

## Mech 2721

### *Chapter 2721: Desirable Partner*

It took around 134,000 DP to purchase the Attribute Candies he needed to elevate the physical attributes of six Swordmaidens to the level he wanted.

His DP reserves dwindled at an alarming rate as Ves kept purchasing Attribute Candy after Attribute Candy from the System's Store!

He stopped when he only had less than 25,000 DP left, but only for a moment.

After a bit of thought, Ves decided to be a little more daring and shower some extra attention to Venerable Dise and Ketis. He wanted to give them the option of boosting their Dexterity to 2.0!

"Dise is an expert pilot, so her combat acumen is by far the best. She can develop a wealth of new techniques that make the most out of her abnormally-dextrous body. As for Ketis, she'll become a lot more precise whenever she needs to make something delicate."

In the end, he was only left with a measly sum of 1142 Design Points after he redeemed a bunch of Dexterity Candies.

As Ves gazed at the large collection of candies lying haphazardly on the surface of the control console, he became a little dazed.

"Have I gone crazy?"

Objectively speaking, he thought it was incredibly foolish to squander more than 150,000 DP just so that he could turn 6 Swordmaidens into extremely powerful fighters.

Physical strength didn't matter when it came to mech combat! While a fit and healthy body definitely improved a mech pilot's performance when interfacing a mech, the relationship wasn't strong. It was quite doable for people with average constitutions to compete against the mech pilots.

The only benefits these candies provided was boosting the personal strengths of Venerable Dise, Ketis, Commander Dise and three other sisters. The immediate and obvious benefits were distressingly few as far as Ves could tell.

Sure, there may be times where having a lot of strength by his side may help, but that was what infantry weapons and combat armor was for. High-tech weapons and armor could kill any augmented superhuman with ease!

Despite his logic telling him what a dumb decision he made, Ves didn't feel any regret for his impulsive choice.

"I can earn DP easily enough as long as I design more mechs." He consoled himself. "Besides, it will be interesting to see the effects of boosting their attributes to such a large extent."

Justifying it as an experiment eased his mental burden a bit, though it wasn't strictly necessary. It was enough to consider this extravagance to be a reward to Ketis and the Swordmaidens.

He carefully marked the candies and put them into containers that he had already prepared in advance. He picked them all up and entered the testing chamber which had just completed the physical scans.

"Here you go." He simply said and gave each Swordmaiden present a small box that held the candies.

"What is this?" Commander Sendra questioned as she looked at the odd candies stored inside. "We don't have a habit of eating candy. That's for children."

Ketis quickly raced to stop the commander from randomly ingesting one of the candies.

"STOP! It's not that kind of candy! Be careful with that! It's much more powerful than you think!"

All of the Swordmaidens turned to their resident mech designer for an explanation.

"I think.. it might be best for you to try one of them out, but only in the order that Ves has specific." She said.

Ves nodded. "Start with the candies marked with Strength."

They all rummaged through their candy containers until they picked up the Strength Candy that corresponded to their current strength score. While the women were rather suspicious about what they held, they weren't overly suspicious towards Ves. Besides, Ketis already vouched for them, so they should probably be safe for consumption.

Once they popped them into their mouths, the women immediately felt the effects. Their bodies shook as they felt a myriad of changes taking place inside their bodies.

Initially, they became alarmed!

"What?!"

Some of them even reached for their new Unending alloy greatswords as if that would ward off the threat.

Fortunately, the candies worked quickly and efficiently. It only took a few more seconds for their body fluctuations to subside.

"What.. happened?" Venerable Dise frowned.

She had become a lot more agitated due to the changes to her body and that of her other sisters. Her protective instincts had become riled up. Even if she was willing to take Ves and Ketis at their word, she still felt that there was something fishy about this situation!

Ves could already feel Venerable Dise's force of will turning against him to an extent. He innocently raised his hands.

"Nothing bad has happened! In fact, you should all feel better than before. Why not step outside this chamber and swing your new weapons a few times."

They did as he suggested. They all stepped out into the workshop and spaced themselves apart so that no one would be slicing anyone by accident.

Since their bodies felt weird, none of them started going wild straight away. They performed standard practice routines that they had already performed an uncountable amount of times.

The women immediately noticed the difference.

A Swordmaiden champion called Jelena gasped as she swung her weapon with greater ease!

"My sword had become lighter!"

"Our swords are exactly the same as before." Venerable Dise corrected. "Our bodies have changed. We can exert more power than before."

Now that she pointed this out, the other Swordmaidens eagerly tested their new changes.

They were amazed!

Even though their strength only increased by 0.1 according to the scale used by the System, this actually represented a major leap! Each and every Swordmaidens immediately embraced their changes, especially when it became clear that it didn't seem to come with any negative side effects that they could tell!

"Wait, if this is the power of just one of those candies, what about the rest?"

The Swordmaidens eyed their candy containers with a lot more hunger than before. Ves had the illusion that they were just moments away from stuffing their mouths with a dozen candies!

Fortunately, Venerable Dise kept a sober mind.

"Control yourselves! Drastic physical changes should never be taken lightly!"

Ves nodded in agreement. "She's right. I've enjoyed some of these candies myself, and I can tell you that the load on your body becomes increasingly greater if you ingest more candy at once. I highly suggest you space them out. Just eat one or two of the candies a day at most. That way, your physical changes won't warp your bodies to the point you feel like strangers in your own body. I can tell you from personal experience that it will take weeks or months to fully adapt to your changes."

This was not a severe consequence, but one that nonetheless held a lot of implications to the Swordmaidens. Strength without control was never good. Their training constantly emphasized the need to master and control their strength. Exerting strength blindly would just endanger their fellow sisters and leave them open to counterattacks.

Ves engaged in a brief discussion with the Swordmaidens. Together, they decided that the Swordmaidens should just ingest one candy a day at most. In the meantime, they would undergo intense physical training in order to allow them to adjust to their changed parameters as best as possible.

"We need to space out the improvement over time in order to retain full control over our own bodies when we are able to participate in the competitions." Commander Sendra decided. "It's not as fast as everyone wants, but I think this is the best course of action."

Ketis didn't agree.

"Why not swallow multiple of them in the same day? Sure, the adjustment period is harsher, but the sooner we finish off the candies, the more time we can spend on learning what we are capable of at our maximum strength."

Venerable Dise crossed her arms. "Both of you make some valid points, but I'm inclined to favor Sendra's theory. We are already trained and seasoned warriors. We know what we are capable of when we are weak, so we will definitely not be starting off from scratch when we have augmented yourselves to the fullest. It is much more important to maintain peak control than to try to achieve a greater height in battle effectiveness."

Since the expert pilot had spoken, every other Swordmaiden instantly agreed. Even Ketis dropped her theory.

Ves left them to attend these matters for themselves. He already did his job when he handed over all of the candies.

Before he left, Ketis and the other Swordmaidens bowed to him in utter sincerity.

"Thank you for giving us all this candy." His student spoke. "I don't know where you got it from, but it must have cost a lot for you to obtain them. I've never heard of anything that could transform our bodies to this extent without requiring complicated surgery or expensive implants. With these, we'll definitely perform well during the upcoming competitions!"

Venerable Dise did not hide her appreciation either.

"You're a true friend to us, Ves. We shall be your sword for however long you need us. Wield us at any enemy you need to kill."

Ves modestly smiled. "You don't need to thank me so much. We're friends. As long as we stay true to each other, we will always be able to rely on each other."

Inwardly, he still cried about the 150,000 DP he gave away, but it was worth it as the Swordmaidens were one of the few people he viewed as completely loyal.

Sure, they were rough, uncivilized and uncouth. Yet that was why he liked them more. They were so honest and direct about everything that Ves had nothing to fear from their schemes.

If they supported him, they did so openly without any hidden agendas. If they did have other intentions in mind, they would tell him honestly.

Their frontier ways also made them prone to putting their full trust in the few people and groups they considered to be their true friends.

Before the Swordmaidens left, Ketis inquired about another important matter.

"Ves, you told us that you would arrange a backer for us who would take care of us while we're in the Heavensword Association. Have you managed to do that, or do you need more time?"

"Ah, I've already made a deal with someone. Here's her contact information."

Ves activated his normal comm and swiped the relevant data to her own comm.

"Who.. is Angelique Harcourt?"

"Someone I met by chance on the galactic net." Ves casually replied. "While I don't actually know her that well, she's a talented Journeyman Mech Designer who

specializes in designing a specific kind of mech. Since she is rooted in the mech industry of the Heavensword Association, she possesses enough influence and contacts to address any impropriety that might take place."

Though Ketis felt dubious about this, the Swordmaidens truly needed the backing. As foreigners, they had no other protection should the authorities or powerful local factions ever wanted to find fault with them. This became even more important now that their expectations in the contests had risen!

"We'll contact her and see how we'll be able to get along. I hope she's receptive to us. I don't want us to fall out."

"Don't worry, Ketis. Both of you are obsessed with swords, so I have no doubt you'll be able to get along swimmingly."

Besides, if Angelique Harcourt wanted Ves to uphold his end of the bargain, she better abide by her promises.

He still couldn't believe how easy it was for him to convince the woman he met only once in a virtual setting to accept his deal. He only offered to contribute to one of her fencer mech designs, but she already jumped on it as if she was a ravished dog!

"It's just a contribution, not a full-on collaboration."

He didn't want to invest too much time in this distraction so he only offered to make a pass on one of her designs, but that was already enough to gain her agreement. It appeared that his desirability as a collaboration partner had already shot up on account of his fame and all of the accomplishments he made!

*Chapter 2722 - Repressed Urges*

"I'm bored!"

A certain figure slumped on a sturdy, specialized hover chair. The man rubbed his rough stubble as his chair spun around in a circle. He looked frustratingly at his quarters, wishing he could stand up and sit on his couch or lie on his bed without requiring the aid of the bots integrated in his unwieldy chair.

"Nyeow."

Minxie jumped on the tray that was placed above the l.a.p and began to settle on it like it was her personal perch. Her fluffy white tail swished back and forth as the chair stopped spinning.

This was what Vincent's life amounted to these days.

"I'm supposed to be a heroic expert candidate!" He lamented. "Why am I being treated this way? I should be going on parades and earn the appreciation and worship of my friends. I shouldn't be confined to my chair and be unable to do anything that requires me to stand. I'm not even allowed to pilot a mech!"

"Nyeow..."

The cat completely disregarded his feelings and dozed off. While the feline thought it was strange that one of the humans who took care of her was stuck in a chair all the time, she still got her usual scratches, so everything was fine as far as she was concerned.

"If you want your new legs to be attached to your body without complications, you better do as the doctors say." A female voice warned.

Raella Larkinson entered their quarters with a stern face. Even though she was facing an expert candidate who confronted the Trost head-on, there was no awe to be found in her expression.

She wore a formal business uniform that made her look professional and formal. Despite the sudden drop of mech pilots in the clan, interest in the Larkinson Mech Games Circuit only increased.

The Battle of Reckoning served as a giant wakeup call to all of the complacent clansmen. They learned that as long as they adopted the Larkinson name, their fates became bound to the fortunes of the clan.

An enemy that targeted the clan also threatened the lives of every individual member. Even though it sounded obvious, during the Nyxian Gap Campaign most of the non-combatants were never exposed to any danger.

This was different!

Becoming a part of an expeditionary fleet meant that every Larkinson became exposed to the same threat.

If they lived on a planet in a cozy little state, then the loss of the combat forces wouldn't have been able to threaten their lives, at least under normal circumstances.

Yet because they lived and worked alongside the same Larkinsons who ventured out for battle, the civilians and support personnel within the clan had nowhere to run in the event their soldiers lost!

Though certain people such as Raella thought that this kind of thinking was silly, she was glad that her fellow clansmen became less naive.

Her days would only get busier in the upcoming months when the Larkinson Clan was slated to undergo another rapid expansion.

That meant she had less time to spend with Vincent, not that she minded that. Ever since her boyfriend lost his legs, he had become a lot more tedious to be around with. They were no longer able to do many activities together because his disability got in the way.

Vincent looked at his lower body in distress for the umpteenth time. The stumps of his legs were mercifully hidden from his sight, but there were moments in his day where he couldn't avoid looking at it. Just a glimpse was enough for him to recall the moment his mech crumpled inwards when it collided straight into an expert mech!

According to the mech technicians that inspected his ruined mech after the battle, he had come very close to losing another 'leg'. If the force of the collision was just a tiny bit stronger, if the front of his c.o.c.kpit pressed against his body just a centimeter or two deeper, then he didn't even know whether he wanted to continue living!

"Have you asked the big man whether he can do anything about the Adonis Colossus?"

His girlfriend directed a stony glare at him. "Hell no. Why would I do that? Our patriarch doesn't need to waste his time on fixing up your stupid old mech. I did approach Ketis, though. Even though she seems to be preparing to go on a trip, she did me a favor and approached a number of her colleagues."

"And?"

Raella shook her head. "No one has any time to fix up your mech. The assistant mech designers are all being worked to the bone in the Design Department. Their design projects are way behind schedule and Gloriana is practically hounding them to complete their work. Even after they are done with their current projects, there will be new ones that will occupy their time as well. What they do over there is much more exciting than trying to reconstruct the Adonis Colossus."

In other words, the only people who were skilled and knowledgeable enough to restore his personal mech to a working condition didn't want to work on his mech. They all looked down on his manly mech!

"Damn! If I had legs, they wouldn't have dismissed me out of hand. I'm no good now that I can't stand anymore!"

"Don't be such a w.h.i.n.er, Vincent. Your legs will come in due time. It will only take a couple more weeks to finish their growth and make sure they fit your body well enough. The doctors can't rush this process any further."

Vincent scowled. "These docs are too incompetent. I heard that the organ doctors based in Prosperous Hill IV can grow out an entire limb within an hour and attach it to a body in the very same day!"

"That's because the Lifers excel in this aspect. The very best specialists in this area are at the forefront of their research fields. Do you think these highly-regarded researchers can be approached so easily? Hah! They're superstars in their own circle. Just like how Ves can't be bothered with trivial matters, you can forget about catching their attention with your boring little request. Just sit in your chair honestly and wait for your new limbs to be ready."

Even though Vincent had already spent weeks after he was discharged from the medical bay in this condition, he didn't know whether he could go on for another day in this condition.

Due to safety concerns, he wasn't allowed to pilot a mech or enter a simulator pod either. The doctors mentioned a bunch of theories about how his brain structure would get confused about having legs when his actual pair was gone and how that might screw up his body coordination after he finally gained his new limbs.

It was all confusing to him, but the only answer he remembered was that he wasn't allowed to do anything related to mechs!

This was incredibly frustrating!

"I can't even do anything over here!" He w.h.i.n.ed. "I'm an expert candidate. There's an itch inside me that urges me to pilot a mech all the time. I have so many new ideas, but I can't do anything but play them out in my mind."

"Oh you poor baby." Raella approached and kissed him on the cheek before petting him on his head. His dirty blond hair became messed up due to her ministrations. "Would you like me to spoon feed you while you are at it? You're such a brave and heroic expert candidate."

"Nyeow~" Minxie purred as she dove her head in a bowl laid out on the table.

"I need a new mech like the Adonis Colossus." Vincent said as he took a bite out of his juicy steak.

Fortunately, his body condition didn't prevent him from eating food like normal people.

"Hmm?" Realla looked up from her own meal. "You'd be facing the same problem as before. There is a huge list of priorities over at the Design Department. There's no way that any of their mech designers have any time to address your needs."

"I'm not trying to get them to work on my mech straight away. I just want to experience what I had with the Adonis Colossus once again in a modern second-class mech. It doesn't have to be a full custom piece like before. I just want Ves to make a manly mech that makes me feel powerful again."

"I can pull some strings to allow you to purchase any mech for sale in Prosperous Hill VI."

"It's not the same! I can barely tolerate piloting other mechs!"

"Not even the new Bright Warrior Version B?"

"That's a great mech in its own right, but it's not.. masculine, you get what I'm saying? Just look at its waist. There's no bulge to be found in that area!"

"Is that how you judge mechs these days? You don't care about their cost, performance or mech type. Your eyes just lower straight to their crotch, is that right?"

"Don't misunderstand me, babe. I pay attention to all of that stuff as well. It's just that even if everything falls in line with my needs, if the mech is not to my taste, I won't be able to get my groove on. Almost every mech is designed in a way that shows no regard to the matter I care about the most. Ves was the only mech designer who understood me as a man! The Adonis Colossus is such a masterpiece to me that I really can't imagine going back to piloting a normal mech."

"You sound like you're addicted."

Vincent thumped his c.h.e.s.t with his palm. "Maybe I am. So what? I became an expert candidate with the help of the Adonis Colossus. That mech just sung to me when I was fighting against the Trost back then. When I went through apotheosis or whatever it's called, me and the Adonis became one during that critical moment. Do you know what I was thinking about when I melded my heart and soul with my living mech?"

"You needed a bigger codpiece?"

"We both wanted to become heroes!" The injured expert candidate claimed. "We both wanted to save the day, attract everyone's admiration and enjoy life at its greatest by bedding the loves of our lives!"

Raella rolled her eyes until she suddenly frowned.

"What do you mean with that last bit?"

Vincent paused and lowered his head. "It's so sad, don't you think? The Adonis Colossus died a v.i.r.g.i.n. In its short time of existence, it never really got to enjoy the touch of a female mech. Every time I piloted it, my mech would always become more

excited whenever a Valkyrie Redeemer flew close. There's just something about the contours of that Hexer mech that caused my Adonis to heat up a bit, both literally and figuratively. It's too bad it will never have the chance to experience life at its most splendid moment!"

"You.. I think you need to see a therapist."

"I'm not crazy! I know what I'm talking about! Our mechs are alive, aren't they? You recently piloted one of the prototypes, so you should know that this is true. Well, let me tell you that they have the same wants and needs as any human. They take after us in a way. What's sad is that unlike us humans, they can't seduce each other on their own accord. They need the cooperation of their mech pilots to relieve their urges. We should do something about it. Don't you think that's a great idea?"

"HELL NO!"

*Chapter 2723 - Memorable*

"So you're truly leaving?"

"I am."

Though Ketis was still busy trying to organize everything the Swordmaidens needed for their upcoming visit to the Heavensword Association, she still made time to meet with Joshua.

"I wish I could come with you. Anything can happen over there and I'm not sure whether you'll be doing okay by yourselves."

"There's no need for you to fret, Joshua. We'll be accompanied by a sizable escort of Infinity Guards. We are also being cared for by a local mech designer who can help us keep out of trouble." She tried to reassure him as she was inspecting, cleaning and polishing the parts of her combat armor.

The Unending Dragon Mark I was largely made out of the same wonder material that comprised the weapons of the Swordmaidens.

Before the Battle of Reckoning, she wasn't really sure why Ves was so crazy about Unending alloy. Sure, the material was as hard as first-class armor, but it was way too unattainable through normal means.

It wasn't until the battle when Ketis understood the true value of Unending alloy.

When she witnessed Venerable Dise and her fellow Swordmaidens in action, she became captivated by their most glorious moments. She repeatedly rewinded the

footage where the Bright Sword Prime and the other swordsman mechs managed to slice the limbs off the Jeanne D'Arc in an instant!

She never thought that non-expert mechs were capable of unleashing such a powerful cutting energy attack!

She held her upgraded CFA greatsword many times. With the help of Sharpie, she eventually learned that her living sword was able to pass something to the blade.

Ever since then, she tried to use the methods that Ves had taught her and what she figured out on her own to metaphysically 'hone' her weapon.

In fact, she didn't just limit her attempts to her sword. She picked up one of her gauntlets and concentrated on the fingertips.

She felt Sharpie responding to the sharpness that had been imbued in these parts. While it was only a minute for now, Ketis had a feeling that it could tear through solid metal if she kept honing over a longer period of time.

The same might also hold true for the rest of her Unending Dragon if she diligently kept up her efforts.

Unfortunately, Ketis didn't think she'd be able to see the fruits of her efforts. Sharpie was too big and her resilient combat armor was too big and massive.

Maybe she'd be able to accelerate her efforts once she became a Journeyman, but that would take some time to accomplish.

"Isn't this visit merely about recruiting a bunch of new mech pilots who are suitable to become a part of the Swordmaidens?" Joshua questioned as he watched her take care of her equipment. "I don't think your fellow sisters need a mech designer considering that the contests are all held using mechs supplied by the organizers."

"You don't get it. This trip is important to me. No offense to Ves, but he's not that enthusiastic about swords and swordsman mechs. He can't teach anything about swords to me because I know much more than him in this specific area. The Heavensword Association is known as the paradise for swordsman mechs so I'll be able to learn a lot more about my chosen specialty over there. In fact, a part of me wants to stay there and never return."

"Will you?"

"No." Ketis shook her head. "As much I'd like to indulge myself by spending my life with like-minded sword enthusiasts, that's not where the future of the Swordmaidens lie. We want to go out of our corner of the galaxy. We want to see the cosmos and use our power for something more than trying to fight for ourselves. While our grand expedition

is filled with peril, there is a sense of purpose that we have long been lacking. It's so nice to be able to step outside of the box we are confined in. It feels as if we have finally managed to jump out of our cages that kept us boxed in place."

"I can understand the feeling. I feel the same way. If not for the opportunities provided by Ves, I'd still be languishing in the Komodo Star Sector. In fact, without his virtual mechs, I would have never been able to progress all the way to expert pilot."

Both of them were grateful to Ves. Their lives had already changed beyond their wildest dreams and this was just the start!

When Ketis completed her inspection, she reassembled her Undying Dragon and packed it up so that she could stow it with the rest of her luggage.

"Do you think you'll be able to achieve good results over there?" Joshua curiously asked.

"Oh, I think the Heavensworders will be awfully surprised when my sisters and I enter the arena." Ketis grinned. "We've gained some awesome gifts from Ves that should help us reach the later stages of the contests. I can't say anything further than that. Some of the seeded contestants are truly ridiculous. I don't think I'll be able to defeat any of them in the one-on-one personal combat competition."

"What about the group competition?"

"We Swordmaidens excel at fighting alongside each other! What we lack in sophistication, we make up with trust and familiarity with each other. In the coming months, we'll be drilling with each other very frequently in order to make sure we know what everyone else is capable of. That will help us cover each other's backs when we finally compete."

She was truly hopeful about her odds. The candies she and her fellow Swordmaidens already ingested had boosted their strength and combat prowess at a much faster pace than she imagined.

Since she received more candies than everyone else, she might actually become the strongest member of their main combat team!

She grew a little disappointed when she thought about how she would have to stand by the sides when the swordsman mech competitions took place.

"It's too bad I'm not a mech pilot. I truly want to exchange blows with other swordsman mech pilots."

Joshua moved close and embraced her strong and athletic body. "You are already a great mech designer. There's no need for you to feel envious. Enabling your sisters to fight better is also satisfying, right?"

She tried to smile back. "I guess so. There are plenty of swordsman mech designers over there who I can exchange with. That will definitely broaden my horizons. I don't think I'll be able to approach any Journeyman, though. I'm still an Apprentice. I haven't designed any mechs that sold for millions like Ves."

"You're his student, though."

Ketis shook her head. "That doesn't mean much in the mech industry. Mech designers can teach many students, but that doesn't mean that those people will become as great as their instructors. We still have to carve out our own place in the community."

She normally didn't care about her own reputation or accomplishments. She just wanted to become better so that she could design the best swordsman mechs for her sisters.

Yet now that she was about to head off to a state that could teach her a lot about her interests, she suddenly realized that she was not in a position to take maximum advantage of the opportunities.

While the Swordmaidens could still leech off the rising reputation of the Larkinson Clan to an extent, this did not apply to her. She could hardly take any credit for the stellar accomplishments of the Larkinson Clan.

If she wanted to gain something from her fellow peers, she needed to find a way to stand out from the crowd, just like Ves.

He would probably choose to present a fantastic swordsman mech design and dazzle the crowd.

Yet that was not in the cards for Ketis. She still didn't feel she was ready to design her Monster Slayer yet. Even if she started right now, she'd never be able to complete it by the time the Greater Omanderie Festival had ended.

She turned around and grabbed her greatsword. The only way she could attract the attention of her peers in the mech industry was to fight her way to the top in one of the competitions!

As long as she made it near the end, she would be able to attract a lot of attention solely due to the fact that she was a mech designer by profession!

There had never been a mech designer who reached the later stages in the personal combat competitions in the history of the Greater Omanderie Festival!

As long as she broke this record, she believed she could definitely break into the local circle of swordsman mech designers!

"I would really like to see you fight in person." Joshua sighed as he embraced Ketis from the side. "I'd also be there if any accident takes place. I know you can hold your own in the arena, but you never know what might happen when the blades start swinging."

Ketis grinned and leaned her head over to plant a kiss on his cheek. "You're so cute, Joshua, but you should be worrying about my opponents. The strength I've employed in my spars against you is nothing compared to when I'll go serious!"

They were anything but a typical couple. Even though Joshua was an expert pilot, he felt rather inadequate whenever Ketis kicked his b.u.t.t during their practice bouts.

Even though his swordsmanship was improving by leaps and bounds, pure skill was only a part of the equation. Ketis still had him beat when it came to physical conditioning and intuition. Even if Joshua caught up in those aspects, he would never be able to equal her when it came to comprehending the essence of swords.

"I'll miss you, Ketis." He said. "Who will I practice against now that I've lost my favorite sparring partner?"

"Why not ask the other expert pilots?"

"They're no fun. Tusa is busy with his own thing while Jannzi is way too serious. Orfan is too old. Dise is going with you. As for the expert candidates, they're not suitable for various reasons. The only one who is somewhat worthwhile to be around is Imon Ingvar, but he stopped being difficult for me to beat since I've started to learn from your lessons."

Being an expert pilot was not all that pleasant sometimes. Joshua could feel how his status affected other people's attitude towards him. They began to think he was truly a superhuman or even a demigod. While he had definitely changed in many aspects, he still yearned to be treated as a regular clansman.

Sadly, that would never happen as his sheer presence was able to overpower other people and cause them to feel an irresistible sense of awe towards him. Only a handful of people were truly able to treat him like normal.

Ketis happened to be one of them. The adoration she showed towards him was much more personal. As he looked into her eyes, they seemingly shared the same thought.

They both leaned in and shared a deep kiss with each other.

"Let's forget about our coming separation for a moment." She whispered. "Before we go, let's make a memory that we will never forget. Does that sound okay with you, Venerable Joshua?"

"Of course."

The two pressed their bodies against each other and felt each other's body warmth. Their passion became enflamed as they kissed each other over and over again.

Ketis' growing strength was put to the test for the rest of the evening!

#### *Chapter 2724 - Foreign Celebrity*

After local inspectors spent days going over every ship of the expeditionary fleet, the Golden Skull Alliance finally received permission to engage in their planned activities.

"Finally!"

Incoming cargo vessels operating under the purview of the local government already flew in to facilitate the first trades.

The cargo vessels brought raw materials to feed the production halls of the Spirit of Bentheim and lots of supplies to replenish the fuel, ammunition, energy cells and other goods consumed over the course of the Battle of Reckoning.

In turn, the cargo holds of the expeditionary vessels also emptied a little as they transferred some of their valuable salvage.

More deals were being made with each hour that passed. The Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan all made their separate arrangements, though they occasionally banded together in order to leverage their combined bargaining power to receive more discounts for their bulk purchases.

Even though Ves spent most of his time in the design lab, he made sure to remain apprised of the logistics.

"The PHTS hasn't allocated nearly enough transport capacity to us." Gavin complained during a meeting. "Even with the added quota the Infinity Guards have delivered to us, we still need several weeks to offload our salvage and receive our ordered goods at this rate. If we could just get our fleet in orbit of Prosperous Hill VI, then we could have everything done in a week."

Pretty much every visitor in this star system loathed the Prosperous Hill Transportation Services. It was a nationalized consortium of intrasystem transport and transit companies that all operated in unison.

Since everyone relied on the PHTS to get anything done, the people and managers working for this company were not as efficient, to put it lightly.

"As long as they bring the goods we need while taking away the junk we are trying to get rid of, there's little point in complaining. Our fleet is just too big. It's a huge challenge to any transportation network to take care of the needs of a fleet that approaches that of an entire mech division."

Instead of wasting his time on useless complaints, he preferred to go over more interesting topics. "Has there been any progress in searching for a good deal for the Auralis?"

"Ah, the results are as you expected. Our buyers are much less enthusiastic about acquiring the capital ship once we aired the possibility of keeping her long-range FTL drives for ourselves. If we sell the ship as a whole, we can probably gain one really good capital ship as well as a bunch of extras, or we could choose to obtain two cheaper but serviceable capital sh.i.p.s. If we keep the FTL drive for ourselves, we can probably get a decent capital ship, but don't expect too many bells and whistles."

"Hmmm. That sounds within my expectations. These options aren't as exciting as I hoped for. Maybe we should just put up with the potential risks and find a way to incorporate the Auralis into our fleet."

Gavin grew concerned. "Everyone in the clan I've spoken to about this matter isn't confident we'll be able to make the Auralis safe. There are even some who believe the vessel is haunted due to how many people died at once."

Ves paused. "Do people really believe in that superstition?"

"You can't blame them, boss. It's really creepy if you think about it. Even I wouldn't even want to step aboard the ship. We all feel it's better to get rid of her and start with a more neutral vessel."

"That sounds really stupid, do you know that?"

Gavin simply shrugged.

"Tell me about the sh.i.p.s that we can acquire instead. Are there any fleet carriers or other interesting vessels in the mix?"

"Oh, there are numerous second-hand fleet carriers as well as a larger assortment of non-combat vessels available for selection. We can even acquire some of them with cash if you think we can handle the financial burden. They're all cleaned up and prepared for sale as best as possible. They've even been certified as safe for use by purchasers, so we shouldn't worry too much about hidden dangers. If anything goes wrong, we have the possibility to ask for compensation from the sellers."

That was actually a clever market development. The demand for starsh.i.p.s was huge, but just like Ves, not everyone looked forward to acquiring a second-hand vessel that was still rife with traps set by their original owners.

In order to reassure potential buyers that their sh.i.p.s wouldn't suck out all of the air in their quarters while they were asleep or increase the gravity on the bridge by 50 times all of a sudden, the sellers had to make their products more attractive.

The way to do this was to hire a lot of specialists or contract the services of companies that excelled in these jobs. Certifying institutions made sure that these companies remained honest and that they were competent enough to know what they were doing.

Of course, whether this entire industry could be trusted at all was another question, but it was still reassuring to know that it existed.

"Keep gathering more offers and fill me in whenever there is a ship that sounds useful to our expeditionary fleet. Also keep on the lookout for any good bargains that we can acquire for cash."

"Will do. In fact, our resident shipwright is already looking into the dossiers of various capital sh.i.p.s."

Ves began to ask about other issues.

"How is the recruiting landscape. Is there any great demand to join the Larkinson Clan?"

"Well.. at the very least, our clan is attractive enough to spark the interests of some second-raters. The issue is that we aren't getting the kind of people we are truly eying."

"That's to be expected." Ves sighed. "For all our recent claims to fame, we are still upstarts as far as most people are concerned."

Second-class job seekers were far more critical than their third-class counterparts. It was actually pretty easy to find any ordinary workers in any highly-populated star system like Prosperous Hill.

Yet there were lots of companies as well who were on the lookout to hire talented and highly competent personnel.

These talents were much more scarce because the people that tended to have promise enjoyed superior conditions. For example, their parents invested in an expensive cranial implant. They received quality genetic treatments that just happened to react extremely well to their DNA. They attended an elite institution that exposed them to excellent teachers who were skilled in maximizing the potential of their students.

Whatever the case, these harsh conditions meant that the pool of talented manpower was quite limited even in a state comprising trillions of citizens. In places like Prosperous Hill, most talents already had their next gigs lined up for them before they even visited the galactic net!

Yet the reality was much less encouraging than he thought.

"Why haven't we generated enough interest among high-valued personnel?"

"There's several reasons for that. First, we're not Lifers, so we don't hold much attraction to the locals who comprise the vast majority of the job seekers in this star system. Their mech pilots are unaccustomed to piloting classical mechs so they don't want to do anything with us. Their other personnel can find more attractive opportunities at domestic companies."

"What about the foreigners? A highly-trafficked port system like this should be home to plenty of foreign-born workers."

"That's true, boss, but we're actually not that famous around these parts. Majestic Teal hardly pays attention to anything that goes on in Komodo, so all of the feats we have accomplished have barely rippled in this star sector. Another factor that diminishes our importance is that we aren't the most prominent, famed or eye-catching organization around these parts. There are lots of other organizations that are much more renowned and prestigious among the locals."

Ves frowned. "Is that true?"

This was very different from their home star sector. Influencing the course of the Komodo War, defeating a pirate warship and designing numerous mechs that changed how outfits fought each other all caused him to become known to almost every citizen whether they were third-raters or second-raters.

Yet all of that merely amounted to a stone thrown in a lake.

"The lives of Majestic Tealers aren't as impacted by our work." Gavin pointed out the key reason. "The Komodo War doesn't directly intrude in their lives. You're not from this star sector so no one here has any reason to cheer for you. Most importantly, our increasingly more popular LMC mechs are all third-class models that are too weak to be fielded in the Life Research Association. As a result, our influence in Prosperous Hill is practically negligible."

As for the average citizens who comprised the vast majority of people, they simply went about with their own day while treating any news relating to him as celebrity gossip.

Gavin noted his disappointment.

"There is an easy way to fix this problem, you know."

"What do you suggest, Benny?"

"Change your mind about the Ferocious Piranha Version B." His assistant daringly proposed. "I can guarantee you that as long as you release this model into the mech market, every second-rate state in this star sector and the surrounding star sectors will blow up. They will all want to purchase as many Ferocious Piranhas as possible because this mech is really a cancer against any weak-willed mech pilot!"

"It's not just the weak-willed ones that are vulnerable to the Ferocious Piranha." Ves mildly corrected him. "While I think you are correct, I'm afraid our clan will blow up as long as we release this model to the public. It's too effective, especially against melee mechs. A lot of vested interests will have a very good reason to follow in the Friday Coalition's footsteps as long as we introduce a mech that threatens their core business."

"We'll have supporters as well. Think about all of the loyal customers we'll be able to gain. Based on the performance of the Piranha Prime and the prototype Ferocious Piranhas, I can already tell you that every single light mech pilot will instantly get sold by this mech. In fact, a lot of other mech pilots who are accustomed to piloting medium mechs will probably want to pilot this ravenous beast regardless of their specialization!"

Ves knew that Gavin was right because a lot of mech pilots in the clan were already clamouring to get a piece of the Ferocious Piranha as well. The allure for this explosive new light mech that could turn many nearby mech pilots into paralyzed idiots was just too great!

In comparison, the Bright Warrior Version B that was just starting to roll out of the production lines of the Spirit of Bentheim hardly attracted any enthusiasm at all. While it was still a good performer by most standards, its lack of powerful glow and distinctive strengths made it hard for mech pilots to get hyped.

#### *Chapter 2725 - Prosperous Hill VI*

Prosperous Hill VI was a bustling planet.

It not only featured varied industrial sectors, but also funneled in trade goods produced from the other planets in the inner system or transported over from other star systems in the region.

In turn, Prosperous Hill VI also shipped a lot of goods outwards. The PHTS constantly worked their cargo ships and transports to the bone due to the sheer amount of goods they had to cart back and forth.

In fact, some trading companies didn't even bother to go through this whole song and dance. A huge amount of aging and dubiously space worthy cargo haulers floated permanently in the outer system.

They acted as private warehouses that offered convenient storage space and transfer of goods to any trade vessels that happened to be in the vicinity. It was much cheaper and faster to hand over or receive goods this way, but only if the vessels in question arrived from the right star system.

If not for the fact that the local rulers disapproved of anyone constructing permanent bases and space stations in the outer system, there would have been a lot more commerce in the outskirts.

As it was, the strict rules forced everyone interested in doing business to converge to Prosperous Hill VI where the authorities meticulously kept an eye on every transaction.

A fast courier vessel silently cut through space. The luxurious corvette bore the colors and markings of the Prosperous Hill Transportation Service, as she should. Otherwise, the vigilant-looking biomechs patrolling all of the established routes to and from the inner system would have swooped in to stop the unauthorized intrusion.

Except for vessels belonging to powerful or high-ranking LRA officials, no other ship was allowed to enter the sphere that denoted the inner system. This frustrated every smuggler, terrorist or malcontent that wished to do something that the authorities wouldn't take kindly of. The fact that hardly any news appeared that spoke of trouble arising from external causes was a good sign that this policy was doing its job.

Even if it was possible to circumvent these harsh conditions, the gains weren't worth the costs. Perhaps someone attempted to operate a stealth vessel as a means to smuggle goods in or out, but it only had to get caught once before a very expensive asset had to be written off!

That did not necessarily mean that shady business never took place in Prosperous Hill. There were plenty of locals competing against each other and foreigners still needed a central space to conduct face-to-face meetings.

Ves wasn't thinking about that at the moment.

He and Gloriana along with a small group of other clan officials were enjoying the comforts of their current transit vessel. Due to the favorable grid position of the expeditionary fleet, Prosperous Hill VI was actually fairly close, so it wouldn't take too much time to reach the planet.

While Ves was garbed in his formal patriarch uniform in order to denote that he was on official business, he did not intend to spend all of his time in meetings.

Every highly-populated planet offered numerous venues for sightseeing, relaxation, learning and inspiration. Ves was particularly keen on the latter. Every novelty he encountered provided him with different ideas that could cause him to develop an entirely new mech design concept.

The more divergent the locale, the greater the possibility of coming up with a radical new idea.

In that regard, Ves was slightly regretful his first visit did not bring him to Prosperous Hill IV. The fourth planet from the local star was hailed as the true center of biotechnology and biomechs.

He definitely intended to drop by there in the time his fleet was laid over in this star system!

"What are you thinking about?" A female voice asked.

"I'm just thinking it was a shame that we didn't get accosted by local patrols." He murmured as he looked at the large projection showing random views of scenic spots in the star system. "I would have been able to look at a biomech up close. I've never gotten close to any of these odd machines."

She smiled and patted her dainty hand over his own. "Be patient. We'll be getting close to them soon enough. Even if Prosperous Hill VI is not the focal point of biotech in this star system, it still features plenty of applications."

Practically every settlement in the LRA incorporated at least some form of biotechnology in place of regular technology. This could be as simple as organic air filtration devices to ultrathin biomechanical suits that the Lifers wore in place of conventional vacsuits.

Even though a normal vacsuit already performed well in protecting their wearers against vacuum and moderate radiation exposure, Lifers took an obsessive pride in replacing mechanical products with organic alternatives.

There was a certain rationality about it. Even if these organic alternatives couldn't beat the performance or cost-efficiency of the products that the rest of the galaxy considered standard, then their continued use would lower the cost of production while also spurring further development.

The advocates of ubiquitous biotechnology all thought that humanity would be better off if they made use of organic alternatives.

Ves thought it was better that these advocates remained a fringe group.

Just because he was curious about biomechs and such didn't mean he was ready to embrace them wholesale. He just wanted to take a look, that was all. Hopefully he would get to see plenty of biomechs up close.

"Would you ever accept biomechs in the Larkinson Clan?" He asked.

She crinkled her nose. "You already know what I think about them. Not a single biomech is completely consistent with each other. Small variables during their growth can considerably affect their performance and other parameters. I can't stand the sight. Besides, no one in the clan knows what to do with them. We can't 'produce' or service them. We need to bring in a whole crew of Lifers in order to establish a basic infrastructure that is capable of handling biomechs."

"You're right. It's unnecessary for us to make use of two different and incompatible mech systems at once."

A part of him still felt it was a shame, though. He would have loved to obtain a handful of biomechs if only for him to admire and play around with. Perhaps the recruiters might be able to sign on a sufficient number of Lifer mech technicians to devote a single combat carrier into a specialty biomech vessel.

As Ves and Gloriana chatted, Lucky and Clixie chased each other while threading through the seats and tables. Lucky eventually caught the other cat by jumping on her back and softly biting her neck.

Despite possessing teeth that were sharp and powerful enough to chew through Unending alloy, Lucky's metallic incisors didn't even pierce Clixie's skin!

"Miaow!"

Ves had seen this plenty of times, so he wasn't concerned about Lucky drawing blood. He did grow curious about the teeth issue, though.

Either Lucky exerted perfect control, which was extremely difficult, or there was something funny about his teeth.

One of the theories that Ves formed was that Lucky was able to generate an energy field over his teeth that did the actual cutting. How that worked, he couldn't even begin to guess. He observed Lucky crunching exotics that were as hard as mech armor and still hadn't been able to detect any unusual energy emissions.

Soon enough, the corvette approached the orbit of Prosperous Hill VI. One of the perks of travelling on a small transit vessel reserved for VIPs was that her passengers weren't forced to transfer over to a space station.

Neither Ves nor anyone else aboard the vessel noticed any fluctuations. The second-class ship was so well-dampened against vibrations and other fluctuations that everyone felt as if they were still on solid ground.

The transit vessel quickly approached the sprawling city known as Veoline, the capital of Prosperous Hill VI.

As the ship was on her way to one of the quieter and more exclusive spaceports of the metropolitan area, Ves switched the projected view to a direct angle pointing downwards.

"That's a lot of trees." Gloriana immediately noted. "There is far more green in this city than any place I've visited before."

"Supposedly, not all of them are merely trees."

The spaceport that the corvette finally landed at was a prime example of that. It was a broad and sprawling collection of giant structures that all featured walls that resembled wood.

When the Miracle Couple and their entourage took their first step on Prosperous Hill VI, they all couldn't help but gawk at the walls around them. Their resemblance to wood was uncanny, but there was a strange coloration to them that made it clear that they were more than ordinary organic matter.

Yet the walls were nothing compared to the roofs. Huge, sprawling branches extended from the top and soared into the sky. The leaves they bore eagerly absorbed the energy radiated by the local star.

A small delegation of Infinity Guards met the new arrivals in a hallway up ahead. They consisted of armored guards but their weapons were safely stowed on their backs. Only a single person was wearing an ordinary uniform.

"Welcome to Prosperous Hill VI, Patriarch Larkinson, Lady Wodin-Larkinson. I am Irvine Spefan. I am assigned to be your guide and attendant for the duration of your stay on this lovely planet. Should you ever require additional services from us, feel free to ask. Even if we do not provide the service you seek, we have extensive contacts throughout the local economy."

Ves looked curiously at the maroon-haired man. His slightly odd accent stood out from the other Infinity Guards.

"Hello, Irvine. Are you a local, perhaps?"

"Not quite, but I have lived here long enough to pick up the local customs."

"So you're not a part of the main fleet?"

"Oh, no. My assignment is purely ground-based. The Star Striders make a habit of establishing branch offices in every port system. That is where we get much of our business from, after all. We are also able to coordinate with your guard duty to make sure that no one runs afoul with local laws and customs."

"I see."

The group ventured forward. They went through the usual checks, though they were brief because everyone had already gone through more extensive checks and verifications when they stepped onboard the transit vessel.

Soon enough, they were allowed to forward. They entered one of the main halls of the spaceport.

"How beautiful!"

Gloriana gasped.

The interior decoration made it look as if they had entered a garden, but one that still bore all of the traits of a typical public structure. Plants, trees and flowers adorned the space while various strange organisms meticulously attended to them to make sure they were presented in a good light.

There weren't any animals such as birds, mammals or other creatures to complete the scenery. Instead, all Ves spotted were colorful beetle-like creatures that basically functioned as organic bots.

These artificial lifeforms looked rather cute and disarming, though a part of him felt horrified as well.

"Please don't mind the caretaker beetles." Irvine spoke in a tone that made it clear he said this many times. "The beetles are harmless and completely incapable of doing anything outside of their genetic programming. They are used to tend to the organic structures and scenery. Please don't get too close to them. If you accidentally kill or damage them in any way, you'll receive a mark on your record. If you incur too many marks, you'll be requested to leave the planet."

"Is that necessary?"

"Very much so. The beetles are designed to be incapable of resisting attacks. They are not even allowed to run away in the event of an attack due to safety reasons. You cannot believe how many visitors couldn't resist the urge to kick them in the air when Prosperous Hill VI was just starting to grow as a trading destination."

Ves smiled wryly. He was just entertaining that urge himself!

*Chapter 2726 - Yelkin Zernzon*

Irvine Spedan might not be native to Prosperous Hill VI, but he certainly possessed the knowledge of one. The man also possessed enough awareness as a foreigner to be aware of what other visitors such as Ves and Gloriana might need or want to know.

The group boarded a very unusual vehicle that was supposed to take them to their first destination.

"Is that.. a living creature?"

Gloriana looked quite squeamish at their supposed armored shuttle. Even her husband found the vehicle to be odd.

"This is a well-functioning shuttle." Irvin smiled politely as he approached the organic vehicle and tapped his fingers against the tough, plate-like surface. "While it is technically a living creature, it is more apt to compare it to a biomech. It is a machine that is grown out of organic matter. However, as long as you look past that, its specs and other performance parameters highly resemble its classical counterpart."

Ves looked skeptical. "I get that, but why keep the head at the front of this vehicle? It doesn't appear to serve an essential purpose and it disrupts the aerodynamics of the shuttle."

"Ah, that is more of an aesthetic design choice, sir. The overall philosophy of the Lifers does not support hiding the organic aspects of the machines and other conveniences they possess. Instead, they want to make the organic nature of their biomechanical products visible and prominent in order to take pride in their area of specialty."

While Ves could understand this sentiment, he absolutely couldn't understand why the designers of this shuttle decided to extend the head of a rhino-like exobeast out of the front.

While the beast head was dull and unresponsive, it looked as if it might be able to come to life at any second to roar at other shuttles or take a bite out of nearby people!

Ves had a feeling this would hardly be the only unnerving sight he would see during his stay on this planet.

Fortunately for his sensibilities, the passengers didn't have to board the organic shuttle by passing through any traditional orifices. A few plates move aside to allow a hatch to swing open.

When the shuttle finally took flight, Ves didn't experience any fluctuations that were different from any normal shuttle.

A pair of aerial mechs flew alongside the vehicle. Other shuttles bearing security personnel also formed a protective cordon around it. While this level of protection was not capable of resisting a powerful enemy, it was still considered strong by local standards.

Due to the nature of the organic shuttle, it didn't offer any windows, but the projections provided Ves a good view of both Veoline's scenery and the classical mechs positioned at the flanks.

He was slightly disappointed that they weren't biomechs, but it was not a big deal. He would be seeing plenty of biomechs once he reached his destination.

"Mr. Spefan?"

"Yes, Patriarch Larkinson?"

"As you know, we are on our way to one of the facilities owned by Dr. Frederico Navarro. What can you tell me about this mech designer?"

"Well, if you have taken a look at his public record, then you should know he is a Journeyman Mech Designer who is based on Prosperous Hill IV. The complex we are heading to is primarily a service center and a warehouse for the mechs produced in the aforementioned planet. Dr. Navarro does brisk business in this star system as he and his mech company has settled into a niche of the biomech market."

"How prominent is he compared to his peers and competitors?"

"He's not as famed as you in the markets you are participating in." Irvine immediately replied. "According to sources, Adaptive Solutions sells tens of thousands of biomechs on an annual basis. That is considered to be a moderate success by the standards of the regional mech market."

Ves nodded in agreement. Not everyone was as abnormal as him. If his design philosophy was less flashy, then he would have felt grateful for being able to sell more than 10,000 mechs a year.

Any ordinary Journeyman would be proud of achieving this level of sales in a second-rate state. Competition was much stiffer here as they had to carve out a place in a market where mechs designed by Masters already captured most of the share.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana looked down on Dr. Navarro because of the disparity of sales. While it was true that the couple had begun to design second-class mechs, their

commercial business was based entirely on third-class mech models, which competed in a much less sophisticated market.

"Is he a rising star in these parts?" Ves probed.

This kind of information was hard to obtain from the galactic net. Rather than trying to judge whether the rumors, gossip and biased reporting from various different sources were accurate, he felt it was better to get his answers from someone who didn't have any special relations with this particular biomech designer.

"It is hard for me to say as I am not a mech insider, but in my view the mech community thinks his growth is stalling. He advanced to Journeyman fairly young, but ever since then, his products have only improved incrementally. While his newer mechs definitely perform better than his older products, he hasn't come up with anything new or drastic enough in the last decade."

Ves had taken a look at Dr. Navarro's mech catalog. While he didn't understand the finer points of biomechs, the specs constantly trended upwards at a satisfactory rate.

"His mechs are getting better at a steady pace. I don't think he's stagnating." Gloriana voiced.

"That is true, but the biomech market highly favors change, ma'am. Each succession of a previous mech model must introduce a new eye-catching feature in order to distinguish themselves from the older generation. Customers pay far more attention to these additions than all of the dry numbers on a spec sheet, though they also need to be in order."

This sounded familiar to Ves. "So the buyers of biomechs highly value gimmicks, is that right? If Dr. Navarro is a savvy entrepreneur, then he should have added something novel to his mech designs no matter if it fits or not. Why hasn't he done that?"

Irvine looked clueless. "I cannot say, sir. It may be that his adaptive mechs cannot randomly incorporate additional elements in their design. This is what Dr. Navarro has stated himself. It may also be redundant as the transformation aspect is already the most powerful feature of his mechs."

That may be the case. The identity of the mech in question may already make additional features redundant. That was how Ves felt about some of his mechs. His main specialty was already valuable in itself and he did not want to introduce anything that cluttered up a clean design.

The shuttle didn't take long to reach its destination. The conversation stopped as the rhino-headed vehicle landed on the grounds of a large service complex.

When the passengers moved out, Ves and Gloriana looked up at what appeared to be a massive metallic tree.

"Whoa." Ves let out. "That's the biggest tree I've ever seen."

"It's not exactly a tree, but it comes close." Gloriana corrected him as she stared up at the magnificent structure as well.

"Meow?"

Lucky looked puzzlingly at the thick and smooth walls of the circular tree. The trunk was stupendously thick and broad, but it also reached several hundred meters into the air.

The entire ground was shaded in mottled shadow as huge leaves eagerly absorbed the rays shining from above.

While the entire complex looked organic, Lucky's nose was attracted by the materials that made up of it. There were plenty of exotics and other metals infused in the massive tree structure.

Was it edible to him or not? The gem cat couldn't make up his mind!

As they started to approach the tree complex, a distant figure emerged from the middle of the trunk.

The tree then did something amazing. A part of its bark morphed into a long branch that slowly extended downwards until it touched the ground at an angle.

The figure then proceeded to jump onto the smooth and concave surface and started to slide down along its length at an increasingly rapid pace!

"WHOOOO!" The voice of a younger man hollered as he almost neared the ground.

Just before he was about to crash, his body abruptly slowed until he retained just enough forward momentum to push his body to a standing position at the end.

"Hahaha! That never gets old!"

Now that the young man landed on the ground, the huge tree automatically retracted the long branch it had just grown out of its surface.

Both Ves and Gloriana were nonplussed at the odd sight.

"Oh, forgive my manners." The man wearing the uniform of Adaptive Solutions quickly bowed. "You must be Mr. and Mrs. Larkinson. I am Yelkin Zernzon. Dr. Navarro

welcomes you to his service complex. He is ready to receive you inside our main building."

"Uhm, okay. Please lead the way."

The entire group began to follow the young man forward.

"What position do you hold in Dr. Navarro's organization?"

"I'm his prospective apprentice." Yelkin answered. "Before you ask, that means that I am not his disciple, but I will be if my study results are good enough."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

What?!

Both Ves and Gloriana were rather surprised at that. Usually, mech designers looking to take on disciples never went after people who were so young. They were too young and imm.a.t.u.r.e to determine whether they met all of the requirements of a good apprentice.

The main exceptions to this rule were whether the young apprentice was either a prodigy or had some kind of family relation.

Ves ruled out the former because Dr. Navarro wasn't prestigious enough to attract valued talents.

"Are you related to him by any chance?"

Yelkin smiled back. "Nope. People ask me that all the time, but it's not like that. My teacher thinks that I am compatible with his approach to mech design. I still have to prove myself for many years, though. I have to take a lot of advance classes in order to get ready to attend the Veoline University of Applied Biotechnology next semester."

"That's rather fast." Ves remarked. "Why the hurry?"

"Studying biomech design is tough. Very tough. We need to study how to design both classical mechs and pass all kinds of biology and biotech-related courses on top of that. After that, we are supposed to learn how to merge that together in order to design and grow our own biomechs. It can easily take a decade to learn all of this knowledge, and that's with the help of a nifty implant, so you can never start too early."

That indeed sounded tough. Even Gloriana looked like she would likely struggle through all of the subjects she needed to learn. The considerably higher barrier to entry was one of several reasons why biomechs never fully caught on in human space.

"Are there many cases like yours in the LRA?"

"Oh, sure." Yelkin nodded. "I'm far from the youngest that got picked in advance by a respected biomech designer. There are some cases where our honored Seniors and Masters keep their eye on ten-year olds. The earlier they can nurture their potential apprentices, the better."

This sounded absurd to Ves. He bet that the only reason why the mech designers did not look at kids younger than ten was because their genetic aptitude wasn't clear yet. This was practically as young as the mech designers could reasonably go to select their prospective apprentices!

Ves still couldn't wrap his mind around this custom. "Shouldn't it be very hard to find the right seeds when they are at this age?"

Yelkin laughed again.

"Ha! Foreigners always say that. To us, it's normal. I don't know why all of you look at older students or starting mech designers for apprentices. It makes little sense to us. Aren't these candidates almost done with their formative growth? It's better to go younger so that you can actually shape the growth trajectory. That's what Dr. Navarro has been doing this to me. As long as I meet his expectations, I'll be sure to become an asset to his team!"

While that sounded logical to Ves, a part of him still felt disturbed for some reason. He didn't quite know why.

#### *Chapter 2727 - Uncovered Biomechs*

Though Yelkin was young, he was remarkably bright as far as Ves could tell. Even he felt tempted to take the teenager under his wing.

In the past, he might have considered someone like Yelkin to be his younger brother of sorts. Ves briefly thought back of his brief interactions with Oleg.

It was different now. He had grown older and advanced to Journeyman. No matter how young he was when he reached this state, no one ever considered a Journeyman to be a youngster anymore.

At his age and rank, he was catapulted to the ranks of mid-level mech designers. He had reached the phase in his career where it no longer made sense for him to be buddies with other beginning mech designers and mech design students.

Instead, an invisible gulf had formed between him and the aforementioned people. As an older, wiser and vastly more successful mech designer, he had to think about starting to take on his own students.

In fact, he already did, though he didn't think he was doing much to guide his current students. Gloriana had already taken on the responsibility of teaching Rennie and Maisie Ann so Ves only had to make sure that Maikel and Zanthar were on the right track.

To be honest, Ves hadn't invested too much in the two young men. Part of that was because the original purpose for teaching them had partially become redundant now that Ves had broken off from the Larkinson Family.

Unlike before where only a trueblood Larkinson must take over his legacy in the future, there were over fifty other individuals in the Design Department who had the potential to carry on his mantle.

Whether Larkinson blood flowed through their veins or not didn't matter to Ves. Anyone who was a member of the clan and connected to the Larkinson Network was trustworthy enough in his eyes.

Still, Ves didn't want to leave a job half-finished, so he simply carried on with instructing Maikel and Zanthar, if only to gain some valuable teaching experience.

One of them might even be successful like Ketis, who was very close to becoming a Journeyman herself.

"Are there any other students studying under Dr. Navarro like you?" Gloriana curiously inquired as she held Clixie to her c.h.e.s.t.

"Miaow."

The feline looked quite curious at the huge tree structure. It was as if she was itching to climb it all the way to the top!

"I'm the only one so far. The other mech designers working for Adaptive Solutions are just assistants." Yelkin answered.

"How many assistants are working for his company?"

"Around hundred, more or less. They tend to come and go once in a while. Some gain newer and better opportunities, while others are in the need of employment after they graduated with a degree in biomech design."

Gloriana sent a sharp glance at Ves.

Her message was very clear. If a Journeyman Mech Designer who only sold tens of thousands of mechs a year was able to employ a hundred assistants, why shouldn't they be able to do better?

Ves minutely shook his head.

It wasn't the same. Yelkin's story made it clear that the Novices and Apprentices who chose to work for Adaptive Solutions hardly developed any loyalty or commitment to their employer. They just wanted to earn their paychecks while gaining some valuable experience and learning resources along the way.

Those kinds of mech designers weren't suitable to Ves. They weren't interested in signing on to the Larkinson Clan on a permanent basis either.

While there was nowhere to go right now for any assistant that quit working in the Design Department, it was best to hire loyal and obedient assistants right from the start.

Ves needed people with the right mindset in order to make sure that the design teams operated smoothly without needing to play nanny. This was definitely going to be at least five times as hard if he began to recruit second-class mech designers.

Even the most average second-class mech designers were quite full of themselves! Their overall quality was still leagues ahead of any third-class mech designer due to the stricter entry requirements and greater study load.

He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to recruit enough assistant mech designers that were willing to play by his rules during his stay in Prosperous Hill.

As Ves wondered about his recruitment issues, the group finally passed through a huge entrance.

The interior of the tree-like structure looked similar to how it was outside. However, the atmosphere was different, both literally and figuratively.

As a facility that was largely devoted to repair, maintain or upgrade the products sold by Adaptive Solutions, it was not set up like a repair facility for classical mechs or machines.

He did not encounter a boisterous hall where bots, production equipment and crews of mech technicians handled a lot of metal parts. Instead, he came across strange pools filled with murky liquid. Biomechs with visible battle damage were partially submerged in each pool.

Nobody attended to these organic machines. The only humans in the hall were a sparse amount of personnel who wore lab coats and checked the consoles installed next to every pool.

Yelkin seemed to know what Ves and the rest were wondering about. He smiled at their puzzlement.

"It doesn't look exciting, but this is how biomechs are repaired."

"I thought biomechs are able to regenerate to some extent. Is it necessary to send some of these mechs back? They don't have a scratch on them as far as I know."

"Any living machine that either incurred heavy damage or lacks the special materials to regenerate their core components need to be sent back to us." Yelkin calmly explained. "They also get sent back if they are in need of getting updated to a newer iteration of their design."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "They actually get upgraded like this?"

"Sure. The mech is already doing most of the work itself. You just need to put the necessary nutrients and energy close enough for them to be able to sustain any regeneration or transformation processes. That's what the pool is for. They are all genetically programmed for this. The supervisors you see are merely there to make sure that no mutations or any other oddities occur. It's easy enough to undo an unintended change when it is just taking place, but it's a lot harder to undo it after the mech has completed its transformation."

The soupy pools looked like a cross section of an exobeast's stomach. Ves certainly wouldn't want to swim in it. All of the acids and other dangerous materials mixed into the liquid would probably corrode his body in an instant!

Yelkin led the group upwards. Fortunately, they didn't have to take the long way up and ascend via the spiralling surface. They instead entered a large elevator installed near the center of the hollow tree trunk structure.

The ride upwards was fast and smooth. Once they reached at least two hundred meters upwards, they entered a floor that was no longer occupied with any pools.

It was instead set up as an exhibition room where many of Frederico Navarro's mech designs were put on display.

What impressed both Ves and Gloriana was that the mechs put on display were not projections or simple scale models.

"Are they..." Gloriana asked in a fascinated tone.

Yelkin grinned. "That's right. These are actual, physical mechs that are genetically and biomechanically identical to our real products. My teacher has just tweaked their growth setting so that they never grow beyond the scale of a human."

There was a greater meaning in the scale that Dr. Navarro chose for his iconic biomechs. Seeing them put on a raised pedestal where the light shone at them in the most flattering way made them look oddly.. familiar.

"They look like mutated humans." Gloriana straightforwardly remarked.

The biomechs were humanoid in appearance. Each of them looked like people who Dr. Navarro had skinned, causing them to look like the victims of a serial killer. If not for the different pigments of their fleshy surface, it would have been far too easy to confuse them for human bodies instead of scaled-down biomechs!

"I don't see any biomechs with exoskeletons in this display room." Ves commented.

"My teacher is not a fan of that style. Hard exoskeletons interfere with the transformations that he is known for. While covered biomechs do have their place, Dr. Navarro is not in the business of designing them. He is quite content with the flexible mechs he has designed up to this point."

Many biomechs were covered by exoskeletons of sorts. N.a.k.e.d flesh alone was far too vulnerable and soft to withstand attacks by themselves. Flesh was seen as the equivalent of internals in classical mechs, so they should be protected from damage as much as possible. Grown exoskeletons neatly addressed this need.

However, there was another school of biomech design that favored 'n.a.k.e.d' or fleshy biomechs. Humanity encountered plenty of exobeasts throughout the galaxy who were able to resist a huge amount of punishment with their muscle density and the toughness of their flesh alone!

By extracting this tissue and researching it to the point where they were able to reverse-engineer and cultivate the hard muscle mass themselves, they could be grown on an industrial scale for use in mechs and other applications.

Ves looked quite impressed at the seemingly 'skinless' biomechs. It was undoubtedly harder to design a good mech without the benefit of a hard exoskeleton.

The latter took a lot of cues from classical mech design. Other than the fact that the materials and production methods were different, classical mechs and covered biomechs shared many of the same design principles, thereby making it easy to succeed in designing one that could achieve commercial success.

In fact, some biomech designers even eschewed grown armor plates and simply bolted on metal plates instead in order to shorten the growing period!

Then there were biomechs that took a more radical turn from conventional mech design.

Uncovered biomechs were significantly harder to design. The defensive properties of fleshy mechs were vastly different. While their surface wasn't as damage resistant, much of their muscle mass exhibited a uniform degree of damage resistance.

An egg shell was quite hard, but the application of a sufficient amount of force would eventually lead to a breach. Once a hole had formed, the vulnerable internals were highly susceptible to damage.

In contrast, a thick block of cheese offered pretty much the same level of resistance whether it was applied to the surface or deeper inside the biomachine.

The reality was more complicated than that, but this was a convenient way to understand the resistance profile of a fleshy biomech.

As long as the quality of the muscle mass of a biomech was high enough, its damage resistance could easily surpass that of a covered biomech or classical mech!

After walking past a dozen interesting uncovered biomechs, Ves asked another question.

"Is it possible to pilot these mini mechs?"

"Of course, sir. We don't stick tiny mech pilots in them, but it is easy to insert a small transceiver in place of its usual c.o.c.kpit. A mech pilot immersed inside a simulator pod can remotely connect to these display pieces and control them in the manner of an actual mech."

That sounded interesting, but not entirely practical. While it sounded like a great idea to field infantry-sized mechs, the signal that enabled them to be piloted from a distance could easily be hijacked or scrambled by enemies.

An odd idea suddenly entered his mind.

The reason why both organic and mechanical mini mechs were impractical was due to the vulnerability of their control mechanism.

The ideal solution was for them to be controlled by a tiny mech pilot, but that was absurd for obvious reasons.

Yet what if there was an alternate solution? What if he could stuff a pilot inside these mini mechs who had no body?

For example, Ves managed to harvest the near-complete spirituality of Venerable Foster after the previous battle. What would happen if he tried to integrate it with a human-sized mech?

Would he.. be able to recreate an expert mech on a human scale?

*Chapter 2728 - Unnecessary Alternative*

The visit to the Life Research Association already paid off as far as Ves was concerned.

He hadn't even met an actual biomech designer yet but already gained a bit of useful inspiration.

The idea he had just generated held a lot of promise. In the history of mechs, Ves had never heard of any designer creating a human-sized expert mech.

The possibilities were endless.

High-ranking expert pilots bent and broke the rules of reality. They were fearsome presences in any open battlefield and could substantially change the course of a battle between thousands of opposing machines.

Yet one of the most regretful shortcomings of expert pilots was that they needed a mech of a certain scale in order to exert their power. The resonance abilities they were able to evoke not only required a certain amount of resonance exotics, but also had to channel it in a mech that was large and sturdy enough to bear the stresses of bearing these extra forces.

Had people attempted to develop an expert mech-like suit of personal combat armor before? They did, yet the outcomes always led to failure.

Ves didn't have access to the confidential research conducted by the big shots such as the MTA and the first-rate superstates, but there were more reasons behind the inability to turn an expert pilot into a devastating infantry soldier.

Still, wouldn't it be different if the internals of a miniature mech consisted of actual mech parts rather than the flesh and bone of a human body?

The dynamics would be entirely different! The biomechs that Dr. Navarro put on display may look like armored humans, but they were still 100 percent pure mech despite their diminutive size!

Aside from bonding a mini mech with an incorporeal expert pilot, Ves may also be able to use a spiritual network to enable them to be piloted by remote.

Of course, Ves didn't really put much stock in the latter because any signal, even a spiritual one, could be interfered with. It was not that wise for him to rely too much on any network until he gained more confidence in their resilience against inference.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" His wife asked as she walked alongside him. "You're thinking about some crazy but impractical idea again, am I right?"

Ves hesitantly laughed. "You know me too well. These miniature mechs are truly fascinating. They hold all of the potential of their real counterparts, but they are scaled down to the size where they can enter structures. Think of the damage they can unleash if they can be piloted in a practical manner."

"If it was that easy to make mini mechs workable, then we wouldn't be bothering with all of these human guards." She gestured to all of the guards accompanying them on this trip.

Due to the constant threats on their lives, the Miracle Couple never thought about remaining discrete. Their ostentatious guard force consisted of heavily-armed Battle Criers, Glory Seekers and Infinity Guards.

Yet infantry was still limited in the power they could exert against threats. They could do precious little against even a single mech. It was not just a difference in scale, but also a difference in utilization of capacity.

Ves shook his head. These were very complicated problems and no doubt caused a lot of discussion within the upper echelons of the MTA. A mere Journeyman like him was too weak and incapable of affecting this issue.

Just the thought of trying to merge the spirit of an expert pilot like Venerable Foster to one of these miniature biomechs sounded crazy and reckless to the extreme.

The thought of inadvertently reviving Venerable Foster in an artificially-cultivated super body only for her to go out of control and go on a rampage sounded like a more complicated way to drop a stone on his foot. Didn't he stumble upon a story like that once?

Whatever the case, he might as well shoot his head with the Amastendira! At least then he wouldn't have to go through so many steps to ruin his life!

After passing through the long exhibition hall, they finally emerged on a large and expansive balcony. It was situated close to the top of the massive tree complex so it provided an impressive and expansive view of the outskirts of Veoline.

Ves spotted more tree-like structures and organic vehicles in the distance. The view of Prosperous Hill VI was truly something else. The integration of biotechnology in human society presented a much more profound shift in how a society functioned. What he had just glimpsed on this first day was only the tip of the iceberg.

Now, he was about to meet one of the proponents of this alternate human society.

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson. Thank you for accepting my invitation." A m.a.t.u.r.e mech designer wearing a colorful green and yellow robe stood up from his chair and approached with a smile. "I have heard that you have encountered quite some difficulties during your journey. I deeply regret the hardsh.i.p.s that you and your fellow dependents have endured."

Ves brushed aside the issue. "It's fine. We are not afraid of suffering hardsh.i.p.s. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

Dr. Frederico Navarro exuded a m.a.t.u.r.e demeanor. He was already a Journeyman for some time and possessed the confidence of one who was assured in his station of life.

When Ves cautiously probed the biomech designer with his spiritual senses, he encountered a mind that was solid and stable. This suggested that while Dr. Navarro hadn't made any radical breakthroughs recently, but he still improved at a satisfactory pace.

Ves and the host shook hands. Neither bothered with pointless power games such as trying to overpower the hand of the other.

They were mech designers. They let their skills and mech designs do the talking.

It was no coincidence that Yelkin inadvertently led the visitors through Dr. Navarro's exhibition hall. The wordless tour was meant to impress Ves in a way that projections could never equal.

Even though Ves was aware of Dr. Navarro's intention, the tactic still worked. Ves was truly impressed with the mechs that the Lifer was capable of designing.

The only snag was that Ves didn't possess a foundation in biotechnology. He was unable to comprehend all of the intricacies and nuances of the products sold by Adaptive Solutions.

After they went through the initial greetings, they all sat down.

Both Ves and Gloriana sat together while Yelkin personally served tea to the guests.

Ves didn't really think it was necessary for the young student to do something like that. It was a pointless gesture and one that did not make much logical sense. It was much more convenient for Dr. Navarro to call in a bot or whatever organic equivalent he possessed.

If that was too inconvenient, then Ves could just grab the teapot himself and do the job himself, but that may be an artifact of his lower-class background. He was still unaccustomed to all of the rules that people in his station took for granted.

Dr. Navarro's eyes gazed appreciatively at Clixie. "That's a lovely Rubarthan Sentinel Cat you have got there. Where did you obtain her, if I may ask?"

"She's a gift from the MTA." Gloriana modestly smiled back. "A distinguished mech designer over there appreciated my potential and gifted me with this lovely companion. She's been with me ever since. We love each other so much."

"Miaow~"

Clixie luxuriated in her owner's praises. She swished her tail back and forth while arrogantly lifting up her head.

"I see her intelligence is quite developed as well. The Rubarthans have quite a knack for engineering pets. I would love nothing more than to take some tissue samples from her exquisite body, but I do not believe that will not result in any meaningful gains. The genetic programming of bioproducts like your cat are encrypted through very sophisticated means. Even if I manage to crack the code, I do not have the necessary resources and lab equipment to replicate a product of her caliber."

Dr. Navarro eyed Clixie as hungrily as Ves did whenever he opened one of his souvenir nutrient packs.

Naturally, the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat in question was s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e enough to pick up the biomech designer's intentions. Her tail lowered and her hair slightly raised.

"Miaow..."

She hissed a warning at the host.

"Hahaha, have no fear, little one. I do not have a habit of touching other people's possessions." Navarro tried to reassure the vigilant pet. "Besides, I am very much aware of how lethal you can be. I doubt this day will end well for me if you feel the need to lash out."

"Meow?"

Lucky had been wandering about the balcony while ignoring the humans sitting at the table. He padded over when Clixie started hissing.

Despite the gem cat's remarkable appearance, Dr. Navarro did not even spare a glance at the other pet. Even though Ves was pretty sure that Lucky was at least a hundred times more valuable and advanced, the biomech designer held too little appreciation towards any purely mechanical products!

After a bit of idle chatting, Dr. Navarro finally steered the conversation towards mechs.

"Mr. Larkinson, as a native of the Komodo Star Sector, you must be new to biomechs, am I correct?"

Ves nodded honestly. "I have only read about them in certain textbooks or seen them in virtual form. Before today, I never had the opportunity to gaze at a biomech up close. No one in my past and current circle makes use of biological machines."

"That is unfortunate to hear. Komodo is directly adjacent to Majestic Teal, yet our Life Research Association has failed to export any of our well-regarded products to one of your two second-rates."

"The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony are both larger than the Life Research Association. Their mech industries and mech markets are several times larger. They are already capable of fulfilling most of their mech-related needs by themselves."

"Yet you have been able to interest them with your products. The Friday Coalition has already tried to kill you several times while the Hexadric Hegemony enthusiastically embraces your product despite being the opposite of a female Hexer mech designer. How do you do it, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves offered his host a modest smile. "It's quite simple, really. While I am not well-versed with the variety of features that biomechs can offer, so far I have not encountered any advantages that classical mechs are unable to replicate. Biomechs may be built in a vastly different manner, but why should customers bother with them if they do not offer anything different? My own products are different. Even if the quality of our mech designers fall short of those designed by distinguished Masters, none of them are able to offer anything comparable to my glows. Not only is my specialty unique, it also conveys immediate and obvious advantages to my customers and clients."

It was hard to argue against this logic. Dr. Navarro bent his head. "The biomech community is very cognizant of this reality. Even though we do our best to pretend we are ignorant, it is indeed true that our biomechs are not yet capable of offering selling points that truly makes them more desirable than classical mechs."

This honest assessment was a very shameful admission! Both Ves and Gloriana looked a little astonished. They thought that someone like Dr. Navarro would mindlessly defend the superiority of biomechs no matter what evidence to the contrary he heard!

Ves couldn't help but alter his perception of Dr. Navarro. A mech designer who was self-aware was much more worthy of his attention than someone who was too self-absorbed in his own assumptions.

He had a suspicion that this invitation was not that simple.

## *Chapter 2729 - Lazy or Efficient*

It was a lovely day out in Veoline. Millions of locals and foreigners went about their day in the lively capital city of the bustling commerce-oriented planet.

Organic shuttles and transports regularly ascended into space or descended from orbit. The spaceports saw constant traffic, but no matter how many people or goods were being moved, no congestion took place.

Every vehicle and vessel that traveled under the banner of the PHTS followed a single unified schedule that made sure that there was never too much or too little traffic in any place.

This was quite beautiful to behold even though the view at Dr. Navarro's service center was a bit too far away.

Through the various policies enacted and enforced by the local authorities, Prosperous Hill VI remained bustling without exhibiting any hint of disorder. On the surface, Veoline was a city that traders would love to visit again. The restrictive rules and regulations didn't sound as bad anymore if they produced an orderly city like this. Even Ves felt it might be great if he and his clan settled down on this prosperous planet.

Sadly, a life of peace and quiet was not in the cards for him. His ambition reached higher and he urgently needed to grow stronger to get ahead of latent dangers.

Ves didn't imagine he'd be able to progress as quickly as he wanted if he shackled himself to a single state. No matter what novelties the Life Research Association offered, eventually Ves would not be able to gain any valuable insights and inspiration from the local biotech industries.

He was determined that constantly moving was the right way to go. There were countless states and regions in the cosmos that were dozens of times more interesting and unusual than the LRA. It would be rather pathetic of him to end his grand expedition just when he had stepped outside of his native star sector. This was hardly an endeavor worth celebrating!

As Ves continued to admire the calming view, he went back to considering the issue that Dr. Navarro had introduced.

One of the fundamental reasons why biomechs were unable to threaten the dominance of classical mechs was because they did not provide any substantial advantages.

Sure, they did offer plenty of unique features, but that only made biomechs sidegrades at best. There was no specific property of biomechs that stood head and shoulders above any feature that normal mechs were able to offer.

The only consolation to biomech enthusiasts like Dr. Navarro was that biomechs were still competitive enough to hold their own in the brutal mech market.

"If biomechs became the established standard in human space, then the infrastructure that is ubiquitous in our state would have been more common throughout the galaxy." The host calmly spoke, breaking the momentary silence.

Ves followed up on that observation.

"If that happened, then the infrastructure for classical mechs wouldn't be as vast and common. The direct consequence is that it becomes more expensive and troublesome to produce, sell, field, maintain, repair and dispose of purely mechanical mechs. On the flipside, biomechs are cheaper and easier to work with. No matter if you are a designer, producer or user, if the entire galactic community is set up to make the most out of biomechs, then hardly anyone would want to make their lives more difficult by choosing the less popular alternative."

"That is indeed what many of us in the LRA think. Human civilization progressed and ascended to the stars by leveraging their growing mastery of the mechanical. This is a trend that has continued for many millennia. It is too hard for contrarians such as us to convince the rest of our fellow humans that biotechnological alternatives have their uses as well." Dr. Navarro sighed after he took a sip of his tea.

His drink did not cool at all due to the organic warming mechanism embedded in the cup. It kept the tea at exactly the temperature that he enjoyed the most.

"It is exactly because mainstream humanity has depended upon and enjoyed so much success with their mechanical inventions that they are committed to classical mechs." Ves stated. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. While this expression sounds crude, it reflects the reality that continuing in our current direction is the path of least resistance. It presents the least difficulties while yielding the most results."

Dr. Navarro adopted a contemptuous expression. "How lazy. Humanity is too short-sighted. Too many people are incapable of looking beyond their noses. If they actually bothered to do so, they would know that the future of tech requires the cooperation of both organic and mechanical technology."

Ves blinked. "That is a bold statement, doctor. I doubt many people outside the LRA agrees with that notion."

"That is because they are leaving themselves out of the equation." The bearded man grinned and tapped his c.h.e.s.t. "We humans are organic in nature, are we not? While it is true that classical mechs such as your own products are made of metal, composites and other inorganic components, they always feature a conspicuous cavity in their c.h.e.s.t. Do we fill this gap with another machine? No! We always put living, organic humans in this space. Mechs are specifically designed to be useless unless we provide

at least one organic element to them. In fact, many other mechanical creations are the same."

"That is mostly a function of our need to control the machines that govern our lives." Gloriana couldn't help but respond. "We never want to be at the mercy of AIs and automated machinery, so we create products that are always kept in check by a human element. If we drop this precaution, any determined enemy can collapse our whole society in an instant by hacking or subverting our automated conveniences."

Ves supported this sentiment as well. "I fully agree with my wife. Dr. Navarro, the point that you have raised is not a problem that is exclusive to mechanical machines. It applies to every powerful device, no matter if they are made of metal or organic tissue. Both kinds of creations are at risk of going out of control."

Ves thought that Dr. Navarro was just spouting philosophical nonsense. Putting a living being inside a mech did not make it partially organic. It just meant that it was controlled directly by a human, as it should be. This had little to do with the competition between classical technology and biotechnology.

The biomech designer did not make a convincing case for his cause. While he was cognizant of the reasons why biotechnology was not able to supplant conventional technology outside of its established niche, he did not present any compelling reasons why the rest of the galaxy was wrong.

Whether they were talking about biomechs or broad applications of biotechnology in general, both of them were unattractive to most people. Biomechs were freaky, unnerving, incomprehensible, expensive and difficult to work with. Why bother with them when an ordinary mech already accomplished the job?

Even Ves held the same view.

"Forgive me for being blunt, but opposing the mainstream just because you are a contrarian is not enough. You need to provide substantive reasons to make others acknowledge biomechs and biotechnology to a greater degree. Your failure to do so here is a n.a.k.e.d reflection of the fact that you are unable to explain why your viewpoint benefits humanity as a whole. While humans are irrational to a degree, they still have enough common sense to avoid any solutions that just give them more trouble. Call them lazy if you want, but they are just being efficient in my eyes."

Dr. Navarro was taken aback at the firm tone that Ves adopted. He felt a bit offended for a moment, but a mech designer of his caliber knew that venting his heating emotions would not advance his viewpoint in the slightest.

Instead, he decided to take a long sip of his tea.

"I see now why you are called the Devil Tongue. You do not mince words."

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "I only do so when my patience is being tested. I did not want to give you this harsh dose of reality, but you continued to press me with your flawed arguments. If you wanted to avoid my reaction, then you should have done a better job with conveying your point."

"Ah, it's too difficult to do so. If I was discussing this matter with another biomech designer, we would have been speaking the same language. There would have been no debate about the utility and usefulness of biomechs and biotechnology."

"Let me ask you a question, doctor. Have you ever ventured outside of the Life Research Association in your life?"

"I did." He replied. "I briefly traveled to the MTA's sector headquarters in Majestic Teal when I became a Journeyman. The star system where their headquarters is based is beyond amazing. It is unfortunate that I did not feel comfortable to be around so much mechanical technology. I returned quickly after I was done with my pilgrimage."

"That's your problem. You returned home way too quickly. As a Journeyman, how can you not know the importance of traveling around? When I ended my visit to the sector headquarters in my home star sector, I took the opportunity to travel for an additional year before I returned 'home'. I learned so much during my experiences. I broadened my sights and became more aware of how other mech designers approached their work."

Dr. Navarro started to look indignant. "I have not isolated myself, Mr. Larkinson. I have ventured several times throughout my career. It is just that the mech community outside of the LRA has little to offer for biomech designers such as myself. I have visited and interacted with over a hundred peers from my state. The lessons I've learned and the inspiration I've gained has propelled my work for decades."

Ves refrained from shaking his head. He really couldn't believe what he heard.

"Has not a single biomech designer bothered to venture outside this state?"

"There is little point. Outside of business reasons, there is no benefit to exploring the mech industries of other states. Biomechs and classical mechs have too little in common. If we spend the same amount of time on visiting other biomech designers, we can gain much more tangible results."

"Have you ever thought that you'd only be learning what every other biomech designer is able to learn? There are only so many insights that a single mech industry can provide."

The host fell silent for a time. "Maybe you are onto something, but there are too many hindrances. The fact that we do not share the same infrastructure, the same design principles and even the same base of knowledge means that classical mech designers

such as you do not welcome us. In fact, most ordinary mech designers who decide to visit our kind mostly do it out of curiosity. They never gain anything substantial out of exchanges. We are too different."

Ves crossed his arms. "I can see how that can happen. I'm different."

"How so, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I'm not looking to gain anything too specific. I just keep an open mind and take whatever I can get. I'm already satisfied with what I've gained so far. Even if my new insights do not affect my subsequent work, I am still enriched with what I've learned."

Dr. Navarro smiled. "I am glad to hear that. Our state has seen worse mech designers."

"While this is certainly an interesting discussion, my schedule is rather tight." Ves coughed. "I'd like to address the main purpose of my visit here today. Why do you wish to challenge me to a design duel?"

He received a mild smile in return. Dr. Navarro did not appear all that upset despite failing to convince Ves with his rhetoric.

"Let's say that I am curious about your design philosophy. You claim to design 'living mechs'. Yet how can a mech be alive when it is solely made out of cold hard metal? If you have taken at least a cursory look at the biomechs that are being serviced downstairs, then you should know that they are organic creations. They nearly have all of the elements that meet the definition of life! Let me return the favor and ask you this question. Are biomechs not more alive than your so-called living mechs?"

#### *Chapter 2730 - Definition of Life*

"I think we are adopting different definitions of life." Ves began.

The question posed by Frederico Navarro was a profound one that could not be answered with a single sentence.

Fortunately, Ves had already received advance warning that Dr. Navarro wanted to challenge him on this point.

As a mech designer whose domain was half-dedicated to an aspect of life, how could he be caught flat-footed by a mere philosophical challenge?

He openly claimed to design and sell living mechs. He did not consider any of it to be a lie. Even if other people did not agree with his assertion, it didn't matter too much to him. They would learn in time that his products possessed advantages that fit within the boundaries of life.

His design philosophy never lied. If it was based around life, then Ves should be absolutely correct when he said that his mechs were all alive.

The only issue was that he did not live in an absolute reality where a single truth was taken as objectively right.

Different people clutched onto different truths due to their different perspectives. The issue became even more muddled when human ego and emotions entered the equation.

Even Ves was not immune to this effect. If anyone actively challenged his living mechs, he always felt compelled to defend his stance even when he was confronted with overwhelming evidence that countered his views!

This was what made exchanges between mech designers rather tricky. The purpose of an exchange was to generate useful insights to both sides without shattering the foundation of their specialty.

Of course, that was only one way to look at exchanges. More aggressive mech designers enjoyed challenging their peers and rivals by engaging in philosophical debates. Their goal was not to enrich their own views, but to tear down the views of others.

Ves didn't mind doing so to a mech designer who disrespected him, but Dr. Navarro had not reached this threshold. Throughout the entire meeting, the biomech designer still acted as a decent host. The points he made and the views he expressed completely conformed to his background as an adept of biotechnology.

Dr. Navarro was still earnest. It would be excessive for Ves to tackle this question in an aggressive manner.

"Who is the strongest Star Designer? Who is the strongest god pilot? Are sh.i.p.s stronger than mechs? All of these questions and more produce endless debates." Ves slowly continued. "I have found that the main reason why two sides can never come to a consensus is because they apply different criteria as a result of using ambiguous definitions. For example, consider the first question. How do you actually measure the 'strength' of a Star Designer? The power of their mech designs? That's not a good approach as some mechs can easily counter other specific mechs."

This was an extremely heated debate on the galactic net because every Star Designer had their own armada of diehard fans. Billions of mech designers and mech enthusiasts would literally fight and die for their idol in order to defend the viewpoint that their chosen Star Designer was the strongest!

Even Dr. Navarra looked unwilling to wade in this swamp. "You are avoiding my point. While I understand the message that you are trying to convey, not every question

should remain unanswered. Stating that we may hold different definitions of life is valid, but this is not a sufficient answer."

It seemed that Dr. Navarro was not afraid of encountering a little friction.

"That's fair." Ves minutely nodded to the older Journeyman. "It's just that it is much more difficult to convey my argument if we are divided in meaning. Life means something different to me than other people. I'm sure that you also feel that your idea of life is distinct from other people. This is why I feel reluctant to proceed with espousing my views. Even if I elaborate my philosophy, most of it will just sink into an ocean when it reaches your ears."

"Exchanges can be like that. You don't need to be pedantic towards me. I have been through my fair share of debates. No matter how useless it seems, it is best to start with voicing out your views. We cannot go any further without knowing our differences."

"Very well." Ves took a deep breath. "In my opinion, what makes mechs alive is whether they are able to think and feel for themselves. That is the basic definition that I have always based my work from. It's not visible, but all of the mechs that I have designed are alive because they each have traits that fit this definition."

"And these traits are...?"

Ves raised a finger. "First, my mechs are responsive to their mech pilots in a way that is not related to the programming or physical configuration of the mech. What I mean by that is that as mech pilots interface with my mechs, they become exposed to a living personality. Two personalities, actually. The most obvious ones are the sources of my glows, while the less obvious ones are the lives that represent the mechs themselves."

The biomech designer quickly began to frown. He was already starting to have trouble following Ves' argument.

"So your mech actually holds two lives instead of one? How does that even work?"

"It's complicated. Glows are a more advanced application of my design philosophy. My earliest mech designs did not possess any glows, but I still consider them to be alive to an extent. Feedback from mech pilots have already made it clear that they truly feel their mechs care for them as long as they care for their machines in turn."

"Is this true?" Navarro skeptically asked.

"I can transfer some of those reports to you, though whether you trust them is another matter. Regardless, you just need to go on the galactic net or ask any mech pilot that has used my products to know that my statement is true. As mech designers, we exist to serve mech pilots. Their opinions hold great weight. In fact, I would argue their views supersede ours. Even if they are not versed in the finer points of science and

engineering, if they believe a mech is bad, no amount of brilliant engineering can make the machine good."

"That is.. a refreshing view to hear. It is a humbling one as well."

Ves had actually hidden a deeper meaning behind that response. Dr. Navarro was clever enough to pick this up and offer his response.

"Before I go on, let me ask you a question in return. According to the feedback your mech company receives from its customers, have any mech pilots felt their mechs were 'alive' in a way that I have described?"

The other mech designer firmly shook his head.

"What you consider to be a positive aspect is a negative aspect to other mech designers. If a mech pilot feels that his biomech is able to think and feel for itself, then something must have gone horribly wrong. Biomechs and other mechs for that matter aren't supposed to be autonomous. While our products have developed neurological organs that function similar to brains, they are adamantly not designed to form a distinct consciousness. Even if a biomech designer has been careless enough to do so, the method of production rules out the possibility."

Biomechs were grown out of seeds, eggs, nuclei or whatever else the designer called the starting point of their products.

When one of these biomech seeds were dropped in so-called feeder pools, they automatically followed their genetic programming and absorbed a steady amount of nutrients in order to reach their end state.

Yet how did these biomech seeds emerge in the first place?

Cloning was the answer. The only way to produce biomech seeds was to clone them from another biomech seed.

The first biomech seed was a meticulously cultivated product that the biomech designer carefully formed by utilizing advanced lab equipment.

Of course, whether a biomech seed was cultivated from scratch or cloned from an existing example, their means of reproduction left no opportunity for them to gain any sentience.

There had been a couple of.. incidents.. in the early days of the Age of Mechs that taught every mech designer that making biomechs sentient was an incredibly awful idea.

The rules that prohibited everyone from developing new species that were smart and powerful enough to challenge humanity's dominance in the galaxy also applied to biomechs.

This meant that any mech designer who was stupid enough to make a biomech that was able to do everything a human was capable of would get into a lot of trouble!

This was relatively easy to ensure when it came to classical mechs. Almost every aspect of their physical design was clear, transparent and controlled.

It was a lot more difficult to make sure that biomechs were also under control. Their ability to grow and mutate also made them prone to developing in a direction that was not desirable. This could be very dangerous in certain circumstances!

This was why sentience was a much greater taboo among biomech designers. They constantly had to fight against the stereotype of a mad scientist who wanted to create giant living biomechs who were prone to going out of control and turning against their own makers!

Ves turned his attention back to the discussion at hand.

"My views on life are centered around sentience." Ves plainly spoke. "A mech made of flesh and bone is not alive in my eyes. It's just a large and powerful clone. A classical mech developed by another mech designer is exactly the same. The materials and physical makeup may be different, but from a mental perspective, the lack of independent thought and feeling means that they are only 'alive' in the sense that bacteria are alive."

Those words had a profound impact on Dr. Navarro.

Even Yelkin, who had been standing quietly at the side, began to shake at the controversial view that Ves just voiced!

Dr. Navarro's smile became strained. "You will not make yourself popular among my kind if you share your opinion on this matter. I think we can both agree that making mechs autonomous and independent is not an outcome that we wish to see. That said, if your design philosophy makes it possible to allow biomechs to develop a sentient mind, then I am afraid that you will instantly incur the ire of practically our entire biomech industry!"

"I'm aware of that. I never proposed to apply my own design philosophy to an actual biomech. I merely think that when it comes to life, a biomech will never be alive unless this happens. This is my belief and I am pretty convinced by it. A biomech that does not have the qualities of my existing products is as lifeless as a slab of meat. It just has the appearance of life, not its essence."

His host never dropped his frown. Dr. Navarro felt that the views espoused by Ves were much more difficult to address than he thought.

While he was not persuaded by how Ves chose to frame the issue, he struggled to formulate his response.

In a way, Ves was right. Biomechs were mentally crippled to make sure they didn't act out by themselves. This was an approach that pretty much every biomech designer applied to their work.

Dr. Navarro had never questioned himself whether this was a d.e.s.i.r.ed approach. Were biomechs truly better if they were unthinking and unfeeling?