of piety."

"They're your followers, not mine."

"That is not what they think."

"Just because they think I'm the Bright Martyr doesn't mean I buy into your crap!" Ves pushed back! "I designed this mech to defend our fleet, not your stupid cult. The Spirit of Bentheim and many of our other starships will soon rely on this mech model to be their point defense. I hope the mech pilots among your followers will pilot my artillery mechs without causing trouble. Can you make sure your men behave?"

"Their obedience is never in question. My followers will always be faithful to you and your commands."

"Whatever. As long as your believers make good use of the Transcendent Punishers, I might design a melee Ylvainan mech in the future."

"You will definitely do so." James confidently stated. "It shall be a work of glory that will revitalize faith and convert new believers!"

Ves glowered at the prophet. "If you keep talking like that, I feel much less inclined to design another Ylvainan mech."

"It will be a second-class lancer mech. Once complete, the mech burns with the fire of our faith as it impales its spear through the bodies of the fallen and the wicked. Piloting this great mech will be an honor to any believer."

"SHUT UP!" Ves blew up! "Don't think I don't know what you're doing! You're implanting suggestions in my mind so that I will subconsciously grow accustomed to your suggestion to the point where I will actually design it! This is nothing more than a manipulative psychological trip to turn your remark into a self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Believe what you will, but the design choices you make in the future are impeccable. Your lancer mech design will be a work of that will become a legend!"

The prophet spoke so much nonsense that Ves tired of this discussion. He automatically disregarded what James said and turned to leave.

"I have work to do. The Spirit of Bentheim is slowly ramping up production of our Transcendent Punishers. Even though the efficiency of our production halls aren't high, as long as our mech technicians aren't incompetent, we should be able to fill up all of the bunkers of our flagship."

The learning curve of the GAIA production line and all of its complicated tools and equipment was very formidable. When utilized to its fullest, the formidable production line could probably put together a Transcendent Punisher in 2 days!

This was incredibly fast!

A normal second-class production line needed at least 5 to 8 days to complete so much work. A heavy mech possessed a lot more components, so more time was needed to fabricate them and assemble them. The Transcendent Punisher design was also very complex as it incorporated at least three different weapon systems and a very comprehensive internal architecture.

If not for obtaining twenty top-of-the-line GAIA 3D printers and other high-quality mass production-oriented equipment, Ves wouldn't have been able to obtain the initial batch of Transcendent Punishers within a week!

To be honest, Ves wasn't sure whether the Spirit of Bentheim would be able to occupy all of her bunkers upon departure. If the learning curve was steeper than what his production crews could handle, then they might have to work while his fleet transitioned into FTL.

As Ves considered whether he should pay a visit to the production halls in order to instruct the mech technicians in person, James called out a warning.

"One more thing, Bright Martyr. You may want to sharpen your defenses. I sense turbulence on the horizon. Old hatreds are coming together to finish their grudges once and for all. Your heart will be burdened by regret if you leave without settling your bonds of karma."

Ves stopped his tracks and turned around. His eyes bore into James' well-meaning gaze.

"I have three points to say to you." He raised a finger. "First, so many people hate me that I am always under threat. Telling me there's danger on the horizon is as useless as saying that stars are hot and that entering a black hole is a one-way trip."

He raised another finger. "Second, who says that grudges have to be resolved? I have formed plenty of grudges and have made a lot of enemies. I've outgrown most of them. This star sector is too small to make me care about the issues that bothered me in the past. People like Carlos and Patricia have become so insignificant that I don't really hate them anymore. They're sad, pathetic space peasants who will never amount to anything in their lives."

Ves raised another finger. "Third, I don't have much of a heart anymore. It's largely been subsumed by my Jutland organ. I never regret anything as I consider every mistake to be a valuable lesson. Also, that karma doesn't exist except in the delusions of certain religions. I don't care at all if a mountain of karma is weighing down on my shoulders. My daily workload is a much more telling burden."

With that, he strode away while shoving everything James had said aside. Rather than worrying about vague and unsubstantiated predictions, Ves would much rather think about progressing his mech design projects.

He ascended up the decks and moved all the way back to the design lab.

Once there, Ves loosened up as he had returned to his home ground. The sanctity of the design lab was far more comforting to him than any temple.

He threw a brief glance at Maikel. Ever since the kid found his passion, he acted like a man possessed.

With his high Intelligence score and even higher Concentration score, Maikel quickly absorbed the basics of mech programming and moved on to more advanced textbooks!

"Keep up the good work."

After glimpsing at the work of some of his design teams, he reached the area reserved by the lead designers and returned to his wife.

"Miaow!"

Clixie looked up from the desk as she smelled his arrival. The cat squinted in pleasure as Ves ran his hand over her soft and lovely fur.

"That's my cat, Ves." Gloriana swiveled her chair around. "Where is Lucky?"

"He's on shift. By the way, now that we're married, Clixie ought to be mine as well now, right?"

"No!"

"Miaow!"

Gloriana quickly grasped her furry pet and held her protectively against her chest. She planted a kiss on Clixie's forehead. "She's my baby!"

They chatted a bit before they moved on to the state of a couple of their projects.

"The Bright Warrior IB design is going along well." Gloriana called up a projection of the current iteration of the design. "Since you are prioritizing it so much, we have spent the most time on it. Many of the design choices and solutions we've applied to the original, the IC, are still valid when translated to a second-class frame. It's just that we can't copy our work straight away without making targeted adjustments."

"Have you tried our new ship AI yet? Our new ASTERA AI core is already proving to be incredibly helpful. I can simulate thousands of different solutions in a matter of seconds and pick out the best ones. We don't have to waste so much time on theorizing and performing manual calculations. We can just employ a brute force process that will automatically allow us to pick the most optimal solution while we do something else."

Gloriana frowned. "That's a lazy approach, Ves, and you know it. Without understanding the theory and the steps we have to take to solve a problem, how can we ever understand our mech designs? If we want to fabricate a masterwork mech, we need to be as familiar with our mech designs as possible. We can't take shortcuts."

"I don't necessarily disagree with you, but Bygul is a very helpful resource. We shouldn't waste its formidable processing power."

The two still differed in opinion regarding this. While Ves wanted his designs to be as good as possible, he didn't see any conflict. As long as they didn't go overboard with relying on their AI core, they could still end up with a good product that was fully in their grasp.

"If we utilize Bygul more often, we might be able to accelerate the completion of this project." Ves predicted. "Once we reach the optimizing and bug-fixing phase, much of the work is processor-intensive."

"We'll see."

The other mech that he wanted to talk about was a project that Gloriana and Ves were quite interested in. The design project codenamed Devious was a Hexer stealth mech intended to facilitate sabotage, infiltration and assassination.

This was the first time that Ves designed a true stealth mech. The Hexer stealth tech that he had access to and the knowledge on stealth technology that he had obtained had significantly raised his proficiency in this field!

Gloriana frowned and petted her cat. "The Devious is shaping up to be a fine mech, but I haven't heard anything about its proto-god so far. Have you made any progress?"

"I have a plan in mind. I intend to create a new design spirit, but in order to do so, I have to gather the right ingredients. That is proving much more troublesome than I thought."

Thank you for reading my work! If you wish to support The Mech Touch, please vote with your power stones!

#### *Chapter 2598: Devious*

Stealth tech always fascinated Ves. Having fallen victim to it plenty of times, he always desired to harness this tech for his own purposes.

The problem was that Ves had a hard time accessing books on stealth tech. While Aisling's library helped to supplement his knowledge, he didn't feel as if they were fully up to date.

The most current and effective stealth applications were never publicized in any textbooks or teaching material. Instead, they remained hidden within the databases of secretive research bases.

As long as these applications became accessible, they no longer provided a strong advantage!

After all, as long as someone was able to figure out the principles behind a stealth system, they could easily target its weaknesses and develop a counter!

This meant that while Ves was able to design a stealth mech, it simply wouldn't be good enough to fool powerful enemies. He could forget about dispatching a stealth shuttle to infiltrate a government base or the headquarters of a powerful organization!

All of that changed once Gloriana chose to design a Hexer stealth mech. She personally lobbied the Hegemony to design such a mech for the state and completed a deal that granted the Design Department access to specific stealth systems and stealth components along with the requisite knowledge to integrate them in a mech design.

This was exactly what Ves needed to design an effective and modern stealth mech!

Theory had to be paired with the right component licenses. If Ves only possessed the former, then he would have to develop stealth systems from scratch, which would take

years. If he only possessed the latter, then any mech he designed would never possess cohesive stealth abilities.

Now that he obtained both, he didn't have to struggle with this dilemma anymore. Ves just needed to devote some time to study the provided literature and manuals in order to advance his understanding by leaps and bounds. He even felt as if his understanding of stealth tech had shot up all the way to Journeyman-level!

Together with Gloriana, they enthusiastically came up with a basic but promising stealth mech concept. In the past two months, they slowly built it up until they ended up with an incomplete mech design that could perform multiple stealth-related roles.

The Devious Project centered around a landbound light mech that featured minimal defense, low offense and fairly good mobility.

It was not a front-line combat mech. As long as it exposed its whereabouts to the enemy, even a single rifleman mech could take it down after landing just a couple of hits!

With a budget of around 200 million hex credits, the light mech was supposed to be as affordable as possible while still possessing effective stealth capabilities.

This was a very difficult project. It would have been a lot easier to design a mech that could keep its presence hidden from the enemy if his budget was three times higher!

As long as he could make use of more expensive materials, he could design a mech with much better stealth capabilities!

Unfortunately, the Hegemony preferred to obtain a more frugal mech design. Ves guessed that DIVA and the other intelligence agencies wanted to perform a lot of stealth missions without burdening their strategic materials reserve.

If any of the stealth mechs got caught, then their loss wouldn't hurt the Hegemony!

"These Hexers expect too much from my glows." Ves shook his head. "Glows can't single-handedly hide an entire mech from plain sight. They're too big!"

Gloriana placed her hand on his arm to reassure him. "The government doesn't expect you to do that much. The stealth tech incorporated in our Devious mech should be good enough to evade most forms of detection. Only high-powered directional scans and continuous active scanning will cause it to expose some flaws. Mech pilots and operators normally don't perform these scans too much because it imposes a heavy burden on their sensor equipment. What the government truly wants is a mech that can reduce the vigilance and suspicion of enemy mech pilots and other personnel."

"I know. I'm just not too certain whether it will be useful."

The Devious was supposed to possess a glow that cast a spiritual veil over the mech. The goal was to make the enemies around it more complacent, but the range of the glow was too short to cover too much ground.

Of course, Ves could also employ the directional glow channeling method of the Valkyrie Redeemer, but that only took care of one person at a time.

Any mech pilot who wanted to utilize the Devious mech needed to exercise precise judgement under high-stress situations.

Ves was afraid that the Hexer mech pilots assigned to pilot this mech wouldn't be up to the task.

"You're worrying too much, Ves. Hexer mech pilots are the best in this star sector! While I admit that the Fridaymen come close, the Hegemony trains its mech pilots well! The Devious will succeed. I know it. You just need to figure out how to create your new proto-god."

To be honest, Ves wasn't too worried about the technical challenges either. Even though Ves and Gloriana didn't possess much experience in designing stealth mechs, starting with a fairly low-tier one meant that the Devious design wasn't too complex.

In fact, if not for the fact that both of them had to spend a lot of time on bringing their proficiency in stealth tech up to standard, they probably would have been able to complete its design in four months instead of longer!

Yet the most important component was still missing. Out of all of his existing design spirits, nothing seemed to be fit for the purpose.

Gloriana suggested that he employ the Superior Mother, but slanted towards the dust phase of existence this time.

It wasn't enough. The dust phase was one of the most passive and less intrusive glows of the Superior Mother, but its effect was very subtle.

To the Hexers, dust was trivial. Dust was forgotten. Dust was silent. While it sounded as if these traits fit well with a stealth mech, in practice it mostly on other Hexers.

Whenever non-Hexers experienced this aspect of the Superior Mother, they experienced a small but noticeable sense of nihility and despair!

It was as if they began to recognize their insignificance! The galaxy and the multiverse were infinitely larger than any individual!

Just the Superior Mother alone was able to treat Fridaymen like dust!

This was an odd, weak but very noticeable effect. Pairing it with the Devious defeated its purpose. At best, it could hide its presence among other Hexers. Against the Fridaymen, such a glow would only serve as a giant proximity alarm.

Therefore, Ves had little choice but to resort to another design spirit. With nothing suitable in his collection, he eventually concluded he had to make a new one from scratch. He could pair with the Superior Mother for the Devious design in order to combine their useful traits.

However, after losing a convenient source of spiritual fragments in the form of Nyxie, Ves had very few sources to create what he wanted.

So far, the most reliable source of spiritual energy was his other design spirits. As long as he didn't bleed them too often, it was okay for him to ask them to make a donation.

However, Ves hadn't found the attributes he wanted. He wanted to obtain a fragment taken from a source that excelled in hiding.

Finding this source was his biggest headache so far! While Ves had ordered a bunch of strange exobeasts and biological products that possessed excellent hiding capabilities over the past two months, none of them possessed spiritual potential. They were just creatures of flesh and blood that held no value in his eyes!

As Ves explained this problem to his wife, she frowned.

"What will you do if you can't find what you seek? Will you be able to make your proto-god without the right ingredients?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I can form images, do some pre-processing and conduct a ceremony, but that will only result in a mediocre design spirit. If we want to obtain the best, then we should really obtain an appropriate ingredient."

"Do you have any solutions other than buying random exobeasts?"

"We still have a couple of months left before we reach the deadline. According to our current schedule, we will probably arrive at the Life Research Association in Majestic Teal around at that time. The LRA is a regional leader in developing biological products. They have invented artificial creatures that we can't even imagine! They should definitely have what we want and more."

In fact, if there was enough time left, Ves didn't mind harvesting the spirits of more spiritually active exobeasts. The LRA was famed for setting up expansive reserves. Many of them were even open to recreational hunting, attracting lots of tourists who were eager to harvest trophies and expand their prestige.

All of these hunting planets offered regulated hunting environments that were officially recognized by the Galactic Hunting Club.

Since the LRA was a second-rate state, its hunting preserves were several times more dangerous!

Gloriana began to look upset. "A lot of overconfident hunters die in those preserves. Are you thinking about heading back into danger again? You just got out of the Nyxian Gap!"

Damn! She caught on to his scheme! Ves rapidly readjusted his plans.

"Nonono! I'm not heading down there in person, honey! I'm a mech designer and a clan leader, remember? I think it's much more appropriate to dispatch a bunch of clansmen to these hunting preserves and tell them to retrieve some noteworthy exobeasts. We can just sit back and relax while our mech pilots and soldiers complete their missions."

She softened up when she heard this answer. "That's better. You're learning, Ves. You don't have to take part in these silly hunts anymore. With all of your design achievements, the prestige you can earn from hunting a challenging animal is really trivial!"

Ves didn't quite agree with that. There was something visceral and exciting about confronting a dangerous exobeast in its own territory. He wasn't stupid enough to voice these desires.

"It'll be hard to obtain the right exobeast this way." Ves warned. "The biological products that we can buy straight away tend to be tamer and less ferocious than the animals that are specifically made for the hunt. It's unlikely that the former possesses the right strength. We need to hunt down formidable creatures that have proven themselves to be strong enough to overcome several hunting teams. What is even more troublesome is that I need to obtain these animals alive!"

This was a lot harder than the hunt for the Crown Cat that he had previously participated in on Felixia I. When Zeigra finally died, Ves had to act quickly in order to salvage his dissipating spirit.

If Ves wasn't on the field at the time a spiritually powerful exobeast died, all of the creature's spirituality would disappear by the time the hunting team brought the corpse back to the Larkinson fleet!

Gloriana wasn't interested in hunting, so she didn't express much interest in his problems.

"Our soldiers and mech pilots aren't average. Have some confidence in them. I'm sure they will be able to bring the animals back alive. The Swordmaidens are supposed to be quite good at hunting ferocious exobeasts if I recall."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "That's true, but they are mostly interested in decapitating or bleeding their prey to death. I'm not sure they will be able to show enough restraint during the hunt."

Well, he would figure it out when he reached the LRA. The Swordmaidens may have been pirates once, but their discipline and obedience was quite good. They were not prone to losing control.

"By the way, our stealth mech is a light mech. Even if it doesn't have any flight capabilities, we should bring in Juliet to this project. She can definitely improve the mobility of the Devious by another notch."

"GET LOST!"

#### *Chapter 2599: Flatter Crystals*

Aside from needing to create a new design spirit, the Devious Project did not present any significant obstacles. Gloriana eagerly tackled all of the challenges as if they were personal. Ves also enjoyed the process of designing his first proper stealth mech.

There were two major shortcomings of the Devious that Ves didn't like

First, the Devious was limited by its relatively stingy design budget. This limited its effectiveness and increased the danger to the mech pilots.

Second, the Devious was a landbound mech. It was a lot easier to design a landbound stealth mech because of its flatter profile and its simpler internal architecture.

Stealth mechs with flight capabilities had to incorporate miniaturized flight systems or alternative means of traversal in order to prevent their energy signatures from lighting up like a torch in the dark!

These mechs also generated a lot more heat due to their increased energy consumption. Every process generated heat due to inherent inefficiencies, and making mechs fly tended to build up a lot of heat during flight!

What was even worse was that the stealth mech's energy reserves drained even faster during flight. Not only did it have to provide power to its energy-hungry flight systems, it also had to maintain all of its active stealth systems, which wasn't light in terms of power draw!

The challenges of minimizing energy consumption, increasing efficiency and preventing any heat from leaking out were already enough to drive Journeymen crazy!

Even Ves and Gloriana didn't have enough guts to design a spaceborn or aerial stealth mech at their current stage. Perhaps only proper Seniors were good enough to tackle these advanced projects.

"It's okay." Gloriana reassured Ves as he voiced his frustration to her. "We can design something suitable in the future when we really need such a mech. For now, I don't think the Black Cats are required to perform any sabotage."

"You're right." Ves loosened up as he idly petted Clixie's furry back. "I'm just being envious. Having a spaceborn stealth mech in our lineup would definitely be handy and give us more options, but we don't strictly need it in order to survive."

"Once we finish the Devious Project, we can make use of it ourselves. That will give us at least some solutions."

"You're right."

This was the best part about this project. The Glory Seekers and the Larkinson Clan could make use of this mech as well. Even if the Hexadric Hegemony refused to extend that right to them, the experience of designing a stealth mech was already valuable in itself.

With the immense amount of money at his disposal, he could definitely find some way to obtain the necessary permissions to make use of stealth systems and stealth components elsewhere.

He could also make a deal with a different state in the Yeina Star Cluster. As long as the Devious Project succeeded and the Hexers made good use of his stealth mech, other states would definitely want to get their hands on something similar.

In fact, the LMC already received inquiries from different states! They offered various interesting conditions such as money, territory and even noble titles in exchange for designing a mech with a glow that met their requirements!

Many of the people or institutions that approached the LMC with these offers were quite savvy. They recognized the advantage of LMC mechs and showed a lot of sincerity in order to gain the same advantages that Ves had bestowed to the Hexadric Hegemony.

It was a pity that Ves simply couldn't design so many mechs. He had way too many mech design projects on his to-do list to entertain these commissions.

There wasn't a big hurry either. As long as Ves designed more mechs that made an impact in the Komodo War, his value would definitely rise. Second-rate states were

unimaginably wealthy and powerful. The people who worked for the government weren't stupid either. As long as they wanted something bad enough, they would definitely bring out something that was precious and relevant to the Larkinson Clan!

In fact, Ves was patiently biding his time. He wanted to generate more demand and drive up the value of his services in the hopes of obtaining another capital ship or receiving a batch of strategically-important resonating materials!

The fact that the LMC's commercial catalog was already on its way to generate a monthly income of 1 trillion hex credits was already a testament to his design prowess!

After he made this realization, Ves underwent a gradual shift in mentality. He raised his evaluation of his own value and considered his time to be much more precious than before.

It was a pity that he didn't have enough time! The biggest problem he faced once he reached a certain level of success was that his output was limited by the amount of time he was able to invest in his work.

Knowing that he could obtain an unimaginable amount of wealth and power but being unable to get more than a fraction of that due to his limitations was painful!

There was no way for him to increase the amount of time he was allotted per day. He had to tackle this problem from a different angle. The answer he came up with was delegating some of his workload to other mech designers.

"The Design Department is not sufficient anymore." He murmured. "I need to raise more Journeymen in order to lead more projects. I should hire a lot more assistants as well in order to set up more design teams. As long as I obtain more help, I can devote my precious time to the work that really matters to me. I can spend more time on developing my specialty as well, which should accelerate my progression."

He missed the days where he designed an entire mech by himself, but it was simply too inefficient. Of course, he had to be careful not to let his technical design abilities grow rusty. It was best to start some passion projects every now and then and work on it from the ground up in order to ensure he was still able to design a mech by himself. Master Willix had already advised him to do so in order to prevent himself from becoming dependent on others.

Aside from the Devious Project, Ves also devoted a significant time on the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B and the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B projects.

Both were powerful second-class mech projects that Ves wanted to add to his clan's common mech roster as soon as possible. The former was a versatile mech model that could fulfill most of the roles his mech forces needed to fulfill.

"I need the Bright Warrior IB to replace our cheap commercial second-class mechs as soon as possible!"

As for the latter, the Ferocious Piranha IB would definitely become a killer against most enemies. The Version C of this product line was already in the process of sparking a revolution in the regional mech market. Once the second-class version came out, the results would be so astounding that Ves was too afraid of selling it to the public!

"Our clan is too weak and the LMC doesn't have a solid foundation in the second-class markets of this star cluster. We can't rock the boat too much." He muttered.

There were massive interests involved in the second-class mech markets. Each market leader possessed enough wealth and power to ambush the Larkinson Clan in order to get rid of any market disruptors.

At most, Ves would only be able to get away with selling Ferocious Piranha Version B's through private sales. He did not even dare to put up his mech design for licensing, so he would probably be confined to producing the second-class Ferocious Piranhas in house.

Fortunately, the Spirit of Bentheim was more than up to the task. As long as his expeditionary fleet obtained enough Transcendent Punishers, Bright Warrior Version B's and so on, he could switch the factory ship's purpose from servicing the needs of the clan to producing high-quality mechs with high markups.

It didn't matter if the profit from private sales paled in comparison to the profit generated by the LMC's business operations in the Yeina Star Cluster. Ves wanted to diversify his income so that he and his clan would be able to survive the collapse of any revenue source.

Due to prioritizing the mech design projects that were of immediate use to him and his clan, Ves was not able to allocate as much time on his other design projects.

Fortunately, they weren't too complicated.

The Hexer supportive mech designed to debilitate enemy expert pilots by 'blinding' them with the Illustrious One's glow had to be as economical as possible.

As a mech designed to confront expert mechs without being able to threaten them in any serious way, it was destined to be utilized as cannon fodder. To the Hex Army, this meant that it should be piloted by boys. It didn't help that the design codenamed Blinding Mech was meant to be deployed in greater numbers.

After a lot of considerations, Ves set the Blinding Mech's design budget at just 145 million hex credits. This was 55 million hex credits less than the Blessed Squire, though

the Blinding Mech did not incorporate sophisticated energy siphoning and energy transfer systems.

Instead, Ves stuffed it with third-class luminar crystals. Due to the fragility of these crystals, Ves incorporated them in the shield and frame of a defensive landbound knight mech.

"Mobility is not important for this mech. It doesn't have to be fast, nor does it require any flight capabilities."

Ves equated the role of the Blinding Mech to the Doom Guard. Both mechs were designed to counter specific enemies in very particular ways. Because they were geared towards defensive deployments, he could focus their designs to excel in their narrow roles.

In order to ensure adequate defensive capabilities while keeping costs down, Ves piled up the Blinding Mech's design with a lot of heavy bulk armor. The alloy formula of its armor system was made up entirely with low-grade exotics and other readily-available materials.

While this essentially slowed the Blinding Mech down, Ves considered it to be an acceptable tradeoff. The only annoying part was that he couldn't go too far with this. Unlike the Doom Guard, the Blinding Mech had to take part in at least some offensive operations.

These requirements essentially limited the defenses of the Blinding Mech. While it possessed plenty of armor to resist a decent number of ranged attacks, Ves did not expect it to last long against an expert mech.

A sardonic smile appeared on his face. "Well, it's not as if doubling its budget will help much either."

Expert mechs were unreasonably powerful. Their attacks were always capable of slicing or punching through most standard mechs. Ves just had to put enough armor onto his Blinding Mech design to prevent it from falling over after getting hit by a casual attack.

"An expert mech still has to expend a bit of effort to take one of these machines down."

That was the best that Ves could hope for. The Blinding Mech did not need anything else as it was only meant to create opportunities. It was designed to fight alongside other Hexer mechs that were much more suited to launch follow-up attacks.

As Ves tinkered with the relatively uncomplicated knight mech design, he became especially proud of the crystal array he sandwiched in the thick and bulky shield of the Blinding Mech.

Normally, the shield resembled a typical solid slab of metal. However, once the mech pilot issued a command, the surface layers retracted in order to expose the flat, gleaming crystals embedded in the middle!

While luminar crystals classically came in a diamond or oval shape, Ves knew it was possible to synthesize or cut them in other shapes as well.

In order to prevent the shield from becoming too bulky, Ves intended to embed flatter, block-shaped luminar crystals into its interior.

While this design choice significantly reduced the bulkiness of the shield, the efficiency of the crystals dropped as a consequence. For some unknown reason that Ves couldn't fathom, making the crystals flatter reduced their efficiency and output by up to 25 percent!

Though this was a rather painful tradeoff, Ves still considered it worthwhile. By covering the entire interior of a tower shield with blocky luminar crystals, the effect should still be very significant!

"I'm not sure how effective the Blinding Mech will be against expert pilots, but it will definitely have an effect on regular mech pilots as well!"

#### *Chapter 2600: Giant Killer*

The more Ves spent time on the Blinding Mech Project, the more he became interested in its performance.

The supportive knight mech depended so much on the Illustrious One's glow that Ves had basically turned it into a sacrificial vessel.

If Ves disregarded its design spirit and its luminar crystals, the Blinding Mech did not have much going for it anymore. It was far worse than the Blessed Squire in this regard.

His first Hexer mech design at least possessed enough utility and armor to be an asset on the battlefield without relying on the Superior Mother.

The same could not be said for the Blinding Mech. It possessed inferior armor, bad mobility and just a simple sword as its only weapon. It also didn't provide any further utility to justify its presence in battle.

All of this meant that Ves was basically making a huge gamble. At this point in the design project, he didn't know how effective the Blinding Mech could channel the Illustrious One's dazzling properties.

If Ves miscalculated somehow, then he essentially wasted six months of his precious time on a project that resulted in a piece of trash!

"I can't even use the Crystal Lord Mark II Version C as a reference."

The new third-class laser rifleman mech was supposed to be an excellent premium product. However, all of the hype surrounding the Ferocious Piranha Version C basically sucked out all of the oxygen for the other mech.

While the Crystal Lord IIC did sell at brisk amounts, it was simply not as attention-grabbing. Its glow was not focused towards the Illustrious One's blinding effect at all, so the strengths of this model weren't as apparent.

At the very least, there were too few anecdotes, battle footage and battle reports to make any solid conclusions. Any incidents where enemy mechs fumbled in front of the Crystal Lord Mark II could also be chalked up to other reasons.

The LMC did not plan to market the new Crystal Lord model at this time either. Unless it was able to generate hype on its own, it was better to focus on maximizing the sales of the Ferocious Piranha Version C.

"Well, I have enough confidence in my product. It has to work. The Illustrious One isn't a useless bum after absorbing the essence of the Blinding One."

Ves no longer worried so much about the Blinding Mech's viability and focused on completing his designs.

Aside from that, he also spent a decent amount of time working with Juliet on the first LMC mech exclusive to the Penitent Sisters.

The purpose of this project was to design a mech that could punch above its weight and pose a threat against powerful mechs.

While that sounded similar to the Blinding Mech, this was different. The Blinding Mech was a landbound mech that was suitable for large-scale battlefield conditions. It was meant to be piloted by relatively expendable male Hexer mech pilots and did not possess any inherent offensive capabilities.

In contrast, the project codenamed Giant Killer was meant to deliver a mech design that not only complemented the Penitent Sister battle formations, but also leveraged the skill and fervor of its mech pilots to leapfrog their battle strength!

Therefore, the Giant Killer simply wasn't compatible with the Hex Army or the Glory Seekers. Even if other Hexer mech pilots got their hands on some Giant Killers, the mechs wouldn't be able to exert their full strength.

This was because the power of the Superior Mother played a pivotal role in empowering the mechs and mech pilots.

So far, Ves did not disseminate the power of his battle networks and battle formations. As far as he was concerned, he wanted to keep this feature as a trump card for his Larkinsons. He didn't even intend to share it with the Glory Seekers despite how much the Giant Killer could increase the overall security of their combined fleet.

In the beginning stages of this project, Ves and Juliet puzzled which mech type they should adopt.

The obvious solution was to start off with a lancer mech, but Ves had already ruled out that option beforehand. Against powerful second-class expert mechs or just a single first-class mech, attempting to swarm them with melee mechs was too costly!

"It has to be a ranged mech." Ves insisted. "The mech has to possess enough firepower to deplete energy shields and punch through solid armor. It also has to possess enough mobility to adapt to numerous different circumstances. It also needs enough defenses to last on the battlefield."

"That sounds like an expensive mech." The Penitent Sister designer noted.

"The Giant Killer must be powerful enough to give it a chance against second-class expert mechs or very basic first-class mechs. I don't expect it to win a duel against powerful opponents, but I expect to obtain some results as long as we are able to deploy at least 200 mechs."

There was no other way to defeat a significantly superior mech without investing a lot of money and resources.

Fortunately, due to the law of diminishing returns, the total value of Giant Killers deployed in the field did not have to exceed the value of a small number of powerful mechs.

As long as the Penitent Sisters piloting the Giant Killers enjoyed a decisive numerical advantage, they should already have the grounds to win such a clash!

The offensive power of the mech was key. The Giant Killer didn't have to be as well armed as the Transcendent Punisher, but it had to be able to pierce through the toughest possible armor.

That was not an insurmountable problem for a heavy landbound artillery mech, but it was an entirely different matter when it came to a medium spaceborn rifleman mech!

The advantage of the Transcendent Punisher was that it was able to output a lot of damage and make use of the cover provided by the bunkers of the Larkinson Clan's starship.

However, these conditions also limited the Transcendent Punisher's versatility. Its firing angles and its mobility were so limited that it was too difficult to take advantage of its firepower in certain scenarios.

The biggest disadvantage was that the Transcendent Punisher was not suited for offensive operations!

The Giant Killer was supposed to fill up this gap. It didn't have to match the firing rate or the damage output of the Transcendent Punisher, but it had to be armed with the most powerful ranged weapon that could be fitted onto a relatively mobile spaceborn mech.

Since Ves was willing to invest a lot of money in the Giant Killer, he set its overall design budget at 800 million hex credits. That was very expensive compared to his other design projects!

It was worth it though. With an allotment of 800 million hex credits, Ves could make use of excellent lightweight armor systems, powerful flight systems, efficient power reactors and high-capacity energy cells.

Setting a lavish budget also allowed him to incorporate miniaturized components, thereby freeing up precious capacity that opened room for additional parts and modules.

"Still, all of these aspects are secondary to the weapon system. In a battle against a powerful enemy, you can't allow them to live long enough to destroy all of our mechs. As long as the battle revolves around attrition, our losses will be horrendous regardless if we win or lose." Juliet remarked.

Ves leaned back in his chair while stroking the physical projection of a glowing electronic cat. "You're right. We shouldn't get caught up in stuffing as much goodies in the Giant Killer design as possible. All of these features are secondary to the firepower of the mech. Bygul, can you search for ranged weapons that meet the criteria I am about to set? Make sure the weapon model is accessible and fits the framework of the Giant Killer concept.

[Mew.]

Bygul served as an adequate substitute for Lucky. What Ves particularly liked about the ASTERA AI Core's virtual avatar was its adaptability. Bygul learned so quickly that he adopted many of the characteristics that Ves liked to see in cats.

If there was one downside about Bygul's propensity for change, it was that the cat didn't possess a strong and unique character. Ves had to command him to curtail the learning routine in order to solidify his personality.

The AI core instantly performed the task that Ves had assigned to it. The core split up a portion of its processing power and began to access numerous databases. It also

accessed the galactic net and explored several different weapon catalogs for suitable weapon models.

In the span of just a few seconds, Bygul not only collected information about thousands of suitable weapon models, but also ranked and categorized them in a very clear and user-friendly format.

A new projection appeared in the design lab that listed all of the potential choices.

Ves smiled and rubbed the head of the electronic cat. The physical projectors built into the design lab compartment made sure that Ves felt as if he was petting a real cat!

"Thank you, Bygul."

The projected cat looked up at him with cute, glowing eyes. [Mew mew mew!]

The only disappointment was that Ves didn't feel any emotion from his new cat. No matter how good Bygul emulated the joy and love of a living animal, without the life that gave these emotions heft, it was all fake.

Ves sighed. "Lucky is still better."

Still, the convenience provided by the Spirit of Bentheim's AI core was incomparable. Ves and Juliet only had to examine the list of results for ten minutes before they settled on a choice.

Ves pointed his finger at a large cannon.

"The Samheim VVK-11C is one of the most powerful gauss cannon that can be fitted on a medium mech frame. It's cumbersome and impractical, but not too much."

Juliet detected a complication. "The Samheim gauss cannon isn't designed to fire standardized rounds. Instead, it can only be loaded with proprietary, ultra-heavy rounds."

The Xcordon gauss cannons utilized by the Transcendent Punisher were capable of firing several different standardized projectiles. This made it easier to supply it with ammunition.

In contrast, the weapon developer of the Samheim deliberately made it difficult if not outright impossible for the weapon to be loaded with commonly-used rounds!

This meant that every customer was forced to make use of proprietary Sarun rounds. Naturally, if anyone wanted to produce these rounds, they had to license the projectile model from the same company.

Ves did not necessarily get upset about this. In some cases, forcing a customer to utilize a single brand of ammunition was nothing more than a scam.

However, he did not believe it was the case at the moment. When he agreed to pay billions of hex credits to license the Samheim gauss cannon and its accompanying Sarun round, he studied the complete design schematics and technical parameters.

"This is still a worthwhile weapon to pair with our Giant Killer. The Samheim makes use of some special methods to increase its muzzle velocity that requires specific adaptations on its rounds. What's even better is that the Sarun round is even better able to pierce through shields and resilient armor due to its peculiar design and high-quality materials."

That was assuming that Ves and his clan had enough money. Neither the Samheim nor the Sarun round were cheap. Not a single mercenary corps would want to make use of this extravagant weapon system. There simply wasn't a way to earn enough profit!

Ves was different. He and his clan were swimming in money. This was why he unscrupulously set the Giant Killer's budget at 800 million hex credits. He could afford paying for quality!

Juliet "If we pair the Samheim gauss rifle with the Giant Killer, then it won't be a rifleman mech anymore. It's more apt to describe it as a cannoneer mech."

"You're right. It does look like that. It even has the relatively limited ammunition capacity due to the size of the rounds and the energy needed to fire them all. This is not a mech with a lot of staying power!"