

Mech 2731

Chapter 2731 - A Different Judge

Classical mechs and biomechs may share the same purpose, but their circumstances were different.

Normal mech designers did not have to study complicated biological subjects, let alone figure out how to combine that with principles of mech design.

Normal mech designers almost never worried about their mechs coming to life and going out of control.

Normal mech designers rarely bothered with the issue of trying to gain acceptance for their products from the greater mech market.

During his discussion with the bearded biomech designer, Ves gained a lot of sympathy towards the position of hardworking people like him. Because biomechs went against the dominant trend of human technological development, they had to work several times harder just to keep their heads above the water.

That said, Ves was still an adherent of mechs made out of metal, composites, exotics and other inorganic materials.

In his opinion, it was not desirable to overcomplicate mechs. The forceful insertion of biotechnology resulted in a higher barrier of entry, harsher requirements to progress, a smaller mech industry and a greater distance between mech designers and their customers.

There were many downsides to adopting biomechs. This wouldn't be so bad if Dr. Navarro was able to enunciate a compelling advantage, but so far Ves hadn't heard anything convincing enough.

The various points that biomechs were traditionally known for such as their self-regeneration capabilities and lack of maintenance requirements were useful, but did not really stand out either.

Ordinary outfits were able to service and repair their damaged mechs just fine by hiring an adequate crew of mech technicians.

Sure, it may be annoying to hire so many people, but mech technicians were some of the cheapest people to employ.

Then there was the issue of life.

"Our different backgrounds and life experiences caused us to develop diverging thoughts about life." Ves calmly explained as he sat next to the table overlooking Veoline. "I have never seriously played with all of this biotechnology stuff, so I have never really thought about biomechs when I formed my principles of life. My design philosophy doesn't really care about the form of the mech at all. Whether it is a classical mech, a biomech or a mech made out of energy or other substance, they are all conceptually the same machine that each share the same purpose. The only distinction that I make to consider whether they are alive is whether they have the mental qualities of life."

Ves was quite happy to have entered into this debate. Being confronted by a colleague who adhered to a different perspective of life generated a sharp and obvious contrast to his own. It was through these direct collisions that he became more cognizant of his special qualities.

His design philosophy centered around life as it manifested in a spiritual sense. Biotechnology had nothing to do with it, so Ves did not need to mess with any flesh-and-blood mech in order to realize his design philosophy.

Dr. Navarro looked more troubled as the debate went on, but he was not someone who lacked a spine. As a Journeyman, he possessed an unwavering degree of confidence in his own design philosophy.

"I can accept your proposition that we are separated by our different views of what constitutes life, but I do not ascribe to your ranking." The older Journeyman retorted. "A biomech may carry some inherent variations, but they are all under control. A mech that changes and mutates out of its own will is not desirable. Neither the MTA nor the public wishes to see mechs that they constantly need to be on guard against. If your living mechs are truly alive in a mental sense, then they should be capable of forming their own opinions on their users and owners. It may be nice if the mechs are content with their situations, but what if they aren't? What if your mechs turn against your customers? Can you handle the consequences of such a devastating event?"

That was a good counterattack, but Ves was ready for it. He had already thought about it a long time ago.

"My mechs are explicitly designed to be part of a greater system. A mech is merely a single piece of the puzzle. The mech pilot is the other crucial piece. Only when they are merged together will they be able to perform greater than the sum of their parts. That is what my work is really all about. The MTA officially recognizes my design philosophy as Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis, which means that my mechs are specifically designed to rule out the possibility of going out of control."

That was not necessarily true, but Ves didn't need to point that out. As far as his public works were concerned, they were all incapable of acting independently or able to inflict real harm on their mech pilots.

Navarro responded with a sharp question. "The possibility still exists, right?"

Ves smiled back in response. "I could say the same for your works, otherwise you biomech designers wouldn't implement so many precautions."

After exchanging a few more minor points, the debate slowly drew to an end.

They both held their final statements where they reiterated their true thoughts.

Dr. Navarro took a deep breath as he gazed up at the top of his giant tree complex.

"Your views on life are truly compelling, but they are incompatible with the biomech industry." He spoke. "The mechs that you design are a latent threat to the mech market in my opinion. You may think that your self-thinking and self-feeling machines will serve humanity as you intended to, but the leeway that you have given to them will ultimately come to bite you back. The more mechs you produce, the greater the odds that a catastrophic development might occur where a mech may turn into a man-hating monster. This risk does not exist in biomechs because none of them ever allow for the possibility of developing independent thought. Only the mech pilot is required to provide this aspect. Nothing else."

The living mechs in the doctor's views were biological products that were just as dull as ordinary mechs. Dr. Navarro sounded as if this was good instead of bad. The biomech industry's taboo on sentient or uncontrolled war machines was so strong that he could not bring himself to accept the views of his guests. The consequences were too undesirable.

While Ves was aware of this restriction, it did not change his own views in the slightest. He long divested his approach to mechs from the taboos espoused by the MTA. He only paid attention to the stances of the reigning authorities when the chances of getting caught were too great.

Of course, Ves didn't consider himself to be an extremist in the mech industry. His mech designs mostly fit in the boundaries that the MTA considered safe. His goal wasn't to tear down the existing mech paradigms. Instead, he wanted to supplement them so that the mechs in the galaxy became even better once they gained the qualifications to be treated as partners rather than tools.

He sighed.

"I don't think you are all wrong or misguided. Not really." Ves said his own piece. "I just think it is rather boastful to claim that you are the true designers of living mechs when your products are simply unthinking machines in another form. The way I see it, your biomechs only possess one aspect of life, but it isn't one I value. My mechs, despite being made of metal and other processed materials, each possess their own thoughts and emotions. I'm not the only one who prefers mechs that are alive in this fashion. I

have tens of millions of satisfied customers throughout the star cl.u.s.ter who swear by my products due to the benefits that my unique design philosophy can bring. Are you able to do the same?"

Biomechs failed to achieve acceptance in the mainstream mech markets. While there were certain regions such as the Life Research Association where the local conditions allowed them to become dominant, that was the exception rather than the rule.

Even if the great advantages of classical mechs were taken into account, it was undeniable that the LMC continued to expand its business operations at an explosive rate. Ves was considerably younger than Frederico Navarro but the Living Mech Corporation was already a hundred times greater than Adaptive Solutions!

"Perhaps the export volume of the LRA's entire biomech industry is greater than the sales volume of my own mechs, but I am only a single mech designer." Ves added. "On an individual basis, I seriously doubt that any of you except for your Masters are able to equal me in this regard. Even if I am wrong, the comparison is unfair to begin with. I am just a Journeyman whose design philosophy hasn't reached its full potential, yet a rapidly-growing group of customers swear by my products. The market has spoken, Navarro. My vision of living mechs has the potential to become the new standard, while your version of living mechs simply doesn't bring enough value!"

Dr. Navarro looked as if Ves had punched him in the face. This was a brutal argument, and one that was grounded in reality!

Biomechs already existed for centuries, but they hardly made any progress in breaking through the mainstream mech market.

In contrast, LMC mechs only existed for a decade or so and only truly became more ubiquitous in the last couple of years. Yet the meteoric growth in sales and popularity far exceeded that of any single biomech designer from the LRA such as Dr. Navarro and other Journeymen of his generation.

This was a n.a.k.e.d crush! Ves ultimately gained the upper hand of this debate not by proving that his definition of life was superior, but by appointing the mech market as the ultimate decider!

As mech designers, people like Ves and Dr. Navarro was taught to serve their customers. No matter what bright ideas they had, if the market didn't accept them, then they held little practical value. This was something that was very hard to argue against!

"The mech market is flawed." Dr. Navarro retorted, though his spine had grown a lot slacker. "Laymen don't understand the technical aspects of our mech designs. Biomechs are much more brilliant than they can ever understand. Trying to translate the different benefits of biomechs to the public has always been one of our shortcomings. I've also mentioned earlier that it doesn't help that the dominant infrastructure is not set

up to facilitate the use of biomechs. These factors result in significantly lower sales in areas outside of our home market. I believe that if we truly compete fairly against each other, our biomechs will gain greater appreciation from our target audience."

Ves smirked. "Are you willing to put that to the test?"

The other Journeyman frowned.

"What do you propose?"

"In the end, talk is talk. If we truly want to prove who is right, we should proceed with a design duel. I just think we should adopt a different format in order to see whether your claim that your biomechs will earn more appreciation than my LMC mechs."

Dr. Navarro looked uncomfortable with where this was going. He had lost the initiative despite being the host of this meeting. That was a serious failure on his part.

Ves did not allow the other mech designer to block his suggestion.

"Let's do it like this. Instead of holding a traditional design duel, we should adapt our existing works. My Design Department is already in the final stages of completing some mech designs. Let's agree to convene in a month and pit our mechs against each other."

"What is the point of this, Mr. Larkinson?"

"The tally of wins or losses aren't important. What we should look at instead is the opinions of the mech pilots selected to use our products in the dueling arena. We'll give them the opportunity to pilot both our products. After they are done with their duels, we should ask them which one they prefer the most. Does this sound fair to you, doctor?"

"This.."

Ves grinned wider. "I'll even give you a handicap. As long as you can ensure that the mech pilots chosen to take part in this design duel will give their honest opinions, they can be Lifers. These are your fellow citizens! They hold no bias against biomechs. In fact, it's probably the opposite. Therefore, there is no way you can argue that you are suffering from an unfair advantage in this mech duel. Are you still hesitant to accept my challenge?"

Though Doctor Navarro looked quite upset at being railroaded into this lopsided design duel, his pride and confidence in his own philosophy did not allow him to refuse!

"I... accept, though I wish to make some suggestions of my own. I do not wish to take undue advantage of the situation."

Chapter 2732 - Challenged

An hour later, Ves and his group exited the giant tree complex. They walked back to their shuttle parked in the periphery of the service center grounds.

"Miaow!"

"Meow!"

Both Lucky and Clixie enjoyed the opportunity to stretch their limbs again. The time they spent on the balcony near the top of the artificial tree was too boring for the energetic cats.

Their owners were amused by the antics of their pets. While their pets had plenty of space aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, they were much more comfortable with frolicking on open soil.

It turned out that Ves was still unaccustomed to living in space. Even though he made a decision in his mind that making his fleet his new home was for the best, he couldn't get rid of his yearning for endless lands, open skies and natural light shining down on his head.

Despite the high population density of Veoline, the lack of pollution and extensive organic air filtration solutions meant that the air was completely fresh and natural.

It smelled completely unlike the filtered air that passed through the ventilation system of the Spirit of Bentheim. There was always a sense of falseness in the air that the Larkinsons aboard the various vessels of the fleet breathed in every day. Only those who were born and raised in ships like these would take the unnatural smell for granted.

"Why did you propose to alter the mech duel?" Gloriana broke the silence.

He already sensed her puzzlement. He smiled at her and gestured his head at the shuttle.

She understood what he tried to convey and kept her curiosity in check. It only took a few more minutes before they arrived at their armored shuttle. Its strange rhino bust looked as odd and out of place as ever.

Now that he understood the perspective of biotechnology adherents a bit more, he knew that the head was purely decorative in function. The rhiny-like head did not possess any functioning brain structure, so the shuttle wasn't truly alive like his mechs.

It was only after they stepped into their vehicle that Ves explained his actions.

"To be honest, I'm eager to finish our remaining mech design projects. I know you feel the same way."

Gloriana nodded as she sat down next to him and leaned against his arm. "A normal design duel doesn't take much time to resolve, but it is still a distraction considering our busy schedule. I really don't want to spend too much time on this planet when our five remaining projects are way behind schedule."

The good news was that they didn't require much time to get their projects across the finish line. They just needed to spend a few more days to put the finishing touches on the remaining mech designs before they were fit for use. The Hex Army had waited too long to receive the next batch of Hexer mechs designed by the Miracle Couple.

Ves wasn't sure whether the three designs that they were about to hand over would succeed in reversing the losing trend. The Friday Coalition's mech militaries had already regained all of their former territories.

It was the Hexadric Hegemony's turn to take a beating this time! The Hexer border systems were already in the process of resisting the Fridayman counterattacks. Though they held for now, the momentum was still in the favor of the enemy due to the increasingly more impactful difference the foreign expert pilots made.

The Fridaymen may have failed to win the Battle of Reckoning, but that was due to other reasons. The superiority in number of expert mechs had taken a huge toll on the forces of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Most battles at this stage of the Komodo War did not result in an upset. The sides were too even in many aspects. This made the difference in the quantity of expert pilots a lot more influential. It only took a single push to tip the balance!

Both Ves and Gloriana were aware of the overall score, so they were both quite eager to provide relief.

There was a bit of a problem, though.

"Many of the second-class mechs we've designed so far are either exclusive to the Larkinson Clan or the Hexer people." Gloriana pointed out. "Your refusal to design a second-class mech for the commercial mech market means we don't have many options to impress the group of impartial mech pilots in a month."

Ves was still at ease. He patted Gloriana's hand in reassurance.

"The rules of the design duel don't prohibit customization and alteration of our existing designs. In fact, it is expected of us to do so in order to present our work at its best in the coming show. While some of our mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher, the Bright Warrior Mark II and our nearly-completed Giant Killer are solely designed to work

with Larkinsons, I can still modify them so that they become more inclusive. Their glows and foundations aren't fixed."

"Are you sure? Previously, you treated them as something sacred. You always refrained from changing the divine aspects of your mechs."

"That's because our products should remain constant to our customers and users. Altering how they work will only result in disruptions and make our lives a lot more complicated. This is not the case this time. I already know for sure that Dr. Navarro will be taking his best mechs and modify them so that they become even better. We should do the same."

"Are you sure you can win?" Gloriana asked another question.

This was not a straightforward matter.

"You can never be sure about duels." Ves carefully stated. "The fact that my mechs are very good at winning over mech pilots is an obvious point in my favor. Dr. Navarro knows that, so he wouldn't have accepted my proposal if I left it at that. I had to win him over by allowing our mechs to be utilized by domestic mech pilots."

"That's a considerable handicap, Ves. The Lifer mech pilots have all been trained to pilot biomechs. Their national pride also compels them to favor biological machines over classical machines. You can't expect fairness from them. Even if they have some experience with piloting inorganic mechs, they will likely feel out of place."

Ves shrugged. "That is a valid concern, but Dr. Navarro is a decent fellow. He represents the LRA's biomech industry in this design duel. Since the entire spectacle will be broadcasted to the public, the duel has to appear fair to the both of us. If one side holds a considerable advance, then the validity of the outcome will always be in doubt."

This was why he didn't fear the consequences of his proposal at all. Even though Ves and Dr. Navarro still agreed to make use of local mech pilots, they would both make sure the individuals in question issued their judgement on an impartial basis.

The design duel eventually boiled down to a set of challenges.

Would Ves, the foreigner who exclusively designed classical mechs, be able to win over the local mech pilots with his unique interpretation of life?

Dr. Navarro had to overcome his own challenge. Would his biomechs be able to retain the allegiance of Lifer mech pilots when they had a taste of mechs that were rapidly trending in popularity?

Both of them had to overcome different problems, but that made the duel even more interesting. Ves felt very competitive at the moment. He wondered if he would truly be able to open up the LRA's mech market if he managed to win this design duel!

At least Ves was supposed to gain greater access to goods and services in the LRA if he won this duel. That was his primary motivation to participate in this spectacle.

What particularly attracted him was the right to approach and hire excellent biotech experts!

These highly-prized surgeons, doctors, exobiologists, geneticists and so on studied at the foremost learning institutions of the LRA. Their knowledge and foundation were qualitatively superior to any other biotech expert in the star cl.u.s.ter.

These people were one of the LRA's most attractive expert products!

While the LRA educated an excess of biotech researchers, the state still had to impose restrictions in order to avoid a brain drain. Only a select number of people and organizations were allowed to recruit these prized personnel.

"What is your strategy, Ves?"

"The duel consists of ten matches where each mech pilot is able to experience both of our products. Who wins or loses is not a determining factor. What truly matters is that the mech pilot enjoys my products more. I need to do my best to win over at least six out of ten mech pilots."

In order to avoid dragging on the design duel, every mech pilot only had a single opportunity to pilot a biomech and another opportunity to pilot an LMC mech.

This was far from enough to conduct a valid academic study on which products the local mech pilots preferred more, but that was not necessary.

For example, the mechs that were dueling each other had to be within the same price category. They also had to be standard mechs, which meant that Ves wouldn't be able to employ any of his prime mechs or expert mechs if he had any. The mechs did not have to be identical to their existing models, but they had to be recognizable enough to represent the work of their designers.

An additional rule was that mechs designed in collaboration with others were also allowed. In fact, this rule was necessary because pretty much all of his recent mech were designed in partnership with Gloriana and lately Juliet as well.

Dr. Navarro designed a fair share of mechs with other colleagues, so he wasn't unduly disadvantaged by this additional rule.

"I'm thinking about adapting a Transcendent Punisher, a Bright Warrior Mark I Version B, a Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B, a Valkyrie Redeemer and a Giant Killer."

Gloriana frowned. "All of them barring the Ferocious Piranha are exclusive mechs. It feels wrong to open them up to outsiders. The Valkyrie Redeemer is especially problematic. We can't allow a 'public' version of this mech to fall into the hands of others. If the Friday Coalition is able to field a variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer that doesn't explicitly reject them, then we'll be in big trouble!"

"You don't need to be worried about that." Ves chuckled. "I will employ plenty of precautions to make sure that the mechs that I will modify will not break the exclusivity of the designs in question. The glows of all of my mechs come from their respective design spirits. I can ask these spirits to make the mechs friendlier, which means I can also ask them to do the opposite."

He did not worry about this issue at all. He instead concerned himself on how to make the piloting experience as pleasant as possible when his mechs were piloted by people outside of his initial target audience.

Non-Larkinsons were never meant to pilot his clan-exclusive mechs such as the Bright Warrior. The Transcendent Punisher was even trickier as Ylvaine was quite a picky design spirit.

For all of his tolerance, Ylvaine had always tried to push away mech pilots who did not respect the tenets of his faith.

Not only that, he also had to modify the spiritual foundations of the exclusive mechs so that they did not instinctively reject outsiders either. This was going to take a lot of spiritual engineering to pull off successfully.

"I have a lot of work in store." He muttered.

Chapter 2733 - Quinlist

Ves and Gloriana traveled to a large base situated in another area at the edge of Veoline proper.

Just like back in the Cinach System, the Larkinsons decided to rent a large base on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI in order to facilitate their operations in the star system.

From recruitment to procuring supplies, a lot of work had to be done over the next couple of months in order to get the grand expedition back on track.

Not only that, but the base also provided ample opportunities for Larkinsons to go on leave. Hardly any clansman wanted to remain stuck on their sh.i.p.s that were parked in

some dark quadrant in the outer system when there was a very pleasant planet next door!

The only difference from last time was that the Larkinson Clan's allies also decided to join the party.

For security and other reasons, the members of the alliance each agreed to share a single base.

Naturally, they did not mix everything together, but divided it up into three different sections.

Fortunately, the Veoline area offered a lot of land and real estate for rent. The Golden Skull Alliance was hardly the only organization in the star system that sought to establish a short-term presence on the surface of the trading planet.

The local rulers even established several districts that were specifically set up to accommodate these needs!

The Gentle Lotus Base was one of twenty different lots in one of those districts. It happened to be the largest plot of land that was available for rent at the moment. At least half of the other lots in the district were already rented by various other foreign fleets and organizations.

No locals lived in this area so if the foreigners ever came to blows, no one native to the planet was liable to get hurt.

As the armored shuttle and its escorts approached Gentle Lotus, Ves took a glance at the progress of the buildup.

Gentle Lotus only featured a single pre-built base structure at the start. This structure may have been sufficient to meet the needs of a modest trade fleet, but it was incapable of hosting tens of thousands of people!

For this reason, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers immediately shipped a bunch of prefab modular structure components and began to piece the giant building blocks together.

It didn't matter if the structures looked rather basic. They only had to last a short amount of time before the expeditionary fleet was ready to depart.

As Ves and the rest emerged out of their shuttle again, they all beheld the state of the construction effort.

Gloriana frowned. "It's taking longer than I thought to set up the prefab buildings."

"You can't blame our people. Both our personnel and our assets are at the mercy of the PHTS. Nothing gets down on the surface without securing passage on a PHTS ship. The demand for in-system transit is consistently high so we aren't able to hog as much transportation capacity as we wish."

Everything related to intersystem transport constantly had to go through a very narrow pipeline. This caused considerable delays for everything.

Though Ves felt just as irked as Gloriana about the situation, it wasn't as if he was able to do anything about it. The damn Lifers never bothered to scale up their transportation fleet as trade and commerce activity kept rising in Prosperous Hill.

They entered one of the prefab structures that the Larkinsons assembled first. The b.a.r.e metal walls and floors didn't even feature any markings or decorations. The bots that were supposed to beautify the interior had yet to be shipped to the surface.

The pair separated at this moment. Gloriana proceeded to the section that had been set up as a temporary design lab. Juliet and the assistant mech designers had already reached the surface as well.

While it made little difference to work on the projects on land, it saved Ves and Gloriana the trouble of needing to travel back and forth.

Performing their work on land also made it more convenient to test the final prototypes under atmospheric conditions.

Since at least some of the Hexer mech designs were purely landbound designs, Ves and Gloriana had no choice but to outsource the prototype testing to a specialized testing company based in the Hegemony.

Establishing this relationship made it convenient to test the Design Department's non-Hexer mech prototypes with the testing company as well.

Yet no matter how much data the Hexers produced, it was all second-hand. They didn't know LMC mechs as well as the Larkinsons and there were certain aspects that were very troublesome to verify in practice due to incompatible glows.

In short, Ves and Gloriana believed it was better to perform the final round of prototype testing themselves. Their extensive knowledge and familiarity in their own work allowed them to conduct much more pertinent tests.

While Gloriana went off to check on the preparations for the upcoming tests, Ves moved up a couple of floors until he reached the room that would become his office for the foreseeable future.

Lucky and Clixie had already snuck out in order to explore the surrounding grounds. Both of them wanted to make the most out of their time outside a confining ship.

As Ves settled on his foldable office chair, he decided to call in Major Verle.

The senior mech officer was right next door. It took less than a minute for the former Vandal officer to enter the office.

"You called?"

"I did. Please take a seat."

Once the older man made himself comfortable, Ves began to ask a few routine questions.

"How many mech pilots do you plan to recruit?"

"That is still under debate." Verle replied. "Ideally, we'd like to recruit 10,000 second-class mech pilots, but that is more of an aspiration than a goal. We are also aiming to pick up at least 40,000 support personnel. Do keep in mind that we expect a portion of these recruits to bring their families along, so our numbers will balloon significantly to more than 50,000 people in the most optimistic scenario."

That would more than double the membership roster of the clan. This was a massive expansion that would surely strain the cohesion of the clan. Even if the Larkinson Network helped with binding the new recruits closer to the clan, considerable changes were inevitable.

Ves perceived a potential issue.

"There will be a considerable division between our new and existing clansmen. Most of the recruitable personnel in this star system either consists of Lifers or citizens of other states in Majestic Teal. What is worse is that they are all second-raters. They enjoy an inherently superior upbringing. Their professional qualifications are also leagues better than that of the Larkinsons. I bet the more competent second-raters also enjoy at least a basic suite of second-class augments, which means that they are doubtlessly better at their jobs than the old-timers."

Major Verle grew grim. He was already aware of the implications.

"This means the old guard are at risk of getting supplanted by the newcomers. So far, our clan is principally organized as a meritocracy. One of our principles is that the most qualified personnel deserves to occupy the most senior positions. Back when we solely hired third-raters, this has never been a problem because everyone started from the same point."

This was different. Ves and the rest of the clan faced a very difficult choice. Should they adhere to their current policies or should they change tack and insist on protecting the old guard by emphasizing seniority?

"I think that it is very premature to promote an excess of second-raters to senior positions. Qualifications are important but they are not the only factors that determine whether people are suitable to take on greater responsibilities. Instead, I think they should be humbled by placing them on the lower rungs of the ladder. This not only protects the positions of those who have worked hard to grow our clan to this point, but also allows the passage of time to smooth out the differences between the newcomers and the established clansmen."

Second-rater had an awful tendency to look down on third-raters. If too many of them were placed above third-raters, then this behavior would only grow worse.

This was not what Ves wanted to see.

By reversing this situation, Verle believed that it would do a lot of good in narrowing the differences between the two groups. If the older and more established Larkinsons were allowed to boss around the supposedly-superior Lifers and former citizens of other powerful states, then they wouldn't suffer from an inferiority complex.

Though all of these assumptions and predictions sounded logical, Ves wasn't sure whether Major Verle was right.

"I'm not entirely confident that the differences between the two groups will melt, but I do agree with the sentiment that our older clansmen should be rewarded for their service. Aside from merit, loyalty and dedication are also important to our clan. Our surviving mech pilots especially earned a lot of contributions. They should never be slighted."

Major Verle nodded in agreement. He had a vested interest in this issue. After all, he was replaceable as well.

"By the way, Verle, I think that the rank of major is no longer apt for your current position. Your actual role and responsibilities are much greater. I don't think I've heard of any major who commanded over enough mech pilots to form an entire mech division."

"That's true, sir. The only reason why I haven't brought up this proposal myself is because it is not proper for me to raise this issue. We're not a rigid military organization, there is a lot of flexibility. Our mech pilots will listen to me even if my official rank is just a lieutenant."

"Be that as it may, we can't keep you at your current rank. Our clansmen might know better, but foreigners who understand nothing about our internal situation will just think we are fools for letting a 'mere' major command an entire mech division."

Though Major Verle exhibited an impeccable amount of control over his body, Ves could clearly sense the man's excitement.

No one disliked obtaining a higher rank!

Ves chuckled in amusement. "Since you don't want to appear too partial by determining your own promotion, I guess I'll be making this decision myself. In light of your merits, your competence, the high regard of our other commanders and your current responsibilities, I'd say you should definitely be promoted to a mech colonel."

This was the most suitable rank for Verle. According to the military rank system of the Mech Corps, it represented a double promotion as Ves decided to skip the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Yet Ves wasn't finished.

"I'm not stopping at colonel. If everything goes right, our mech forces will exceed 10,000 mech pilots sooner or later. Rather than revisit this conversation in a couple of months, I think it's better to settle the issue in advance. Congratulations, Quinlist. You're a general, though only on an interim basis for now. Once the Larkinson Assembly approves my proposal, you'll become a general for real."

He didn't think the Larkinson Assembly would vote down the proposal to promote Verle to this rank. While it was true that the Larkinson Clan suffered a lot of casualties when he was in charge, the losses weren't his fault. He had done his best to manage all of the mech forces and coordinate them in battle. There was no one else in the clan who was more qualified to lead the military wing of the Larkinson Clan than Verle!

"..Thank you, Ves. Though if I may make a request, please don't call me by my first name."

"Whatever you say, Quinlist."

Chapter 2734 - Lacking Identity

Promoting Verle to the rank of general was a big jump.

Was he qualified to hold such a senior rank? That was debatable. He never commanded a force at this level. Due to his heavy workload, he never had the time to shore up his inadequate theoretical foundation either, so he was not a genius in command.

What he did have was everyone's trust. He showed enough competence so far to earn the appreciation of both trueblood Larkinsons and every other soldier in the clan. He excelled at shaping morale and he inspired confidence in his own leadership. Everyone recognized his authority, though not everyone agreed with his policies.

That was enough as far as Ves was concerned.

While he could have shopped around for some retired colonels or generals in Majestic Teal, the truly good ones were never easily for hire. Ves would be forced to pick between one of several desperate or faulty candidates who might make a mess out of the military wing of the Larkinson Clan.

Rather than gamble on the unknown and potentially ruin the most essential guarantee of safety for Ves, he would rather settle with the familiar and continue to rely on Quinlist Verle.

Ves had to admit that his familiarity and personal relationship played a decisive factor in this consideration. He felt rather dirty about it because he knew that Verle might not be up to the task.

Of course, that might change over time. There were plenty of learning sources available to the hastily-promoted general. Verle had access to an expansive budget, so he shouldn't be shy in taking some of that money in order to invest in himself.

The Military Bureau that Verle was in charge of largely played a background role for now. It merely fiddled with unifying logistics and establishing a common set of rules and regulations and so on. While these activities were important, the military of the Larkinson Clan was still decentralized.

The mech commanders had the real say in how their forces were supposed to run. While Verle had the authority to impose his own decisions, in practice he almost never did so. Every mech commander was already doing a fine job in managing their troops so there was no reason for Verle to spoil his relationships with the influential leaders.

Even so, Ves didn't want his mech forces to grow too far apart. By letting them stay in their own silos, their trust and cooperation with the other mech forces would never be optimal.

This was quite a delicate issue as Ves didn't want to go too far in the other way either. If the Military Bureau dictated more rules, the differences between the Avatars, Sentinels, Vandals and so on might blur. Each of them would start to lose their distinct strengths and specialties.

Ves liked it if his soldiers possessed a lot of personality. He didn't want them to be almost identical to each other. While there was strength in uniformity, as proven by the Hex Army, there was strength in diversity as well.

In truth, he was too used to the model employed by the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition. By allowing different mech regiments to develop their own martial traditions, the identities of the mech pilots and other servicemen became more internally cohesive.

This was incredibly important to him as his glows and his battle networks were able to generate unique advantages when they took advantage of these conditions.

"Major Verle is already aware of all of these nuances. He will make sure to steer our mech forces in the right direction."

The entire military of the Larkinson Clan was about to undergo an explosive expansion. This was a huge endeavor as it was far from simple to acquire 10,000 mech pilots at once.

An expansion of this scale also demanded the acquisition of more sh.i.p.s and mechs, which was very troublesome for various reasons.

To be honest, the expeditionary fleet was already sizable. It was not good to tack on hundreds more combat carriers on top of that. Managing so many assets and people would become so burdensome that it could bog down the entire command structure.

Ves also had to take the integration of all of those new people into account. It was not acceptable to lump all of the newcomers in a separate ship with hardly any of the old guard around. The Larkinsons needed to immerse them into the culture and customs of the clan in order to minimize any rifts.

All of these management aspects already gave Ves a headache. It might be possible that the Larkinson Clan might take it slow on expanding its fleet and mech roster in order to buy more time to indoctrinate the new recruits.

"It's actually quite common to maintain a modest surplus of mech pilots."

Mech pilots were simultaneously scarce but cheap compared to mechs.

It cost a lot more to acquire a single mech than an accompanying mech pilot. However, in dangerous places such as frontiers, hazardous regions or remote star systems, it was impossible for mech forces to replenish the mech pilots who had lost their lives!

At least mechs could be patched up to an extent after they incurred damage. Mech technicians were even capable of bringing wrecks back to working condition.

Yet not even the best doctors in the clan could bring a dead person back to life.

"It would be nice to have some spares around." Ves muttered.

If the Golden Skull Alliance had a bunch of free mech pilots at its disposal, then it might not have been necessary to hire a mercenary force as powerful as the 14th Fleet of the Star Striders.

While the Infinity Guards provided him with a lot of reassurance, it would have been better if he didn't have to rely on external protection in the first place.

"This time, we lucked out because we were ambushed in a developed star sector that is neutral towards us. We might not be as lucky next time."

The Red Ocean was significantly less developed and there were many zones where hardly any colonies were around. Even if his expeditionary fleet was close to a settlement, it was questionable whether the Larkinsons were allowed to recruit mech pilots and other key personnel.

"The population of humans in the new frontier is much smaller." Ves reminded himself. "I'll have to take that into account and make sure to enter the Red Ocean with as many recruits as possible."

It was very difficult to bring a lot of sh.i.p.s, mechs and other assets into the dwarf galaxy. Yet it shouldn't be a problem to bring a million people along if he wanted to. A lot of capital sh.i.p.s could temporarily be transformed into passenger vessels that could transport lots of people like cattle.

While the journey wouldn't be pleasant, it was worth it if Ves truly wanted to make sure that the Larkinsons wouldn't be suffering any manpower problems when his expedition began in earnest.

Ves noted down his thoughts and decided to discuss these critical points in his next meeting with the leaders of the clan.

In the next couple of hours, Ves stayed in his office and began to meet with more people.

One of the more notable visitors was Commander Melkor. He looked a bit subdued despite the pleasant environment. The Battle of Reckoning had gutted his mech force. While not a lot of support personnel had died, it was a different story when it came to his mech pilots.

The Avatars entered the battle with more than 800 mechs.

Only a fraction of that was left, and a lot of the fallen mechs failed to protect their precious pilots against the lethal blows of the Fridayman elites.

Though Melkor didn't blame Ves for spending too little on the stopgap mechs for his mech forces, it was undeniable that this crucial decision indirectly led to hundreds of unnecessary deaths.

The relations between Ves and Melkor became a bit less warm after that. Even now, Melkor maintained an overly stiff posture towards his cousin.

"You called, sir?"

"Please take a seat." Ves gruffly said.

As he did so, an uncomfortable silence unfolded. It seemed that Melkor wasn't in the mood for any small talk at this time.

Ves sighed. "The Avatars must recover."

"I know."

"Have you formulated a recruitment strategy?"

"We did." Melkor nodded. "We already established a recruitment methodology back when we were based in the Cinach System. We've improved our methods and expanded our infrastructure in order to get ready to recruit second-class mech pilots and other personnel. The people we intend to attract this time are a lot more demanding than the third-raters we've picked up before, so it won't be easy to meet our quota."

"Do you anticipate any problems with regards to this issue?"

The Avatar Commander hesitated a bit. He eventually decided to voice one of his concerns.

"The last battle pretty much exposed our greatest weakness. Can you guess what I am referring to, sir?"

Ves frowned. He didn't like it when other people put him on the spot like that. In the last few months, Ves never really paid attention to the Avatars. Even though it was supposed to be the most premier mech force at his disposal, they were just... there.

"I think the Avatars lack some good iconic models."

Melkor mildly shook his head. "That's certainly a part of the issue, but the problem I'm referring to is more fundamental in nature. It's our identity, sir."

"Identity?"

"It's too bland. Think about it. We're supposed to be the elites of the Larkinson Clan, but that is hardly a unique property in our strange and haphazard mix of mech forces. You have the Swordmaidens who are considered to be the strongest individual mech pilots. You have the Penitent Sisters who are virtually on par with the regulars of the Hex Army. Even the Flagrant Vandals show signs of overtaking us due to their solid military background."

This was all true. Even though Melkor framed the issue in a way that exaggerated the shortcomings of the Avatar, it was undeniable that the other elite mech forces all stood out even more.

"What is our purpose, Ves?" Melkor asked in an increasingly heated voice. "Why do we exist? I know how we started out. Back before the Vandals, Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters came along, we were meant to be your honor guard and your trump card. Yet as our combat forces continued to integrate different forces, we gradually lost the capital to feel proud of ourselves. It doesn't help that you took our expert pilots away. Over the course of our existence, we grew in numbers but we lost the elements that made us great. We lost our strongest heroes, we lost our forefront status and we lost our capital to feel proud of ourselves. The gap between us and the Living Sentinels have narrowed. We might as well disband if this trend continues."

Damn. Ves knew that the Avatars had fallen in a trough at this point, but Melkor painted a bleak picture of the future of his troops.

This was not something that Ves could resolve in an instant. He furrowed his brows while leaning back on his foldable seat.

What was the purpose of the Avatars?

This was a crucial question to Ves and the clan. As Melkor had just pointed out, it was not enough to say that they were the elites.

The Avatars needed a new purpose. If their current identity was too insufficient, then they just needed to take on a more specific role.

While Ves had some thoughts on the matter, he turned his eyes to the man who brought the matter up in the first place.

"I don't believe you thought about this problem without coming up with a solution or two. Please share your thoughts with me. Since you know your men the best, it's only appropriate to hear you out first."

Melkor smiled a little. "I was waiting to hear you say that. I do have a vision for my troops. It's something that I've been working on for some time. I think this is the right time to change tack. It will be much harder to swing the direction of my force once our numbers expand by multiple times."

Chapter 2735 - Redefinition

In the process of explaining his new vision for the Avatars, Commander Melkor started with the identities of the other mech forces of the clan.

"I believe the Penitent Sisters fulfill our original purpose much better than my Avatars." He began. "It's not your fault. They're just better than us in every measure except friendliness towards the male gender. The Hexers have many shortcomings, but training skilled and disciplined second-class mech pilots is not one of them. Even if some of their doctrines aren't tested in combat, they make up for it in unit cohesion and esprit de corps. The Penitent Sisters are strong, and they know it. Their results in the previous battle is hard proof of that."

"That's not a fair comparison." Ves shook his head. "Due to the importance of our Valkyrie Redeemers in enabling Venerable Joshua to unleash an empowered energy attack, we refrained from deploying the Penitent Sister mechs in the trenches. We had to preserve their numbers as much as possible until they could engage their battle formation."

Melkor lowered his head in response.

"That's exactly how an elite mech force is supposed to be employed. They have to be employed in the right moment and the right time in order to maximize their impact on the battlefield. In contrast, my Avatars were lumped in with a bunch of other ordinary forces and were tasked with resisting the powerful Fridayman mechs in frontal combat. Does this sound right to you, sir?"

"We were short on mechs. We needed your mechs to hold the line. Besides, the Fridaymen employed their elite units as frontline combatants as well. There is no distinction in this regard."

"That's because the Fridaymen didn't bring any regulars for this mission. The elite mech units we fought against were also shaped to take part in massive battles. They are comfortable with acting as the anvil of a greater unit. My Avatars weren't designed for this role. Not initially, at least. Yet during the Battle of Reckoning, you employed us as an anvil when we are much more comfortable with acting as the hammer."

"We didn't have enough anvils."

Melkor took a deep breath.

"I get that, sir. I don't fault you for putting our Avatars in the place where we were most needed. When you are short on anvils, you look for substitutes among the hammers that are not as good or vital in their current purpose. Obviously, my men scored worse in this aspect so we had to fight like Living Sentinels."

Obviously, Melkor was highly ambivalent about this turn of events.

From a logical standpoint, the higher ups made the most rational decision. It was objectively the best and most optimal choice to make out of the available possibilities.

Yet from an emotional standpoint, Melkor resented the circumstances, and so did many other Avatars probably. They were always told they were the pride and joy of the Larkinson Clan, but when they fought their most serious battle to date, the Avatars turned into supporting characters so that other mech forces such as the Penitent Sisters and the Swordmaidens could play the starring roles.

"The Battle of Reckoning is long over." Ves gently stated. "While the circumstances we faced back then are regrettable, in this time of rebuilding we can make it all better. Your Avatars will grow bigger, better and stronger, and your men won't be the only ones to do so. Every element of our clan will improve so that we will not be as desperate next time."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir, but the Avatars cannot go on like this. We need to specialize ourselves just like the other mech forces. We need a new and more focused purpose so that we know what we are building towards and can take pride in something that the other mech forces cannot equal."

"I suppose you've formed an idea."

"Indeed, I did." Melkor began to grin. "As it is right now, the force makeup of our clan already covers a number of roles. Yet none of them are quite as suitable to be employed as heavy cavalry as us. That is not to say that the others are bad at launching assaults, but they are much more suitable to be employed as flankers or commando units. What we can do is to perform the charges that others cannot. We shall be the spear of the Larkinson Clan!"

"You mean with lancer mechs?"

The Avatar Commander nodded. "Among other mech types. While it is too monotonous to replace all of our machines with lancer mechs, I do envision them as one of our defining mech types. I want to see entire formations of Avatar mechs charging forward and breaking open a massive hole in the ranks of our opposition! No matter how stiff the enemy is holding back our might, our Avatars must be capable of smashing through every obstacle and disrupting the carefully-laid plans of our enemies. We are your best tools when tricks and schemes aren't enough."

In other words, Melkor wanted his Avatars to become the fist of the Larkinson Clan. While it was nice to take out a difficult opponent by circling around and stabbing them in the back, that was not possible all the time, as was the case in the previous battle.

Sometimes, an enemy had to be overcome by fighting them on their terms.

The Avatars wanted to stand out from the other elite mech forces of the Larkinson Clan by excelling in creating openings.

In this situation, it would be nice to have a solution that could just charge straight through the front!

"A heavy assault role is quite dangerous." Ves pointed out. "No matter how successful you are, as long as the enemy is strong enough to hold back our other mech forces, they are probably capable of exacting a significant toll on your troops. Each frontal assault is fraught with peril."

"My men can take it. As long as this is our main purpose, we will work hard to meet everyone's expectations. Of course, we also need the right mechs. We won't be able to breach through any enemy formation without mechs that are tough enough to drive a wedge into the enemy ranks."

The Avatar Commander looked expectantly at Ves. For his part, Ves was quite willing to address this need. The problem was that this wasn't the only priority on his mind.

"I'll take care of it, though my upcoming design schedule is already packed. Our expert pilots urgently require expert mechs in order to match opposing expert mechs. The Battle of Reckoning would have proceeded a lot more favorably if Venerable Joshua and so on were piloting real expert mechs instead of the knockoffs I developed in haste."

Though Commander Melkor had heard this response enough times to get used to it, his patience was wearing thin.

"I've tolerated your delays over and over again, but real lives are at stake, sir. The longer it takes for you to design quality mech designs, the more we have to wait to reach our full potential. If it takes longer than a year for you to equip us with quality assault mechs, then give me a bag of money so that I can purchase the machines we need from the mech market."

Ves leaned forward from his chair. "Let's not be hasty, Melkor. Our Bright Warrior Version B is just complete. While it isn't a dedicated assault mech, its lancer mech configuration is still potent."

"Didn't you tell us that the new Bright Warrior is supposed to be the new starter mech of our clan, sir?"

"I prefer to call it a universal mech. It's a mech that straddles the middle ground in order to maximize its compatibility with different mech pilots. Even though that means that its configurations aren't as colorful as specialized mechs, they are still fit for their respective purposes. Their performance does not fall short to comparable commercial mechs while still possessing all of the traits of living mechs that our mech pilots know and love."

Ves called up some projections and explained in clear and simple terms how good the new Bright Warrior performed compared to its closest competitors on the mech market.

In truth, the Bright Warrior incorporated a lot of compromises in its design that noticeably diminished its overall performance.

The differences were rather minor. It was easy enough for Ves to gloss over them and focus on all of the good points of his latest completed mech design.

His sales pitch partially won Melkor over.

"I guess we can give the Bright Warrior a try, if only for a couple of years." He reluctantly responded. "It's not a long-term solution though. While this mech is indeed better than a solution from the market, the defensive properties of this machine are not quite up to my expectation."

"Its mobility is above average. All of its configurations are a little faster than usual. Miss Juliet Stameris has done a great job at maximizing the mobility parameters of this design."

That was true. A heavy cavalry unit had to possess at least a certain measure of mobility to perform their assaults. The Avatars didn't need too much of it though. If all of that speed and agility came at the cost of defense or offense, then the gains weren't worth the losses.

Ves and Melkor spent a few minutes envisioning how the new Bright Warrior would be able to facilitate the proposed transition.

"I do have to admit that most of our mech pilots probably won't be ready to pilot an advanced lancer mech straight away." Melkor conceded. "In that sense, starting off with a less-demanding mech like the new Bright Warrior is a good choice. Even if its configurations aren't as powerful as I wish, their skill floors won't be as high either. They make for fine tools to transition into better mechs down the road. What's even better is that unlike the crappy budget mechs we utilized before, this model can actually withstand the rigors of high-intensity combat."

The Bright Warrior model potentially possessed other advantages as well, though Ves didn't want to bring them up right now. What the Avatars mainly needed was a solid mech to regain their footing and transition to an assault role.

It was not a permanent solution, though. In time, the Avatars needed a more fitting solution.

"Once I've addressed the needs of our expert pilots, I'll work on the mechs you need." Ves promised to Melkor. "A new lancer mech is definitely on the cards, and I might design some additional mechs that are suitable for assaults as well. In fact, I can also

squeeze in some time to work on your long-awaited custom mech during our stay in this star system. I can adapt a Bright Warrior Version B to suit your piloting style just like how I've shaped the Bright Beam Prime to compliment Venerable Stark's marksmanship."

Contrary to Ves' expectations, Melkor did not show much enthusiasm for this suggestion.

"I'm quite impressed at the Bright Beam Prime, but I would like to be able to shoot more than three times per engagement, sir. I don't want my custom mech to be based around the Bright Warrior either. I'd like to receive a mech that is adapted from a more dedicated rifleman mech."

Melkor had waited so long for his custom mech that he might as well wait a little longer. He wanted the wait to be worth it. He knew that Ves was capable of designing much more excellent ranged mechs.

"That reminds me." Ves suddenly jerked his head. "My Giant Killer design is almost ready. While it's a cannoneer mech that is exclusive to Penitent Sisters, I can modify one so that you don't need to be Hexer to pilot it. Are you open to this offer?"

Cannoneer mechs were basically slower and more hard-hitting versions of rifleman mechs. While their differences were quite significant, they also shared plenty of similarities.

Melkor thought about it for a moment but eventually shook his head. "Thank you for the offer, but I think it's best for me to stick with a regular Bright Warrior for now. I need to use the same model that the rest of my men are relying on to be aware of their plight."

"That's a noble sentiment."

"I do what I must."

Melkor may not be as prominent of a leader as the likes of Commander Casella Ingvar or Commander Cinnabar, but he was dependable in his own way. Ves liked that about him. The Avatars were in good hands as far as he was concerned.

Chapter 2736 - Defective Design

At the end of their private discussion, Ves and Melkor came to a new understanding.

The opinions they shared and the decisions they made would profoundly change the Larkinson Clan's first elite mech force.

Commander Melkor insisted on transforming the Avatars of Myth into the spear of the Larkinson Clan!

In order to facilitate this transformation, he intended to increase the intake of offensive melee mech pilots and reduce the emphasis on ranged specialists.

Even though Melkor was a rifleman mech specialist himself, he did not mind the change. There was still a place for ranged mechs in the Avatars. They just wouldn't be the main focus anymore in order to make sure that his entire unit excelled in frontal assaults.

Melkor loosened up after Ves supported his plans and promised to facilitate the transition. He loosened his shoulders and relaxed his posture.

"Thank you, Ves." He said in a more personal tone. "My men and I truly need these changes."

"It's been hard on you, Melkor. Responsibility is never an easy burden to bear. It gets even harder when something awful happened under your watch."

The various battles the Larkinsons had fought since the founding of the clan repeatedly traumatized the clansmen. While the harsh experiences hardened them into battle-worn soldiers, they also incurred other damage.

Commander Melkor was no different. His burden was greater, so he took a greater share of the mental damage than others. It was hard for people who cared about the wellbeing of their underlings to remain unmoved by the significant number of the deaths that had taken place.

Different people coped with the problem in different ways. Some just bore their pain silently. Others turned to alcohol or stimulants. Then there were people like Ves who simply shoved his guilt aside and tried his best to wipe it out from his mind.

It was too bad that not everyone was like Ves. Melkor looked like he could use a hug or a pat on the back.

"You don't need to look so glum, Melkor. Are your Avatars complaining about your leadership?"

"No. I've been spared from suffering the same fate as Commander Magdalena, though sometimes I feel I should."

"She unjustly fell on her sword because that was what was necessary to drag the Living Sentinels out of their slump. She doesn't deserve this fate and neither do you. External factors are the cause for all of the setbacks we've suffered. You did the best you can to respond to all of the developments that threatened our existence."

"Many people say that." Melkor grunted. "Major Verle often tells me that as well. I still feel that a more seasoned and experienced commander could have kept a few more

Avatars alive. I often spend hours thinking that I should have pushed through certain decisions that would have lowered our casualties."

"You're getting lost in what-ifs. That's not a healthy habit to have. Introspection is only useful if it helps you become a better person. Since this is not the case right now, you should stop wallowing in the past and focus on the future instead. Your men still need your leadership. They need an authority figure, not a moper."

That spurred Melkor to straighten himself up. No good came from doubting himself to this degree.

After straightening Melkor out, Ves bid goodbye to him as he left.

"I hope you'll succeed in rejuvenating the Avatars."

Once Ves was done with his meetings, he decided to put down his patriarch hat in order to don his mech designer hat. He exited his temporary office and navigated to the large and mostly-empty space that was supposed to be the design lab for the duration of the Larkinson Clan's stay in this star system.

A lot of mech designers were absent at the moment. The missing design teams weren't slacking off. Rather, they were probably preparing to fabricate and test the prototypes at a nearby testing facility.

Ves walked up to Gloriana, who was busy with examining the latest iteration of the Devious design.

"Anything to report?"

His wife shrugged. "Nothing that you don't already know. Well, there is one issue I'd like for you to deal with. The Devious is long overdue a suitable proto-god. While its stealth systems are all functional, they aren't too effective due to the limited design budget of our design. We need to match this capability with a suitable glow in order to make the mech more suitable for stealth operations."

Ves rubbed his palm against his face. He'd been postponing this problem for a while. "I've been trying to find a good solution, but I haven't found any suitable ingredients. We either have two choices. We can either wait for me to scour through the Prosperous Hill System in the hopes of finding a good ingredient, or I can switch over to my backup plan and center the glow around the Superior Mother alone."

"You mean her dust phase aspect?"

"Yes. I think it will help with making the Devious more unnoticeable to mech pilots, but I can't guarantee it will be as good as we hope. If I had the right design spirit, then I

would feel much more assured that this model will be able to infiltrate Fridayman positions."

Gloriana looked troubled. This was a hard choice to make. Time was of the essence as the Hex Army urgently needed to obtain some new options to break the current trend of the Komodo War!

"What do you think we should do?" She asked.

She did not hesitate to shift responsibility back to him. If he was the one to make the harsh decisions, she wouldn't be burdened by any guilt. She could sleep easy knowing that Ves was to blame for any mistakes!

Even though Ves didn't like it, he was already used to bearing responsibility over pivotal decisions that could shape the lives of billions if not trillions of people.

"There is still time." Ves crossed his arms. "I'll be spending a portion of my time on visiting the various locales of Prosperous Hill VI and maybe IV. There's bound to be a lot of exobeasts and genetic products for sale. I'll go look for lifeforms that excel at hiding their presence in the markets I intend to visit over the coming weeks. If any of them are spiritually strong, I'll snap them up no matter the cost."

Gloriana looked assured. "You do that, then. Just like you, this is the first time I've designed a stealth mech. I don't want it to be average. It has to be special like every other mech we've collaborated on. It's hard to do that on a physical level so we need to rely on the Superior Mother and whatever proto-god you create."

Her words reflected the great constraints placed on the Devious design. It was truly hard to formulate an effective stealth mech with a total design budget of just 200 million hex credits.

While that was more than sufficient to design a mech that could fool the senses of most private sector forces, the military of the Friday Coalitions utilized better sensors. Military-grade detection systems were tuned to detect even the slightest fluctuations that Hexer stealth technology was prone to make.

As long as they worked properly, that meant that the passage of stealth mechs should only generate fluctuations that were below the alarm thresholds of different detection systems.

If these thresholds were set too low, then the guards would have to respond to way too many false alarms. Therefore, the detection systems were programmed to watch out for short spikes or longer periods of suspicious patterns.

In general, the former only happened if the stealth system malfunctioned or if the mech pilot was too careless.

Most stealth mechs got caught due to taking too long to sneak around. The longer they lurked around, the more suspicious readings they threw out.

The Devious design did not present any special solutions against this problem. Its fairly basic stealth systems were barely enough to dampen all of its emissions to a satisfactory level. It wasn't capable of performing miracles.

The intended glow of this Hexer stealth mech design was designed to solve a different issue.

Every stealth mech had to be careful about tripping the suspicion of nearby hostiles. This was a rather confounding problem as intuition was something that couldn't be quantified. Some people possessed a sharper intuition than others. One person's intuition may be calibrated towards danger while another person's intuition was s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e towards the weather.

Whatever the case, mech pilots generally possessed greater intuition towards possible intrusion than other people.

If any mech pilot on duty suspected a possible intrusion, then he might choose to investigate regardless of the sensor readings of his mech.

Intuition was strange and involved some of the more esoteric and metaphysical aspects of the human mind. There was no way that ordinary states invented a means to fool people's intuitions!

Yet what Ves attempted to accomplish was exactly that. By formulating a glow that was capable of generating a false sense of security, the Devious would have a much greater chance of slipping in and out without triggering an alarm!

If this actually worked out, Ves wanted to employ the Devious for his own purposes!

"Do you think we can develop a variant of Devious that our Black Cats can make use of?" Ves asked.

"I don't think that's appropriate. It's one thing to allow the Penitent Sisters to pilot the Valkyrie Redeemer. Their Hexer pedigree is sound. This is different. The more we use the Devious, the more its core technologies risk becoming exposed."

"I think you're exaggerating the problem here." Ves accused. "While the risk you describe does exist, I doubt it will work out the way you think. The Hexers will probably use the Devious a lot more times than us, thereby exposing more to the Fridaymen than we ever could."

"I still don't like it. We both designed the Devious as a mech for the armed forces and intelligence services of my home state. It feels wrong to twist it so that we can abuse its

powers for its own use. Besides, we can do better. The Devious is too cheap for the likes of us. If we want to make use of stealth mechs ourselves, we should step up and design one that is at least twice as costly."

"I agree with you, but we don't necessarily have to go back to the drawing board and design a new mech from scratch. We can save a lot of time and effort by developing a more expensive and effective variant of our Devious design."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Ves. We should wait until we have completed this project and witness its effectiveness. We can form subsequent plans once we have solid data on its performance."

Gloriana adopted a much more serious demeanor as she looked at the projected design schematics of one of their most ambitious projects.

Even though its design budget was just a paltry 145 million hex credits, this mech had the potential of reversing the Hexer malaise if it lived up to its problem!

Yet Gloriana did not look upbeat when she considered this design.

"Our Blinding Mech is supposed to be our killer weapon against enemy expert mech pilots."

"That's true." Ves slowly nodded.

"THEN WHY DOESN'T IT WORK!?" His wife abruptly blew up! "DURING SEVERAL ROUNDS OF PROTOTYPE TESTING, IT B.A.R.ELY DID ANYTHING EXCEPT SLIGHTLY IRRITATING EXPERT PILOTS!"

"Hey, our Blinding Mech exhibited significantly greater effectiveness against ordinary mech pilots in those testing sessions!" Ves defensively raised his palms.

"WHO CARES ABOUT THAT?! YOU PROMISED THIS MECH WOULD HELP THE HEGEMONY WIN THE KOMODO WAR, BUT ALL I SEE IS A DEFECTIVE DESIGN THAT DOES NOTHING MORE THAN SHINE AN INVISIBLE FLASHLIGHT IN SOMEONE'S EYES! IT'S USELESS!"

"I'm working on it, honey! I'll find a way to fix this problem!"

Chapter 2737 - Poor Mech

"Patriarch Ves!"

The observation room of a private testing facility became a lot more boisterous after Ves, Lucky and his usual entourage of guards stepped inside. The members of the

design team monitoring the current testing session all looked up from their consoles and stood up to convey their respect.

Ves casually waved his hand. "Proceed with your work. Don't stop on my account. Who is in charge at the moment?"

"That would be me, sir." Catherine Evenson remained standing.

"Give me an update on the latest iteration of the Blinding Mech. How is it performing?" He asked as he approached the front of the room.

She proceeded to do so. Catherine summoned various projections of graphs and tables filled with data to detail the current performance of the mech design in question.

The large transparent windows looked down at an extensive pit where over fifty mechs moved according to a predetermined plan.

All of the mechs belonged to the Larkinson Clan. An entire mech company's worth of prototypes moved in formation.

Each of those late-stage prototypes carried the thick and ungainly form of the Blinding Mech. Its utilitarian, masculine appearance lacked the elegance of female Hexer mech models.

What made the model look even more remarkable was that it did not wield any weapon at all. Neither its arms nor its frame boasted any armaments of any kind.

The Blinding Mech was actually quite capable of wielding weapons in battle, but that was not its primary responsibility. Its performance with either melee weapons or ranged weapons was rather poor due to budget constraints.

Auxiliary mechs didn't necessarily need to be armed. Their primary purpose was to support other friendly units in battle. If they were forced to carry the battle, then something must have gone horribly wrong.

The materials needed to fabricate the mech consisted of ubiquitous low-grade exotics and ordinary metals. The bulk of the Blinding Mech was deceptive as an ordinary knight mech of the Hex Army could easily withstand several times more damage!

Even the mech pilot was supposed to be disposable. Ves already received word that the Hexadric Hegemony were in the process of conscripting hapless male potentates whose genetic aptitudes were too low to qualify for regular military service.

It would have been great if the Hexers were on the winning side, but since the opposite was the case, the state could no longer afford to squander its resources. Boys had to be put to work no matter the cost!

Being aware of this reality hadn't made it easy for Ves to design this mech. Yet it was the only way he could think of to counter the unfair advantage the Friday Coalition held. As the Battle of Reckoning had brutally emphasized, it was incredibly costly to resist an opponent who brought additional expert mechs!

Ves did not wish to see the Hexadric Hegemony collapse. The state was the Superior Mother's greatest backer at the moment. Gloriana would also become hysterical if the Hexer people became homeless all of a sudden.

He also did not wish to let the Friday Coalition enjoy the satisfaction of winning an existential war. The Fridaymen targeted him several times and a lot of good clansmen had died due to their aggression.

The bad blood between him and the Coalition ran very deep! There was no way Ves was going to allow something as inconsequential as his conscience get in the way of his revenge!

In order to fulfill this greater goal, Ves simply shut out his complaints and diligently designed the Blinding Mech without adding any additional frills, which was exactly what the Hex Army sought.

The Blinding Mech was not like the Blessed Squire. While the latter was also a male Hexer mech, its design was a lot more noble and benign towards its mech pilot.

The Blinding Mech could only put up a shield and pray that an armed Hexer mech came to the rescue.

The Blessed Squire was able to tank quite a decent amount of damage, which was pretty different from the Good Boy that it was originally meant to supplant.

The Blinding Mech was a fake defensive mech. It possessed the bulk but not the defensive capabilities to withstand aggression from hostile military-grade mechs.

The Blessed Squire was designed to be deployed as an individual mech supporting a larger unit of mechs. In turn, the other mechs would automatically do their best to coddle and protect the supportive knight mech so that its valuable glow would be preserved.

The Blinding Mech was supposed to be deployed in mass formations numbering hundreds of identical copies or more. This was all necessary because a single mech was not enough to achieve the desirable effect.

This last point was the most disturbing aspect about this mech design. No good would come from grouping so many flimsy, slow and pathetically-armed mechs together.

If even a single Fridayman mech company entered their midst, then a massacre would quickly ensue!

Ves could only hope that the Hexer military commanders weren't heartless enough to deploy so many Blinding Mechs without providing adequate protection to them. With a production cost of 145 million hex credits a copy, it still cost billions of valuable hex credits if entire squads got trashed at once!

While Ves looked down at the Blinding Mech exposing the luminar crystals embedded on the surface of their uncovered tower shields, Catherine finally concluded her report.

"...as it stands, a mech company of Blinding Mechs has only proven to be marginally effective at debilitating ordinary mech pilots but has not been able to hinder any expert pilot. I do have to mention that these are only preliminary results that are subject to several caveats and limitations."

Ves glanced at the former Sentinel noble. "Tell me about the caveats."

"As you can see right now, we have only been able to fabricate 40 copies of the current iteration of the Blinding Mech. While we have never fabricated so many prototypes of any single mech design before, this is still a sparse amount when you consider how it is meant to be fielded."

"That's true. How long will it take for additional Blinding Mechs to be shipped to this testing facility?"

"I'm afraid it will take at least three more days, sir. Due to confidentiality requirements, it is irresponsible to outsource the production of the prototypes to any mech company in the Prosperous Hill System. It is prudent to produce the needed mechs from the Spirit of Bentheim herself, but..."

Ves grimaced. "The Spirit of Bentheim's main priority is to mass-produce as many Bright Warrior IB's as possible. Her production halls have recently been configured to optimize the fabrication of the new standard mech of the clan as much as possible. Temporarily switching over to fabricate a hundred Blinding Mech prototypes won't go smoothly."

"Correct, sir. It doesn't help that we have to ship raw materials and finished mechs back and forth from the outer system to Prosperous Hill VI by relying on a single transportation service. The PHTS has proven to be a severe bottleneck that imposes considerable delays."

There wasn't much they could do about this problem, so Ves mentally shrugged and accepted that it would take time for more Blinding Mechs to arrive.

Still, even if the testing facility became host to over three mech companies of Blinding Mechs, he doubted whether the results would become any different.

This was why he dropped by the testing facility. Only Ves was able to troubleshoot the mech design when its spiritual aspects failed to deliver on their promises.

"Miss Evenson, I'd like to witness some of the basic tests in person." Ves commanded as he got down to business. "Please suspend the current testing program and deploy the test mechs according to my direct instructions."

"Uhm, it will only take another hour to complete the schedule."

"Don't bother. We've already collected enough data on the Blinding Mech's physical performance characteristics. Even if a few parameters differ from the previous iteration, no one cares about a few percentage points worth of deviations."

The Blinding Mech revolved completely around its ability to repel enemy expert pilots. Everything else was secondary. Ves saw no point in fiddling with its physical configuration at this late stage.

It took a few minutes for the test mechs to suspend the current test and 'reset' them so that they were ready to act according to instruction.

"Which group of mech pilots are helping us with the prototypes?" Ves suddenly asked.

"Commander Ingvar dispatched some of her Living Sentinels mech pilots to us. We originally approached the Penitent Sisters, but they do not have any males among their mech pilot roster."

It wasn't a big deal in this case. The Blinding Mech's design spirit was the Ill.u.s.trious One. Ves refrained from adding the Superior Mother to the mix because she wouldn't be able to contribute to the performance of the mech in any meaningful way.

In fact, Ves was afraid that her strong presence might interfere with the Ill.u.s.trious One's role!

"Let's start with pitting a single Blinding Mech against a single regular mech."

Once the upper layer shifted out of the way, the shield exposed an entire grid of flat luminar crystals!

There were even more luminar crystals hidden inside the frame of the Blinding Mech. They didn't really serve any obvious purpose as far as other mech designers were concerned, but Ves thought differently.

Luminar crystals interacted with the Ill.u.s.trious One in interesting ways, so there was nothing wrong with adding more to a mech.

"Begin with blinding the opposing mech."

The Blinding Mech in question activated its main function. The blinding attack was actually a combined attack.

As Ves switched to his spiritual vision, he could see that the mech pilot mentally activated the Blinding Mech's triggered ability. The design spirit became stimulated, causing it to interact with the luminar crystals embedded in the shield in a mysterious fashion.

Whatever the Ill.u.s.trious One did somehow caused the luminar crystals to become charged with a minute amount of spiritual energy!

At the same time the design spirit made its move, the circuitry and other components of the shield began to channel electrical energy into the same crystals.

This caused the front surface of the tower shield to dazzle all of a sudden!

If any human stood in front of the Blinding Mech while it engaged its Blinding Pulse ability, that person would probably be blinded from all of the flashes!

In fact, the intensity of the flashes was deliberately controlled to avoid inflicting permanent retinal damage. It would have been too easy for the Blinding Mech to harm lots of civilians if this precaution wasn't in place.

There was no way that a few bright flashes of light was capable of overloading the sensors of any modern machine.

The bright light flashes were only there to compliment the spiritual flashes channeled by the same luminar crystals!

Yet as an ordinary commercial mech standing opposite to the Blinding Mech got exposed, it remained absolutely stable!

The telemetry from the mech pilot on the receiving end of the Blinding Pulse only jumped a bit before going right back to normal.

While this was just a single attempt, the lack of any meaningful result did not bode well for the Blinding Mech!

Yet the mech did not do anything. Ves clearly observed the prototype channeling some sort of spiritual emission towards the target.

The problem was that it was too weak!

Chapter 2738 - Insufficient Input

The first attempt yielded a disappointing result, but Ves already anticipated this outcome.

It was too much to ask for a single copy of the Blinding Mech to debilitate another mech pilot.

Theoretically, it made little sense. The Ill.u.s.trious One was not as powerful as the Superior Mother and the Blinding Mech wasn't capable of channeling a lot of spiritual energy.

The Blinding Mech was not a prime mech. It did not carry an entire reserve of spiritual energy transferred from the Ill.u.s.trious One in advance. Even if it did, it wouldn't be of any use as only expert pilots were capable of utilizing such mechs.

There was no way the Hex Army had enough expert pilots to spare on the Blinding Mechs!

Even if it did, the Hexers would never put these precious individuals in cannon fodder mechs!

Each aspect of the Blinding Mech was either cheap or disposable. At its lowest level, the model was merely a vehicle to channel one of the Ill.u.s.trious One's unique spiritual characteristics.

On paper, this meant that it didn't matter whether the mech was cheap or expensive in construction. Its spiritual characteristics wouldn't be any less potent if Ves designed it as a third-class mech instead.

While Ves wasn't wrong in thinking so, he was hoping a stronger effect than a negligible fluctuation.

"Ready nine more Blinding Mechs."

Once a squad of Blinding Mechs exposed the luminal crystals embedded into their shields, their mech pilots simultaneously triggered the same ability!

This time, the effect on the target mech pilot was a bit more noticeable. While the ordinary mech did not experience anything except for moderate visual flashes, the pilot actually blinked his eyes for a moment.

Yet that was all. While the distance between the observation room and the testing ground was a bit far, Ves could still see that the overlapping Blinding Pulses hardly resulted in a stronger impact.

"Prepare all 40 Blinding Mechs."

It was only when an entire mech company worth of Blinding Mechs activated their Blinding Pulse abilities at once that the target mech pilot experienced actual differences!

"Ahh!"

The mech pilot blinked several times while trying to nurse his head through his helmet. His discomfort was evident as the telemetry transmitted by his mech showed some concerning fluctuations.

The effect was moderate enough to affect the mech pilot's performance in battle, but not enough to knock him out of action entirely.

"Okay, let's put an expert pilot in front of the Blinding Mechs. Who is on duty this time?"

Catherine Evenson "Ah, let me call up Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson. He is on standby right now with his prime mech."

The Piranha Prime walked out of a mech hangar with slow, light steps. The mech stepped in front of the formation of Blinding Mechs and simply stood in place.

Ves shifted his gaze to the camera feed of the c.o.c.kpit. Tusa looked incredibly bored. He didn't want to waste his time on serving as a practice target for an experimental new mech. The only reason why he showed up with his prime mech at all was because someone had to do the job and he happened to get the short end of the stick.

"Let's get this over with, please." Venerable Tusa flatly said.

Though his attitude could use some adjustment, Ves didn't care too much about what the expert pilot thought. The Blinding Mechs had an expert pilot to try their abilities out and that was enough.

"Commence the test!"

The luminar crystal-encrusted shields flashed yet again. Different energy waves washed over the low-intensity resonance shield Piranha Prime.

Nothing else happened!

The reason for the former was because he confirmed something that was very helpful to the effectiveness of the Blinding Mech.

Though the sensors hadn't been able to detect any spiritual interactions, Ves clearly perceived that the combined spiritual emissions from the Blinding Mechs succeeded in passing through the Piranha Prime's resonance shield!

For some unfathomable reason, the resonance shield failed to designate the spiritual emissions as an attack. The barrier let the spiritual flashes pass through as if they were just harmless rays of light.

This was a pretty confounding interaction. Ves couldn't help but rub his smooth-shaven chin as he tried to figure out how resonance shields worked.

Who or what determined the defensive parameters of a resonance shield? Were all of them the same, or did they only block attacks the expert pilot deemed harmful?

For now, it seemed that the latter was true. Ves never programmed anything related to resonance shields when he developed his prime mechs. They only emerged when expert pilots interfaced with his primer mechs.

This indirectly suggested that a lot of spiritual manifestations were rooted in the mech pilot rather than the mech. The former had to be strong, but the latter didn't necessarily have to be the best.

This was an interesting little insight, but not one that changed the overall outcome of this test.

Catherine issued a single request over a private command channel.

"Venerable Tusa, please describe your experiences during the brief event."

"I... dunno really. I feel like someone flashes me in the eyes, but my mech automatically filtered out the excess luminosity captured by its optical sensors. I still felt a bit strange though. Maybe some of the sensors got damaged during the Battle of Reckoning. Please tell someone to inspect my prime mech after this is over."

"Ahem." Catherine slightly coughed. "Did you experience any discomfort or debilitating effects at all during the brief interval when the Blinding Mechs were flashing their shields?"

"No." Tusa replied in an impatient tone. "I felt a little weird, but not enough to affect me in any way. It takes way more than a strange twinkle to distract me from my goal."

After asking a few more questions which yielded several more disappointing answers, Catherine eventually turned to her superior.

"As you can see, sir, a full mech company of Blinding Mechs failed to debilitate Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson in any way."

"Have you performed this test on any other expert pilot?"

"We did." She nodded. "Venerable Joshua exhibited an even milder reaction towards the Blinding Mechs."

All in all, Ves figured the fundamental problem behind the lack of effectiveness.

The triggered ability was just too weak.

In its current state, the Blinding Mech would never be able to disturb any expert pilot no matter how many of them were deployed at once.

Ves didn't think the addition of a couple of hundred Blinding Mechs would change the fundamental result. As he had just observed, the intensity of the Blinding Pulse did not scale linearly when multiple of them were stacked together.

Instead, just like glows, the combined effect was only mildly stronger than just a single spiritual emission. The only major advantage was that it became a lot harder to disrupt all of them, which was only useful if the damned ability did anything in the first place.

"You can resume the regular schedule." Ves sighed and turned away from the observation window. "I have seen enough for now. I'll be down at the hangar bay to take a look at the prototypes up close."

Half an hour later, the Blinding Mechs all moved to their assigned places in the hangar bay and powered down. The Living Sentinel mech pilots all exited the c.o.c.kpits and moved to a debriefing room in order to document their individual experiences.

Ves approached a random prototype and looked up at the tall and heavy machine. Its thick frame and hefty shield exuded a subtle atmosphere that was completely different from that of his other Hexer mechs.

The Ill.u.s.trious One possessed a very understated glow despite the light shows he frequently generated. Ves didn't even pretend how this worked. He just wanted to focus on the Blinding Mech's spiritual foundation and spiritual construct he shaped to enable its primary purpose.

"Blinding an expert pilot is harder than I thought." He muttered.

"Meow." Lucky echoed as he floated around the Blinding Mech in question.

According to his nose, the Blinding Mech was the equivalent of a nutrient pack! Other than filling up his stomach, the mech possessed no other value!

Ves sneered at his pet. "I remember a time where you wouldn't hesitate to eat junk exotics that are primarily used to make third-class mechs. Even if the Blinding Mech is a budget model, it's still a second-class machine!"

"Meow!" Lucky arrogantly huffed while distancing himself from what he considered to be a disgusting meal.

Not even a gem cat valued the Blinding Mech. Ves was quite depressed by all of the bad news surrounding this project. The mech design was an ambitious experiment, but right now Ves didn't see any way of getting it to work.

As Ves experienced many times throughout his mech design career, the simplest problems were also the hardest ones to solve.

"There's a lack of power."

It was impossible to affect change without supplying energy. If there wasn't energy to fuel a reaction, then the effect would always disappoint no matter what it was supposed to achieve.

It was like pitting his Unending Regalia suit against a mech. Even though his combat armor largely consisted of near-indestructible Unending alloy that was worth as much as an entire starship, any ordinary mech could easily defeat it by stepping onto the suit!

In this example, the difference in scale resulted in a massive difference in power that simply couldn't be surmounted by the weaker side.

The Blinding Mech was not as small as a personal suit, but from a spiritual perspective it might as well be. It was just an ordinary mech paired with an ordinary mech pilot. This combination didn't even come close enough to matching the spiritual strength of an expert pilot!

"We might need a thousand Blinding Mechs to achieve an effective result against a single expert pilot, and only against a weaker one!"

This was too unreasonable. While the Blinding Mech was designed to be deployed en masse, it took too much resources, manpower and transportation capacity to put the model to use in this case.

When he traveled down to this testing facility, he thought the problem was more technical.

Yet when he examined the spiritual construct and the Illustrious One's interaction with it in detail, he concluded that it was working exactly as intended.

The spiritual parts were all doing what they were supposed to do. The input was just too feeble to achieve a strong enough output.

"This isn't the first time I'm dealing with a lack of energy." Ves grumbled.

Right now, he didn't see any way for him to supply the Blinding Mech with additional spiritual energy. The mech was already straining to draw as much as it could accomplish from the Ill.u.s.trious One.

It wasn't enough.

"At least my prime mechs have another source of energy."

Those were different circ.u.mstances. What Ves needed to do was to achieve a comparable result but without the benefit of prime materials, manual preparations and expert pilots.

"This is impossible!"

Free energy did not just show up out of nowhere! Even the Ill.u.s.trious One had to divert the harvest he received from the modestly-growing number of mech pilots of the recently-released Crystal Lord Mark II.

While the third-class rifleman mech model had achieved a decent degree of popularity, it was more of a hidden gem at the moment. The original Ferocious Piranha sales hadn't abated yet, so it was still attracting the most attention out of all of the LMC's mech catalog!

For these reasons and more, the Ill.u.s.trious One could only do so much. Even if he was as strong as the Superior Mother, he wouldn't be able to sustain the effective functioning of the Blinding Mech for long.

"I need another source of energy." Ves concluded.

Yet where could he possibly obtain one? Due to all of the aforementioned limitations, he did not possess anything that could address this vital need.

"Wait a minute." He suddenly paused. "At least one of my battle prizes may be capable of generating energy!"

His thoughts went back on one of his most significant harvests from the Battle against the Abyss. For all this time, he barely paid any attention to it because he was immersed in his immediate priorities.

It wasn't until now that he possessed an actual need for it. For the first time in months, Ves finally thought about the namesake of Unending alloy.

Chapter 2739 - Unending Ambition

Ves harvested several spiritual remains from powerful entities over the past year.

He not only obtained the essence of ancient existences referred to as the dark gods, he also expanded his collection with the spiritual remains of a couple of expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designer.

The bounty he possessed was enough to make any spiritual engineer happy, not that Ves knew of any. Still, he felt a lot less poor now that he accumulated some spiritual resources again.

With the loss of Nyxie, the high-grade life-prolonging serum and the Grand Dynamo, Ves couldn't squander his spiritual energy as much as before. This was part of the reason why he hadn't touched the spiritual fragment of the Unending One and other spiritual treasures.

He didn't dare to do anything with them without a solid plan in mind!

The value of the spiritual fragment of the Unending One was inestimable to him. Not only did it possess a huge amount of potential, there was only one of its kind in existence!

Ves very much doubted that he'd be able to encounter another eons-old spiritual entity with a powerful devouring attribute over the course of his travels.

Though he felt tempted to use the spiritual fragment of the Unending One as an ingredient in several different experimental products, he didn't want to risk the chance of ruining the result.

This time might be different.

Ves possessed a real need for an energy source to solve a pressing need. The Blinding Mech was like a bot without an energy cell. Only after stuffing a compatible energy source inside would it be able to work as advertised.

Yet this wasn't the only possible application of the Unending One.

"I have needs as well."

He long held ambitions to develop a homegrown version of the Grand Dynamo that once supplied him with an abundance of spiritual energy.

While he had no hopes of replicating the sheer amount of useful functions of the original spiritual energy generator, he theorized that he might be able to leverage the Unending One's intrinsic properties to achieve a similar result, if at a much lesser degree of effectiveness.

In fact, he had so many other possible uses of the spiritual fragment of the Unending One that he simply couldn't choose.

The need for energy was universal. No one said no to extra energy. Ves believed he would come up with even more energy-hungry applications that required him to supply an additional energy source.

This was why he developed a plan to 'farm' the fragment of the Unending One.

Even though his mother killed the dark god, he knew that spiritual existences had an annoying tendency to restore elements of their old selves if they were fed with lots of energy.

Prophet Ylvaine was a very good example of that.

Ves never went through with his plan for this reason. If he wanted to grow the spiritual fragment of Unending One like a fruit tree and continually harvest additional fragments from it, then he had to make it stronger.

"It's too dangerous!"

Dark gods used to be incredibly dangerous due to multiple reasons. Not only did they possess an abundant amount of spiritual energy when they were alive, they also possessed a wealth of knowledge and experience in manipulating it all. They were so much better than him in manipulating spiritual energy that he only had to make a single mistake for them to make a comeback!

"The safest way to process them is to remove the possibility of letting them grow back to their old selves." Ves concluded.

That was what he effectively did with the spiritual fragment of the so-called Blinding One.

By forcefully merging it with one of his oldest design spirits, it effectively turned into a giant upgrade potion to the crystal leader.

The change was so profound that he turned into a much greater design spirit. This was why he called him the Ill.u.s.trious One these days.

"Should I do something similar with the Unending One?" Ves asked himself.

He wasn't sure whether something like that could even work. The Unending One was far more dangerous than his other spiritual fragments.

The closest comparable entity to the Unending One was his own mother.

When Ves happened to have harvested a tiny spiritual remnant from Cynthia, he ignorantly used it as an ingredient to create the Superior Mother.

This was all the opening it needed. To his alarm, the creation process completely went off the rails as his mother's tiny spiritual fragment swallowed every other spiritual element around it and grew to enormous proportions!

While the results eventually worked out for Ves, that was only because the source of the hijacking incident was friendly towards him. The Superior Mother turned out to be an even greater boon than he ever thought possible after it fused with Cynthia.

"I can't expect a friendly reception if I try to do the same with the Unending One!"

It might be possible to avoid this outcome if he sterilized the fragment of the Unending One of all of its weird and hostile influences. Yet Ves knew very well that his method of filtering and cutting out undesirable spiritual attributes was very crude.

If Ves missed just a tiny portion of the original Unending One, the former dark god would definitely find a way to come back from the dead!

"Ahhh! This is too frustrating!"

"Meow?"

Lucky on the other hand looked puzzled at what Ves was doing now. What was the big deal?

"You don't understand, buddy."

The mech designer looked helplessly at the Blinding One. If he attempted to insert any element of the Unending One in it, then there was a possible chance that it might mutate into an unholy clone of the most powerful dark god that Ves had ever fought against!

Should he just shelve this plan and find another solution?

"No. I can't keep avoiding this issue."

The fragment of the Unending One was an incredibly valuable resource, but it did not help him at all when it was just lying around in his vault.

There were many other potential benefits of harnessing the power of the Unending One.

In the short term, he might be able to power up his prime mechs even further. Even if he didn't foresee any possibility of them needing to go into action, it was still nice to have that reassurance in the back of his mind.

While not all of his mechs depended heavily on their spiritual properties, it never hurt to supply them with more spiritual energy.

"I also have a personal interest in harnessing the Unending One."

He concentrated his mind and began to inspect his own mind. His Spirituality had steadily grown, and that showed in subtle ways. His design seed became a little more intense and the quantity of loose spiritual energy floating in his mind had increased.

There was little to complain about the natural growth of his Spirituality. He had the feeling he was growing just as fast if not faster than any other Journeyman in his position.

In fact, Gloriana also grew at a similar pace, but Ves had a feeling that was due to all of the progress she made whenever they succeeded in making another masterwork mech.

Juliet's spirituality grew at a significantly slower pace. She was probably a more representative example of how quickly Journeymen progressed.

Yet.. what if Ves had a way of growing faster?

He wasn't just thinking about adding another spiritual dynamo in his mind. In fact, he found it rather boring. Other than supplying him with an excess of loose spiritual energy, an isolated energy generator didn't really do anything to facilitate his personal growth.

"The other issue is that spiritual dynamos and spiritual energy generators are external objects." He muttered.

This was why he developed an ambitious plan. In the darkest depths of his mind, he cooked up an incredibly bold and crazy-sounding premise.

"What if.. I absorb the fragment of the Unending One?"

This was not a trivial suggestion!

Even the tiniest purified fragment of the Unending One was still dangerous. Yet if Ves had a way of mitigating or neutralizing the risks, he might be able to internalize the powers of the tentacled whale for himself.

He just needed to look at the Ill.u.s.trious One to see an example of a successful absorption!

Even though the massively-strengthened design spirit exhibited an increasing amount of powers of the Blinding One, the Ill.u.s.trious One was nothing like the dark god in terms of personality.

If Ves was able to pull off the same merger, wouldn't he be able to become a much more potent mech designer and spiritual engineer?

Still, there was one major consequence that immediately caused him to stop in his tracks.

Assuming he was able to control all of the potential ways the merger process could go wrong, absorbing the Unending One would definitely alter his mix of spiritual attributes. To put it in a more simpler way, his domain would change into something else.

Right now, his primary spiritual attributes were equally divided between mechs and life. He considered this the best balance to progress his current design philosophy.

What if it changed? What if he inserted a third spiritual attribute that didn't originally belong?

Ves could think of two possible outcomes.

The less desirable one was that he formed a mismatch between his attributes and his design philosophy. Ves was afraid that he might sabotage his promising mech design career due to his greed!

"Yet.. there is also another possibility."

The second outcome was that his domain and design philosophy somehow found a way to integrate the new variable.

"Wouldn't it be great if my spiritual creations could grow by eating or absorbing other sources of energy?"

This would definitely supercharge all of his products!

As long as he was able to control the side effects, Ves foresaw endless benefits if he succeeded in integrating a portion of the Unending One in his own spirit!

He just couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger. The chance of catastrophic failure was too great. His inability to control every variable or predict every possible procedure meant that this amounted to a high-risk gamble where his very life would be at stake!

"Maybe.. I should take a step back. Maybe.. I should test it out on another mech designer first."

Ves g.r.o.a.n.e.d. He just recalled he killed a perfectly functional Journeyman Mech Designer not too long ago. Even though he did it to satisfy his revenge and earn brownie points with Gloriana, it didn't change the fact that he threw away a valuable test subject!

He would just have to find a way to get his hands on another Journeyman.

"I'll probably get one sooner or later." He crossed his arms. "I make so many enemies these days that it's a statistical certainty that I'll piss off a Journeyman."

For now, there was no reason to rush this ambitious plan. He needed to get back to solving his more immediate problem with supplying the Blinding Mech with an energy source.

Countless questions flooded his mind.

How should he make use of the fragment of the Unending One?

How should he integrate the prepared energy source to the spiritual foundation of the Blinding One?

How would he be able to prevent the Blinding Mechs from absorbing energy from its own mech pilot?

All of these issues required an extensive amount of thought and consideration. He might also have to perform a few risky experiments in order to verify his new ideas.

"Luckily I'm in a star system that is a regional center for biotech research." He grinned. "I might be able to obtain something that can help me realize my plans!"

Chapter 2740 - Human Detection Systems

It took some time for Ves to regain his composure. Although there was no harm in dreaming big, every ambition introduced a lot of risks. The greater the ambition, the greater the potential setbacks.

Normally, Ves would shove his ambitious ideas to the back of his mind because he was already preoccupied with other priorities.

He was reluctant to do so this time.

"I already have the spiritual fragment of the Unending One for months and it's just collecting dust in my vault. When will I ever get to do something with this prize? It's too valuable to keep it in storage!"

He also had a bunch of other spoils of war that he needed to make use of somehow. Most notably, it would be very helpful for him to study the remains of the Charlemagne, the Jeanne D'Arc and the Scarra for his upcoming expert mech design projects.

He decided to think about it over the next few days and try and see if he could spare some time on experimenting with the powers of the Unending One.

Ves currently had to juggle between several major priorities. He had to prepare for his upcoming design duel, complete his five remaining mech design projects, stay informed about the attempt to exchange the Auralis for another capital ship and supervise the mass recruitment effort of his clan.

He actually had a lot of other concerns and duties, but he couldn't possibly address them all. He needed to find a way to delegate these matters to people he trusted. He was already doing that but there were some issues that he was too concerned about to leave in the hands of others.

"They're generally split in two different categories: mech-design related and clan governance related."

The former could be solved by appointing a good-enough mech designer to solve the mostly-technical problems he regularly had to deal with. His concern was that none of his assistants were good enough. Even if they were, without his kind of specialty, they were helpless in the face of spiritual-related issues.

"I see now why Masters are fond of raising direct disciples. They're the best form of assistants that you can get." Ves muttered.

Right now, none of the mech designers who answered to him were heirs to his design philosophy. He guided and instructed the likes of Ketis and Maikel in a way that allowed them to find their own way in mech design. While that made him feel good, he was not doing himself any favors.

"It's not yet time to pass on the essentials of my design philosophy." He whispered to himself.

This solution had to be set aside for later.

"Crazy ideas like mine, for example." Ves joked.

"Meow." Lucky nodded his head in agreement.

"You naughty cat!" Ves leaned forward and grabbed Lucky from his desk.

"Meow?!"

"Don't think I haven't forgotten about your lack of production! You've been spending a lot of time on the Auralis with Calabast, haven't you? Did she feed you with the abundant amount of material reserves and scrap when you were working over there? How come you haven't produced a single gem?"

"Meeeeeoow!"

Ves was losing patience with Lucky. What was the point of having a gem cat if no gems showed up? The little bugger was getting lazy!

"You know, I think I have a sliver of B-stone in my pockets. I prepared it just for you. Let me retrieve it so that I can—"

"MEOW!"

Ves suddenly paused. "What? Are you sure?"

"Meow meow meow!" Lucky urgently yowled as his tail whipped about in excitement.

"You better not be lying to me, buddy."

"Meow!"

After a bit of hesitation, Ves decided to give his pet the benefit of the doubt. He let go and allowed Lucky to fly a few meters away.

"I'll give you another month. You're lucky that I'm too preoccupied with other priorities to bother about your lack of production. You better give me something good after I'm done with my mech duel and my remaining projects. I don't think there will be any further distractions preventing me from meddling with your digestion system."

"Meow meow!"

While he was running low on usable gems, Ves did not mind waiting for another month if Lucky lived up to his promises. One good gem was worth 10 middling gems in his opinion. Overall, the longer it took, the stronger the output.

Of course, whether those gems were actually useful did not entirely depend on strength. In some cases, Lucky produced some gems with very weird effects. It was a struggle for Ves to find a good use for them when they didn't do anything straightforward such as increasing the defense of a mech.

At least he no longer underestimated these useless gems as much. For a long time, he disregarded the Whipping Boy gem, only to find it was shockingly effective in battle when paired with a mech that already had a suppressive effect such as the Valkyrie Prime.

He prepared to formulate a suitable glow for the Devious in case he wasn't able to obtain a compatible design spirit from the local environment.

It was easy enough to implement a glow that was based on the Superior Mother's dust phase of existence. The Devious had already been designed to embody the dust phase of existence since the mech had been conceived.

The effect of this glow was rather effective in lowering people's guards. During the initial tests, Devious mechs in stealth snuck around a testing ground that was modeled after a typical base and managed to evade the suspicion of the mock guards by 15 percent.

This was quite a drastic jump!

Gloriana became a bit more mollified when she witnessed the disposable Hexer stealth mech in action with its new glow.

"Our mech design's performance is truly better. Its success rate against the circumstances the prototypes are facing make it seem as if the Devious is a stealth mech that is twice as expensive."

Ves shook his head as he studied the data. "I think you should be careful about drawing any conclusions from these initial results. Just like how the Friday Coalition adapted to the introduction of the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie Redeemer, the state will definitely find a number of ways to hinder the Devious from raiding their rear positions."

LMC mechs in the Komodo War were way too high profile these days. Ordinary new Hexer mech models did not catch much attention because their impact on the war was rather modest.

The Fridaymen were justified to direct so much attention on the products of the Miracle Couple. The glows of the two aforementioned mechs radically changed the dynamics of the battlefield. Even if the mechs themselves weren't too strong or noteworthy, their spiritual traits were simply too impactful!

The annoying part about all of this was that Ves didn't think the glows of his subsequent three Hexer mech designs were all that revolutionary.

Sure, the Devious might gain a glow that lowered the vigilance of people around it, but so what?

The root of any stealth mech was its stealth systems, and if those weren't all that good, the automated sensor systems would definitely ring an alarm regardless of what kind of fancy glow was active!

Therefore, the application of the Devious would always be limited. The Hexers fielded much better stealth mechs that could infiltrate much more tightly-guarded places.

Still, even a cheap stealth mech had its place. The Devious was not that complicated to pilot so any average mech pilot could employ it to perform risky battlefield infiltrations. If the Hexers were willing to deploy a large number of stealth mechs, they could easily frustrate the Fridayman supply lines, thereby slowing their forward progress!

As the Devious began to perform repeat infiltrations against the same group of helpers, the latter became a lot more vigilant. Now that they became aware of the effects of the stealth mech, the clansmen assigned to play the role of base guards did not lose their vigilance as easily.

Still, even if they knew that the Devious was definitely attempting to sneak up to them at some point, they still lost their alertness when the stealth mech came close enough!

"It's too difficult to remain alert when the glow doesn't announce itself." Ves noted the key issue. "The Devious is too good at lowering vigilance without giving itself away."

The Devious finally began to show its faults when an expert candidate and an expert pilot started to play the role as guards.

During one testing session, Ves directed his eyes to the c.o.c.kpit feed of one of the guard mechs.

From what Ves had experienced, light mech specialists generally came in two varieties.

The most dominant group consisted of flighty and impatient individuals such as Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson. They loved to pilot fast mechs because they could reach their destinations faster and outpace everyone else.

While their combat instincts were exceptionally sharp in order to allow them to pull off their risky attack runs, their inability to stay calm meant they made for poor guards!

Someone like Trinity Larkinson belonged to another group of light mech specialists. While she was almost just as capable of dancing on the edge of the knife with a light mech as other battle enthusiasts, she was much more capable of sitting still in order to observe her surroundings.

"Over there!"

Her mech abruptly raised its rifle and fired a harmless laser at the corner of a structure that was about 200 meters away.

The laser seemingly passed through empty air and struck another distant structure, but the observers of the test knew better.

The Devious that had just turned around the corner disengaged its active stealth. Trinity had managed to catch the mech barely a second after it slowly rounded the corner!

"Why did it get found out so fast?" Gloriana frowned.

"Expert candidates possess greater intuition than ordinary mech pilots." Ves explained. "I think they may be sharp enough to notice that an external influence is attempting to alter their perception."

The results were even worse when the Devious attempted to sneak past an expert pilot. Even a rather sloppy individual like Venerable Rosa Orfan succeeded in detecting the presence of an invisible stealth mech a kilometer away!

"This is ridiculous!"

Expert pilots were very sharp individuals, and not just due to their intuition alone. Their elevated mental capacities allowed them to merge with their mechs to a much greater extent. They became much more attuned with the senses of their machines. They were also capable of leveraging a greater proportion of a mech's computing power to process much more data.

All of this meant that expert pilots were much more capable of picking up and analyzing suspicious patterns in sensor data than regular mech pilots.

Expert pilots made for excellent base guards!

This setback substantially reduced the utility of the Devious model. The Fridayman Coalition fielded a lot of expert pilots. Even if they were off-duty at a base somewhere, their sharp intuition might cause them to detect something amiss even if they were enjoying a meal in a mess hall.

The glow of the mech might do more harm than good in this case. While ordinary mech pilots weren't able to detect the shifts of their own minds, expert pilots were much more aware of their changes. They were definitely capable of sensing an external influence acting on their minds!

"Well, that's why this model is cheap." Gloriana eventually shrugged. "If an expert pilot happens to catch it, then the Hegemony can afford the loss."

Ves wasn't happy with this outcome. He believed he could do better. While the Superior Mother was a capable all-rounder, in the end she was not the best choice to augment a stealth mech.

If he wanted to achieve a better result, he just had to find a suitable ingredient to form a design spirit that excelled at hiding presences!