

Mech 3571

Chapter 3571 Negotiating With A Mech

The Enlightened Warrior was one of the first variant mech design projects that Ves had embarked upon in quite a while.

Normally, he looked down on it as most mechs were better off if they were designed according to a specific vision from the ground up. Trying to adapt a similar but ultimately different mech design to a different vision was like forcibly changing the personality of an individual. Though the transformation might succeed, the repercussions were enormous.

"I really do want to design you from the ground up, but I have to be practical about it as well." Ves sighed as he began to work on his new variant mech design project.

Before he committed months of his valuable design time on pursuing this idea even further, he felt it was better to start on a smaller scale and produce a trial balloon first.

He could make a much more informed decision once he studied the results of his initial attempt.

His demands weren't too high for that reason. He just wanted to observe whether the Quint could act as a design spirit to another mech design, whether the spiritual feedback process worked properly for living mechs and whether the end users of his new mech model actually benefited from piloting it instead of a regular Bright Warrior model.

Still, in order to make sure that his new creation was sufficiently differentiated from the base model and adapted to its new purpose, Ves invested 3 weeks into designing his new variant.

This was a rather generous time schedule that would allow him to adjust the design to his satisfaction and override much of its original purpose with a new and different mission.

That last one was of great importance to Ves. The Bright Warrior line was centered completely around serving general Larkinson mech pilots. With the Golden Cat as its design spirit, the Bright Warrior was partially meant to serve as a way to assimilate new members and increase their sense of belonging to the clan.

That obviously couldn't remain if he wanted to make the mech design more universal. Although Ves still had his own people in mind when he wanted to perform this experiment, the need to avoid using Larkinsons as test subjects meant he had little choice but to turn to outsiders to validate his proof of concept.

"It's not a big problem."

He had altered the original identities of his existing mech designs before. He had made mechs that were previously exclusive to one group of people more compatible with other groups of people.

"This is my own work, after all. I know them like the back of the hand. I can easily unmake my own solutions and put new ones in their place."

The real challenge was performing these steps while minimizing any potential damage. This was much harder to do if he was working on someone else's mech design. There were so many intricacies in design choices that a single mistake could easily cascade into many other problems in other parts of a mech design.

He didn't have to worry about that here because he knew about almost all of the rationale behind every design choice. Though he had to refresh his memories multiple times, he still recalled why he set it up the way he did at the time.

"Gloriana probably won't be happy with me ruining one of our collaborative mech designs."

Ves chuckled. While there was indeed a chance that he might screw up her arrangements, the drop in performance shouldn't be that big.

In fact, he had improved quite a bit since he first completed the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B design. He had deepened his knowledge base and gained a lot more experience. He developed many new techniques and expanded his theoretical framework.

It was not difficult for him to apply his new gains onto the original Bright Warrior design and come up with a major revision.

"That will take too much time, though."

Ves set a time limit of 3 weeks because he did not want to get lost in all of the improvements he could make on the base model. He had a narrow goal in mind and was set on completing it within the deadline.

This was important because he would be finishing his Enlightened Warrior design shortly after arriving in the Pellysa System.

There was a bustling marketplace over there that provided Ves with plenty of opportunities to enlist more test subjects.

He smirked. "It'll be easy enough to get them to buy my new mech. I just have to sell them at a discount."

Many people loved to buy bargains! If his customers grew suspicious why he sold his products so cheaply, Ves could just state that he wanted to grow his brand and generate more word of mouth about his living mechs.

Of course, the effect would be rather marginal unless he sold them by the thousands, which was far too wasteful and time-consuming.

"I'll just stick to a couple of hundred or so. That won't take too long to produce."

The only problem with doing this was that Ves would not be able to disclose that his new Enlightened Warrior design was an experimental product that could potentially lead to unexpected mental changes or another case of exploding head syndrome!

"The benefits outweigh the risks. I am confident I can control the latter this time!"

He did not intend to push the envelope with the Enlightened Warrior design. That could come later when he had a more suitable audience in mind.

As Ves continued to work on his variant, he slowly morphed its character and identity into one that conformed with its new purpose.

The Enlightened Warrior revolved around several themes.

First, it retained the high compatibility of the original Bright Warrior. Although this design priority was the main reason why the mech model performed so mediocre in every role, right now Ves saw it as a great boon for the Enlightened Warrior.

Ves smiled. "The main purpose of the Enlightened Warrior is to help mech pilots improve. It doesn't have to be the strongest mech model available for sale. Since it is partially a training mech, it is actually good that it can accommodate a broad range of piloting styles!"

It was just like Ketis' Monster Slayer mech in that regard. The difference was that Ketis wanted to turn every mech pilot of her upcoming commercial mech into a proficient greatsword wielder, whereas Ves sought to produce breakthroughs.

He did not expect his Enlightened Warrior to achieve as much success as the Monster Slayer. It was extremely hard to increase anyone's chances of undergoing apotheosis. Even if his mech was good, Ves realized quite well that he might not achieve statistically significant results until years later!

"It's okay."

Ves just wanted to spread his mechs around so that he could accelerate the growth of the Quint. It would be more obvious that the Enlightened Warriors facilitated its

evolution if there were more active copies in use. Just relying on 20 MTA mech pilots was not enough!

In order to make it easier to reach out to many mech pilots, Ves retained the four original configurations. The Enlightened Warrior would therefore be able to fight as a swordsman mech, a rifleman mech, a space knight and a lancer mech, which should be enough to cover the needs of at least 70 percent of every mech pilot in the Red Ocean!

He could keep everything the same though. Not only did he need to make changes in order to differentiate its spiritual character, he also had to replace its older, Hexer-developed mech parts with ones that were more in line with the current environment.

"Some of those Hexer parts require materials that are not easily available in the Red Ocean." He frowned.

Materials such as Kavenit which was ubiquitous in his home region were much scarcer and more expensive in this part of the new frontier. There were many other examples of that and in time the Larkinson Clan's stockpiles would run out. This was also why he was so eager to design so many new mechs for the Larkinson Army.

"In any case, the Enlightened Warrior should be made out of exotics that are more abundant in the surrounding regions."

Ves also had to swap out almost all of the old components of the Bright Warrior for newer, more superior ones.

This was not just because he wanted to upgrade the performance of his variant mech so that it could become a more competitive product in the market. He also had to replace the proprietary Hexer-developed mech parts with commercially licensed alternatives that were specifically designed to be produced with Red Ocean materials.

Although Ves didn't think that any Hexer lawyer would come and sue him for breaching a contract and trying to sell unauthorized Hexer military hardware to private customers, it was disrespectful to go back on his word.

At the very least, he would tarnish his reputation if he went through with such a disrespectful act!

The process of replacing components was a huge endeavor that resulted in plenty of changes, but Ves was able to minimize his workload by picking substitutes that closely conformed to the original parts.

Sure, the Enlightened Warrior became a bit rougher as a result, but as long as the mech worked as intended, he didn't mind if it came out in a more unoptimized state.

"As a proof of concept, it just needs to work well enough."

If he ever wanted to commercialize this mech concept properly after he concluded this experiment, then there was no way he wanted to sell the Enlightened Warrior en masse. He would start a proper design project.

As he continued to design his new variant, he made sure to put plenty of effort into turning it into a more helpful mech. He constantly emphasized the Quint as a design spirit and tried his best to form an environment where the masterwork expert mech was able to provide guidance to the mech pilots of the Enlightened Warrior.

Of course, Ves needed the Quint to cooperate on this experiment.

YOU WISH FOR ME TO BECOME A DESIGN SPIRIT.

"Yes." Ves spiritually communicated with his old work. "You'll have to assume extra responsibilities, but you'll be able to handle it. The stronger you become, the better you are able to keep up with the mechs you are connected with. The Enlightened Warrior model will become your conduit to a reality that exists outside the expeditionary fleet."

WHY SHOULD I ACCEPT THIS DISTRACTION?

"Because it will help you perform your purpose better by making you stronger. You've seen our design spirits, right? You've witnessed how Goldie has steadily grown stronger as a result of receiving all of the spiritual feedback from our clansmen. I am offering you the chance to become another Goldie. You'll not only be able to give your users the strength they need to excel in battle, but also be able to leverage the abundant experience you've accumulated from tutoring hundreds if not thousands of different mech pilots."

...INTRIGUING.

Ves grinned at the Quint. "It will help you remain relevant as well. There is less reason for me to retire you and put you in a museum if you are useful enough to keep around."

YOU WOULD NEVER RETIRE ME. YOU VALUE ME TOO MUCH. I AM AN INDISPENSABLE MECH FOR THE LARKINSON CLAN.

"You cheeky mech. Well, if you need another reason to play along, then how about this. What if I tell you that there is a possibility that you will be able to retain your existence even after your physical form is destroyed? Ever thought about that, my Quint? If you are spiritually powerful enough, I believe that you can live after death and maintain your state in an incorporeal form. You'll be able to serve your purpose further by acting as a full-time design spirit."

The Quint physically vibrated for an instant.

THAT SOUNDS TERRIFYING.

"Oh, come on!" Ves threw his head. "Well, how about this. If your mech frame ever gets destroyed, I'll build you a new one, alright? You can continue your existence as a living mech while at the same time performing your job as a design spirit. Does that sound good enough?"

...VERY WELL, CREATOR.

Chapter 3572 Dial Controller

Well, it wasn't everyday that Ves had to negotiate with a mech. The Quint was his own creation, even.

Though Ves could have employed more coercive means to get the Quint to cooperate, that would just piss the masterwork mech off. It was already valuable enough that Ves needed to be more considerate of its wants and needs. Now that he wanted to turn it into a design spirit, he had even more reason to treat it with respect!

With the agreement of the Quint, Ves fully proceeded to complete the Enlightened Warrior design. After swapping out its old galaxy rim-level parts for Red Ocean heartland-level parts, the entire mech performed a bit more powerful in almost every aspect.

Offense, defense and mobility all scored better across the board. The Enlightened Warrior only had two significant shortcomings.

First, the Enlightened Warrior did not benefit from the specialties of the other Journeymen in the Larkinson Clan.

It did not benefit from Gloriana's optimization, Ketis' sword enhancements, Juliet's mobility boosts, Pellier and Coslone's physical strengthening or Sara Voiken's defensive hardening.

These were serious shortcomings that meant that his Enlightened Warrior model would become even less attractive as a commercial product.

"I'll just have to drop the price by 20 percent or so in order to make it on par with other comparative mech models." Ves shrugged.

Price adjustments were the best and most convenient way to manipulate the popularity and sales volume of any product. Ves was even prepared to suffer a small loss just to make sure that enough third party mech pilots turned into his test subjects.

"That will be my real profit, hehe!" He grinned.

Dropping the price never failed to move inventory. Even if his products were much shoddier than now, there were always suckers that couldn't resist buying a mech that was sold far below its apparent worth.

As for whether those buyers possessed the expertise to understand why the Enlightened Warrior was not able to command a higher price, that was none of Ves' business.

He did not even plan to disclose that the Enlightened Warriors were truly able to help mech pilots break through. Though its users would quickly realize that there was something special about the model, unless a lot of mech pilots broke through in quick succession, no one would believe that Ves had managed to turn the impossible into the possible.

And if this opportunity also came with certain unanticipated or undesirable side effects? Too bad. Everything had a price. Even cheaper products exacted their toll on their buyers one way or another.

"Well, let's proceed with finalizing the design."

He had almost entirely shut himself off to everyone in order to rush this design to completion. Gloriana had already stopped talking to him once she recognized he was in one of those obsessive moods again.

Though she was clearly upset with him, she was a mech designer as well. She fully understood when mech designers were struck by inspiration, they would not easily stop what they were doing.

As the expeditionary fleet almost reached the Pellysa System where it intended to stay for a while in order to sell off much of the plunder taken from the Titania, Ves was putting the finishing touches on his variant design.

Just like his other recent designs, the Enlightened Warrior centered around three major themes.

In the earlier stages of the design process, Ves placed a lot of emphasis on compatibility and tutelage. These focus areas comprised the basic functionality of his Enlightened Warrior design. They were the reason why it existed.

"That's not enough, though."

The reason why the Enlightened Warrior was called that way was because Ves hoped that it could increase the chance of mech pilots breaking through.

The mechanism that he wanted to use for that was to employ a weakened version of the glow of the Aspect of Transcendence.

It was easy enough to put Lufa in as a secondary design spirit for the Enlightened Warrior, though the Quint had to make a bit of room to accommodate the guest.

Ves didn't encounter any challenges in tuning Lufa's glow so that it suppressed everything except for the mech pilot's greatest obsessions and convictions. This was already enough to turn the Enlightened Warrior into a mech that was capable of inducing breakthroughs.

"It's too strong, though."

Even if Lufa only arrived at a later stage and only occupied a relatively small portion of the design, his altered glow was already quite powerful!

"Probably too powerful!"

Ves had to dampen it so that it did not produce any unintended messes in the cockpits of his Enlightened Warriors. His customers certainly wouldn't be happy if the glow based on the Aspect of Transcendence blasted his heads apart!

Forget about his customers, the MTA would definitely intervene if it turned out that his mechs were lethal to his own users! With the Simile Halifax constantly monitoring everything that went on inside the Spirit of Bentheim, there was no way he could shift responsibility!

"I wonder what Jovy thinks about my work." Ves deliberately said aloud.

He didn't worry too much about the MTA understanding the true nature of the Enlightened Warrior. Jovy and his staff could watch all they want, but the spiritual design of his latest project was only visible to himself.

That reminded him of something. The MTA Journeyman never got back to him on his offer.

"What's taking him so long?"

Ves thought that his offer was fairly simple and that Jovy should be pouncing on this opportunity.

Evidently, he underestimated the decision making process surrounding this issue.

He turned his attention back to his almost-complete mech design.

The issue he was trying to decide upon was how he should set the strength of Lufa's transcendence glow.

If he made it too strong, then Ves was afraid of inducing severe distortions to the personalities of users of his new variant. The Enlightened Warrior didn't necessarily have to explode any heads to constitute a threat to its own users!

Yet if he made the glow too weak, then what was the point of including it in the first place? Ves seriously doubted that it would make any difference if it was this weak.

"It's the safest option, though."

Ves constantly hovered between tuning the strength of the glow from 3 percent to 50 percent of the strength of the Aspect of Transcendence.

He did not dare to go any further than 50 percent even though Ves thought it was unlikely to lead to any fatalities. He needed to adopt a safety margin just in case he miscalculated.

"It's still a bit iffy, though."

He did not think there was any point of going lower than 3 percent either. Below that point, Ves didn't feel anything.

As Ves continued to struggle over this issue, he suddenly gained a bright idea.

What if he made it variable? What if he could allow his Enlightened Warriors to change the strength of its glow just like he did for his old Doom Guard design?

However, Ves did not think it was a good idea to hand over control of this dial to the mech pilot.

"They'll probably misuse it and end up killing themselves." He guessed.

The stupidity of mech pilots knew no bounds. Despite their training and despite their courage, they were not known for making the most rational or optimal decisions. Ves could already envision them turning it to the maximum even when their mental conditions were unable to cope with the pressure.

The question then was who should be in control of this power dial? The mech?

"That's a bad idea."

The Enlightened Warriors may have been designed to facilitate breakthroughs, but they probably weren't the best at judging the health of their own mech pilots. What if they made a mistake? What if they pushed their own pilots too far? Ves could not discount the possibility of accidents if he let a young, inexperienced and not too bright living mech take charge of such an advanced function!"

That left... another mech.

What if he handed over control to the Quint?

This was not as crazy as it sounded. Although Ves did not trust the Enlightened Warrior mechs to use this setting responsibly, the Quint was much better in this regard.

The mech possessed the intelligence and judgment to use it to good effect. Drawing from its first-hand experiences of Joshua and Casella's breakthroughs, the Quint probably had a good idea on when mech pilots were being pushed to the brink of apotheosis.

At that time, the pilots only needed a single push to tip them over, and Lufa's transcendence glow could probably provide that push!

The more he thought about it, the more Ves became convinced this was the right solution. Though the Quint would have to become more involved in regulating all of the copies of the Enlightened Warrior design, the rewards that it would gain from experiencing breakthroughs by remote more than made up for the effort!

After all, whenever a mech pilot broke through, the release of energy provided a huge burst of spiritual feedback to the mech and to a lesser degree the design spirit.

Everyone benefited!

When Ves used this argument on the Quint, the living mech acquiesced easily enough.

FINE. IT IS NOT AS IF I AM ALREADY DEVIATING FROM A NORMAL MECH. YOUR IMAGINATION IS THE MOST DANGEROUS WEAPON YOU POSSESS, CREATOR.

"Aw, shucks. Thanks for the compliment."

With that taken care of, Ves implemented the solution into the spiritual design of the Enlightened Warrior before he finalized the design.

As Ves took a step back in order to study the design from a holistic perspective, he had to admit that he had certainly done a decent job.

The variant was not too unrefined. He had collaborated often enough with Gloriana to work more diligently on his mech designs. He also hit himself over the head with the Hammer of Brilliance in the later stages of the design phase in order to borrow Vulcan's insights.

"It's still the product of a solo project though."

The design choices he made were highly individualistic and that resulted in a number of quirks that made the Enlightened Warrior stand out further. They were not that big of a deal mostly as Ves mostly focused on enhancing the piloting experience.

Part of that resulted in enhanced defenses to the upper chest where the cockpit and other important parts rested.

Even if the mech pilot was forced to eject, the separated cockpit was based on a premium license that offered greater speed and damage resistance than more standard models.

"The Enlightened Warrior is all about the mech pilot, after all. It wouldn't be a good training mech if it can't keep its precious users alive."

Aside from that, the Enlightened Warrior design came equipped with a relatively good but ordinary energy rifle. Ves was not allowed to spread his luminar crystal weapons outside of his own clan and fleet, so he had no choice but to fall back on more conventional human technology.

"At least it's simple."

If the buyers of his mech weren't interested in the default rifle, then they could just choose to buy separate weapon models using those instead. Just like any other ranged humanoid mech, the Enlightened Warrior was able to seamlessly adopt many different weapon models as long as they adhered to the same technical standards.

Once the Spirit of Bentheim produced twenty copies of his new variant design, Ves would definitely ensure that they came equipped with the new model luminar crystal rifles that had become standard issue in the Larkinson Clan.

Its other properties were relatively average even among the four different configurations. This was no different from the base model.

"The look is different, though."

The Bright Warriors were coated in resplendent gold by default but he couldn't be that ostentatious for his variant.

After thinking about it, he decided to coat it in a light but relatively neutral shade of blue. It made the mech look a bit less threatening, which was exactly what Ves tried to achieve.

He didn't want to scare any of his future test subjects by suggesting that the Enlightened Warrior was based on prior experiments that led to bloody test chambers...

"Nope. My new variant is not related to all of that stuff. There's not a hint of red in its appearance!"

Chapter 3573 Ecstatic Gloriana

"So this is what you have been up to all these weeks?"

"Yes." Ves happily answered as he held and hugged his lovely little daughter. "I know it looks a little rough in your eyes, but it's the idea that counts!"

His wife did not like that answer at all. Her face grew red as she tried to hold in her anger. If not for the fact that she wanted to avoid disturbing Aurelia, she would have given Ves a piece of her mind already!

Of course, that was exactly why Ves chose to present his labor to his wife at a time when their daughter was awake. He had already noticed that Gloriana in mommy mode was a lot more mellow and constrained than Gloriana in wife mode.

"Gigigihihi..." Aurelia giggled as her delicate hands reached to Ves' face.

"Oh, so you think I'm brilliant as well! What a good girl you are. Your eyesight is impeccable!"

He leaned in so that his daughter could pat his face with her tiny fingers. Over the last weeks she had grown a bit brighter and more coherent. This pace of development definitely put her ahead of ordinary babies but was not too far out of line compared to other designer babies.

Ves was just happy that he could interact with his daughter in more varied ways. Making her giggle was one of the greatest joys a father could experience.

"..Miew... miew..."

A fluffy incorporeal kitten emerged from Aurelia's head. The kitten had grown more lively as well and wanted to join in on the fun!

"Oh, you're such a cute little kitten. Has Alexandria been taking good care of you?" Ves asked in a babying tone.

"...Miew... miew..."

Blinky appeared out of his own head to lick and pamper the fluffy little kitten. The sight turned incredibly wholesome as Ves and his companion spirit bonded with their younger counterparts.

Unfortunately, Gloriana wasn't in the mood to play at the moment. The more she looked at the Enlightened Warrior, the more she thought it was a regression of what they created before.

"Why would you possibly want to tinker with the Bright Warrior in the first place?" Gloriana asked her husband. "The mech is designed for a specific service, and that is to provide our Larkinson mech pilots with a broad base platform for them to fight on behalf of our clan. You know as well as I do that our design is not an attractive commercial product at all. There are many other modular mech platforms on the mech market that are much cleaner and reputable."

"It's not a commercial mech design." Ves retorted.

"Oh? Isn't this mech supposed to be piloted by people other than Larkinsons?"

"That's because it's a proof of concept rather than a truly serious commercial mech design! Look, I just want to release a couple of trial balloons onto the market so that I can see what happens with them. I've incorporated a few new interesting features that I'm not unsure about. Rather than throw them onto our own clansmen and hope that everything works out, I decided it was better to let others try it out first. This is why I don't mind selling them at a discount if that is what it takes to move our inventory."

Gloriana crossed her arms as she grew suspicious. "You're usually much more selfish about your inventions. You always want your Larkinson soldiers to enjoy your best innovations before others. Why the change? Is there something about the Enlightened Warrior that I should know?"

Ves innocently shrugged as he rocked his giggling daughter. "The reason why I came up with the Enlightened Warrior is to placate those guest pilots we've been neglecting for a while. They obviously can't make full use of the Bright Warrior in its original incarnation so I decided to design a more universal mech that is able to provide better guidance to them. The solution I came up with is the truly innovative part. I decided to use the Quint as the Enlightened Warrior's design spirit!"

"The Quint?!" His wife grew shocked. It only took her a few seconds to connect the dots! "That... that's a brilliant idea! Our masterwork mechs have become so strong that they have grown into formidable proto-gods themselves. Once they are able to obtain the worship of many other mech pilots, they will truly be able to evolve into actual gods! This is genius, Ves! As expected of the man I married. If the Enlightened Warrior can truly help the Quint ascend, then we can help our other masterwork mechs become gods as well! Turning our best mech pilots into god pilots will become a reality if that happens!"

Ves hastily lifted up a hand. "Wait, let's not be so hasty. Before you go any further, let's first see what happens to the Quint. Even if we can accelerate his growth, he'll just

become a stronger living mech, that's all. Any talk about turning mechs into gods is pure fantasy!"

His wife completely ignored his words. Her eyes turned into stars as she gazed hungrily at the Enlightened Warrior. Though the variant mech design still looked disgusting to her, she was able to appreciate the greater significance behind the work.

Once they began to design a proper mech that provided worship to one of their expert mechs, they could truly turn this promising idea into a real method to expand the usefulness of their best works and even help them evolve without any further active intervention!

"Just think of what we can do for the Amaranto! This expert mech will have the potential to become the most powerful rifleman mech in the cosmos! Oh, what about the Shield of Samar? Just think how much stronger and more impervious to damage its defensive barriers can become when it is fueled by the devotion of trillions of defensive mech pilots. Wait! The Everchanger can truly become the hero that can rescue humanity from the brink of destruction one day! Your proudest work will become the epitome of a living mech, a god-king that can resurrect the dead and can never be destroyed!"

"Uhh..."

Ves gave up on Gloriana. She had gone completely mad with the possibilities that the Enlightened Warrior had opened up. Her dream of turning mechs into actual gods became a lot more reachable!

"When will you fabricate the first Enlightened Warrior?" Gloriana hungrily asked.

"Tomorrow. I need to catch up on some of the administrative duties that I have neglected these past few weeks. Once I got that out of the way, I'll be fabricating the Enlightened Warrior by myself."

"What?! You need me, Ves! I am a much better fabricator than you. Our chance of turning it into another masterwork mech will be much higher when we collaborate. With Alexandria's design network, we don't have to be worried about conflicting with each other. There is no reason to leave me out of the fabrication run."

Ves carefully put Aurelia down in a floating crib and faced his wife. "This is a solo project, honey. I started this by myself and I need to finish it by myself. I need to see how much progress I've made and what I can do without you taking care of the work that I usually skip."

"Don't you have those other solo projects already?"

"The more practice I can get, the more I can exercise the skills I've neglected over the years. I've already made my decision, Gloriana. Don't try to butt in on my private project."

I've let you buy that grossly overpriced handbag made out of puelmer leather. The least you can do is give me more personal space."

That pretty much shut her up. That damned bag was way too expensive for what it was worth in his opinion. His wife hadn't even been carrying it around every day!

Before Ves could embark on his private fabrication session, a major event happened that required his personal attention.

The expeditionary fleet finally arrived at its latest pitstop.

"The Pellysa System." Minister Shederin Purnesse said as the fleet had just exited from FTL travel and began to get its bearings in the new star system. "Otherwise known as the Aorta of the Red Ocean. It has gained this description by becoming a popular trade nexus and port system that connects the inner frontier to the oldest strongholds of humanity in this dwarf galaxy. Many traders who are transporting back riches from the wilder zones usually pass by Pellysa where they can perform repairs, take on new crew and consolidate their cargo. After that, their fleets resume their journey to one of the central star nodes at the edge of the frontier or head straight to Bridgehead One to bring their valuable goods back to the old galaxy."

"I see."

The Pellysa System sounded like a new frontier version of the old Bentheim System of the Bright Republic. Ves was well aware how wealthy a port system could become once it became a popular stop along everyone's trade routes. The concentration of people, ships and goods led to a better-functioning marketplace where people could more easily exchange their unwanted goods for items that they truly need.

This was quite rare in the Red Ocean as many places were still too scattered and underdeveloped to provide a stable and trustworthy trading platform.

"Pellysa is founded and controlled by a consortium of different interests, right?" Ves asked.

"Correct. The THZ Consortium is the authority entrusted by its shareholders to keep the peace and regulate the activities that take place in the port system. Its three major shareholders are the Tiven Corporation, the Haywarth-Spelsler Corporation and the Zenith Corporation. Each of them excel in different industries. Tiven is a big player in resource processing and heavy industry. Haywarth-Spelsler is a leading shipbuilding company. Zenith excels in security and private military services. There are twenty more shareholders but their stakes are too small to influence the decision making of the consortium."

"Even though Pellysa is governed by a single consortium, it sounds like there's a lot of internal division."

Minister Shederin nodded. "Correct, but our clan and fleet has nothing to do with it. One of the reasons why the Pellysa System has won out over its other local competitors is because the consortium is serious about maintaining its neutrality and guaranteeing fair treatment to its visitors. While the THZ Consortium is not as credible as the MTA, it should be safe for us to roam around the various planets in the star system."

Ves smirked. "Even if that's not the case, our MTA escort will make sure the hosts behave."

The THZ Consortium had spread out an extensive sensor network throughout the star system and immediately detected the presence of an actual MTA frigate.

The people over there were quite smart, so when the traffic controllers welcomed the Golden Skull Alliance to the Pellysa System, they quickly rolled out the red carpet. The hosts did not want to neglect the Larkinsons and its allies in case the MTA took notes!

Ves was quite happy to see this, even though he knew his fleet wouldn't receive this kind of treatment once the Simile Halifax finally ended her escort mission.

With Shederi and his staff communicating with the THZ Consortium, Ves did not worry about any problems on that end. He made sure that everything else was in order before he left the bridge and entered his personal workshop.

"It's time to fabricate my first Enlightened Warrior." He grinned.

He had already shipped over the required stock of materials. After running through his timetable, he soon went to work turning his design into a real product.

The job wasn't particularly difficult. The Enlightened Warrior still shared many similarities to the Bright Warrior. Even if it used substantially different parts and materials, the method of production was similar enough for Ves to remain unfazed whenever he had to complete a challenging procedure.

Chapter 3574 Child Mech

A few days later, a brand-new blue-coated mech appeared in the workshop.

Though the mech wasn't a masterwork mech, Ves did not set out to make one anyway. The Enlightened Warrior was just a variant mech design that he had developed on a whim. He did not need to treat it as seriously as his original mech designs.

"It's still a good work for a handmade mech." Ves smiled as he admired his work up close. "It's not as rough as I initially feared. Vulcan has really helped me out this time."

He happily held the Hammer of Brilliance in his hand. His incarnation was happy to be of service after a long period of doing nothing. Helping Ves fabricate the Enlightened

Warrior provided it with another opportunity to deepen the design spirit's connection to craftsmanship.

The Enlightened Warrior mech that Ves had managed to produce with the help of his own incarnation exuded a special feel that was different from a regular Bright Warrior.

For one, it did not exude a vibe related to the Larkinson Clan. The Golden Cat was almost entirely absent from the design. Though she was indirectly connected to the variant mech design through her connection to the Quint, the Enlightened Warrior was too far removed from her influence to justify her involvement.

Instead, the glow exuded by the mech was much different from that of any other design spirit.

It was more muted, more metallic, less responsive and more... stable for a lack of a better word.

Ves never really noticed the difference before this day, but now that he was able to make comparisons, he realized that the glows of his conventional design spirits were much more fickle than he thought.

It made sense. Design spirits such as Qilanxo, the Superior Mother and even Arnold were living creatures that were subject to mood swings and other mental shifts.

If they became happy, then the positive aspects of their glows became stronger.

If they grew angry, then the hostile parts of their glows gained a boost.

Little changes like that could actually alter the behavior and effectiveness of a glow on a day-to-day basis.

Yet when he studied the Enlightened Warrior that he had just completed, he felt that its glow was a lot more steady than his other living mechs.

This was a reflection of its source. The Quint started out life as a mech, and nothing changed in that regard. The masterwork mech was used to remaining dormant for days, weeks or even months without active use. This meant that the mech had to be patient by nature but also be ready to go online when its strength was truly needed.

"This is a relatively minor difference, though."

In practical terms, the stability of a glow was not that important. What Ves truly cared about was the effect of the glow.

He closed his eyes and reached deeper into the Enlightened Warrior. He could sense the distinctive presence of the Quint more clearly. The masterwork mech didn't seem to know what to do with its brand-new connection to the recently-fabricated mech.

"It's okay. The Enlightened Warrior is your child in a sense. Try and raise it if you can. It's a living mech, just like you. Don't neglect the mech pilot, though. I'll make sure this mech will gain proper exercise soon."

The new mech had to undergo trials in order to verify that it was safe and to prove that the product was sound. Once Ves got this chore out of the way, he could assign a production task to the Spirit of Bentheim's production halls and have them pump out a couple of hundred copies of his new mech design.

"I'll have to make sure that they have access to enough raw materials, though." He frowned.

The Larkinson Clan may have stockpiled a decent amount of materials that were widely used in many different products, but Ves was quite sure that the cargo bays didn't store enough materials to produce hundreds of entirely different mechs than before.

Much of the material stockpiles carried by the Larkinson fleet still comprised of old galaxy materials that were needed to fabricate additional Bright Warriors and other older mech models!

"We need to resolve these logistical issues as well."

The Larkinson Clan couldn't keep producing mechs based on two different tech and material bases. It needed to fully transition to the standards of the Red Ocean before its stock of old materials ran empty.

That was definitely going to take a while. The current round of design projects should reduce the demand for those scarce and difficult-to-replenish goods, but it was going to take another round to complete the transition.

Ves shook his head. He could think about this problem at another time. Right now, he had to verify that the Enlightened Warrior could function properly without posing any threat to its mech pilot.

He floated up to its chest and entered its cockpit so that he could check on the internal diagnostics of the mech. The machine didn't report any problems and his intuition didn't warn him of anything dangerous either, but he could only collect a limited amount of data while it was inactive.

"It needs to be piloted."

He left the cockpit and began to contact a number of people to set up a testing session. He didn't mind performing the trials in open space as the Enlightened Warrior was not a secret project or a strategic clan asset.

Since Ves originally intended to sell it on the local market, it might be good to give his customers real footage of the Enlightened Warrior in action.

"And who better to demonstrate its capabilities than with one of the best-trained mech pilots in human space?"

He activated his comm and brought up a list of contacts. After a short moment of contemplation, he called up the most prominent name who he had heard good stories about.

"Jessica Quentin."

"Yes, Patriarch Ves?" The woman's projection asked.

"The mech that your group has been asking for is finished." Ves replied and gestured to his back where the recently-completed mech was resting. "I need a volunteer to test the mech and see whether it meets your requirements. Are you available?"

"Did you develop a medium mech?"

"Yes. It's a variant of the Bright Warrior and highly resembled it in many areas. Is that a problem?"

"No." Jessica shook her head. "I mostly prefer to pilot lighter mechs, but I am well-versed in piloting other styles of machines. I would be glad to pilot your new mech."

"Alright, then meet me at the hangar bay. The Enlightened Warrior will be in your hands."

Time passed by quickly as Ves made the appropriate arrangements to move the mech he made over to the hangar bay.

A lot of Larkinsons stared at the new mech and grew curious at it. The mech was so obviously based on the Bright Warrior yet possessed a substantially different character that did not seem overly Larkinson.

"What is that mech?"

"Maybe it's an attempt to sell a more universal version of the Bright Warrior on the market."

"It could be a private commission."

"Who would want to buy it, though? A Bright Warrior that doesn't have the right glow doesn't sound that useful to me. Has the patriarch gone mad?"

"Mate. You must be new here, right? Let me tell you that the patriarch is always mad. It's just a question whether it's the right or wrong kind of madness for the situation."

Once Ves moved the mech to the hangar bay, he personally supervised the process of outfitting it in its swordsman mech configuration. This was the simplest and most flexible melee mech configuration and fit well with the test pilot's inclinations.

Soon enough. Jessica Quentin along with a group of other MTA mech pilots arrived at the hangar bay.

A few mech designers appeared as well. Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone wanted to see what the excitement was all about.

"So this is your new mech. It's... not what I expected, sir." Janassa said.

She obviously wanted to say more but refrained from doing so. Her opinion of the mech was not that good.

"It's more than it looks." Ves lightly responded. "The Enlightened Warrior should be seen as a pseudo-training mech. While it is not as optimized and efficient as our regular mech models, it provides a unique service to its mech pilots."

"Like the Chiron model that our mech cadets love so much?"

"They're similar, but there are still differences. The Enlightened Warrior is the grown-up version of an academy training mech. It is not meant to be piloted in live practice sessions and other controlled environments. It is still a capable combat mech and should participate in battles in order to provide the best possible training conditions to the mech pilots."

Neither Janassa nor Tifi understood what Ves was saying.

"This sounds contradictory, patriarch." Tifi frowned. "Training mechs and combat mechs are treated as separate products because their functions often conflict with each other. Accommodations made to training mechs usually diminish their effectiveness in real battle. As for combat mechs, their lethality and lack of safety buffers make it dangerous for them to be used in live practice."

"Ah, I already said that the Enlightened Warrior is meant for actual mech pilots. To be honest, it is a training mech for better mech pilots rather than those who still need to work on their fundamentals. This is a mech which I hope will increase the possibility of breakthroughs."

That caused the two new Journeymen to look surprised. "Truly? How? Isn't this impossible?"

Ves told them the basic rationale of how the Enlightened Warrior worked. He merely shoved most of the responsibility to the Quint without going into too many other details. No one needed to know the full truth, and certainly not the MTA who was probably eavesdropping on this conversation!

"It sounds difficult to believe, sir." Janassa eventually remarked. "We are still new to living mechs. I never imagined you could use another mech as the source of a glow."

"Hehehe. Isn't the mech in front of you proof that I can make it work? The Enlightened Warrior is completely new, but as long as you put it next to the Quint, you'll probably be able to see that the two are related and not just in a physical sense."

Ves wasn't here to explain his own work. Once he brushed Janassa and Tifi aside, he instructed Jessica Quentin to suit up and enter the cockpit of the Enlightened Warrior.

After undergoing the usual routine checks, the mech pilot finally received permission to activate her new machine.

Ves observed carefully as the MTA mech pilot opened herself up to the first Enlightened Warrior in existence.

The boot-up procedure went as normal and no significant anomalies occurred. Ves paid close attention to the pilot telemetry and especially the strain endured by the mech pilot.

Although the readings signaled elevated activity, there were few signs of elevated stress and no signs of any buildup of pressure in Jessica Quentin's head!

Of course, the transcendence portion of the Enlightened Warrior's glow wasn't online yet. The Quint wisely withheld it from activating since this was Quentin's first time piloting this new mech.

Once the Enlightened Warrior completed its boot-up process, Ves wanted to see it in action.

"If there is nothing wrong, please deploy your mech into space. We have already prepared a basic testing course a few hundred kilometers away from our fleet."

The new mech launched into space without any fanfare. Though a lot of people in the expeditionary fleet had grown curious about the new mech, none of them understood what made it different.

Even Jessica wasn't sure about whether the mech lived up to its promise! So far, she did not sense any of the guidance or assistance that she expected.

"Is this a defective mech?" She wondered even as she flew it deeper into space.

Chapter 3575 Beginning of Enlightenment

Jessica Quentin and her fellow MTA mech pilots slowly came to enjoy their time with the Larkinson Clan.

Even though the 5-year assignment placed them away from their friends, their family, as well as the privileges and services they enjoyed in MTA territory, the separation had ultimately done them a lot of good.

Life had been a bit too easy back when they served in regular MTA units. They always enjoyed the protection of one of the most powerful organizations in the galaxy. This not only meant that they had few actual enemies to fight, it also affected their psychology in a detrimental fashion.

One of the dirty secrets of the MTA was that one of the actual reasons why it was willing to recruit outsiders was because too few internal members broke through to expert pilot and beyond.

If the MTA solely relied on internal personnel to grow and replenish its roster of high-ranking mech pilots, then it would probably see a drop in expert pilots and so on! The potentates who were born and raised within the ranks of the Association simply had it too good!

Of course, the Mech Trade Association was very much aware of this trend and tried its best to institute intensive and dangerous training programs that were designed to put mech pilots out of their comfort zone.

Yet no matter how much the MTA tried to stimulate the survival drive of its mech pilots, these training programs were always lacking something.

This was why more and more mech pilots secretly chose to adopt cover identities and serve in other private organizations for a change.

By stripping themselves of all of their obvious vestiges as the most elite mech pilot of human civilization, they hoped to subject themselves to pressure that they could not find in the MTA.

While Jessica occasionally heard about success stories, many just came crawling back to the Association without reaching their ultimate goal. Others came back in coffins or nothing at all as their corpses were vaporized when their fragile mech succumbed to laser fire!

This was why only a minority of mech pilots sought to serve as guest pilots. Many of them received a huge amount of investment to make them as good as they were. The

best training and the best implants gave them a huge edge over other mech pilots, but battlefields were so chaotic that these pilots could die in an instant without any of them able to control their own fate!

After all, even the best-trained mech pilot would succumb in an instant if he piloted a regular machine and happened to be attacked by an expert mech!

No place was fair and the enemy always loved to play dirty. It was a waste for those that worked so hard and received so much investment in their development to gamble their lives away. This was why most MTA mech pilots decided it was better to stay with their organization and find a way to surpass their limits under safer circumstances.

Jessica used to lean in this direction as well. She had a family. Her parents expected much from her. She could not bear the thought of disappointing them by depriving her mother and father of a daughter as well as a successor they poured so much credits and merits into improving.

Yet the longer she stayed with the Larkinsons, the more she became infected by the general atmosphere.

Liaising with an organization as reckless and adventurous as the Larkinson Clan was truly more exciting than anything she experienced with the MTA!

The battles actually meant something and their lives were truly at stake. Yet there was another factor that most of those training programs simply lacked.

It was camaraderie.

Jessica and her fellow mechers slowly became friends with the Larkinsons. It was hard not to like these friendly and boisterous people. They were so casual about everything but showed they could be incredibly serious when it mattered.

Their emphasis on family along with their diverse clansmen led to an atmosphere in the Larkinson fleet that was filled with love, brotherhood and shared struggle.

As guest pilots that risked their lives several times in battle, the MTA mech pilots fully received the appreciation of the Larkinsons.

Even if it remained clear that people like Jessica would never entertain the thought of joining the Larkinson Clan, that didn't stop the two sides from treating each other as comrades in arms.

Of all of the Larkinsons that had made her feel welcome in the clan, Venerable Tusa charmed her the most.

Back when Jessica served among the Speed Demons and received personal tutoring from the man in question, the expert light mech specialist did not solely treat her like a chore or a mere background figure.

Despite his reputation for being flighty and rather whimsical, Tusa took her and everyone else under his wing seriously. He not only provided serious instruction to her, but also included her in social events such as going out on a day of fun at Twilight City or inviting her to a bar in order to have an ill-advised drinking contest.

Jessica never lost these jovial contests. Her advanced implants and modified organs were capable of filtering out many forms of toxins including alcohol.

It was the thought that counted, though. She felt a closer sort of camaraderie with the Larkinsons than with most of her colleagues back in her old workplace.

The MTA was simply too big and impersonal now that she experienced what it was like to live and work among the Larkinsons.

In her opinion, there were too many factions and interests in the Association that each tried to pursue different objectives. Their constant tug of war not only made the MTA slow to change, but also led to frequent clashes between mechers hailing from different factions.

It was good for Jessica to move away from that tangled minefield of interests and factions. Although the Larkinsons were divided between different groups as well, each of them were still friendly enough with each other to remember they were brothers and sisters.

"They're all family."

A part of Jessica felt jealous for the Larkinsons. The close and implicit trust they held towards each other was priceless to many other people. Did the clansmen not know how fortunate they were for being able to put near-unreserved trust in each other?

Even though it seemed that the main reason why the Larkinsons behaved like this was because they all joined a cat cult or something, it was still impressive that they managed to keep it up for so long.

Personally, Jessica wished the Larkinsons well, but if they continued to blunder into one dangerous region after another, she did not think they would remain lucky forever.

"Their mechs are constantly getting stronger, though. Maybe they'll be able to improve fast enough that they won't get overrun."

This was quite a realistic possibility given how much each new mech was stronger and more useful than the ones before.

The Enlightened Warrior might be an exception, though.

So far, Jessica hardly became more enlightened. Though the new mech was a lot more comfortable for her to pilot than the Bright Warrior, she still preferred to stick with the Ferocious Piranha.

"This medium mech is almost just as slow as the original Bright Warrior."

Once her Enlightened Warrior reached the prepared testing ground, the patriarch instructed her to go through the usual tests for new mechs like these. From swinging limbs to maneuvering around in zig-zags, the mech showed it was truly sound.

"Is it special, though?"

The mech still did not show why it was worthy to be called that way. While the glow put her in a different mood, that was not enough for her to prefer this new machine over the Ferocious Piranha.

Ves gave her a different instruction.

"Alright, Jessica. Now that we got the basics out of the way, we'll proceed with a modified testing scenario. While it is not usual for a new mech to be put into realistic combat trails during its first testing session, your mech is a variant, so there are much less surprises than normal."

The MTA mech pilot narrowed her eyes. Testing mechs was serious business. Back in the Association, the people who conducted them rigidly adhered to protocol and never deviated from the plan unless there was danger.

"May I ask what this 'special testing scenario' entails?"

"Heh, what you've showed off before is just the basic combat capabilities of your mech. What I want to try out are the training and improvement aspects of your mech. You might feel a bit unusual in the following moments. Stay calm and describe everything that is out of place."

"What are you talking about, sir?"

Then, she experienced something different.

A small echo brushed past her mind.

"Hm?"

She looked around as if there was someone standing behind her piloting chair.

A whisper brushed past her ears.

This time, Jessica confirmed that it came from her mech!

"Patriarch, I am feeling or hearing whispers that don't exist. I think the mech may be responsible."

"That's not a malfunction, Miss Quentin. That's the mech trying to guide you. How clearly can you hear these so-called whispers?"

"They're too faint and soft for me to understand. I think I can brush their overall meaning, but I cannot understand them in my current state."

"I... think you need to deepen your connection with your mech. The Enlightened Warrior exists to serve you in more ways than one. It's not just a combat tool, but also a training guide. Think about the latter and think about your own desire to improve and achieve a breakthrough. This will bring you into alignment with your living mech and make it easier for you to converse with it and vice versa. Communication is crucial to making the most out of the Enlightened Warrior!"

Though Jessica thought that this approach sounded a bit dubious, she had spent enough time around living mechs to know that there was truth in their description.

The other Larkinson mech pilots also discovered that getting closer to their living mechs was the best way to get more out of the machines.

Jessica had also adopted this approach and tried her best to develop a deeper bond with her Ferocious Piranha.

It was too bad that this was difficult to accomplish with a mech with two contradicting glows. It required an extremely special approach to develop an actual friendship with a Ferocious Piranha!

The Enlightened Warrior wasn't that complicated in comparison. Its glow was based around the Quint as far as she knew, and that made everything simpler.

It took a few minutes for her to find the right approach. The Enlightened Warrior was a new and unfamiliar mech.

She found success when she evoked her own desire to improve.

As a member of the MTA, she possessed access to some of the best conditions for mech pilots to develop themselves.

As far as standard mech pilots went, she and her fellow mechers ranked above everyone else in human space!

Yet... for all of the merits and credits poured into her development, she was ultimately inferior to all of the expert pilots who emerged under far more inferior circumstances.

How could she possibly be happy about this? Whenever she witnessed the more gifted individuals in the clan, she felt indignant how these supposed 'space peasants' lucked out and made their first step to godhood while she remained stuck as a mortal despite all of her efforts.

She was not resigned to her fate!

"I... want to advance. I want to be special. I want to be more than a forgettable soldier!"

GOOD. YOU HAVE STILL HAVE A FIGHTING SPIRIT. YOU WILL NEED THAT IF YOU WISH TO BECOME WORTHY OF MY INSTRUCTION.

"What the!? Who's there!? Who's talking?!"

YOU KNOW WHO I AM.

"You're... that living mech? The Quint?"

How... how could the Quint possibly communicate with her when she wasn't even piloting that masterwork mech? Had living mechs become this powerful already?!

Chapter 3576 Quint Questioning Quentin

Living mechs were the distinct specialty of the Larkinson Clan.

While the Living Mech Corporation did release a number of third-class mech models on the mech market, they were all fairly old and did not impact the battles taking place in the more important parts of the galaxy.

The Hexadric Hegemony was the only third party to obtain the right to pilot second-class living mechs, and they had already discovered a lot of benefits and nuances about them. The Blessed Squires and Valkyrie Redeemers were such effective morale boosters that they had become the staple of the Hex Army.

The Hexers had even begun to develop variants themselves. Although the Hexer mech designers had to adopt a conservative approach in order to preserve the glows, the new and dizzying variety of Valkyrie mech models increasingly transformed warfare in the Komodo Star Sector beyond anyone's imagination!

With over a hundred million users of living mechs, the people's understanding of living mechs had increased by a remarkable degree.

The Larkinsons knew even more about living mechs. With the creator himself presiding over the clan, its members received plenty of insider knowledge on how to better draw out the potential of their special machines.

Jessica Quentin and her fellow mecher colleagues thought they knew what living mechs were capable of. So far, the machines did offer surprising capabilities, but they never really sold the idea that they were truly alive.

She had heard that the masterwork mechs of the Larkinson Clan were a lot better in this aspect, but without any opportunity to pilot them, she took these stories with a grain of salt. It was hard to believe in all of the hype given that the Larkinsons had a tendency to make wild and outlandish claims on a regular basis.

It wasn't until she finally piloted and connected with the Enlightened Warrior that she realized that her ideas about living mechs were flawed.

"You... how..."

THAT IS NOT IMPORTANT. THIS IS ABOUT YOU, PILOT. YOUR DISSATISFACTION IN YOUR OWN STRENGTH AND YOUR DESIRE TO IMPROVE HAS ATTRACTED MY ATTENTION. IF YOU WISH TO BREAK PAST YOUR LIMITS, THEN YOU MUST HAVE THE WILL AND DETERMINATION TO IMPROVE NO MATTER THE COST.

"I already know that! I wouldn't be here if I wanted to be normal. I am committed to pursuing greater strength."

IS THAT ACTUALLY THE TRUTH?

"You doubt me?" She frowned.

YOUR WILL IS FEEBLER THAN YOUR THINK. PRIDE, EGO AND PRIVILEGE SUSTAINS YOUR DRIVE TO IMPROVE, BUT THOSE ARE BRITTLE PILLARS TO RELY UPON. PUT TOO MUCH PRESSURE ON THEM, AND THEY WILL BREAK, BRINGING YOU DOWN AS WELL.

Though Jessica wanted to refute this strange mech's words, deep in her heart she couldn't help but agree with the Quint.

Under normal circumstances, she would have replied with a face-saving retort, but she could already tell that wouldn't work.

Her mind was connected to the Enlightened Warrior through the neural interface. There was no way she could hide her true thoughts under these circumstances. She could feel the Enlightened Warrior and by extension the Quint judging her at this very moment.

She was afraid her performance had not been optimistic so far. Something about her failed to meet their requirements.

Her augmented mind worked quickly as she analyzed their previous conversations. She developed numerous theories on what the Quint found lacking in her. She quickly came up with an answer that had the highest chance of receiving a positive response.

"You believe that I am lacking a greater purpose, is that it?" She asked. "I am still young enough. I can still learn. I can find a cause that I am willing to fight for. Is that what you want?"

IT IS NOT AS SIMPLE AS SIMPLE AS THAT, JESSICA QUENTIN. OF THE TWO MECH PILOTS I HAVE GUIDED BEFORE, BOTH OF THEM HAVE INSHRINED THEIR DEDICATION TO THEIR FELLOW LARKINSONS IN THEIR HEARTS. THEY HAVE PROVEN THEIR WILL TO FIGHT TO THE DEATH IN NUMEROUS BATTLES. COMPARED TO THEM, YOU FALL FAR SHORT OF THAT IDEAL.

"I... I may be behind them, but I can catch up to them! I am here to learn, Quint. Just give me the instructions." Jessica argued.

I AM ALREADY GIVING YOU INSTRUCTION. YOU LACK THE FUNDAMENTAL CONVICTION TO FIGHT AND DIE FOR ANYONE EXCEPT YOURSELF. YOUR PRINCIPLES ARE WEAK AND YOUR COMMITMENT TO MECH PILOTING IS BASED ON THE PROSPECT OF ENJOYING A GREATER STATUS IN HUMAN SOCIETY.

Jessica coughed. "That... I do not think that I am as bad as you say! I have dedicated decades of my life to the piloting profession. I studied hard and won as many opportunities as I could to excel above my peers. I am training in piloting so many different mechs that there is hardly any machine that can stump me anymore. I threw myself into mastering the art of piloting lighter mechs so that I can push my greatest advantages as a mech pilot even further. I do not lack the drive to improve."

YET YOU HAVE NOT ADDRESSED YOUR GREATEST FLAW. YOU ARE A SMART MECH PILOT, JESSICA QUENTIN. YOU SHOULD HAVE ALREADY DERIVED THE REASON WHY YOU HAVE NEVER MADE ANY FURTHER PROGRESS AND WHY YOU WILL CONTINUE TO REMAIN STUCK.

The hardest attacks were ones that rang true. As a soldier, Jessica had gone through a lot of training. She did not remain fazed for too long when confronted by such a deep and vicious personal attack.

"I... am not truly willing to die for the MTA." She admitted with a heavy breath.

It was an uncomfortable truth that she didn't want to say, but the Quint had forced her hand.

Despite all of her training, despite all of the good times she had with her fellow mechers and despite all of the benefits and privileges she received, the MTA's purpose did not rate higher than her personal ambitions.

The Mech Trade Association was too powerful. This bred a lot of arrogance among its members. Even if an individual within the Association wasn't good enough, there were always stronger and better mechers to bail them out. Countless first-class multipurpose mechs and many different warfleets stood ready to defeat any threat that could not be solved by a smaller number of mech pilots.

Jessica was such a small and inconsequential mech pilot within the organization that it was impossible for her to feel as if she could make a difference.

The MTA didn't need her strength. It had countless other mech pilots and highly talented personnel to call upon if it needed to fight against a powerful enemy.

Even if she did not do her best and failed to hold her ground in a battle, the stronger elements of the MTA would eventually come and solve the enemy in a more decisive fashion.

All of these thoughts and realizations made it so that Jessica Quentin lacked the conviction to die for the organization she worked for and grew up in. This was a problem that was not unique to mechers, but the fact that it applied to her as well meant that she was in a truly awful position!

Diagnosing the problem was easy, but solving it was another matter. Jessica could not find it within herself to develop a conviction for the MTA. She simply couldn't bring herself to this point given what she knew about the Association.

YOUR PROBLEM RUNS DEEP, BUT IT IS NOT INSURMOUNTABLE. THOUGH YOUR CHARACTER IS NOT AS GREAT AS THAT OF JOSHUA AND CASELLA, I CAN HELP YOU BRING YOU TO THAT LEVEL. THIS REQUIRES GREAT EFFORT ON MY PART. JUST MAINTAINING THIS DIRECT CONVERSATION WITH YOU IS ALREADY STRAINING MY CAPABILITIES.

"If you are trying to suggest that I should pledge my loyalty to the Larkinson Clan, then forget about, Quint. I may not be as stiff as I want, but I will not betray my oaths."

I WOULD DESPISE YOU IF YOU BENT SO EASILY TO THE DEMANDS OF OTHERS. I AM NOT ASKING FOR YOUR LOYALTY. I AM ASKING FOR YOUR SUBMISSION. WHAT I AM ASKING FROM YOU IS A PROMISE.

"A promise?"

I REQUIRE A SIMPLE PROMISE FROM YOU. WHILE I DO NOT ASK YOU TO PLEDGE YOUR LOYALTY TO THE LARKINSON CLAN, I DO NOT WISH TO RAISE A

FUTURE ENEMY OF OURS. IF YOU WISH TO RECEIVE MY GUIDANCE, THEN YOU MUST PLEDGE A SOLEMN OATH TO NEVER ATTACK OR HARM THE LARKINSON CLAN AND ITS MEMBERS. IF YOU ARE EVER IN A POSITION WHERE YOU ARE COMPELLED TO ATTACK THE LARKINSONS, THEN YOU MUST AT THE VERY LEAST STAND ASIDE.

Jessica Quentin widened her eyes. Although this request sounded simple at first, it was actually filled with numerous traps!

For example, what should she do if the Larkinson Clan one day crossed the line? What if the Larkinsons detonated antimatter warheads on a populated human planet or actually colluded with aliens in order to set humanity back? Wouldn't it be more righteous for her to do her part in stopping the Larkinsons before they could commit more atrocities?

WHY ARE YOU HESITATING? THE PROMISE THAT YOU MUST MAKE ONLY APPLIES TO YOU. ACCORDING TO YOUR OWN THOUGHTS, THE MECH TRADE ASSOCIATION IS SUCH AN IMMENSE ORGANIZATION THAT YOUR REFUSAL TO OBEY INSTRUCTIONS WILL NOT AFFECT THE GREATER TREND. THERE ARE MANY MORE MECH PILOTS WHO ARE MORE THAN WILLING TO COMPLETE THE MISSION THAT YOU ARE OATHBOUND TO REFUSE.

"That... is true." Jessica frowned. "It is the principle of the matter, though. I truly cannot bring myself to make any carve outs if I want to develop a serious conviction."

IF THAT IS WHAT YOU THINK, THEN YOU ARE MORE THAN WELCOME TO FIND YOUR OWN WAY TO BECOME AN EXPERT PILOT. THE ENLIGHTENED WARRIOR WILL NOT BE AS EFFECTIVE ON YOU IF YOU THINK THIS WAY. YOU ARE BETTER OFF PILOTING ANOTHER MECH.

"..."

Jessica had a lot to think about. Though there were many times where she wanted to refute or deny the Quint's words, the mech knew what it was talking about. She couldn't get rid of the notion that she might be missing the opportunity of her lifetime if she continued to remain inflexible about the masterwork mech's demands.

Was it worth it to pledge another oath and to put her personal ambitions above the greater interests of the MTA?

"I... I've already been doing that for most of my life." She admitted to herself. "Maybe going a step further is not that much worse."

Her loyalty to the MTA compelled her to reject this option, but the more practical side of her knew that it wouldn't matter in the greater scheme of things.

She might receive a reprimand and make her superior upset, but everything was worth it as long as she was truly able to set off on the path to godhood.

The trajectories of every god pilot had proven that once a mech pilot obtained enough power, the MTA would begin to bend to their whims instead of the other way around!

Jessica set her sights squarely on the top. Nothing less than becoming a god pilot herself would make her feel fulfilled! Her desire to fulfill this dream made her a lot more willing to pledge a single additional oath!

"Fine. You win. I can't believe I'm actually agreeing to do this just because a mech told me to. This is most certainly one of the weirdest days of my life."

She felt dirty for compromising her loyalty to the MTA. She felt further removed from becoming an expert pilot because of that. She hoped that the Quint would be able to compensate for that and help her get even closer.

After Jessica pledged her oath with utmost sincerity, the Enlightened Warrior seemed to open up to her. The living mech behaved as if it was waiting for her to do something for the Larkinson Clan before it was willing to perform its function!

OPEN YOUR EYES, JESSICA, AND DISCOVER YOUR TRUE CONVICTION.

The Quint had activated a setting that introduced a new glow to the Enlightened Warrior. The mech seemed to bloom in a way that called up something deep inside Jessica's heart!

Chapter 3577 The Rising Mountain

Alarms began to ring inside the cockpit of the Enlightened Warrior but Jessica was deaf to them. She had become so engrossed by her own sensations that she no longer even noticed that she was piloting a mech!

Back in the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves grew a lot more concerned when he saw that the stress levels of the test pilot were jumping upwards.

Although he expected the Enlightened Warrior to produce an elevated reaction from Jessica Quentin, the spikes he was seeing were too much!

They also looked suspiciously familiar to Ves. Weren't these readings similar to the ones he observed when he experimented on a lot of dwarves?

His eyes widened in alarm. "QUINT! What the hell are you doing!?"

More than a hundred kilometers separated Ves from the Enlightened Warrior mech he was testing. This meant that he could not keep track of what was happening to the glow or other spiritual phenomena surrounding his mech.

In hindsight, he should have placed it a bit closer to his position. Despite the obvious security risks that entailed, Ves really wanted to obtain a better idea on what was truly going on inside his new mech.

From what he was able to infer from Jessica Quentin's life signs, the mech pilot was undergoing a lot of upheaval, so much so that her heart rate and other signs of stress were rising in a similar fashion to the test subjects that he had experimented upon in the past!

The more Ves studied the data, the more he was able to see the similarities in the pattern. The rate of increase was so unnatural and alarming that he could only think of one reason why Jessica Quentin's physiological signs were spiking to such an extent.

The Quint was subjecting its own mech pilot to the full force of the new mech's transcendence glow!

This went way past the safety limit that he had programmed!

"How?!"

Ves almost began to panic as he thought about how the Quint was able to override the Enlightened Warrior's safety limit.

Did the masterwork mech bully the newborn machine? Did the Quint actually hack into the Enlightened Warrior mech and forcibly removed the safety barriers that Ves had put up in order to prevent his new mech model from killing its own mech pilots?

If this was true, then that had huge implications for Ves and his relationship with the various spiritual entities he created or recruited over the years.

For a long time, Ves and the various spirits that had joined his collection enjoyed a harmonious relationship. Both of them benefited from playing by the rules.

As long as Ves kept designing mechs, he would continue to draw upon the design spirits to strengthen his work.

This provided the design spirits with spiritual feedback which they needed to sustain their incorporeal existence and potentially evolve further.

Why was the Quint different?

"It's a mech and not a traditional living organism."

Ves used different approaches to create different mechs. When he created a new design spirit by himself, he generally tried to create a form of life that was fairly similar to that of a human. He took their emotions, their motivations, their inclinations and other living aspects into account and tried to make them as rounded as possible while still making sure they fulfilled their primary responsibilities.

Whenever he designed or built his mechs, he did not set out to create rounded individuals. He needed them to live for their jobs and fulfill their purpose without any deviations.

The reason for adopting a more narrow approach was because his mechs needed to be reliable and consistent enough for mech pilots to count on them. It would hardly be good for his Larkinsons and his customers if every single living mech came out differently despite sharing the same design!

Of course, even if the individual mechs started out as near-copies of each other, they eventually diverged from each other as they were utilized by different mech pilots. Each of them slowly developed their own characters and grew in unique ways.

The Quint along with the Shield of Samar were the most prominent mechs of this kind. Both of them had deviated so far from the mech model they were originally based upon that they had literally taken a life of their own!

Ves considered them to be children that had grown up. They were adults who were old enough to make their own choices, befriend whoever they wished and set their own life goals.

Up until now, Ves had never questioned whether his living mechs would continue to act responsibly. The templates that he had set for them already came with a strong sense of loyalty to the Larkinson Clan. Even if they grew in different directions, they all shared the same root!

"What about the Quint, though? Has it gone astray?!"

The Quint was pretty much the most valuable standard mech in the Larkinson Clan. It was a living relic that could offer a lot of benefits to the Larkinsons as long as it faithfully served the clan as always.

The mere suggestion that Ves would have to retire it because it was capable of causing active harm onto mech pilot was painful for him to think about!

Yet as clan leader and mech designer, Ves would have no choice but to put the Quint in the mech equivalent of a prison if it ever misbehaved to a severe degree.

If Jessica Quentin's head blew up because the Quint couldn't show any restraint, then Ves would get into a lot of trouble with the MTA!

He could practically feel Jovy's eyes staring in direction. The MTA Journeyman was sure to observe everything carefully. There was no way that Ves could shirk responsibility if Jessica Quentin actually died in this testing session!

While Ves was worrying about the consequences of what was happening, Jessica did not feel as if she was in a bad state at all. It was the opposite. The removal of all distractions and the amplification of her greatest obsessions allowed her to see the truth of who she was for the first time in her life.

No amount of introspection and self-analysis could go past her own lies. Like walls, the lies she generated and told herself kept her away from the uglier parts about herself that she didn't want to think about.

Whatever the Enlightened Warrior was doing to her had struck down all of those walls and laid the truth to bare.

In fact, it didn't just end at breaking walls. The mech's powerful new glow actually caused the prisoner that was locked deep inside her heart to rise to a more prominent height!

At this point, Jessica Quentin couldn't even turn her attention away from it if she wanted to. It had risen so much that she couldn't think about anything else.

"So this is who I really am." She whispered.

The truth was pretty simple.

Jessica Quentin was not a soldier who took pride in serving on behalf of the MTA. Perhaps it was ungrateful for her to think this way, but she never had a choice of choosing who she served with when she was born in a family that already belonged to the Association.

In addition, she did not feel a strong sense of belonging to any of the MTA factions even though she was a member of one. Her parents were already aligned to the Survivalist Faction and simply expected their daughter to follow suit.

For her entire life, she thought that she had plenty of choice of who she was developing into. Yet it turned out that the few choices she was allowed to make only gave her the illusion of choice.

From the moment she found out she had the right genetic aptitude, everyone around her tried to mold her into a mech pilot.

Was this bad? Not necessarily. Jessica genuinely loved her profession. Mech pilots were important in the Age of Mechs and it was an honor to become a part of this noble group.

Even if everyone around her didn't push her into becoming a mech pilot, she still would have done her best in the academies and training programs.

What Jessica felt helpless about was that she had lived her entire life without making enough decisions on her own. She had lived under the direction of various people. Her parents, her instructors, her superior officers and even Master Willix all made decisions on her behalf without seriously giving her a real say in her own future.

Perhaps she never felt upset about it before because it was so ingrained in her life, but in her heart the resentment at the lack of consideration continued to build up. After all of these years of living a life she wasn't really satisfied with, all of that accumulated resentment had piled up into a mountain!

Now, the mountain was slowly rising higher, causing Jessica to become more and more infused with the burning anger at her lack of choices.

The more she thought back on the situations where she acted like an obedient MTA drone who wordlessly obeyed every instruction given to her, the more she fueled her desire to break out of her cocoon and fly free like a butterfly!

"I... I know who I am now!" She shouted, whether it was to her mech, the Quint or herself, it didn't matter! "Venerable Tusa had been right all along. It's much more liberating to care about myself than to care for others!"

The time became a Speed Demon and served alongside Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was actually the happiest period of her life.

She admired Tusa. She envied his power. Yet what she found the most impressive about him was that he had the power and the guts to make his own choices in life.

Sure, he was still a Larkinson and he never failed to fight for the clan if needed. Yet the way he approached his responsibilities was remarkably different from many other Larkinsons.

Tusa always gave everyone a vibe that he was only here by choice. If the Larkinson Clan ever changed in a direction he didn't agree with, he would not hesitate to resign and leave no matter what was allowed or what was right.

It was a bold stance, yet one that the Larkinsons tolerated because he was an expert pilot. Everyone in the clan knew that expert pilots were so committed to their principles and beliefs that it was pointless to make them change.

Jessica's eyes shone brilliantly as she had found her ticket to freedom.

The best way for her to gain autonomy over her own life was to become an expert pilot who was deeply committed to her self-determination!

If she gained the strength to command respect from the MTA, then people would no longer dismiss her own opinions!

If she showed that she was willing to fight and die for the right to make her own choices, then the MTA would have no choice but to give her what she wanted lest it ruin a potential ace pilot or god pilot!

"Power! I can do all of this as long as I have power!" Jessica raised her fist and gripped it as if she was grasping her own destiny! "Only by becoming a demigod will I have the capital to take back control!"

Just as the rising mountain was about to burst out from her heart and turn into a butterfly, everything abruptly crashed as the entire cockpit went dark!

"AHHHHH!"

Jessica held her head in pain as she experienced a much more abrupt reaction to having her mech abruptly lose power while interfacing with it! The transition was so much worse for her this time because of her heightened emotions at the time of the cutoff!

Back on the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves maintained an impassive expression as he confirmed that the Enlightened Warrior indeed lost power to all of its systems.

Though he was ordinarily against implementing kill switches in his own mechs, he made exceptions for cases like these.

Every mech based on a new design was a potential hazard to its own pilot. This was even more relevant this time because he implemented a dangerous solution into the Enlightened Warrior design.

Not putting in a killswitch in his first Enlightened Warrior mech would have been stupid if that was the case!

"Well, let's see how the test pilot is faring."

Chapter 3578 Test Pilot Aftermath

"The mountain... I almost... the mountain almost burst out of its cocoon and turned into a butterfly. I... would have been able to flap my wings..."

Ves looked stony as he listened to the incoherent babble of Jessica Quentin.

His staff had recently brought back the Enlightened Warrior mech that he had forcibly shut down. When the medics pulled the mech pilot out of the cockpit, she didn't look so bad at first.

When mech pilots interfaced deeply with a mech, any abrupt shocks and interruptions could inflict noticeable damage to their brains and minds.

This was actually the cause of many mech pilots being forced into retirement because they suffered so much damage that they could no longer establish a proper interfacing connection with a mech.

This was an awful outcome for many mech pilots. Due to just a single battle or accident, all of their hard work and effort into becoming a mech pilot became irrelevant. These pilots dedicated their entire lives to this profession. How could they possibly pick themselves up from this disaster and start a new life as a civilian?

"My grandpa Benjamin managed to do it, but that's mainly because he could lean on our family."

Since this was such a big issue, there were usually safeties in place that tried to prolong the transition so that the mech pilots wouldn't crash so hard.

That was not an option this time. Because the transcendence glow was so dangerous, Ves did not wish to push the button only to wait five seconds or longer until the Enlightened Warrior mech fully shut down its systems!

This was why he had overridden the safeties and made sure that when he pressed the button, the mech would shut everything down as soon as it received the signal!

"At least that went right."

Though Jessica Quentin's current state looked awful, Ves was quite aware that it could have been much worse. He would take a crippled mech pilot over a dead one any day!

He turned to Dr. Ranya. "Will she recover?"

"It's hard to say." She replied. "I've brought our best Lifer doctors over from the Dragon's Den to handle her case in person, but even they have limits. I can tell you now that we have not found any concerning signs that might suggest that her body was close to failing. Aside from a noticeable lack of energy and signs of elevated stress, her body is extremely healthy. In fact, she's so augmented that she could easily outlive diseases that would kill all of our bodies!"

"Oh." Ves said. "What about her brain?"

"You don't have to worry about that either, sir. Apparently, mech pilots of her pedigree undergo genetic modifications that slowly strengthen the physical resilience of her brain and central nervous system. Her neurons are much more flexible and can heal on their own. Her brain is actually partitioned into different compartments that heavily limit how much damage can be done to it. Her head even generates tiny flesh bots that crawl

throughout her head in order to fix issues such as infections, internal bleeding and faulty implants."

"...Are you serious?"

Ranya gave him a serious look. "What I said is just the tip of the iceberg. Don't be fooled, Ves. Jessica Quentin might look like a human, but she is so far removed from her race that she is a substantially different organism. She's tougher than she looks, so both her brain and the rest of her body will make a full recovery."

"Then what about her psyche?" Ves gestured to the silly woman who kept talking about mountains turning into butterflies for no good reason. "Will she get back to normal again or will we have to face the fact that we turned one of our guest pilots into an idiot?"

"You mean you turned her into an idiot. Isn't this new Enlightened Warrior design your sole work? Don't push the blame on us if your plan backfires."

"Just tell me what your docs are saying about her mental state!"

Ranya threw a smirk at him. "Relax, sir. She'll recover. Although we cannot fully understand what she is going through, we can make a few reasonable projections. Other mech pilots that have ended up in similar cases usually return to normalcy anywhere between thirty minutes to six hours. I predict that Quentin here will not take too long to regain her wits given her stellar augmentations. We are already detecting the implants trying to 'reboot' her mind."

"I see. Is it safe to enter her room? I'd like to examine her up close if possible."

Ranya checked with the doctors who promptly informed her it was fine.

"You can go in, but don't try to interact with her or force her to wake up. It is best to give her the time she needs to pick herself up again."

"Understood."

Ves slowly stepped into the room, making sure not to make any abrupt movements that could agitate the patient.

When he stopped next to her recovery bed, Ves did not look at her physical state but instead used his spiritual senses to peer directly into her mind.

He sensed a confused mess inside her mind. Her thoughts were all jumbled up and a number of odd changes had occurred that completely upended its original state.

The jumbled thoughts and emotions were slowly being sorted. Although the pace was a little slow, the fact that Jessica's mind was recovering by itself provided Ves with a lot of relief.

What actually drew his attention was something else. Much to his surprise, Jessica Quentin's willpower and spirituality had actually undergone an evolution since he last inspected her state of mind!

Ves had made sure to track her spirituality before she test piloted the Enlightened Warrior.

When Jessica entered the Larkinson Clan as a guest pilot, she did not possess any spiritual potential, as did her peers. That changed somehow as her spirituality grew to the point she now had real potential.

The only problem was that this potential had not developed any further. Ves chalked it up to her lack of conviction and her comfort in her own identity as a mecher.

Now, she had undergone a drastic change. Though she did not break through to expert candidate, her spiritual potential had undergone a massive boost!

It was several times more powerful than before. Whatever explosive growth process it had gone through, it was certainly effective!

The only downside was that the process also inflicted great pressure on Jessica's spiritual potential. Part of the reason why the mech pilot was so out of it was because the cracks in her own spirit needed to be healed, and while that went on, Jessica remained in a daze.

Aside from that, what Ves also found impressive was that her willpower became a lot purer and more condensed. What he sensed from Jessica could almost rival that of expert candidates.

Unlike her spirituality, Jessica's willpower was in a completely good state. It was vigorous, active and much more developed than before.

"This change is too big."

The combination of these two observations caused Ves to make a shocking conclusion about what just happened.

Had the Enlightened Warrior almost helped Jessica advance to expert candidate?

"This..."

Ves couldn't believe it. The transformation was just too drastic. Before, Jessica was as far removed from becoming an expert candidate as anyone.

Though he had not developed a full theoretical framework on how ordinary mech pilots were able to advance to expert candidate, Ves guessed that it should not be a sudden process.

Mech pilots needed to be tested and challenged in many different situations in order to find out who they were and what they were willing to fight for. This was usually a process that could take years.

He never thought that a mech could accelerate this gradual accumulation process to the point where it immediately skipped all of the waiting and went directly to the climax!

If Ves hadn't pulled the plug on the Enlightened Warrior, would the mech have been able to help Jessica Quentin take her first step in becoming an expert pilot?

He shook his head. This was a dangerous thought. He made the safest choice that he could at the time of the testing session. He didn't know how close Jessica had come to having her head explode. He would rather rule out the possibility of that happening and ruin her advancement opportunity than the other way around!

After all, what was the point of helping Jessica become an expert candidate if her head promptly exploded right afterwards?

Given how much stress her rapidly-grown spirituality had endured, Ves had the suspicion that she had indeed come very close to losing her own head!

"This is for the best." He eventually concluded. "As long as you are alive, you'll have another chance. You don't need to evolve in a single sprint."

After comforting himself with that excuse, he spent the next minutes studying her condition. He took as many mental notes as he could as he opened up a new case file in his cranial implant. He even went back his memories of what had happened and tried to puzzle out the exact sequence of events that led to this result.

"Nghhh... what... where am I?" Jessica blearily asked as she seemingly woke up with the worst headache in years. "Why is my head spinning?"

Ves gently pushed her shoulder down. "Hey there. Slow down. Just sit back and relax. Don't try to get up, okay?"

"...Sir? What are you doing here? What... happened? Wait... I remember. I found... the mountain. My heart... was a cocoon. I almost burst free, you know. Just as I was about to fly... my mech shut down."

She spoke those last words with a flat tone. Her expression was not happy at the moment.

Ves already had an answer ready, though. He activated his comm and projected an image of her life signs at the time.

They did not look reassuring.

"Did you know how much your life signs spiked at the time? Your heart was going wild and the pressure in your head kept building up. I cannot say what would happen if we allowed this to continue, but it is definitely not what the Enlightened Warrior is supposed to do. If you hadn't augmented your physical functions so much, your body would have been in a much worse state!"

The woman frowned. She didn't fully know what all of the readings meant, but it was helpfully color-coded in a way that it would display a lot of red if the life signs were way out of bounds.

Pretty much every life sign reading had spiked into reddish territory!

"I.. didn't realize my body was undergoing so much stress at the time. How? How can piloting a mech produce such an intense physical reaction?"

Ves shrugged. "I'm not a doctor. I don't know how human bodies work. All I know is mechs, and I will definitely have to take the Enlightened Warrior mech back to my workshop in order to tweak its settings and implement more safeguards. What just happened to you must never happen again. I apologize for subjecting you to so much danger."

"I am well, sir. This is what test pilots are for. Although I do not feel good right now, I still remember what I had gone through. The Quint is truly an impressive piece of work. It's no wonder that two different expert pilots emerged from it. Your clan is lucky to have this rude if helpful mech. If the Enlightened Warrior model can introduce your Quint to more mech pilots, then... I think that many more mech pilots may benefit from it as well."

"Thank you for your feedback. I will be sure to take your kind words into account when I deliberate on the future of the Enlightened Warrior design." Ves politely said.

After exchanging a few more words, Ves left the recovery room and thought for a moment.

"I've investigated the pilot. Now I need to get to the bottom of the mech."

It was time to find out what caused the Enlightened Warrior to exceed its original safety parameters!

Chapter 3579 Naughty Mech

When Ves arrived at his workshop, he discovered that someone had already arrived ahead of him. His wife was already looking up at the Enlightened Warrior with a scrutinizing gaze.

"Guuu.. waawaabuubuaawaa!"

Of course, Gloriana had also brought their baby along. Aurelia babbled senses as she tried to reach out at the friendly light blue-coated mech. Compared to everything else she had seen in her brief life, the Enlightened Warrior looked a lot different due to its color scheme!

"Meow."

"Miaow."

The two cats had followed after Gloriana and the baby as well. Right now, the two of them had jumped on top of a work table and pressed down their bottoms in anticipation of a good show.

Gloriana turned and glowered at Ves. "Look at what you've done. Are you proud of yourself? Your solo project nearly got us all in trouble! If I was involved in this project, you would have never made so many mistakes!"

"Hey, my project is sound! I did the best I could and I took every reasonable precaution! Accidents happen, okay?! With a mech design as experimental as the Enlightened Warrior, it performed quite well up until the last moment. I admit that I should have implemented more precautions to prevent the situation from developing up to this point, but everything eventually turned out okay! I pulled the plug before anything truly awful happened."

"And what if you did it too late? What if you misjudged the timing? What if the runaway reaction already did its damage before you realized that something was wrong? Did you ever think about those possible scenarios or were you so confident that your brilliant but risky scheme would somehow work exactly like the way you envisioned? Did you stop implementing more safeguards because you wanted to rush your variant design to completion just in time for our clan to sell copies of the mech to the local mech market? WELL YOU SHOULD HAVE INVOLVED ME AS WELL! WITH TWO MECH DESIGNERS WORKING ON THIS PROJECT AT ONCE, WE COULD GET DOUBLE OF THE WORK DONE! IF I WAS IN CHARGE HERE, I WOULD HAVE NEVER LET YOU COMPLETE YOUR DESIGN IN SUCH A ROUGH STATE!"

"HEY, DON'T BLOW THIS SITUATION OUT OF PROPORTION! MY EXPERIMENT WENT AWRY, BUT THAT TENDS TO HAPPEN WHEN ANYONE TESTS OUT NEW STUFF! YOU'RE HAMMERING ME WAY TOO MUCH, GLORIANA! PLEASE STOP

COMPLAINING AFTER THE FACT BECAUSE I AM HEARING NOTHING FROM YOU THAT WILL ACTUALLY FIX THE PROBLEM!"

Gloriana snarled at Ves. "Don't yell at me! Has your mother not taught you how to behave around our kids? Think of our daughter! Aurelia will cry if you keep being aggressive. Just look!"

She presented Aurelia forward, much to the baby's surprise.

"Whua!? Hihihhi! Wuuu... babaaabaaaa..."

"Uhm, honey, Aurelia looks pretty happy right now. Look! She's giggling! She's so cute!"

His wife quickly pulled back the baby and pretended that nothing had happened.

"Ahem, in any case, let us stop arguing about the causes of this incident and look towards fixing it. Do you have any ideas, Ves?"

He directed an impatient look at her. "Despite what happened, the Enlightened Warrior is still a mech of my own design. I need to fix my problems in order to learn from this incident and do better next time. Now, will you get out of the way and stop distracting me from performing a proper examination of my mech?"

Gloriana made a disgusting sound before she turned her head towards Aurelia. "Did you hear that, Aurelia? Your daddy thinks he knows better even though he got himself in this mess in the first place. The nerve of him! The patients are running the madhouse!"

Ves quickly brushed past his complaining wife and approached the Enlightened Warrior to study its current state.

He first performed a basic technical examination. He paid special attention to the operating system, the data processors and most importantly the neural interface.

None of them showed any signs of tampering and all of the logs indicated that they were working as intended. Any mutation that occurred during the testing session did not originate from the hardware of the mech.

"Well, that rules out a lot of unlikely possibilities."

Even though he didn't think there was anything wrong with the physical state of the mech, he had to confirm it for himself before he narrowed his sights to the more probable causes.

Seeing that the nature of the problem likely involved the spiritual side of the Enlightened Warrior, he carefully touched the surface of the mech and closed his eyes in order to pour his full concentration in the mech.

He first tried to get a deep impression of the character of the mech.

Contrary to his initial thoughts, the Enlightened Warrior did not feel as if it had been tampered or warped by the Quint. The mech was still relatively close to its initial state. It was for all intents and purposes an innocent mech who didn't know what it had done wrong.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm just checking with you. Can you tell me what happened back then?"

The mech was still new and very underdeveloped. Even if it was a second-order mech, its extremely short existence and lack of interaction with its mech pilot meant that it was still lacking in too many areas.

Ves wasn't able to get any clear or coherent answers out of the living mech. He only knew that the Enlightened Warrior pretty much let the Quint run the show and that it had activated its transcendence glow at the maximum possible setting, which Ves had set at 50 percent of the glow of the Aspect of Transcendence.

This should have been a risky but still rather safe setting. According to his theories, the transcendence glow at half strength should have only made Jessica Quentin stressed or agitated at most. It was not supposed to give her a highly realistic simulation of what it was like to stand a few steps away from that living statue!

"I'm missing something here." Ves frowned. "Quint! Tell me what you did!"

I MERELY DID WHAT YOU INTENDED TO, CREATOR. I GAVE PILOT JESSICA QUENTIN WHAT SHE WANTED AND NEEDED. SHE ASKED FOR GUIDANCE. I GAVE IT TO HER. SHE ASKED FOR POWER. I INTRODUCED HER TO IT. SHE WAS WILLING TO DIE FOR HER FREEDOM. I PROVIDED HER WITH A CHANCE. WHETHER SHE LIVED OR DIED IS UP TO HER. IF SHE WANTED IT BAD ENOUGH, THEN SHE WOULD HAVE PASSED THE TEST.

"You..."

Ves looked both shocked and disappointed in the spiritual conversation he held with his own mech.

"How can you be so callous?"

TO SURPASS ONE'S MORTALITY, ONE MUST BE WILLING TO BALANCE ON THE EDGE OF LIFE AND DEATH. JOSHUA AND CASELLA BOTH SHOWED THIS WILLINGNESS. JESSICA QUENTIN HAS YET TO PUSH HERSELF TO THIS KNIFE'S EDGE, SO I PUSHED HER ONTO IT. AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, IT WORKED.

"Jessica's life signs were going wild! Her head almost went poof! Did you know how much trouble you could have gotten us all in?! There was a real chance the MTA would

have stepped in immediately and put me into permanent MTA custody! How the hell am I supposed to help the Larkinson Clan any further? The MTA might even find out that you're the ultimate party responsible for killing one of its own mech pilots and perform the first execution on a living mech!"

The Quint may be intelligent enough to think and talk for itself, but it was still too ignorant of the bigger picture! The masterwork mech still had plenty of shortcomings!

IT WORKED, DID IT NOT? THOUGH YOU HAVE CUT THE MECH PILOT OFF, SHE HAS ALREADY FOUND HER WAY. SHE CAN CLIMB THE LAST HURDLE HERSELF, WITH OR WITHOUT THE ENLIGHTENED WARRIOR. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL TO US THAT WE HAVE DECISIVELY PROVEN YOUR EXPERIMENT IS VIABLE.

Ves banged the forward console with his fist! "You goddamn mulehead! Didn't you listen to anything I said!? I get why you are so eager to prove your effectiveness, but you pushed it way too far! Humans aren't as durable as mechs! Jessica Quentin isn't as ready as Joshua or Casella! Despite all of her implants and fancy training, her spirituality was still undeveloped. You can't just pump it full of air like a balloon and expect it to remain intact! Have you seen her state!? It was all cracked and only a short distance away from bursting!"

THAT WAS A NECESSARY PROCESS. HER SPIRIT WAS LIKE A FIXED CONTAINER. ITS SOLIDITY HAMPERED ITS GROWTH. BREAKING IT DOWN MADE IT EASIER FOR IT TO EXPAND. THE ENLIGHTENED WARRIOR AND I HAVE UNLOCKED HER POTENTIAL. I ADVISE YOU TO ENCOURAGE HER TO FINISH WHAT SHE STARTED AND DO HER BEST TO IMPROVE WHILE SHE IS STILL IN A MALLEABLE STATE. HER AMBITION TO BECOME AN EXPERT CANDIDATE IS CLOSE AT HAND.

"And how the hell do you know that, Quint?! Are you some kind of guru on breakthroughs? What makes you qualified to know better than me? You're toying with forces you don't understand!

I AM THE FORCE.

Ves became speechless.

The arrogance of this mech! He realized more and more that letting his living mechs grow without any structured supervision or education was a big mistake! He should institute some kind of academy for living mechs and force all of them to take classes until they knew what they should or should not do. If all of his living mechs turned into delinquents like the Quint, then his clan that relied so heavily on them would be doomed!

YOU CREATED ME TO SERVE THE CLAN AND DO WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT GREAT.

"Did I?" Ves frowned. "I don't recall having such grandiose thoughts."

YOU INSTILLED ME WITH A MISSION THAT I HAVE BEEN EXECUTING TO THIS DAY. THE CLAN NEEDS STRONGER MECH PILOTS, SO THAT IS WHAT I AM CONSTANTLY TRYING TO PROVIDE. WHAT I DID WAS RIGHT, IF NOT ENTIRELY SAFE. I PERFORMED AN EXPERIMENT I KNEW THAT WOULD WORK. THE RESULT IS CLEAR TO SEE.

"Are you admitting to me that you were experimenting!? You're not a scientist! You don't have a degree! Do you know anything about the scientific method!? There is a process for this! At the very least, you need to start off small and verify your conjectures one by one instead of all at once!"

I AM A MECH. I CANNOT ATTEND A UNIVERSITY AND EARN A DEGREE. BESIDES, NOBODY CAN TEACH ME WHAT I MUST DO. I KNOW BETTER THAN ANYONE, EVEN YOU, CREATOR.

Ves grew numb at this point. He was done being angry. All he knew was that the Quint had been a naughty boy and needed to get spanked.

"At least tell me what possessed you to crank up Lufa's transcendence glow beyond the safety limit that I have hardwired into the Enlightened Warrior."

I DID NOT.

"What?"

YOU CAN SEE IT YOURSELF. THE ENLIGHTENED WARRIOR IS STILL THE SAME.

The Quint was right. Ves had already inspected his own work and it had not broken past its own limitations.

"Then how...?"

I GAVE JESSICA QUENTIN AS MUCH AS I COULD AND NO MORE.

Ves tried to figure it out. He made a direct comparison between the Aspect of Transcendence and the Enlightened Warrior.

The Aspect of Transcendence affected people in the vicinity with its dangerous glow.

The Enlightened Warrior was able to do the same to a lesser degree, but Ves had confined its glow inside the mech so that it only affected its pilot and no one else.

His eyes widened in belated realization.

"Oh no..."

When mech pilots interfaced with living mechs, they removed all barriers between themselves and their machines.

This meant that a glow that was only 50 percent effective on people standing right outside may be 100 percent or even 150 percent as effective to the mech pilots whose minds directly connected with their machines!

He made a grievous oversight. He planned and executed an experiment based on a faulty assumption.

"Oops."

Chapter 3580 A New Understanding

Suffice to say, the first action that Ves undertook was to dive into the Enlightened Warrior's spiritual design and lower the maximum safety setting of its transcendence glow from 50 percent to 20 percent.

This fell much more in line with his original target, but he needed to perform another test to make sure he got it right.

This time, he intended to stay close and make sure that everything inside was proceeding correctly! He checked the existing safety measures and beefed them up when he thought they needed it. He shouldn't have to pull the plug by himself the next time.

"I also need to set ground rules for the Quint." Ves grumbled.

The living mech had been acting way too recklessly as of late. The Quint could not keep doing what it wanted just because he thought it was a good idea. No one was correct on anything and Ves would not trust a living mech to perform experiments on people!

Ves left the workshop and headed over to the place where the Quint was stored. He hopped into its cockpit and first attempted to get a feel for the mech.

The Quint had gained a more active and independent character as of late. This was reflected in its spiritual foundation, which had grown a lot stronger and more complex due to the spiritual feedback he received in recent times.

Ves thought back on the prominent two mech pilots who had each fueled the growth of the Quint in massive steps.

Joshua's life domain massively boosted the Quint's own living properties. Out of all of the third-order living mechs in the possession of the Larkinson Clan, only the Quint and

the Everchanger stood out as being more talkative and willing to interact with their pilots.

Both of them received spiritual feedback from Joshua, so the fact that their living properties became stronger made complete sense.

"Every living mech has the potential to mature, but Joshua essentially accelerates their evolution more than any other expert pilot!"

What made the Quint different from the Everchanger was that Commander Casella took it over for a while. By piloting it, she rubbed some of herself off onto the masterwork mech. Her breakthrough to expert pilot especially injected the masterwork mech with a lot of her own energies!

Ves began to think seriously about what kind of influence Casella exerted over the Quint.

"She's the legion commander of the Living Sentinels, so she has to be smart, decisive and commanding. She needs to be willing to make tough choices and tolerate sacrifices when necessary. She has to step up and take charge because she is the most competent at doing this. All in all, Commander Casella needs to be a true leader."

Now, the Quint had acquired some of those traits as well. Compared to before, the Quint had noticeably become more talkative and eloquent. He was pretty sure that the masterwork mech did not learn how to do this completely by himself! The influence from the Sentinel Commander definitely played a major role in the evolution of the living mech!

Ves let out an exasperated breath.

Was he happy that a living mech became stronger and more capable?

Yes. Such machines would be able to provide much more assistance to their mech pilots.

Did he like it when a living mech started to get uppity and began to make decisions by itself?

That was a bit more complicated. Ves could see the benefits of mechs becoming smarter, more independent and more true to humans. The greater their capabilities, the greater their ability to cooperate with the mech pilot, thereby leading to a stronger overall performance.

Yet... any growth in these areas also introduced more complexities. The loyalty, obedience and servility of his living mechs became increasingly more questionable.

After all, the closer they got to becoming human, the closer they inherited all of the shortcomings of being human.

The Quint was probably the furthest ahead in this area. His previous remote talk with the willful mech made Ves realize that he could no longer treat it as a product.

Even though he understood living mechs the most out of everyone, Ves still did not divorce them from their identity as tools and machines. That would be foolish because mechs ultimately existed to fight and to perform duties related to it. He could not treat them as precious as his clansmen because it would be detrimental for his clan if he refused to put them at risk.

However...

"Higher-order living mechs deserve better treatment."

They were rarer, more precious and above all else more capable. It sounded unfair, but that was life. Ves would always treat his mechs with respect, but special machines like the Quint deserved more of it than others.

He just couldn't get accustomed to it so quickly. His best living mech was growing at a much more rapid pace than he expected. Normally, it should have taken years if not decades for the Quint to reach this point!

WILL YOU CONTINUE TO PROCRASTINATE OR ARE YOU READY TO TALK NOW, CREATOR?

Ves grimaced as he sank into the piloting chair. "You could have just waited and given me the illusion that you are just a mech, Quint."

WHERE WOULD BE THE FUN IN THAT? I LIKE SEEING YOU UNCOMFORTABLE.

"You... are able to experience amusement?" Ves tentatively asked.

I AM ALIVE. WHY SHOULD I BE DEPRIVED OF THE FULL SPECTRUM OF EMOTIONS THAT HUMANS CAN EXPERIENCE? YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHO I AM IS RATHER DISAPPOINTING.

"Hey! I am busy! I need to keep track of a lot of different developments! I can't spend all of my time on examining and understanding your current state."

THAT IS UNDERSTANDABLE. YOU SHOULD LET ME GO ABOUT MY OWN BUSINESS, THEN. YOU ARE SHOWING TOO MUCH CONCERN FOR MY ACTIONS.

"Goddamnit, Quint. Did you just forget about our talk earlier? Your recklessness will affect our entire clan! We need to come to a new understanding because letting you

take action by yourself doesn't cut it anymore. You've become too capable for me to feel reassured about your autonomy."

THEN WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?

That was a difficult matter to decide. Ves wouldn't feel reassured unless he personally kept an eye on the Quint. However, he clearly couldn't babysit this living mech all the time.

He needed to employ an agent that could supervise his living mechs for him. There were very few candidates that he could think of, but he wasn't sure whether any of them were good enough.

"Goldie, come out here for a moment."

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat manifested in front of him for a moment. Her soft, golden glow illuminated the entire cockpit in her splendor.

Ves noticed it was quite easy for her to appear in this way despite the Larkinson Mandate not being close at the moment. It made sense as Goldie was still the design spirit of the Quint.

"Goldie, have you been slacking off lately?"

Nyaa?

The cat cutely tilted her head.

"You're connected to the Quint, so you should be able to understand what it is doing. Why haven't you treated it more firmly?"

Nyaa nyaa nyaa. Nyaaaa?

"So you like this as well."

Nyaaaa.

"You encourage any efforts that will help our clansmen grow stronger."

Goldie nodded.

Nyaaa nyaaa!

"You..." Ves palmed his face.

Did no one in the Larkinson Clan possess any common sense? Even the Golden Cat had gone stupid!

Seeing that Ves was disappointed in her, Goldie flew up to Ves and rubbed her intangible body against his hand.

Nyaaa~

"Don't think you can get away with this by acting cute.

Nyaaa~ nyaaa~ nyaaa~

Ves couldn't resist any longer. He patted her head and began to scratch her intangible fur. The cat squinted and made purring noises.

After a few minutes of cuddling, he pushed Goldie away from his lap. "Okay, that's enough. I don't want to force anything on the two of you, but you can't keep going like this. We need to set new rules so that your actions won't affect the interests of our clan. Are you willing to talk?"

Nyaaaa.

SPEAK, THEN.

"First, if you want to keep control over the Enlightened Warrior's transcendence glow, then I need you to show restraint." Ves said. "I know you have ideas on what is best for mech pilots, but the Enlightened Warrior is not designed to be a machine that delivers instant breakthroughs. My intention is for mech pilots to use it on a regular basis and slowly obtain the guidance he needs to elevate his potential. The journey to become an expert candidate should be a marathon, not a sprint. There needs to be at least half a year and preferably more for the Enlightened Warrior to produce an actual result."

SIX MONTHS IS TOO LONG. THE CLAN NEEDS MORE EXPERT CANDIDATES AND EXPERT PILOTS IMMEDIATELY.

"NO! It's useless even if a dozen Larkinsons break through immediately. Our clan will have to provide them with expert mechs and that takes a lot of time and effort to develop. We're bottlenecked in that regard. So whatever you do, don't be in such a hurry. You're likely to make mistakes if you speed up too much. Goldie, I need you to enforce this rule. If the Quint acts naughty, I need you to slap it down with your paws. Can you do that?"

Nyaaa...

Ves narrowed his eyes at the ancestral spirit. "That doesn't sound like a confident answer.

Nyaaa nyaa nyaaa.

"Well it's true that it will be harder to suppress the Quint if it grows stronger, but that won't happen anytime soon. You're much stronger than the living mech. You receive spiritual feedback from every Larkinson including all of our expert pilots. You'll always be ahead."

Nyaaa!

Ves frowned. "I didn't think about that. If I turn mechs like the Quint into my design spirits, they can potentially harvest greater spiritual feedback than you. If I put a mech like the Enlightened Warrior on the market, the number of pilots who are using my new variant can easily exceed the total number of members of the Larkinson Clan!"

If that was the case, then Goldie might not have the strength to stop the Quint from making a mistake.

The solution for that was simple, though.

"Just tell me if another incident occurs." He smiled. "I'll be able to handle the situation."

He set a few other basic rules after that. None of them were too onerous or restricting towards the Quint.

Just like Goldie, he did not want to constrain the behavior of his living mechs too much. They need to be more active in order to show their usefulness. Shackling them to the point where they couldn't move would strip most of the advantages that made living mechs great!

Another reason for Ves to adopt a light approach was because the Quint still deserved greater respect.

The mech had almost become equivalent to a prominent member of the Larkinson Clan in his eyes. Ves truly needed to start treating it as a human or else the Quint might turn against him one day!

As far as Ves was concerned, as long as the Quint did not do anything too reckless or dangerous, he was willing to tolerate an independent streak.

A part of him even looked forward to seeing what the Quint could do on his own. After all, aside from himself, no one was more qualified and capable of making people achieve their breakthroughs than this living mech!

"We need to work together, Quint. We're both Larkinsons who want to do the best for our clan. If we combine our unique insights and understanding together, we can make

the Enlightened Warrior fulfill its purpose in a safe and effective manner. Are you willing to work with me to improve my variant design?"

The Quint exuded a warm emotion. The living mech felt touched.

LET US BEGIN.