

## The Mech 4901

Chapter 4901 3 To 5

It was finally time.

After a lot of rounds of negotiations, the lawyers on all sides finally came to a consensus on all of the terms of the alliance agreement.

Naturally, the Golden Skull Alliance decided to turn the treaty signing into a large occasion to commemorate this historical event.

Everyone gathered at a luxury hotel situated in the Austere District of Kotor City.

Though Ves wanted to host this event in the Ascension Gallery or another location in the Cat Nest, that would put a bit too much focus on the Larkinson Clan.

"We cannot give the impression that we are trying to become the unilateral rulers of the Golden Skull Alliance." Minister Shederin warned Ves. "We may be able to get away with dictating the direction of our alliance when we are working with trusted comrades such as the Hexers and the Glory Seekers, but we cannot operate as carelessly as before. The Adelaides and Boojays do not trust us to this extent. They agreed to join us because they assume they will have a real voice in how the alliance is run."

"Ah, thank you for that reminder. I wouldn't have paid attention to this if you did not point it out." Ves modestly said.

His foreign minister raised a crucial point. He had much more control over the original form of the Golden Skull Alliance because it was easy for him to leverage his influence among the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan.

While he couldn't persuade them to do anything he asked for, he could easily get them to support his expeditions and travel to any destination he liked!

That might not be as easy anymore now that two powerful groups had joined up. The Adelaides and the Boojays both had strong mech forces as well as their own ace mechs at their disposal! These factors alone meant that Ves needed to be a lot clever in his interactions with their representatives!

"I will be counting on you to keep us on their good side, Shederin." Ves patted the old man's feeble shoulder.

The minister and advisor radiated a lot of confidence. "My men and I shall handle this responsibility to your satisfaction. I am well-versed in diplomacy. With the full backing of you and your clan, I shall endeavor to lower the barriers between our clan and the two new alliance members."

The first steps to developing true friends between the Larkinsons and the other two groups was to make them feel welcome during the treaty signing.

After everyone important arrived at the hotel and started to sign an extensive series of contracts and official documents under the witness of an MTA representative, the just-expanded alliance immediately threw a welcoming party!

Lots of Larkinsons, Glory Seekers, Crossers, Adelaides and Boojays began to mingle with each other in a grand reception hall.

"Wow! That's a pretty kitty? Can I pet it, please?"

"Sure! Don't worry. Clixie is a nice lady."

"Her fur is so soft and smooth."

"Miaow~"

While his kids started to chat and play with the well-dressed children of the Boojay Family, Ves met up with both General Hermain Foraine and Matriarch Rezzie Boojay.

The two had grown quite familiar with each other during the months of negotiations. They were both new to the Golden Skull Alliance and automatically stuck together for solidarity for that reason.

They made for an immediate visual contrast. General Foraine looked every part of a mercenary leader, complete with a slightly irregular green-and-beige uniform that was designed to impress clients.

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay on the other hand wore a ceremonial ensemble that was part of the distinct culture of her family. It consisted of several layers of purple and orange garments that made it seem as if she was wearing several thin robes.

Rezzie also seemed keen on wearing a lot of jewelry. The abundance of rings, necklaces and other ornaments made her look wealthier and added a lot of gravitas to her stature.

"I have a question for you, Ves."

"Ask away, Herman."

"Why are we called the Golden Skull Alliance?"

"..."

"I mean, I have asked the same question to the other members of your alliance, but they all gave me different answers. I have the impression that hardly anyone understands the meaning of the name and the reason why you have settled on it. I was told to go to you in order to obtain a satisfactory answer. I understand why you used the word 'golden' as it is strongly associated with the symbolism of your clan, but where does the skull come from? Why did you settle on such a macabre word, and what meaning does it convey?"

Ves needed a few seconds to think on how he should respond to this question.

He couldn't very well answer that it was a subtle reference to the Skull Architect.

"We needed to develop a unique and distinctive identity that conveyed the right message to outsiders." He began. "We could have called ourselves the Jolly Peace Organization, but that would have presented our friends and allies with a completely different impression. We needed to convey strength and the determination to bite back if enemies mess with us, so calling ourselves the Golden Skull Alliance helps with that. Just the image it conveys is enough to make people think twice."

"Is that all?"

"It's been a long time, alright?!"

Matriarch Rezzie frowned in disapproval. "Names have power, for both good and ill. Skulls do not have a positive association. It will not be difficult for enemies to slander us in the public sphere. It will also be harder for us to befriend and form business relationships with more timid or benevolent parties. I did not choose to raise this matter before we joined your alliance, but now that our new treaty has come into effect, I would like to propose a formal name change."

That caught Ves and General Foraine off-guard. Neither of them expected for the Boojays to care so much about the name that they did not wait until a single day had passed before they already wanted to exercise their power!

"We shall not change our name." A different voice interjected. "We have already built up the brand of the Golden Skull Alliance over the course of several years and many notable battlefield victories. We will generate a large amount of confusion and lose much of the name recognition and the formidable reputation that comes with it if we relabel ourselves."

The female leader turned and greeted the well-dressed man with a welcoming smile. "Ah, Master Benedict Cortez. I am honored to meet with you again."

Every alliance partner had at least one unique advantage that set them apart from their peers.

The Cross Clan was the only group that had a Master Mech Designer!

While the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family both had multiple channels available to them that could give them access to the services of friendly Master Mech Designers, the latter did not directly work for the former.

This caused both Rezzie and Herman to grow envious at the Cross Clan.

Master Benedict not only worked for the Crossers on a full-time basis, but also channeled much of his earnings into the coffers of the Cross Clan!

"I did not expect the name to mean that much to you, Master." Rezzie spoke with a bit of puzzlement in her tone.

Skulls and Master Mech Designers did not seem to go together, but appearances could be deceiving!

"I may tell you the story behind the name one day." Benedict mildly smirked. "For now, it shall remain a secret between Ves and myself."

If the Boojays and the Adelaides hadn't already figured this out, the relationship between Ves and Benedict was remarkably good!

Neither mech designer showed any awareness of the rank difference between the two. Ves did not look up to Benedict just because he was a vaunted Master while the former Skull Architect did not patronize his much younger colleague.

The four leading figures talked a bit more about various practical subjects now that the Golden Skull Alliance grew from 3 to 5 members.

"Have you considered whether you wish to add any of my products to your mech rosters?" Ves asked the leaders of the two newcomers. "The Glory Seekers are really happy with my work, you know. I think that a couple of living mechs of mine can benefit your troops a lot. Our current

downtime is the perfect window of opportunity for your troops to learn how to get along with my works. It will be a lot more difficult to reorganize your forces once we are on the move again."

Both Herman and Rezzie exchanged glances with each other.

"We are not in a hurry to explore this subject." The matriarch of the Boojay Family responded. "We appreciate your offer, but our family has long relied upon mechs that are designed by our own in-house mech designers as well as numerous friendly Seniors and Masters. We do not want to worsen our relationships with our long-term allies."

Ves turned to the leader of the Adelaide Third Fleet. "What about you, Herman?"

"We are in a similar position." The mercenary general responded. "Our parent company employs its own mech designers. Our company policy also compels us to rely on in-house mech models as much as possible. Our Third Fleet is not prohibited from purchasing more local mechs, but we have to justify the added expenses and changes in our operations."

"Ah, I see. Well, if you are ever ready to adopt my mech models, give me a call, okay? Our production capabilities are quite strong. Once our clan regains the Spirit of Bentheim, we will even gain the ability to supply you with mechs in the field. Of course, it would be helpful if you can place your orders in advance. We don't bring an endless amount of raw materials in our expeditions. We are better off leaving the cargo space empty so that we can ship more loot back to safety."

Everyone grinned at the mention of loot. Traveling to the deep frontier and plundering alien treasures had become the primary motivation to join the Golden Skull Alliance!

"Speaking about loot, have any decisions been made about the future direction of the Trailblazer Expedition?" Rezzie Boojay inquired.

"Not yet." Ves shook his head. "We have only made a broad decision to leave the Krakatoa Middle Zone and explore the Torald Middle Zone. My subordinates are in the process of scouting the neighboring zone and collecting as many clues as possible. I will have more substantial information available to you all once we are closer to our departure date. You are welcome to perform your own investigations. You may even propose alternative goals for us as long as you think there are better opportunities for us. That is your right as a member of our alliance. We pretty much treat each other as family."

"That is good to hear."

The expansion of the Golden Skull Alliance meant that the Larkinson Clan had much less right to speak than before.

Nonetheless, Ves thought it was worth it because the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family strengthened the expeditionary fleet to a massive degree!

Though Ves hadn't checked the numbers yet, he expected that his expeditionary fleet would probably swell to the point where it possessed the equivalent combat power of three mech divisions!

This was more than enough combat power to raze small to medium-sized colonies!

If all of them decided to take part in the upcoming war between Davute and Karlach, this singularly powerful fleet could easily act as an unstoppable raiding force!

The idea tempted Ves for a second before he immediately pushed it out of his mind.

Attacking human colonies was a waste of time! The true prosperity of a colonial state like Karlach was mainly concentrated in its port system and other highly defended star systems.

There was hardly any worthwhile loot to be found in its lesser colonies!

#### Chapter 4902 Private School Meeting

The expansion of the Golden Skull Alliance was a major development in certain circles.

The colonial government expressed a lot of concern about the large amount of combat power at the alliance's disposal.

It was rather unbearable for Davute to look at over 30,000 mechs and 2 impressive ace mechs up close only to say goodbye to all of it a few months later!

Minister Shederin and several other people regularly told Ves that they had received persistent solicitations from the state to fight under its banner.

Davute did not hesitate to offer a lot of lucrative concessions, such as greater political power, a much greater share of territories and a luxurious lineup of fleet carriers!

Ves did not even know where the colonial government could pull out so many fleet carriers at once.

Even after all of this time, starships still functioned as a form of hard currency in the new frontier. With all of the shipyards working at full capacity, it was impossible for the Davutans to quickly increase the production of starships and especially capital ships any further.

"Davute is willing to pay a high price to import capital ships from other states." His assistant Gavin clarified to Ves. "The government is already paying at least five times above market price to get its hands on more second-hand fleet carriers, and the price of these strategic assets are already inflated as it is. What is even worse is that Davute can't buy fleet carriers with money alone. It also needs to make other concessions such as favorable trade terms, technology transfer and exchange of rare materials."

The Davutans were getting a lot more serious about preparing for the war. There was no point in accumulating cash and hoarding lots of goods. All of the wealth that the colonial state had earned in the past few years had to be converted into useful combat assets as soon as possible!

Ves snorted at the thought of fighting for Davute. "President Yenames Clive can try, but I will never fight someone else's war again."

"Are you sure about that? The offer from the colonial administration is becoming increasingly more attractive. The Davutans even promised to us that we can form a special mech corps that enjoys complete autonomy. You can pick and choose your own targets and don't have to be forced into battles that you don't want to fight. This is exceptionally rare treatment as the Davutan high command generally does not want to deal with any loose cannons."

"My answer remains the same, Benny. You can tell the representatives of the government that they can stop their useless attempts to sway my mind. I am leaving Krakatoa, possibly permanently. Torald is a much more exciting zone nowadays."

The frequency of alien encounters in the Krakatoa Middle Zone had dropped so much that it would take too much effort to find hidden alien hideouts.

While Ves had no doubt that he could leverage Ylvaine's predictive powers to lead him to abandoned pocket spaces or camouflaged alien fortresses, he did not think highly of these opportunities.

Sure, he may be able to stumble upon another Purgatory or a Palace of Shame, but most obscure alien hiding places tended to be filled with penniless alien refugees that barely managed to sustain their lives after evacuating from their home planets.

The closer he traveled to the center of the dwarf galaxy, the greater the likelihood of finding powerful alien relics or huge deposits of phasewater!

Of course, the risk of bumping into formidable alien warfleets was also a lot higher, but that was why the Golden Skull Alliance welcomed the Adelaides and the Boojays into the fold.

That reminded Ves that he had an appointment to bestow the two groups with their own exclusive kinship networks.

This was not the only appointment on his agenda.

"By the way, the colonial government also wants you to meet with one of its Master Mech Designers to discuss potential collaboration ideas for the first major mech design commission that you have accepted." Gavin told his superior. "The Davutans are quite insistent that you try and get along with one of their Masters so that the two of you can come up with a strong machine that can make a huge difference in the upcoming war."

Ves looked surprised. "Huh? Why didn't I hear about this before?"

"That is because the government only conveyed their demands to us yesterday."

"Didn't I tell Davute that I would seriously work on the commissions after I have completed my current batch of mech design projects? The Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project already consume all of my time when I am at work."

"The government is aware of that, boss. The representative I spoke to has told me that you don't need to start a new design project right away. It is more important for you to meet with the Master and explore a few ideas. The two of you can spend the following months on doing your research, inquiring about the demands of the Federal Military and considering alternative proposals. The Davutans are really keen on making sure that your first collaboration with one of their endorsed Masters goes well."

Though Ves didn't really want to add more distractions at this point of time, the Davutans had made a reasonable request.

"Very well. Just tell me when and where I need to go to meet with this Davutan Master."

It turned out that a meeting had been scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. That barely left Ves with enough time to look up the record and the past mech designs of the Master in question.

When Ves initially learned who he might be working with in the future, he reacted with a considerable amount of surprise.

"What kind of mech design does Davute expect me to supply to them?! Why don't they start with a nice and friendly knight mech instead?!"

All sorts of ideas swelled in his mind as Ves boarded his armored shuttle and moved to the Academic District under escort.

It took only a relatively short time for the shuttle to reach the campus of one of the many technical institutions situated in the Academic District.

"So this is ZUTA University." Ves remarked as soon as he surveyed the campus.

ZUTA University did not own as much ground as the Davute University of Technology, but that made the former cozier and livelier.

The density of students was higher and many of them chatted with each other as if they were on a holiday.

Ves liked the atmosphere even though he did not really feel that most of the students were all that dedicated towards their studies. He did not encounter many people who looked like they were seriously dedicated towards the art and science of mech design.

Then again, the truly talented and dedicated mech design students either attended better schools or spent their time in the classroom or library.

A bot guided Ves into one of several large buildings.

An elevator had brought him to the seventeenth floor where the bot directed him to an office room where the Master Mech Designer awaited his arrival.

Entering it reminded Ves of the times where he entered the offices of his professors back when he studied mech design at the Rittersberg University of Technology.

The space was not all that large, but there were multiple bookcases against the walls that were filled with traditional printed tomes.

Several mech figures decorated the cozy office. Ves could immediately tell that each of them had been made with lots of love and attention, though he did not recognize the designs from his prior investigations. They were all concept works that apparently embodied different extreme configurations.

It granted Ves a better understanding of the individual that he was supposed to talk shop with today.

"Patriarch Ves Larkinson." The Master who was standing in front of his office windows spoke. "It is a pleasure to meet with you. I assume you have been briefed by the government?"

Ves slowly nodded as he moved forward until he reached the older man's desk. "I understand the gist of it. To be honest, I didn't expect the government to pair us together, especially right away."

"I believe Davute is hopeful that I can work with a Journeyman Mech Designer without letting my ego get in the way. In that regard, they are correct. Ah, let me introduce myself. I am Master Decimus Horst. I teach at ZUTA University and specialize in designing heavy artillery mechs. Since Davute has seen fit to bring us together, I believe it is best to explore ideas relating to my specialization. There is no strong rationale to design mechs other than ranged artillery machines."

"That is a given." Ves said. "So where should we start?"

"Hm, normally I would introduce the subject of heavy artillery mechs to you, but that is redundant as you are one of the rare young mech designers that has already designed one of them. I think it is better if we start by exploring your existing work. Are you willing to discuss the design choices that you have made that have led you to complete the Transcendent Punisher?"

Ves already expected that Master Decimus Horst might wish to talk about the Transcendent Punisher. It was one of the most effective and iconic mech models of the Larkinson Clan, after all.

"I am open to this suggestion, but please take into account that I am reluctant to share any sensitive details about the design to you. It is a mainstay of our clan."

"This discussion is to your benefit for the most part." Master Horst said in a friendly and disarming tone. "Please share as much or as little as you are comfortable with. Let us test your foundation and insight into heavy artillery mechs."

The two mech designers began to talk about the Transcendent Punisher design in broad and sometimes philosophical terms.

Ves wasn't stupid enough to project the full and unredacted design of his heavy artillery mech to Master Horst, but they made do by examining snapshots of the large machine.

It was quite frightening to see how many clues Master Horst was able to derive from the appearance of the heavy artillery mech alone!

"This is an effective heavy artillery mech, but it is not necessarily a good design." The Master spoke with mild disapproval. "Your Transcendent Punisher design is an adequate work given your circumstances at the time, but even then you have overlooked many important details that could have improved its performance in many areas. For example, its secondary pulse cannons are almost entirely redundant. They take up valuable capacity but are rarely utilized in any useful capacity. There are many more effective alternatives that you can choose from to gain access to effective missile interception capabilities. I personally prefer to design a dedicated bunker mech that is mounted with at least twenty light cannons. This allows a single mech pilot to concentrate fully on intercepting incoming mechs and projectiles at closer ranges."

That was an interesting idea. It put Ves to thought and made him seriously consider the merits of designing such a mech.

Master Horst also pointed out another shortcoming of the Transcendent Punisher.

"You have grown lazy over the course of designing this heavy artillery mech of yours. You put so much stock on its admittedly effective metaphysical target acquisition feature. Without this useful feature, your Transcendent Punisher is nothing. It does not have the firepower, defenses, mobility, sensors, heat capacity, ammunition capacity, energy reserves and other properties to outperform other heavy artillery mechs in the same tier."

Ves looked helpless when he heard this accurate assessment. "My wife and I were doing the best we could by ourselves. Our clan wasn't as big back then and we did not have anyone else to turn to in order to increase one or more of those properties that you have mentioned."

"It is good that you understand this truth." Master Horst smiled at the younger mech designer. "If we are to work together, then you must forget about your Transcendent Punisher. Do not start with a

proposal that has any relation to this crude heavy artillery mech of yours. We must start with a blank slate and work from there. Do you understand?"

"I... understand."

Though Ves felt as if he had gone back to school for whatever reason, he did not necessarily dislike it. He had long wanted to learn more about designing heavy artillery mechs!

#### Chapter 4903 Outschooled

The more Ves talked with Master Decimus Horst, the more he learned how little he knew about heavy artillery mechs.

Though Ves already held an expectation that a Master Mech Designer who dedicated his entire life to designing mechs of this archetype could teach him a lot on this subject, the disparity between the two was massive!

Ves felt both humbled and inadequate in the face of all of the deep insights and profound truths that the older man possessed.

Many times, Ves looked down on overspecialized mech designers who gave up any attempt at designing other machines in favor of working on their favorite types of mechs and nothing else.

Their versatility was minimal and could not be relied upon at all if there was no need to supply additional mech designs that fell within their specialty.

Ves was an archetypical horizontal mech designer who was brimming with ideas and easily got bored if he worked on a single design or mech archetype for too long.

The thought of spending years, decades or even centuries on designing a small subset of mechs sounded like pure torture to his ears!

He would rather gouge out his eyes than limit his work in any way! His creativity and his desire to explore every interesting facet of mechs must never be repressed!

This strong characteristic of his prevented Ves from ever understanding mech designers such as Ketis and Master Horst.

Whether it was swordsman mechs or heavy artillery mechs, these odd professionals clung to their Class VI design philosophies as if there was nothing else in their worlds. He had always heard that they were incredibly good at designing mechs that they were passionate about, but no one ever helped him quantify this crucial difference.

Though Ves did not possess the capacity to assess Master Horst's understanding of heavy artillery mechs, the latter came across as an endless pit of knowledge and understanding in the form of a normal human man.

It was only through Master Horst's words and his incredibly strong and concentrated spirituality that Ves had a glimpse of the incredible possibilities hiding underneath!

What would it be like to design a mech with such a mech designer? A Master already had the qualifications to design fantastic mechs without the input of Ves!

Of course, that did not mean that Ves completely lost his confidence in front of this seemingly gentle university professor.

Ves approached mech design from a completely new and original direction. He pioneered an entirely new field that centered around highly metaphysical innovations such as living mechs and design spirits.

The combination of these unique and unconventional design applications had not only given him the capital to keep his head high in front of people such as Master Horst, but also turned him into an object worth courting.

President Yenames Clive himself had not only visited him once, but twice. That alone indicated how much Davute valued the benefits he could bring to the mechs of the colonial federation!

This realization kept Ves from feeling too inept and inadequate.

As a professional mech designer, he was extremely well aware that there were many large gaps between himself and Master Horst, but that did not mean that he should feel resentful about this difference.

In any case, Master Horst was over 140 years old. The man enjoyed a century's worth of head start. If Ves managed to reach the same age, he knew for a certainty that he should easily be able to blow this Master Mech Designer out of the water!

Nonetheless, as Ves and Master Horst continued to explore the subject of heavy artillery mechs, it soon became clear that they could not make as much progress in their talks as they thought.

"It is unwise for us to proceed any further." Master Horst said after he shook his head yet again. "I have inquired enough to understand your grasp of mech design and heavy artillery mechs in particular."

"Where do I stand, Master?" Ves earnestly asked as if he was a humble student.

"Your general competences are adequate and actually rather impressive for your age and rank. However, I am not pleased with how little you truly comprehend about artillery mechs. You possess a decent technical understanding of this mech type. The time you have spent in designing your Transcendent Punisher has not gone to waste, yet it has also left you with a massive blind spot. I have already told you that centering your work around its mysterious target guidance feature has made you overlook too many other points of concern of heavy artillery mechs. It is a crutch that prevents you from reaching your greater potential when it comes to designing mechs of this archetype. Tell me, young man. What does mech design encompass?"

Ves decided to answer with one of the standard definitions that he had learned in his textbooks.

"It is an engineering discipline that centers around the art and science of designing mechs."

As a teacher, Master Decimus Horst was more familiar with this definition. He nodded at this mention.

"Art. Science. The two are intertwined for a reason. Art without science is impractical. Science without art is lacking in creativity. Where do you think your Transcendent Punisher leans towards?"

The question that Master Horst posed to Ves sounded like an incredibly basic issue, but it was one that pointed straight at the heart of the Transcendent Punisher's deficiency!

"I see what you mean." Ves said as he rubbed his hairless chin. "Back when I designed the Transcendent Punisher in collaboration with my wife, I did not pay attention to every detail, trusting Gloriana to take care of the more technical side of the design. I don't regret this decision, but I should have known that my wife doesn't have much depth in heavy artillery mechs either. In fact, both of us don't actually know what we are doing as neither of us have received any systematic lessons or guidance with regards to this mech type. We pretty much derived most of our work from studying other heavy artillery mech designs, reading through textbooks and making up the rest as we brought our design project to completion."

"Your approach sounds typical to mech designers around your level. The two of you are only Journeymen. There is no expectation for you to design your mechs to a higher standard." Master Horst reassured the younger man. "Your circumstances at the time were much different from today."

"I need to do better, is that what you are trying to say?"

Master Horst nodded. "That is the main realization that I want you to make. What was adequate for a small clan in the past is completely insufficient for a professional military branch of a large colonial state. While our standards may be somewhat looser and less demanding than those of an established state in the old galaxy, we must still ensure that our works are competitive to the mechs fielded by Karlach. In fact, the driving reason why the colonial government is willing to entertain you at all is because there are many people who believe you have the capacity to design a mech that can qualitatively outperform whatever Karlach can develop. Are you certain that you are up to the task?"

"Yes." Ves immediately replied. "I can just point at the mechs that I have designed for the Hexer people to back up my statement. I have always been vaguely aware that my designs still have a lot of room for improvement, so I will not insist on dictating everything when it comes to designing my first commissioned mech for Davute. Since you know so much more about heavy artillery mechs, I am fine with taking a step back and letting you take the lead. So long as I contribute with my own specialty, I think we can design an excellent heavy artillery mech that fully meets the standards of the Federal Military."

This was the safest and most logical approach. There was no way a Journeyman, even one who felt he was close to becoming a Senior, could ever outschool a Master in the latter's area of expertise!

"That will not do." Master Horst surprisingly responded as he pressed his palm against his desk. "Davute entrusted you with the responsibility of designing mechs for its armed forces. It is you who should set the direction, lead the design projects and ensure that the end products align with your vision. I may be a better and vastly more experienced mech designer than you in almost every criteria that you can think of, but the colonial government did not approach me with this commission. I am not unprofessional enough to rob you of this opportunity to design a military mech that is worthy enough to be used in battlefields throughout this zone."

That caused Ves to pause in thought.

The Master was right, as always. Davute wanted Ves to bestow his magic to the soldiers of the state.

Was the Federal Military of Davute short of heavy artillery mech designs? Absolutely not!

Though Ves did not have access to the full list of mech designs that the military had in store, it was bound to contain dozens of modern heavy artillery mechs that already met the required standards!

Master Decimus Horst could always design another heavy artillery mech for Davute, but doing so only added a marginal amount of value. The Federal Military already possessed a sufficient range of models that excelled in any area, from serving as dedicated bunker mechs to delivering mass devastation onto entire city districts!

The most a man like Horst could do was designing a marginal upgrade to the existing models or address another small niche that Davute's existing mech roster did not already cover.

None of this was a productive use of his time.

Ves understood much more now that the only meaningful heavy artillery mech that Davute wanted to obtain at this junction was one that completely broke the existing paradigms of this mech type!

This was why Ves received the commission and not a Master like Horst. No matter how good the latter may be in designing mechs of this archetype, his greatest strength also limited his ability to design outside of the restrictive confines of his specialty!

Only a complete oddball who developed a unique and innovative Class IX design philosophy possessed the ability to break the rules!

"I understand what I need to do." Ves said with more conviction in my tone. "I will do my best to live up to your expectations and that of the state. I still need your help, though. You have taught me how little I know about heavy artillery mechs."

"Ignorance is not a permanent affliction, Patriarch Larkinson. A gap in understanding can always be filled through learning and doing. Let us adjourn this meeting for now so you can address your most acute shortcomings. Go back and try to increase your understanding of heavy artillery mechs. Do not focus solely on the science of this archetype, but also spend time on deepening your grasp of the art of designing one. I suggest you spend your time on examining the heavy artillery mechs that the Federal Military already employs. The 77th Warborn led by your fellow Larkinson should have them in stock. You should be able to gain permission to visit their base and examine their machines up close."

That was a good suggestion, though Ves did not feel particularly enthusiastic about doing anything with the Warborn at the moment. He always felt as if General Ark and the Larkinsons over there had turned their backs on his expeditionary fleet.

"I will see what I can do. My schedule is a bit full, though. I still need to complete a bunch of important projects for my clan before I can fully dedicate my time on this commission and other projects."

"Take your time, Patriarch Larkinson. The war will not break out in the short-term and it is better to do our best to do everything correctly."

Chapter 4904 Relearning

Master Horst eventually dismissed Ves from the teaching office.

The reason why they hold any further substantive talks was because the old man became disgusted at how little Ves understood about heavy artillery mechs!

While this did not sound pleasant, it was the truth. Master Horst did not begrudge a young Journeyman with a special life experience for possessing too little depth in a highly specialized military mech type. He just refused to work any further with a kid who did not have a clear idea on what he was talking about.

As Ves departed from the teaching building, he continued to remain in thought as he wandered through the green and lively campus of ZUTA University.

His talk with Master Horst exposed more inadequacies and gaps in knowledge that his current Skills and Sub-Skills did not cover.

Much of the knowledge that he obtained through the Mech Designer System largely centered around increasing his competence in the science of mech design.

There was not that much content about the art of this discipline because it was too personal and associated with one's own style.

This was also why experience played a large role in the development of a mech designer.

By practicing their craft rather than reading about it in a book, a mech designer exercised his creativity and made decisions that eventually resulted in a unique mech design that was different from the works of other professionals.

Though Ves already possessed a distinct design style that was strongly aligned with his own strengths and advantages, his broad mech catalog had left him unable to delve too deep in a specific category of mechs.

Perhaps that might not be a big deal as he could lean on the help of other specialized mech designers to make up for his shortcomings, but this was clearly not the right approach for his current commissions.

He was no longer dealing with a bunch of religious fanatics who automatically turned off their brains whenever the Superior Mother became involved.

He was dealing with a bunch of rational actors who wanted to obtain the best mech models that they could obtain from Ves.

Ves truly hadn't been taking these mech design commissions that seriously until now. His enlightening discussion with Master Decimus Horst not only gave him a deeper understanding of what he was lacking in, but also pointed out a clear direction on what he needed to do to quickly make up for his shortfalls.

"It's good that I don't have to start with this commission right away." Ves murmured to himself. "I can't design my mechs as casually as before. If I want to become a better mech designer, I need to hold myself to a higher standard."

He felt more than ever that his days as a Journeyman may be behind him. Twilight settled behind his back while a new dawn awaited before his eyes.

The differences in mentality between a Journeyman and a Senior were massive.

The former was like a playful adolescent that did not hesitate to run around and explore everything they fancied.

The latter had matured to the point where a mech designer had a solid idea on how to go forward and needed to work hard to develop their own groundbreaking work.

Although Ves had yet to gain a solid idea on the heavy artillery mech that he wanted to design for Davute, he wanted to make sure that its value exceeded that of the Hexer mechs that he supplied to the Hex Army!

"That is going to be difficult." He frowned.

He knew quite well that he essentially cheated the Hexers into embracing his work by exploiting their superstitious beliefs. It was so easy for a mech designer with a specialty like his to hoodwink all kinds of religious people.

From the Ylvainans to the Vulcanites, Ves realized that all of the works that made the strongest impact on people all happened to be targeted towards religious nuts!

Was this what Ves wanted to do for the remainder of his career?

"Hell no! I am not going to cater to a bunch of crazies all my life!"

He would much rather become a respectable mech designer who catered to the masses and received the appreciation of customers who didn't pray in front of their altars multiple times a day like a certain wife!

Ves regarded his current commission as a challenge. He had no affection for Davute, but he wanted the state to succeed and win its upcoming war against Karlach.

"No, that's not entirely right. I want Davute to win mainly off the back of my own work!"

He not only wanted to match his contributions to the ill-fated Hexadric Hegemony, but he wanted to surpass his old accomplishments!

After all, for all of his efforts into supplying the Hex Army with a selection of unique and well-received Hexer mech designs, the damn female supremacists ultimately lost the Komodo War!

"That won't happen this time!"

Ves regarded this challenge as a matter of pride. He did not want to become associated with defeat yet again.

He also didn't want to strengthen his notoriety relating to how states tended to blow up as death and destruction always started to ignite whenever he was around.

"It's not even my fault! Well, mostly..."

He frowned a bit as he raised his fingers one by one in order to count the states that had become adversely affected while he paid them a visit.

"The Bright Republic, the Vesia Kingdom, the Ylvaine Protectorate, the Friday Coalition, the Sentinel Kingdom, the Life Research Association, the Vulcan Empire, the Colonial Federation of Davute... does the Nyxian Gap count?"

That was quite a list of states, but Ves did not take it too seriously. Master Mech Designers who sold billions of mechs must have affected a lot more people across many more states over their lifetimes.

Even so, Ves still stood out as a Journeyman in this regard. If he wanted to shed his reputation for bringing calamity and slaughter to many of the states he visited, then he needed to work even harder and ensure that Davute conclusively benefited from his presence!

Of course, the more he helped Davute, the more he harmed Karlach, but he didn't really care about that. He never visited the latter and did not get foisted with any expectation of helping the rival state.

He even had a personal grudge against Karlach. The surprise attack during the founding ceremony had put Ves and his clansmen at risk! There was no way he retained any sympathy for the people of this rival colonial state!

After spending enough time on enjoying the scenery, Ves left the campus of ZUTA University and shuttled back to the Cat Nest.

Once he returned to familiar ground, he resumed his routine. Whenever he was on a work shift, he spent all of his time on bringing the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project closer to completion.

Outside of that, he spent time with his family and made sure that his children still had an active father in their lives.

It was during these more idle moments that Ves could allocate his spare attention on preparing for his first commission with Davute.

Ves obtained a list of recommended reading from Master Horst. This prompted him to purchase a bunch of virtual textbooks and transfer them to his cranial implant so that a part of his mind could read through them one by one even as he played with his kids.

The textbooks were all thick and packed with content. Even if the level of knowledge was rather low, it helped Ves with breaking down his flawed and mistaken assumptions about heavy artillery mechs and put a proper foundation into place.

It was as if he was replacing a lot of self-taught nonsense with more systematic learning!

"Master Horst chose well."

The textbooks precisely fit his own needs, as each of them were written with complete self-study in mind. Ves did not feel the need to call Master Horst and ask questions a single time.

Of course, he would disgrace himself as a Journeyman if he ever had to ask for clarification from a Master Mech Designer on a subject that even Apprentices should be able to understand!

Once Ves read through all of the virtual textbooks in a remarkable amount of time, he did not set out to absorb any new knowledge.

He needed to take a moment to stop and internalize everything he had learned to the best of his ability.

His understanding of heavy artillery mechs had undergone a major shift!

He no longer regarded them as the big brothers of rifleman mechs, but fully recognized that they served a unique role that could not be approximated by any other mech type!

Heavy artillery served a separate purpose and needed to be treated that way. There was no other mech archetype that embodied the concept of maximum firepower more than heavy artillery mechs!

"Long range. High volume of fire. Area damage. Indirect fire. Abundant capacity. These are the traits that define many heavy artillery mechs."

Whether it was shattering starships or breaking down strongholds on land, heavy artillery mechs excelled in several methods of destruction that only they knew how to do well!

As Ves gained a better theoretical understanding of heavy artillery mechs, he also began to rethink the art of designing this special mech type.

Whenever Ves looked at the design of the Transcendent Punisher, he winced several times as he spotted numerous glaring mistakes that he would have never made if he actually possessed a proper understanding of heavy artillery mechs!

That was not to say that his Transcendent Punisher model was awful or completely inadequate. It was the opposite. Its combination of traits still made it stronger and more effective than a more generic heavy artillery mech model.

What Ves lamented instead was how he made a number of awful design choices that ultimately buried the potential of the first heavy artillery mech that he designed for his clan.

If he had designed his Transcendent Punisher a lot better, it would have easily performed 10 percent more effectively on the battlefield than normal.

This was enough of a difference to swing many battles in the favor of the Larkinson Clan a lot sooner!

Hundreds if not thousands of valuable lives could have been saved if the Transcendent Punisher could have killed enemy mechs or breach the defenses of enemy starships a bit sooner!

"I can't make the same mistakes again." Ves grumbled.

He wasn't entirely sure what sort of heavy artillery mech he wanted to design now that he refreshed his understanding of this mech type, but he already formed a couple of new ideas.

"This is not enough." Ves shook his head.

He didn't feel confident yet about his recent gains to return to ZUTA University and talk seriously about their upcoming collaboration.

Master Horst recommended him to visit the Warborn to study the Davutan heavy artillery mechs in use. Ves should also interview the mech pilots on their individual views and experiences so that he could understand the demands and difficulties of the likely users of his future product.

Ves briefly thought about making another shuttle trip before he shook his head.

"I don't have the time to go on another tour. I have a faster way to get what I need."

He waited until he was done for the day. Once he returned to his Royal Mansion during the evening, he moved the bathroom in order to get away from his wife and sat down on the toilet seat bowl before he activated a mental command.

His luxurious high-tech bathroom environment instantly made way for a bright and mist-filled mountain-top environment!

Ves grinned as he became mentally refreshed after entering the System Space for the first time in weeks.

He had a single goal in mind today.

"Let's see what it is truly like to pilot a heavy artillery mech."

Chapter 4905 Portal Of Time

The last time that Ves visited the System Space was when he was trapped inside the ancient alien prison.

Back then, he took advantage of the Mech Designer System's various rules to smuggle in an alien control crystal so that he could reengineer it with the help of the Workshop of Creation.

His exploitative behavior also caused the System to unlock a new feature of the Vault of Eternity that allowed him to rent a lot of convenient storage space in exchange for Ascension Points.

Ves winced at the thought of giving up 20 AP in order to rent 2 cubic meters of storage volume.

It took a lot of effort to earn so many Ascension Points under normal circumstances!

"It's still worth it, though."

The Vault of Creation still stashed a lot of diluted phasewater that he had stolen from the bottom floors of the ancient alien prison.

Once Ves took it all out and processed all of the liquids, he could obtain up to 182 kilograms of pure phasewater for his efforts!

The only complication was that he could not properly explain to anyone how he managed to obtain a huge bounty of phasewater all of a sudden.

This was enough phasewater to drive any research institution or development company crazy!

Not only that, entire states and other powerful groups would come and do everything they could to figure out whether Ves secretly obtained a source of lots of phasewater in the last few years!

"This is a bit of a headache."

Until Ves figured out a way to launder his irregular reserves of phasewater, he was not in a hurry to bring it out of the System Space.

As Ves ascended up the steps of the winding mountain top, he made sure to visit the various stations on the way in order to see whether they offered anything interesting.

The Divine Bazaar had refreshed and offered a lot of random products, many of which were expensive and not that relevant to his current interests. He had no need for an alien alarm clock or an organic metal that was made by compressing and processing the exoskeletons of voribugs.

The Tree of Possibilities beckoned to him a lot more.

As the evolution of the Skill Tree, Ves owed much of his improvement to the Skills and Sub-Skills that the System was able to grant.

Hundreds of ripe and plump enlightenment fruits dangled from the branches of the mystical tree.

Ves briefly wondered whether such a tree existed in reality. He normally would have thought that this was not the case, but then again who knew what people could do with the power of the Wood Scroll.

The fruits attracted him like a moth to flame. If not for the fact that those fruits cost dozens if not hundreds of Ascension Points, he would have plucked them out of the Tree of Possibilities right away!

Each of the enlightenment fruit offered insights and knowledge that was normally difficult to master or beyond his reach.

Just as before, half of the fruits related to mech design, science or engineering while the other half related to the more metaphysical side of reality.

Ves still recalled that he had been able to create his own divine artifact and make a big step in his journey towards Spiritual Ascension with the help of a simple enlightenment fruit that was worth 30 AP.

This told him that he shouldn't dismiss the cheapest and most modest-sounding fruits!

A lot of possibilities came to mind as he read through the descriptions of the fruits one by one. Though none of them directly had any relations to his current needs and priorities, he could still figure out a few indirect ways for him to improve his current projects.

He eventually shook his head.

"I already have more than enough on my plate. I can always revisit my expert mechs later once I have completed their starting forms."

The Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project were already fully loaded with features in their current configurations. There was no need for Ves to add a shiny new feature derived from alien technology to any of them. It was more important to get the fundamentals right and ensure they started off on the strongest possible footing once they were made.

"Maybe later."

Ves spotted a few enlightenment fruits that might not have much relations with his existing design projects, but may be able to help with his upcoming heavy artillery mech design project.

"Later."

After he finished his examination of the Tree of Possibilities, he continued to climb up until he reached the Mission Hall.

The Mission Board offered dozens of new ways for Ves to earn Ascension Points and sometimes other rewards.

"Nothing easy." Ves sighed.

The Missions offered by the System always forced Ves to work for his gains. The ones relating to mech design were already bad enough, but the missions that were relevant to Spiritual Ascension were even worse!

Though Ves spotted a Mission or two that he could complete by remaining within his System Space, he did not feel like doing any of them. He was not in the right state of mind and he already had plenty of other concerns on his mind.

Ves left the Mission Hall and continued to climb higher and higher.

The Sacred Temple rested at the top of the mountain, but this time he stopped short of reaching the peak.

He instead made a turn and stepped onto a structure that he had long neglected during his past visits to the System Space.

"The Time Gate."

It looked exactly as impressive as it sounded. It was an old round circular construction that was covered with runes. Plenty of marks of time made it seem as if it was an ancient relic that had been dug out of a forgotten cave.

In any case, the Time Gate remained dormant for the time being. It cost a lot of energy to activate it and propel his consciousness into the past.

Ves had often wondered how the mechanics of this System feature worked. He never got anywhere as he could not even begin to wrap his mind around the scientific principles of time travel!

"Maybe only the Polymath can make sense of all of this." He mused.

He stepped closer but did not touch it yet. He knew that he had to pay at least 5 Ascension Points in order to activate it once, and he needed to wait an entire standard year before he could make use of it again.

That meant he needed to be careful about specifying his demands to the Time Gate. The damn Mech Designer System had already screwed him over multiple times by throwing him inside the minds of mech pilots who were in a predicament.

Ves had no patience to go through an entire adventure again! He did not want to be put in a position where he had to take direct action and hijack the body of his host to get stuff done!

"What I did with Axelar Streon was already enough, but all of the stuff that I have done while guiding Rion Aaden is even worse!"

He had single-handedly raised a dwarven civilization through his careless actions in the past, only to bring it down in order to further his own goals!

He felt quite justified in exhibiting a lot of vigilance towards the Time Gate. There was far more depth behind its rules and operation than Ves was aware of. It was one of the most profound and effective ways for the System to mess with his life and push him into a specific direction.

This was also why he never fully made use of the System's Mastery experiences despite having the Design Points or the Ascension Points to do so. He just didn't want to get screwed over or have his entire life upended because he entered the mind of the wrong mech pilot at the wrong time.

"I can't run away from this forever, though."

His past Master experiences truly helped him in many ways. It offered him a true first-hand perspective of mech pilots as they fought in battle in real-time. There was hardly any way to replicate such an authentic experience in reality.

Ves always felt that his affinity with mechs improved by a small but measurable degree after concluding another Mastery experience.

It also helped him to do a better job at addressing the specific needs of mech pilots. His customers loved his products a lot more for that reason even if there were alternatives on the market that offered better performance!

With that in mind, he had many reasons to use the Time Gate to acquire a Mastery in heavy artillery mechs

He hesitated before he touched the Time Gate.

"Should I use this opportunity to explore what it is like to pilot a stealth mech instead?"

That was his original choice for using the Time Gate prior to meeting Master Decimus Horst.

He wanted to do everything he could to elevate the Ghost Project. Ves did not possess much depth in stealth mechs. It was a lot harder to obtain information about them since they were used by all kinds of shady and secretive organizations.

Publicizing anything related to stealth mechs was counterproductive!

Not only would doing so expose the strength and limitations of these sensitive machines, the reports might also expose secret operations that must not be revealed to enemies!

As such, a part of Ves felt that exploring heavy artillery mechs could wait and that it was better to learn about stealth mechs instead.

He soon shook his head. "A large number of Davutan mech pilots will rely on my heavy artillery mech in a year or two. The Ghost Project on the other hand is just a singular work that is already being worked on by multiple competent mech designers."

Gloriana had learned a lot more about the specific requirements of different mech types over the years. She was not as shallow and inexperienced as before.

Aside from that, Master Benedict Cortez was also involved in the design process. Though he mostly acted as an outside consultant, he still brought a lot of interest points during their regular group meetings.

"The Ghost Project will be okay. It's not even a normal stealth mech anyway. It is a one-of-a-kind expert mech of great power. Better yet, its starting form is only temporary."

It was much less troublesome to upgrade the design of an existing expert mech than to implement a large-scale update to a widely used standard mech model!

"I can use the Time Gate to explore stealth mechs next year. Right now, it is much more interesting for me to explore heavy artillery mechs."

He did not intend to design a single heavy artillery mech in the near future.

Aside from working on his first mech design commission with Davute, he also wanted to reinvent the Transcendent Punisher!

Ves no longer felt proud of this mech model. Even though many Larkinsons included it in the top 3 mech models of the Larkinson Army, to him it was a flawed and misshapen work that needed to be fixed sooner or later!

Ves already had lots in store for this crucial heavy artillery mech. He believed that it was more than worthwhile to upgrade it to a transphasic mech!

"I can certainly spare the phasewater as long as I can bring out all of the phasewater stored in the Vault of Eternity." He smirked.

If that wasn't enough, he could always hunt down a couple of alien fleets and crush them under the weight of his mechs in order to squeeze out all of the phasewater they carried!

With that in mind, Ves took a deep breath and touched the Time Gate.

Dormant systems came to life as the impressive construct began to glow and radiate more energy.

A portal in time started to emerge!

#### Chapter 4906 Time Upgrades

The current version of the Mech Designer System possessed a lot of powerful and incomprehensible features. From the Tree of Possibilities to the Sacred Temple, each of them provided advantages that could change anyone's life in isolation!

For the System to be able to offer not just one of them, but a whole bunch at the same was nothing less than astonishing.

Each time Ves entered the System Space, he gained the realization that he possessed a fragment of one of human civilization's greatest and arguably the most powerful artifacts.

If not for the fact that the System limited the usage of its powerful features by demanding payment in the form of Ascension Points, Ves would have long been able to take off and become at least ten times as powerful!

"Well, maybe not that much."

He had to remind himself that it was easy to attract too much unwelcome attention if he displayed too many abnormalities.

The completely unexpected visit by the Polymath already warned him that the Metal Scroll and anything related to it was still extremely hot in the highest circles of human society.

If Ves hadn't restrained himself to his current extent, then perhaps the Polymath or the Five Scrolls Compact would have long deprived him of his freedom or his life!

His heart raced as he looked back at everything he had done in recent years. His performance already far exceeded that of a typical Journeyman Mech Designer. It did not take much effort to conclude that there was something fishy with Ves!

Though he managed to fool Master Willix and by extension the MTA that he had become a secret apprentice of the mysterious 'Mr. S.', who knew how long this fictional excuse might hold.

Fortunately, Ves had an easy way of making Mr. S. more tangible.

"I need to make his presence felt throughout the years!"

Ves understood that he needed to take advantage of the Time Gate's function to drop a few traces here and there. It did not even have to be anything big. Just a small hint here or there was enough to lead the Mech Trade Association on a wild goose chase throughout the centuries!

"I have to make sure that the clues I leave behind match the identity of a suspected Master Mech Designer or Star Designer."

Years ago, Ves managed to fool Master Moira Willix that he was in contact with an extremely impressive mech designer by making use of his Superpublic ability.

Since the System managed to improve the exquisite design solutions of a Master Mech Designer by roughly 10 percent, Master Willix clearly leaned towards the theory that Mr. S. was a Star Designer!

This was the only answer that fit the circumstances. Willix simply couldn't conceive of another Master who could comprehensively improve every facet of her work by such a substantial margin.

The only troublesome aspect about the fictional identity of Mr. S. was that he might be associated with the Cosmopolitan Movement.

Ves never had a clear idea how reprehensible cosmopolitans could be until he freed Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik at the end of the Battle of Ramage Repulsor.

Finding out that the cosmopolitans not only made contact with the indigenous aliens of the Red Ocean, but actively provided them with human technology and secrets had completely sunk his opinion of this group of alien sycophants!

It even caused him to question whether it was wise for him to reinforce the impression that Mr. S. was a cosmopolitan.

There was no other way to explain why a suspected Star Designer did not enter the MTA in an open manner and immediately obtain an immense amount of power and influence by virtue of his ability alone!

"Maybe... I don't need to be so rigid about it." Ves decided. "It's much better to remain as ambiguous as possible. There are more secretive groups out there that are not integrated into mainstream human society."

He even wanted to make a game out of it. The thought of teasing the most brilliant investigators of the Association caused him to develop a number of crooked ideas!

Of course, if Ves wanted to do a good job at convincing the MTA that Mr. S. had been around, he needed to scatter a few powerful or mind blowing clues.

"Since the Ouroboros that I had designed back then has impressed the mechers so much, I can rely on other living products to fool my audience."

The principal advantage of living products was that they grew over time. It might take decades or centuries for his creations to ramp up, but at a certain point their strength and capabilities exceeded every existing boundary!

"I hope I can travel a bit further back in time."

Now that Ves had a more solid idea of what he wanted to do for this time jaunt, he directed his attention to the activated Time Gate.

This time, the mystical relic undeniably waited for him to issue his demands.

The System had already told him what he could do. Ves could exert much more control over his upcoming Mastery experience as long as he was willing to pay enough Ascension Points to lock in different variables.

"I still have well over 1200 Ascension Points, so I can spare a bit more this time."

He concentrated his mind and thought deeply on what he wanted out of the Time Gate.

"Put me in the head of a mech pilot of a second-class heavy artillery mech. This pilot should be part of a unit that is actively fighting in a contested warzone."

He wanted to add a few more specifications, but refrained to mention anything else in order to save up on Ascension Points. He could already feel that the Time Gate deducted 15 AP from his account in order to meet his request.

It cost 5 AP to activate the Time Gate. If he did not issue any other request, then it would throw him into a completely random situation!

It cost 5 more AP to narrow the selection to a mech pilot that was paired with a second-class heavy artillery mech.

Curiously enough, this specific parameter encompassed both the mech type along with its class, which saved Ves the trouble of paying more AP to narrow his selection further.

It finally cost him an extra 5 AP to narrow the Time Gate's selection to a mech pilot that was incredibly good at his job.

He hesitated whether he should issue this request at all. Ves had previously entered the minds of good mech pilots such as Eloise Pelican, but he also suffered a lot when he mixed up with awful dummies such as Axelar Streon and Rion Aaden.

In order to eliminate the possibility of repeating this torture again, he felt it was best to deprive the System of an opening to screw him over yet again!

Of course, mech pilots who were typically assigned to heavy artillery mechs tended to be well-trained and carefully chosen. Only responsible people who knew what they were doing could be trusted to control mechs with this much firepower at their disposal.

It would be too easy for heavy artillery mechs to produce excessive collateral damage or go as far as harming friendlies if handled by improper mech pilots!

Ves did not think this last specification was a waste of AP, though. He would be able to make many more gains from this Mastery experience if he hung back and observed the operation of a prodigy pilot!

Thrrrruumm!

The Time Gate became more volatile now that Ves had locked in his specifications. It became increasingly more activated until a bright flash blinded his vision!

An unknown amount of time passed by. Ves had almost no awareness of what was happening to him! The only reason why he was vaguely able to sense that he was in transition for a lack of a better word was because his Spirituality had grown a lot stronger!

If he attuned his extraordinary senses, he could even pick up hints of... stuff.

He couldn't describe what he was picking up. It went beyond anything normal and felt extremely abstract to him. It was as if he had inadvertently trespassed a domain that was completely incompatible to humans!

After an unknown period of subjective time had passed, Ves immediately felt he had reached his destination!

Before he did anything else, Ves made sure to retract his presence and hide himself to the best of his abilities!

"Huh?!"

It had been a while since he last went on these special trips, but he still remembered what it was like for his consciousness to get dumped in another person's mind.

Much had changed since then. Whether it was because of his own astonishing growth or because of the additional functions introduced by the Time Gate, Ves immediately perceived that much more of himself had made it through the passage of time and space!

For one, it wasn't just his consciousness that came along for the ride this time. A large part of his Spirituality had also made it through!

This had massive implications to Ves!

Mrow?

With the addition of his Spirituality, the companion spirit that was attached to it had also managed to hitch a ride!

"How come you're here as well, Blinky?" Ves mentally asked his other personality.

The purple Star Cat looked completely confused.

Mrow mrow mrow?

There was no way for Ves to obtain a clear explanation, so he quickly accepted the changes and tried to study what else had changed since his previous Mastery experience.

Normally, dumping a powerful foreign spirit in another person's head would definitely cause it to burst apart or inflict a lot of mental pain!

That wasn't happening this time. Ves noticed that Blinky and his Spirituality were slightly out of phase with the current reality.

This out-of-phase effect not only hid his presence better, but also made it harder for him to affect the current reality.

As Ves explored this strange but convenient state a bit further, he felt that he could counteract this effect by exerting more power.

This pleased him as there might be times where he wanted to intervene more actively.

If the Time Gate limited his interactions with the people of the past by turning him into a pure observer, then he might not be able to harvest as many gains from this trip as he wished!

It took around 20 minutes for Ves to understand his new condition and ensure that his presence remained unnoticed.

Ves only dared to extend his awareness outwards and figure out the details of his new host.

"A woman this time, huh?"

He did not have any special preferences for gender, though he knew it would make bathroom trips a little more awkward.

It did not take much time for Ves to notice what else was unusual.

The female mech pilot wore a notably decorated piloting uniform and was in the process of reading through reports at a rapid pace with the help of her cranial implant and powerful augmentations!

Ves soon discovered that it had been incredibly prudent for him to focus on hiding himself.

This was because the mind he occupied at the moment was home to a powerful force of will, one that could only belong to an expert pilot!

"What?!"

Had the Time Gate improved so much that it was able to dump him in the mind of an expert pilot of all people?!

Just as Ves became consumed by the enormous implications of riding in the mind of an expert pilot, the door to the ready room slid open.

A mech officer stepped inside and respectfully saluted the only occupant.

"Venerable Irene Mox, your presence is requested in the main briefing room. Your expert mech is ready for deployment. Our best maintenance crew has repaired the damage and replenished all of its supplies."

Though the name sounded as if it could belong to any random human being who had lived in the vastness of human space, the name nonetheless sounded familiar to Ves.

Though he had lost access to his cranial implant and all of the data that he had dumped inside, there were certain sets of names that Ves had memorized before he became an expert pilot!

"It can't be... can it? This is impossible... right?"

However, once Ves cautiously explored the mind of his current host and managed to pick up a few more pieces of information, his alarm instantly skyrocketed!

"This can't be... it's impossible... how could I have ended up in the mind of Divine Irene Mox, the Destroyer of Worlds!?"

In his present time, Ves only knew of one woman who went by this legendary name!

He knew her as Divine Irene Mox, the Destroyer of Worlds!

"SHE'S A GOD PILOT!"

The System had managed to screw him over yet again!

Chapter 4907 Just An Average Expert Pilot

The Destroyer of Worlds.

Anyone who went by this title was bound to hold a special identity!

If anyone dared to go by such a grand and domineering moniker, then he or she better have the strength and reputation to avoid ridicule!

No one dared to make fun of a god pilot in human society.

It was only fitting for such a powerful god in human form to assume the title of Destroyer of Worlds!

Though Ves did not have a clear idea of what god pilots were capable of, the rumors and sources that he had come in touch with were all over the place.

The more extreme ones claimed that god pilots held so much power that it was not out of the realm of possibility for them to be able to break entire planets!

Ves personally believed that these claims were exaggerations. Perhaps it may be possible for most god mechs to wipe out entire cities or land regions at once, he could scarcely imagine how much energy it took to negatively affect a whole planet.

However, it was not that difficult to imagine that certain mechs and mech types could unleash more firepower than others.

Of all of the god mechs that were known to exist during his presence of time, pretty much no one doubted which one possessed the record of possessing the greatest capacity for destruction!

"The Ragnarok."

Few details about the Ragnarok were known to the public. From what Ves recalled of the biography that he had read when he was just a student, The Destroyer of Worlds only acquired this firepower-heavy machine late in her career.

It may very well be the exceptional ace mech that helped Irene Mox complete the Mech Body Merger Process!

The Ragnarok was the main reason why Divine Irene Mox managed to become known as the Destroyer of Worlds.

As one of the top guardians of human civilization, she was regularly assigned to guard the most contentious borders between human space and the surviving alien empires of the Milky Way Galaxy.

When an alien race tried to test humanity's defenses and commit raids across the border, humanity issued an immediate response.

Divine Irene Mox intruded into alien space and visited seven strategic star systems in succession!

Each time her Ragnarok deployed into action, its incredible formidable artillery cannons unleashed incredibly destructive rounds that cracked entire landmasses and progressively destabilized the tectonic activity of an entire globe!

Seven planets turned from densely populated strongholds into ruinous volcanic planets where nothing on its surface was left intact!

Ever since she inflicted so much retribution that the neighboring aliens completely cowered from the might displayed by one of humanity's strongest champions, Irene Mox became known as the Destroyer of Worlds from that day onwards.

In fact, it happened to be an evolution of her previous title.

Her previous moniker was Destroyer of Cities, but it sounded a little too inadequate ever since she exposed her capacity to scour every life on a planet!

No god pilot was a normal individual. Their strength and capacity for killing was unmatched by anything. This included the CFA's largest battleships!

There was no way that Ves could remain calm at the possibility that he had become so 'lucky' that he actually landed in the mind of a future god pilot!

Nothing good would come if he was ever discovered by such a powerful warrior. Even if it looked as if he had gone far enough back in time that Irene Mox was 'only' an expert pilot at this point, Ves did not want to take any chances!

"My first priority is to keep my presence hidden. There is no telling what might happen if Irene discovers that she is hosting a spiritual parasite in her mind!"

So far, it did not seem as if the expert pilot had a clue what had happened. She attended a mission briefing while remaining quiet and thoughtful. Her attention was completely focused on the current predicament of the mech army that she was attached to. Her unit apparently landed on a hostile planet and encountered heavy resistance from the local garrison.

Seeing that Irene Mox was more preoccupied with thinking on how she could best leverage her firepower to support advancing friendly troops, Ves slightly relaxed and assumed that he had yet to disturb the powerful expert pilot.

His next priority was to figure out if he had visited the mind of THE Irene Mox.

Ves mentally frowned. "Irene is a common name for females. Mox is not as common, but since it only consists of three letters, there should still be a lot of people who go by this name."

The best way to confirm this dreadful suspicion was to see whether the details he recalled from the Destroyer of Worlds' biography matched the current circumstances.

He needed to jog his memories as it had been around 2 decades since he last read the biographies of every god pilot and Star Designer known to exist.

That easily amounted to 200 books in total!

There was no way that Ves could read so many biographies in his youth with an earnest learning attitude.

It was fairly common for people to buy the most popular versions of the life stories of these legendary figures.

Since these books were targeted towards the general public, they happened to be light on the details and heavy on the action. The biographies also tended to be fairly short and were known to skip a lot of sensitive and inconvenient information.

In any case, there was no need for typical space peasants to know so many messy secrets. They just had to gain a rough idea on every human hero!

"I should really go out of my way and read the complete versions of those biographies." He mentally grumbled to himself.

Of all of the god pilots he became familiar with due to his interest in mech design, he barely paid any attention to Divine Irene Mox. She didn't excite him as much as other god pilots.

"Let me see... Divine Irene Mox is over 230 years old in my present time. This expert pilot looks to be around 30 years old, so the current date should be 2 centuries in the past."

The location could also provide an obvious clue.

The legendary Irene Mox happened to be a rare god pilot who used to be a second-class mech pilot. She eventually received an invitation to join the New Rubarth Empire after she advanced to ace pilot, but that happened a lot later in her life.

No one had any inkling that Irene Mox was god pilot material back when she was in her thirties. Even the woman herself could not imagine she could make one breakthrough after another as she grew older!

"If I recall correctly, Divine Irene Mox should be fighting in the so-called Terrace War." Ves recalled. "The main sides are the Bontue Republic and the Quillim Principality."

The Terrace War was special for several reasons.

The first reason was that it was actually a proxy war. Bontue and Quillim were both situated in the Treading Drum Star Sector, which happened to be close to the galactic center.

Ves didn't know why the Terrans and the Rubarthans started to meddle in this star sector, but they eventually started to back their favorite states and push them into a war!

It was not wise for the Terrans and the Rubarthans to directly come to blows against each other, so they instead abided by a secret agreement and left the actual fighting in the Treading Drum Star Sector to the local second-rate states.

The Terrans backed the Bontue Republic while the Rubarthans supported the Quillim Principality.

Since Irene Mox eventually acquired Rubarthan citizenship, she should clearly be a citizen of the latter at this time!

Now that he knew what he needed to look for, Ves cautiously extended his awareness. He did not want to go too far in exploring the mind of a strong and sensitive expert pilot, so he borrowed her senses instead and tried to listen to the officers who talked during the briefing session.

"The Bontues have fortified this city..."

"Reinforcements from the Quillim Mech Army..."

"Terran technology is suspected to..."

"We have received no word whether our Rubarthan friends are ready to ship the next batch of high-quality munitions..."

The more Ves listened to the discussion, the more he became certain that he had ended up in the mind of the only Irene Mox that managed to become one of the most powerful human transcendent in his present time!

This was absurd!

The identity of his current host far exceeded his expectations!

The more confirmation he received, the more dread he experienced.

There was no way he wanted to get in trouble with an actual god pilot!

It did not matter whether Irene Mox was far from reaching that level of strength. He knew for certain that she was already doomed to become a peerless mech pilot.

If she managed to detect his presence and gather enough clues about his true identity, then she could leverage her immense power to track him down and force him to account for his actions!

In fact, Ves hesitated whether he should do anything in his current state. He even thought about aborting this Mastery experience right on the spot because he did not want to arbitrarily mess with the history of a god pilot.

The MTA along with the rest of humanity would definitely crucify him if he somehow prevented Irene Mox from reaching her full potential!

"Then again... I'm not sure if I need to be so reticent."

From the way the System's time travel shenanigans worked, all of his actions during these time jaunts had already been reflected in the reality of his present environment!

Even if he made a mistake, then that had already become a part of established history.

"Ugh. I should just set aside these considerations and go back to enjoying the show."

His original purpose for using the Time Gate was to gain a better understanding of how mech pilots handled their heavy artillery mechs.

Though Ves found it rather inconvenient that he had landed in the head of an expert pilot as opposed to a standard pilot, he could still harvest a lot of insights. He just needed to make sure to differentiate between operations that were universal and operations that could only be performed by demigods.

"This planet shall be ours!"

The commanding officer of the mech unit dismissed the soldiers in the briefing room.

As everyone prepared to take part in an upcoming offensive, numerous Quillim mech pilots addressed Venerable Irene Mox with great respect.

"I hope that my men and I will be able to count on your fire support if we are cornered."

"Please keep an eye on my mech company."

"This war has gone long enough."

"The Bontues will break in time."

Though Irene Mox possessed a quiet and subdued demeanor, she nodded and acknowledged everyone who spoke to her. Her popularity among the Quillim soldiers was high.

This caused Ves to gain a stronger interest in her upcoming performance. The biography he read about the god pilot was especially sparse on the details of her early life.

Soon enough, Venerable Irene Mox entered a secure hangar bay where several expert mechs had just completed their maintenance cycles.

"The Iron Hedgehog..."

The expert heavy artillery mech that Irene Mox piloted at this time did not actually resemble a literal hedgehog.

Nonetheless, the expert mech featured an abundance of cannons. Since each of them stuck out of the quadruped frame at various angles by default, it sort of looked like a hedgehog with a lower quantity of oversized quills.

Venerable Irene started to become more excited as she closed in on her expert heavy artillery mech.

Though her expression still remained stoic, her force of will had already begun to rouse to a more active state!

#### Chapter 4908 The Iron Hedgehog

Venerable Irene Mox gently raised her body into the air and smoothly entered the cockpit of the Iron Hedgehog.

As a fairly young but talented expert pilot who distinguished herself in many past engagements, the Quillim Mech Army recently replaced her old low-tier expert mech for a mid-tier expert mech.

That machine was the Iron Hedgehog, an expert heavy artillery mech that had been designed with her proclivities in mind.

To Ves, it was a well-designed expert mech that was a product of its time.

"The current date is 197 AOM." Ves reminded himself. He learned the exact date during the mission briefing earlier. "At this stage, the Age of Mechs has entered full-swing. All of the messy stuff that mech designers invented in the first century has long been settled by the MTA. Mech archetypes are well-defined and a lot of expert pilots have already emerged."

Ace pilots were much rarer and god pilots were so few that they were revered to an even greater extent because of their scarcity!

As Ves examined the Iron Hedgehog through Venerable Irene Mox's senses as well as her strong and bountiful mental activity, he quickly developed a basic understanding of its design and configuration.

The Iron Hedgehog was designed as a pure landbound mech. Although it could technically perform the role of a bunker mech, it was clearly not optimized for this role.

Irene's expert mech was much more suited when deployed on land.

Ves had learned from Master Decimus Horst that if he wanted to figure out any heavy artillery mech, he first had to study its armament.

The quantity of weapons as well as their properties immediately told Ves what they were all about.

The Iron Hedgehog's weapons were split into two different categories.

The armaments placed on the outside edge of its oval top consisted of 8 heavy gauss cannons.

Their calibers were not considerably large, but perhaps they did not need to be. Ves could tell that the gauss cannons were designed to maximize their muzzle velocity and precision.

What Ves found interesting about the placement of gauss cannons was that they could cover any angle when aiming straight ahead.

However, this was only meant for emergencies. The Iron Hedgehog did not have any other way to repel enemies that managed to get past friendly guardians and come close enough to threaten it at close range.

Normally, the 8 gauss cannons should be pointed at an angle. This allowed for Iron Hedgehog to fire solid rounds that followed a parabolic trajectory and land on distant targets with good speed and precision.

They were not the main sources of damage, though. The 8 howitzers that were clustered at the center portion of the Iron Hedgehog's top were remarkably simple in nature!

They were ballistic cannons that were designed to propel high-explosive shells at high angles.

What mattered the most for these howitzers was their ability to inflict lots of damage onto distant locations surrounded by complex terrain.

Many times, resilient structures and thick mountains blocked the firing angles of ranged mechs.

By employing howitzers whose rounds could be fired with steep angles of descent, a heavy artillery mech could provide valuable support from the rear whereas a typical rifleman mech remained helpless!

While there were missiles that could circumvent all kinds of obstacles before they struck their targets, it was possible to blind their sensors, interfere with their guidance or simply shoot them down before they reached their targets.

Simple but solid explosive shells were cheaper, faster, less prone to faults and could easily be replenished.

These were vitally important traits for a heavy artillery mech that was expected to launch hundreds if not thousands of explosive shells over the course of a long day!

From what Ves could surmise of the Iron Hedgehog's design, its ammunition capacity was remarkably disappointing.

"Why does it have so many guns, yet so little space for rounds and shells?"

The answer eventually became clear once Venerable Irene Mox interfaced with her expert mech and directed it to exit the underground hangar bay.

The Iron Hedgehog slowly utilized its four thick legs to step into a ruined city.

It was clear that the Bontues and the Quillims had fought hard over this city. Heavy shelling and collateral damage made it so that there were vastly more damaged structures than untouched ones in this urban environment!

More and more mechs bearing the emblem of the Quillim Mech Army strode out of the tunnel exits. Ves had the illusion that he was watching a period drama due to all of the outdated tech on display.

The Treading Drum Star Sector was located close to the galactic center where all of the best tech emerged first. The mechs that showed up were all fairly advanced during this time period.

It was a pity that to a modern mech designer like Ves, the mechs in view were awfully primitive in many aspects!

"It's 200 years, after all. The overall mech paradigms may have been set, but the tech that empowers these machines is constantly progressing. If I remember my history correctly, the current mech generation introduced a lot of mobility-oriented advancements that have made many mechs faster than before."

In the year 185 AOM, the Mech Trade Association announced the commencement of the Speed Generation. Landbound mechs primarily benefited from the introduction of many innovations, but aerial and spaceborn mechs also received sufficient attention.

Before this mech generation, a lot of mechs moved rather ponderously on the battlefield. There were still plenty of ways to increase their traversal speeds, but that came with heavy tradeoffs such as massively restricting their runtime and forcing them to burn through an excessive amount of fuel or energy.

The Speed Generation solved many of those problems and made it much easier for mech designs to hit more favorable sweet spots.

This period of time also happened to be the point in mech history where light mechs truly became unleashed!

It had been more than a decade after the introduction of this mech generation at the current time. The average speed of mechs had already been elevated and light mechs had become a terrible scourge that needed to be guarded against.

The mech unit that Venerable Irene Mox was attached to clearly took a lot of precautions.

Early striker mechs guarded the periphery while a number of melee mechs stuck close to important ranged mechs such as the Iron Hedgehog.

Not a lot of aerial mechs lifted off from the ground. It was dangerous to put them into exposed positions under the current conditions. The only ones that launched at this time were dedicated scouting models that could evade many attacks.

The slow but steady march proceeded for an hour or so. Nothing much happened as the Quillim mechs had yet to make contact with Bontue mechs.

Though Ves was disappointed that he wouldn't be able to see the Iron Hedgehog in action right away, he bided his time while he slowly and cautiously explored the mind of Venerable Irene Mox.

Whenever she thought of the Bontues, both anger and pain surged in her mind.

Irene hated the enemy!

This hatred went beyond the general anger that any Quillim soldier held towards the Bontues.

Her animosity was clearly personal.

"Her cousin got killed during this war."

She grew up with her cousin. They were close friends and even attended the same mech academies.

Unfortunately, her cousin chose to specialize in piloting light mechs that had just come into vogue. This exposed her relative to a lot more danger during the Terrace War.

Once Irene Mox received the awful news, she not only developed a personal hatred against the Bontue Republic, but also became a lot more driven to kill the enemy!

As the large group of mechs reached the periphery of the ruined city, the Quillim mechs began to split up into smaller units.

Individual mech companies started to move at their own paces.

Light mechs zipped forward and raced across the open terrain that was covered with grass and cultivated fields.

Medium mechs advanced at a slower pace as they methodically headed towards a specific destination.

The few heavy mechs such as the Iron Hedgehog dug into their current positions and waited for the situation to develop.

Ves didn't realize clearly until now how much heavy artillery mechs had to wait around. They weren't suitable for moving around a lot, and their impressive range gave them the luxury to stay in place.

He hadn't been paying too much attention to the previous briefing, but he quickly knew what was happening after skimming Venerable Irene Mox's thoughts.

Her current unit was assigned to attack a neighboring city that was held by the Bontue defenders.

Since this planet originally belonged to the Bontue Republic, it was clear that its troops held a substantial defensive advantage!

Multiple Quillim units had therefore been assigned to attack the neighboring city from several directions. The attacking troops outnumbered the defending ones, but that still made it difficult to dislodge the latter!

More time passed by as the vanguard took its time to cross the distance between cities.

It was only after the landbound light mechs as well as the aerial mechs reached the periphery of the target city that Venerable Irene Mox could finally make herself useful!

"Venerable Mox, please pay attention to the priority targets that we have lit up on the command net. We need your gauss cannons and howitzers to open the way."

Irene finally began to break her stoic demeanor and radiated actual excitement at this time.

"With pleasure."

Despite the vast distance between the cities, the mechs in the vanguard maintained solid communications with the mechs in the rearguard.

Multiple different scout mechs fed a lot of valuable observation data to numerous different command mechs and command vehicles.

Each of these vehicles processed the incoming data before they updated the command net with relevant information to each and every individual mech.

Venerable Irene Mox quickly processed the available data on her priority targets with incredible ease and already determined what she needed to do in the next minutes.

"Iron Hedgehog, opening fire!"

The surroundings boomed as the 16 cannons all opened fire in quick succession!

The four solid legs of the heavy artillery mech had already been braced on the ground to ensure that the powerful machine swayed as little as possible.

Ves watched with amazement as sixteen resonance-empowered rounds and shells followed slightly different trajectories in the air.

Seconds later, the fast-moving gauss rounds struck their targets first!

Numerous highly reinforced bunkers, walls, turrets and other city defenses that were rated to withstand a considerable amount of bombardment were instantly breached!

Only 5 targets had been struck in the first salvo as the tougher ones demanded multiple attacks in order to breach their defenses.

Just after the defenders were reeling from this opening blow, the howitzer shells were arcing down from above at this time!

A lot of rapid-fire cannons had begun to open fire at the incoming shells in a desperate attempt to detonate their warheads in advance, but this did not work as the Iron Hedgehog's howitzer shells were faster and more resistant towards damage!

**BOOOM! BOOOM! BOOOM!**

A mass of impressive explosions engulfed entire streets as they unleashed their resonance-empowered fury on a destructive scale!

What impressed Ves a lot were the shells that happened to strike the larger structures that the Iron Hedgehog had previously breached.

Somehow, Venerable Irene Mox was able to aim her howitzer cannons in such a fashion that their shells accurately flew through the newly made holes before blowing up the interior of these damaged fortifications!

This was just the start.

Ves watched on with amazement as an entire exterior defensive line began to suffer utter ruination as the astounding firepower of a single expert heavy artillery mech methodically lay waste to all of the fixed structures!

Although the Iron Hedgehog rapidly depleted its ammunition due to the high frequency of attacks, Ves saw that this was not that big of a deal.

Two different supply mechs approached from the rear. Each of them held several containers filled with additional ammunition that were just waiting to be loaded into the Iron Hedgehog!

#### Chapter 4909 Distant Shelling

Divine Irene Mox was known to be an incarnation of death and destruction.

Countless lives perished whenever her Ragnarok sortied out to put the alien neighbors of human civilization in their place.

To humanity, the Destroyer of Worlds was one of humanity's most prominent protectors.

This was because any uppity alien empire or race instantly lost all bravado at the mere mention of a punitive expedition that included the Ragnarok!

During the four centuries of relative peace and quiet in the Milky Way Galaxy, the previously dominant aliens had often tried to test the human race to see whether the time to take back their ancestral star territories had come.

None of these incursions ever succeeded because the Big Two always deterred the greedy aliens!

There were many god mechs that undertook the vital duty of guarding humanity's sovereignty over half of the old galaxy.

Although the CFA assumed primary responsibility over patrolling the borders of human space and handling affairs relating to aliens, the MTA did not want to be left out of the party.

After all, even god pilots needed a bit of exercise every now and then. It was unconscionable for these powerful transcendents to direct their titanic might against other human groups.

Therefore, these god pilots not only undertook their protection duties with great enthusiasm, but also looked forward to any excuse that allowed them to make deep incursions into alien territory and put the inhuman populations in their place!

There were still so many alien races left in the galaxy that there were always delusional and irrational warlords among them that sought to undermine the human race in one way or another.

Ves had never traveled to the busiest and most contentious borders of the Milky Way, so he did not really have a clear impression of what went on in those regions.

He did hear stories of how certain god pilots such as the Destroyer of Worlds had become an absolute terror to many of the aliens.

She was the great human boogeyman whose attacks could never be stopped and had the capacity to destroy entire planets!

The only reason that gave the aliens a bit of comfort was that the Ragnarok was only a single god mech. It did not have the power to destroy the billions of star systems that were occupied by different alien populations in a short amount of time.

That didn't mean that the Destroyer of Worlds was harmless or useless in the greater scheme of things.

If the Big Two ever decided to put an end to the centuries-long cessation of large scale hostilities in the old galaxy, god mechs such as the Ragnarok would most definitely play a key role in quickly ending the sieges of the most strategic and fortified alien star systems.

The galactic net was filled with the expectations of many hopeful humans who literally prayed for the Destroyer of Worlds to finish the job that humanity started in the Age of Conquest.

By that time, the true twilight of the gods would commence. Powerful war machines such as the Ragnarok would sound the clarion call and lead the effort to annihilate the old alien overlords who previously reigned over the Milky Way Galaxy!

This was Ves' impression of god pilots such as Divine Irene Mox.

Although he learned later on that she not only became a guardian of the New Rubarth Empire, but also represented its interests in the Mech Trade Association by propping up its Rubarthan Faction, that did not change the public's tendency to look up to her as one of their greatest protectors!

As Ves spent a few days riding inside Venerable Irene Mox's mind, he felt as if he was witnessing the operations of a bad copy of the god pilot that he originally envisioned.

He found it hard to reconcile his image of the planet-destroying god pilot with the younger and much weaker expert pilot.

There were similarities between the two. Both pilots carried the same name. Both excelled in long-ranged bombardment. Both sought to destroy the opposition in order to protect their comrades.

However, there were also many differences that confused Ves to the point of wondering whether he was misremembering history.

Venerable Irene Mox was good at her job, but Ves had seen better expert pilots in his own clan. Her conviction was not strong enough and her primary motivation to fight at this time merely centered around taking revenge for the death of her favorite cousin.

Venerable Irene Mox was certainly talented and motivated. However, she did not show the brilliance or the special qualities that increased her likelihood of overcoming the nearly impossible bottleneck that blocked her path to becoming an ace pilot.

Venerable Irene Mox piloted a fairly good but otherwise boring expert mech. Even when Ves accounted for the differences in technological advancement, the Iron Hedgehog was nowhere near as good as the likes of the Everchanger or the Minerva. It could not even come close to reaching the level of the Ragnarok!

As Ves continued to observe Venerable Irene Mox perform her duties in conjunction with the mech battalion that she was attached to, he found that this future god pilot was... decidedly average at this point of her life.

Though Ves questioned many times whether the System stuffed him in the head of the wrong Irene Mox, far too many details matched up to allow for any other explanations.

He just had to accept that so much had changed over the following 200 years that this seemingly average expert pilot eventually won several jackpots in a row!

In a way, Ves partially felt grateful to the System for stuffing him in the mind of such a unique mech pilot at such an early stage of her life.

It told him that every expert pilot had the potential to become a god pilot in the future. Venerable Irene Mox did not possess any intrinsic qualities such as A-grade genetic aptitude or unique genetic treatments that instantly granted her unlimited potential.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

As the Iron Hedgehog sortied out yet again, all sixteen of its cannons continued to bombard a city that was so far away that it lay far beyond the horizon.

Ves learned a lot of lessons about war, about the operation of heavy artillery mechs and the operation of expert mechs.

After gathering a lot of different clues, he figured out that the Terrace War was a long-running conflict between two different puppets of the first-rate superstates.

The Bontue Republic and the Quillim Principality had already been fighting over the possession of many different star systems.

The two sides had fought for several years already and developed a lot of tacit rules in order to keep the conflict at a controllable level.

One of the more important ones was to avoid indiscriminate bombardment.

The current planet where the two sides were fighting over held a population of 14 billion citizens at its peak.

No matter how the battle for the planet played out, neither side wanted to be left with total ruins that would take many years and an excessive amount of funding and resources to rebuild.

They did not want to be left with the burden of keeping over a dozen billion people fed and docile!

Many of the citizens that lived and worked in the cities under contention had already been evacuated.

They were either brought to other population centers or were ushered into vast underground shelters that were filled with enough nutrient packs to form a mountain.

This turned much of the city into a playground for the mech forces that advanced and retreated depending on the situation.

Right now, the Quillim Mech Army held an undeniable advantage on Korinna V. It had landed many mechs on the Bontue-owned planet and maintained clear orbital superiority.

Even so, taking over fortified and actively defended cities turned out to be a slog.

Each major city on this industrial planet was like a castle that needed to be brought down one by one. They could not be skipped because the defending forces could always run out and wreak havoc in the rear of Quillim's conquered territories!

This had already been the fifth city that Venerable Irene Mox and her comrades sought to topple.

Destroying the peripheral defenses were easy. Many of the turrets, walls and bunkers should have slowed down the advance of Quillim invaders, but the Iron Hedgehog's awesome firepower quickly ruined this effort!

The Bontues weren't stupid. They already knew that if an invasion ever occurred, the outer defenses would get pounded by an excessive amount of artillery.

This was why the defenders built them extra large and extra thick. There were few space constraints at the edges of a city, so the Bontues could easily build entire networks of defensive works just outside of their most important population centers!

It would have taken a normal squad or company of heavy artillery mechs a lot more time and effort to neutralize all of these defenses.

Perhaps the Bontues already knew that these external defenses would fall, but as long as they made the invaders bleed and use up a lot of ammunition, it was already worth the effort!

The Bontues knew this. The Quillims knew this. Venerable Irene Mox knew this as well, so she put a lot of effort into breaking this game!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Each heavy gauss cannon fired penetrating rounds that possessed the capacity of drilling through meters of reinforced alloys, especially when empowered by true resonance!

The high-explosive shells fired by the howitzers could inflict a lot of area destruction on softer targets!

The outer defenses did not stand a chance against Venerable Irene Mox's unreasonable firepower.

What made the Iron Hedgehog even more effective was that it was tended to by a dedicated support unit.

A pair of supply mechs along with several transport vehicles constantly replenished the expert heavy artillery mech's ammunition and topped up its energy reserves.

Once the distant city had lost its outer defenses, the real fight had begun as far as both sides were concerned.

The dense construction along with numerous tall structures made it a lot more difficult for the Iron Hedgehog to bombard fixed defenses and provide support to the advancing mech troops.

This forced the Iron Hedgehog along with much of the rearguard to advance and reposition themselves in order to gain better angles to fire at targets deeper inside the city.

The defenders also relied less on fixed defenses and more on mobile assets in order to slow down the Quillim invaders and bleed away their mechs.

In order to prevent the Quillims from leveraging their artillery to the fullest, the Bontue defenders regularly deployed their melee mechs in the streets and sent them forth to confront the intruders at close range!

"Ah! We need reinforcements at these coordinates! We are being swamped by twice as much enemy mechs!"

"Our nearest reinforcements are two minutes away from your location."

"We won't last two minutes! We need fire support at these coordinates!"

"Are you sure, captain?"

"I trust in Venerable Mox!"

When requests like these emerged, Ves mentally became more attentive as Venerable Irene Mox brought the Iron Hedgehog's firepower to bear against the distant enemy mechs fighting in the streets.

The expert pilot's mind practically turned into a supercomputer as she and her expert mech processed a lot of data sent through the command net.

Once Irene Mox locked in her target, she waited for the right moments before she pulled the trigger at specific timings!

Numerous high-explosive shells flew high into the skies and flew over many structures before descending at steep angles in the rear of the counter attacking Bontue mech units!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Though none of the shells struck the enemy machines directly, the explosions that thundered in their rear were so destructive that they inflicted moderate damage to many of the defending machines.

What was impressive about this round of bombardment was that not a single friendly mech was significantly affected by the explosions.

In fact, the Quillim mechs had been biding their time. They instantly surged with greater momentum and quickly overwhelmed the Bontue mechs that had lost their rhythm due to the earlier bombardment!

"Amazing." Ves mentally sighed in admiration.

It took a lot of trust and skill to pull off this operation!

This wasn't the only time that Venerable Mox supported her comrades in this fashion. Her Iron Hedgehog assisted the friendly mechs in taking over street after street by shelling the enemy mech troops no matter what they did to discourage long-ranged bombardment!

Chapter 4910 Dissatisfied Irene

Although Venerable Irene Mox made it seem as if her bombardment attacks were nothing more than routine operations, Ves understood how difficult it was to perform them time and time again.

Heavy artillery mechs were never that precise, especially when it came to indirect fire.

Unguided or semi-guided munitions fired dozens or even hundreds of kilometers away not only had to cross incredible distances, but could also become affected by many different variables during flight.

Depending on velocity, distance and other variables, the delay between firing artillery cannons and striking distant targets could stretch on for many seconds or minutes!

It was not unusual for heavy artillery mechs to fire their powerful armaments at an enemy mech unit in the distance, only for the latter to move around and completely avoid the shelling!

Heavy artillery mechs would only waste a lot of ammunition if they tried to bombard any enemy mech detected by the scouts.

This was an important consideration in any campaign as the amount of supplies that an invading mech army could ship from the rear was limited.

It was much easier and less wasteful for the heavy artillery mechs to bombard enemy mech units when they were pinned down!

However, it was anything but simple to bombard enemy mechs, even if they were engaged with other machines.

So much could change while the mechs moved that a bombardment could easily damage friendly mechs instead.

This was why most heavy artillery mechs refrained from firing their guns in these situations.

Only a highly skilled expert pilot such as Venerable Irene Mox dared to open fire with her howitzers under these circumstances!

Ves could see that this was a brilliant feat of cooperation that not many mech units could replicate.

The Quillim mech pilots that fight in this warzone were all aware of what Venerable Mox was capable of. They developed a common set of tactics and routines that essentially centered around providing opportunities for the Iron Hedgehog to open fire.

The friendly Quillim mechs did not deviate from their positions too much and tried to pin down the opposing forces as much as possible.

The Quillims even gave up obvious opportunities to land their crippling blows in favor of maintaining their safe positions!

The trust they put into the only expert heavy artillery mech on their side was rewarded.

Venerable Irene Mox put all of her effort into providing the best possible support from a distance. She constantly reminded herself that her expert mech was able to leisurely remain in the rear because her comrades kept the enemy mechs busy.

The expert pilot performed many different operations with her powerful mind and will.

She predicted the movements of the enemy mechs up to a minute in advance.

She calculated the firing angles, trajectories, time of flight of her next attack salvo.

She took the obstacles between her expert mech and her targets into account and calculated whether she needed to destroy or drill a hole through them first.

She selected a specific high-tech shell type to be loaded into the howitzers before setting their individual parameters to fine-tune their trajectories, their time of flight and their explosion radii.

Venerable Irene Mox had very little time to perform all of these calculations, but she was able to do all of this with the help of her expert mech in less than a second!

The shorter the delay, the higher her hit rate. She had trained long and hard to minimize these necessary steps as much as possible.

Once she developed her firing solution, she only took a brief moment of time to listen to her intuition.

This was the final test she applied to herself. If her instincts told her that pulling the trigger would lead to adverse outcomes, she would resolutely hold her fire and find a different way to support her comrades!

Ves had only seen her abort her attacks once over the last few days. It is incredibly astonishing to see her process so much data and get everything right on such a consistent basis.

He learned through his perusal of the textbooks recommended by Master Decimus Horst that most mech pilots simply couldn't reach this level!

Although Venerable Irene Mox may be able to pull it off consistently by virtue of being an expert pilot, Ves knew by studying her precisely controlled actions inside her head that she had trained several advanced skills in order to perfect this routine!

The results of all of her practice was evident. The Iron Hedgehog turned into the greatest long-ranged supporter for the Quillim mech battalion advancing into the city.

Bontue mechs that could normally get away with hindering or even defeating the invading mechs up close all became engulfed in one resonance-empowered explosion after another!

It didn't matter if the Iron Hedgehog's shelling rarely felled the enemy mechs. Venerable Irene Mox had become extremely proficient at estimating how much damage it took to cripple them just enough to turn them into easy prey for other machines!

Although Irene certainly did not mind if she could fell enemy mechs by herself, the Bontues weren't stupid enough to expose their machines to the fury of an expert heavy artillery mech!

In fact, the Bontue defenders had lost so many mechs through the same bombardment tactics that they eventually had to change their strategy.

The Iron Hedgehog was too unbearable!

No Bontue mech pilot wanted to enter the fray, only for an explosive shell to erupt in the rear and easily crumple the relatively fragile rear side of his machine!

The Quillim mech units that advanced into the city picked up their pace as the defenders gave up a lot of ground without putting as much of a fight as before.

It was only when the attacking mechs reached the downtown area that their progress began to stall.

This was because the more central and valuable city districts were much more heavily defended!

The tall office buildings were partially built like fortresses. It took a lot of damage in order to stop them from acting as giant walls.

The downtown city districts were also covered by titan shields.

"These shields are not bad." Ves concluded.

Titan shield technology in this time period was already fairly mature. They were originally derived from shield technology developed for battleships and could withstand a huge amount of punishment.

There was no way for mechs to penetrate the powerful shield barriers quickly. Not even the most penetrating attacks launched by the Iron Hedgehog could punch through these energy shields.

The Quillim attackers could only get past this troublesome obstacle by overloading it with an abundance of ranged attacks.

The other heavy artillery mechs finally made themselves useful and constantly bombarded the titan shields in the distance.

In the meantime, the Iron Hedgehog provided fire support in other areas, but otherwise remained silent in order to conserve its resources.

Venerable Irene Mox used this time to pull herself back from the moment and evaluate her past actions. She meticulously went through every decision she made and ruthlessly criticized her perceived faults even though they weren't that big of a deal to Ves!

She never spent any thoughts on admiring her own skills or basking in the gratitude of the comrades she helped.

There was only inadequacy and dissatisfaction in her mind.

No matter how well she performed her duties, there were always better and more optimal ways for her to solve her problems.

"I should have increased the power of the explosive shells..."

"Howitzer 3 was angled 0.25 degrees too high..."

"The mech of Lieutenant Orië Vellum was struck by shrapnel. That should have never happened..."

Ves had never seen any expert pilot who loathed her strength as much as Venerable Mox.

Was this one of the key qualities that a mech pilot needed to have in order to push themselves all the way to god pilot?

He already developed a theory that the growth of a mech pilot was heavily related to how much they yearned for greater strength in order to attain their goals.

Though Irene did not provide him with definite proof to back up this theory, she still provided a lot of helpful clues!

Of course, Ves did not think this was enough to allow her to overcome the barriers that blocked her way towards god pilot.

"There are still a couple of missing ingredients."

The time it took to fell the titan shields was fairly long. It was not enough to destroy a single one. The Quillims wanted to knock out all of them so that the defenders did not have an impenetrable fortress to fall back upon.

While the Bontues occasionally sent out mechs to launch sudden attacks at the Quillim mechs that were waiting for the titan shields to fall, Venerable Irene Mox patiently waited for the most crucial stage of this urban assault to commence.

As long as the Bontues were driven out of the most heavily defended downtown districts, the city would finally fall into Quillim hands!

The remaining defensive works in the city would no longer be able to block the subsequent assaults. It would be much better for the Bontues to evacuate all of the combat assets that they could transfer and resist the planetary invasion at another city!

"The shields are about to fall in 10 minutes! Get ready, Venerable Mox. You are authorized to destroy up to fifty percent of the infrastructure in the downtown districts. The command net has already marked the structures that should remain intact whenever possible."

"Received." Irene responded as she studied the new data made available on the command net.

Good data collection and planning was essential to optimizing the performance of heavy artillery mechs.

The more time that heavy artillery mech pilots were able to familiarize themselves with the circumstances, the more effective they became when the actual fighting started.

Venerable Irene Mox was incredibly obsessive in this regard. She had already spent much of her downtime on studying the blueprints of the central city district and even went as far as calling up the data on individual buildings!

Irene set a new goal for herself as the time to attack came closer.

"I must end the fight within 18 minutes."

That was a harsh goal! Ves did not think that it was possible for the Quillims to overrun several heavily-defended city districts in so little time.

Ves figured that it would take several hours to dislodge all of the defenders and drive their surviving assets away.

Yet as the titan shields finally fell in succession, Irene turned into a beast again!

"FIRE!"

Though Venerable Irene Mox did not make any unnecessary sounds or movements, her force of will surged with anger and purpose, helping her perform all of the complex calculations and judgment calls in record time.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

All sixteen cannons of her expert mechs fired in sequence as they were all aimed at different targets many kilometers away.

Bontue mechs that fought desperately to hold back the advancing Quillim machines either got knocked off their feet or suffered heavy damage.

Enemy ranged mechs that had just moved out became engulfed by explosions before they could fire more shots.

Strong fixed defenses were struck by multiple gauss rounds and received just enough damage to make them inoperable!

All of this happened in many different locations in the downtown areas.

No matter where the Bontues fought, the distant terror of the Iron Hedgehog suppressed all of them to such an extensive degree that their confidence had cooled.

The suppression exerted by a single expert mech was just too much!

As their comrades screamed and suffered defeat at an alarming pace, the surviving Bontue mech pilots became so affected by all of the chaos and destruction that their willingness to fight quickly evaporated!

Even though the Bontues still had enough mechs and other assets that could bleed the invading machines, Venerable Irene Mox beat them up so much that their commanding officers decided to call for retreat well in advance!

Less than 14 minutes passed since the main offensive began.

Ves was mentally gobsmacked by how much the Iron Hedgehog had accomplished during this engagement.

"This... is the true power of heavy artillery..."