

Mech 2741

Chapter 2741 - Heavy Firepower

Not every mech design project was as convoluted and difficult as the Devious design.

The other two Hexer mech designs yielded much more straightforward results during the tests.

For example, the new communications mech codenamed Cherub completely matched the expectations of its designers.

It was just a simple unarmed auxiliary light mech that didn't carry much except for a decent set of sensor, communication and ECM systems.

They weren't very good, honestly. There was only so much quality that Ves could afford for a mech with a design budget of 55 million hex credits!

If this was all, the Hex Army would never adopt the Cherub. Affordable or not, its performance parameters were too poor to counteract all of the difficulties on the battlefield. The inability to transmit signals under heavy jamming was an outright failure for a communications mech designed for the battlefield!

Yet neither Ves nor Gloriana showed any dissatisfaction with this simplistic mech design.

They watched on as the Cherub succeeded in transmitting complete data packages over various distances under extremely heavy interference.

In order to simulate the toughest possible environment the Cherub model might encounter, Ves rented some special signal interference devices the size of shuttles. When multiple of them activated all at once, the entire testing area became filled with an abundance of disruptive energy waves that visibly discomfited any human inside!

However, whether it was short-ranged communications or long-ranged communications, different Cherub mechs always succeeded in exchanging messages back and forth!

The mech was even capable of transmitting messages even when there was a source of spiritual instability nearby.

Glows and force of wills hardly affected the integrity of the signals being transmitted. This was because the communication signals largely passed through a sub-network of the Superior Mother.

The exact mechanics behind this phenomenon was actually a bit more complicated than it sounded. Ves had to put careful thought in how he designed the sub-network and how to keep the Cherubs connected even in the face of several circumstances.

He even made sure to encrypt the transmissions so that a spiritually-sensitive entity wouldn't be able to decipher any intercepted messages in a short amount of time.

The only shortcoming that disappointed Ves was the relatively low bandwidth of the communication network.

"The limited bandwidth that our Cherubs have access to will largely confine the transmissions to highly-compressed footage or data logs."

Any information was better than no information at all. Even a few pages worth of material was enough to increase the response times of crucial reinforcements or provide more warning time to units that were about to be attacked.

Ves looked satisfied at the results. "The Cherub is not a flashy mech, but one that can serve a very useful purpose."

"That's the case with most auxiliary mechs." Gloriana affirmed. She was quite happy with the results as well even though she didn't feel challenged enough when she worked on this project. "If the Hex Army isn't able to counter enemy expert mechs directly, then we can at least provide it with a better means of staying in touch with different units. Better communications will lead to better and more timely commands. Hopefully, that will prevent some needless casualties and deliver some much-needed victories."

While the Cherubs could definitely change the course of a lot of battles, there was only so much influence an auxiliary mech could exert.

In massive conflicts like the Komodo War, clever stratagems and brilliant plans could only do so much to affect the overall trend.

Most large-scale clashes turned into grueling battles of attrition where the side with the tougher mechs, biggest guns and more skilled mech pilots gained the upper hand.

As auxiliary mechs, the Blinding Mech, Cherub and Devious weren't capable of achieving an instant, substantial impact.

There was one mech that might be different, though.

When Ves and Gloriana moved to a different part of the testing facility, they witnessed a handful of thick and sturdy ranged mechs lining up while bringing their massive cannons to bear.

As a cannoner mech, the Giant Killer had to be able to carry larger caliber weapons that introduced a lot of heft.

It took a lot of strength for the cannoner mechs to carry their massive Samheim gauss cannons on land.

The few times it attempted to engage its flight system and lift up in the air, the results weren't pretty. The Giant Killer flew so slowly and ungainly that any decent ranged or aerial mech was capable of defeating it with ease!

Gloriana looked disgusted. "This mech is awful in the air."

"I think it is best to remove the flight system or limit its flight capabilities for repositioning purposes only." Ves concluded.

It was too easy to take down the Giant Killers when these sluggish mechs attempted to fight in the air. They flew like flying pigs. Even if their elevation granted them a favorable angle against their targets, it simply wasn't worth it to expose them in such an easy fashion.

At least on land the cannoner mechs could take cover and hide its presence behind natural or artificial terrain features.

Still, the fact that the mech was designed to accommodate multiple environments meant that it didn't really perform that well on land either.

As the Giant Killer prototypes showed what they were capable of in the testing grounds, Ves felt they were merely serviceable. While they didn't perform too badly on land, there were better alternatives on the markets.

"True landbound cannoner mechs are faster, more energy efficient and possess a higher damage capacity." Gloriana pointed out.

"Maybe we shouldn't have bothered to make it land-capable to begin with. If we need heavy artillery, the Transcendent Punisher is actually a superior option in most aspects. It has six legs which actually affords a lot of stability and decent locomotion to this heavy mech."

"The Giant Killer is still lighter in absolute terms. That makes it marginally more useful in terrain which imposes limits on how much mass it can bear."

"There's also another advantage to the Giant Killer. Its codename isn't called like this for nothing."

While the Giant Killer only possesses a single primary armament as opposed to the four big guns on the Transcendent Punisher, the cannoneer mech excelled at punching through tough targets!

The firing tests were Ves' favorite moments. Each time a Giant Killer aimed its formidable and expensive cannon at a target, his anticipation steadily increased.

BOOM!

The immense gauss cannon discharged a fat projective at a speed that was enough to ignite a huge swathe of air wherever it passed!

It was as if the Giant Killer unleashed a huge ray of fire instead of a solid round!

The specialized Sarun round that cost more than other kinds of gauss rounds almost instantly reached the other end of the firing range where a prototype Bright Warrior Version B had been parked.

The force of the collision was so great that the Bright Warrior tipped over! Even though the mech could have remained upright if a mech pilot was there to help the machine maintain its balance, it was still incredible that a cannoneer mech was able to lay a single opposing mech flat!

"Incredible." Gloriana sighed.

She wasn't very enthusiastic about this project at first, but now that she saw how much damage the Giant Killer could inflict with a single attack, she quickly changed her tune!

"The Transcendent Punisher isn't capable of penetrating through so much armor with a single salvo. If we had this mech back during the Battle of Reckoning, we would have been able to wear down the enemy expert mechs faster."

This mech was exactly what the Larkinson Clan needed to face the threats of the future. While its massive cannon was overkill against ordinary rabble, Ves was never worried about fighting space sc.u.m in the first place.

His true opponents were states like the Friday Coalition and other powers who were capable of fielding expert mechs!

Yet what made the Giant Killers truly special was not a big gun. The Samheims were indeed formidable, but that was to be expected for a mech that cost 800 million hex credits to build!

While this was way more expensive than any cannoneer mech sold in the mech market, it was not that special once its considerable cost was taken into account.

What really caused the mech to stand out was that it was completely tailored to the Penitent Sisters.

Ves actually didn't dare to test the strongest and most potent function of the Giant Killer. He was afraid that the results might leak out and expose a new trump card that he did not want his enemies to find out.

"Why aren't you proceeding, Ves?"

"I'm afraid of tearing a hole through the terrain. Even though this site is highly confidential, some moves simply can't be kept under wraps."

He was willing to wait until they resumed their grand expedition and reached a quiet star system to witness the Giant Killers at their peak!

As long as the Giant Killers and their mech pilots connected to the Superior Mother's battle network, they would be capable of unleashing an augmented physical attack that could potentially punch through any armor!

Perhaps not even Unending armor would be able to remain unscathed if it was on the receiving end of this potent battle formation!

When Gloriana recalled how the Valkyrie Redeemers wiped out the entire crew of the Auralis, she tried to imagine how much more damage the Giant Killers could do. Unlike the marauder mechs, the cannoner mechs were dedicated ranged mechs to begin with. Their ability to project damage at range was much greater!

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Why.. why don't we repurpose the Giant Killer for the Hex Army as well? It's a Hexer mech design, right? While we are at it, can't we enable the Hexers from my home state to engage in battle formations. You already did so with the Glory Seekers, so I don't see any reason why you can't extend that to the rest of the Hex Army!"

"Absolutely not!" Ves put his foot down. "I already explained to you why that's unacceptable! Battle networks only have a limited capacity due to their greater focus. They should primarily be reserved for our own use. They are also incredibly energy intensive. The Superior Mother would never be able to maintain a frequent rate of activation."

While he didn't want the Hegemony to lose the war, he was still unwilling to share his best products and innovations to others!

Battle formations were still rough and imm.a.t.u.r.e in his opinion. It was very irresponsible to share them to the Hexers. If they were being used too often, his enemies would quickly be able to figure out their strengths and weaknesses, thereby making it much harder to wipe them out in the future!

At least now there was a lot of mystique surrounding the capabilities of the Larkinson Clan. Any enemy had to think twice about attacking the Larkinsons due to their inability to figure out how to protect their own sh.i.p.s from getting cleared of all life in a single blow.

After Gloriana failed to persuade Ves to share his battle networks, she reluctantly took a step back and made a more modest request.

"What if we just hand over the Giant Killer design by itself? I'm sure you can tweak it so that it's compatible with all Hexers instead of just the Penitent Sisters. You'll be able to fulfill an extra quota in advance while the Hex Army obtains another mech that may possibly be able to synergize well with the Blinding Mech."

Ves hesitated when he thought about her proposal. "That's.. doesn't sound too bad, but it's not a good idea. The Giant Killer is designed for short, intensive engagements. The Komodo War features too many drawn-out battles where endurance and efficiency are much more important. Besides, without battle formations, the Giant Killer probably performs worse than comparable ranged mechs fielded by the Hex Army. There is no other reason for the Hex Army to field the Giant Killer other than to obtain another mech that can project a glow."

"It's better than nothing, though. I think we should really consider this option. We should at least show some details to the Hex Army so that their leaders can decide whether they need our work."

Chapter 2742 - Ves the Principled Me Designer

Ves generally disliked repurposing his work.

The Giant Killer was originally designed to serve as the exclusive ranged mech of the Penitent Sisters.

When Ves poured months worth of work into the design, he never thought about sharing it to other Hexer groups. Neither the Hex Army nor the Glory Seekers were meant to harness this new model.

Did he think about it? Yes. Why shouldn't he? The Penitent Sisters may have joined the Larkinson Clan, but they still clung to enough Hexer traditions to remind everyone of their origins.

Theoretically, it was doable for Ves to develop a variant that possessed a character that was more compatible with normal Hexers.

Was Ves willing to do it? Not necessarily.

Aside from all of the other reasons he mentioned, he also had an additional objection.

"I think it is rather disrespectful to discuss such a profound change without listening to the input of Juliet Stameross."

Gloriana scowled. "We don't need to ask for her opinion. While I admit that she has worked hard on this mech design, it belongs to the Larkinson Clan, not the Penitent Sisters alone. We possess every right to decide whether to limit its use to our clansmen or any others we may wish to share our work with. In my eyes, the Giant Killer can serve as a fine Hexer mech with a couple of adjustments!"

Her disrespect towards Juliet caused Ves to feel a bit disappointed. He thought that months of quiet cooperation had increased her regard towards the third Journeyman working for the Design Department, but it appeared he was too optimistic.

"I'm not arguing with you any further." He spoke with a tone of finality. "Your arguments aren't enough to convince me that it is in our best interests to make the Giant Killer more widely available. We already have a bunch of other Hexer mechs to provide glows to the Hex Army. The Giant Killer doesn't bring anything else that is unique to the table. In fact, it probably performs worse in various aspects. Its weapon system is not a proprietary Hexer design. We licensed it! There are also a bunch of other compatibility issues that prevent the Giant Killer from fitting into the command and control systems of the Hex Army."

The Giant Killer did not follow the Hex Army's rules when it came to mech designs. It employed different standards, was not compatible with standard spare parts and employed a unique type of ammunition that had to be licensed separately and was not meant for military use.

In other words, the Giant Killer was comparable to a commercial mech design! While it was a very expensive and powerful design, it was nonetheless meant to function outside of the Larkinson Clan.

Gloriana still couldn't understand why Ves rejected her perfectly reasonable suggestion.

"Didn't you want to complete the quota of 8 mech designs as fast as possible?"

"I do, but I don't want to do a sloppy job. The Giant Killer won't work out as well as our other Hexer mechs, Gloriana. It will fall flat if it isn't paired with an accompanying battle network. I don't want our reputation to be besmirched because we delivered a product that doesn't fit the circumstances. It's also a matter of principle."

"Principle?" She looked confused. "That's not something I hear from you every day."

"Well I have them!" He insisted! "As a service provider, it is unethical to fulfill a job by hastily repurposing an existing work to fit the minimum requirements. We promised to design Hexer mechs that fully conform to the needs and circumstances of the Hexer state. I'm not going to break my professional rules over a mech design that won't be able to make a difference anyway!"

"You... I can't believe you, Ves.."

"You're overestimating the impact the Giant Killer will have on the Hex Army. Just forget about it. If you want to design a dedicated ranged mech for your former state, then we'll tackle this another time."

The two split up on bad terms. Gloriana couldn't handle his rejection. She didn't seem to listen to his arguments or did not take them seriously.

Ves wasn't too worried about her. They had arguments like this multiple times since they got together. Ves eventually learned that his logic would eventually drill through her thick skull. Without any valid counterarguments, she would definitely come around to his line of thinking.

He supervised the remaining tests of the Giant Killer prototypes alone. The Penitent Sisters all reacted with enthusiasm with their exclusive mechs.

"It's not a rifleman mech, but it can hit harder than any other mech in the fleet!"

"Our ranged mech specialists can finally stop feeling jealous of the sisters who get to pilot the Valkyrie Redeemer!"

"It is a pity that we cannot call on the Superior Mother's blessing."

Overall, the Giant Killer significantly boosted the appreciation the Penitent Sisters held towards Ves and the clan. Allowing them to 'own' the mech made them feel special and assured them that they would play a key role in the armed forces of the Larkinson Clan for the times to come.

The addition of the Giant Killer to their mech roster was a strong indicator that Ves did not harbor any thoughts of disbanding them and forcing their members to join the other mech forces!

After making sure that the Giant Killer design was working as intended, Ves attended a final testing session.

The light skirmishers zipping around in the air while using their glows to terrorize the poor targets made for an inspiring sight.

The Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B model had already proven its chops during the Battle of Reckoning. While the early prototypes back then performed quite rough, continued refinement addressed much of the faults and inefficiencies that Gloriana previously noticed.

Different from the Giant Killer, the new Ferocious Piranha retained most of its combat effectiveness in the air. Its low mass and high thrust power allowed the light skirmisher to resist the pull of gravity with much less effort.

If the Giant Killer was a rock, then the Ferocious Piranha was the equivalent of a leaf. It was much easier for the latter to keep itself aloft!

"It's a bit bad on land, though."

This was to be expected. The Ferocious Piranha IB may be a second-class mech, but it still did not offer a lot of capacity to accommodate everything on his wishlist.

Early on in the design project, Ves and Juliet agreed to focus primarily on its flight capabilities. It simply wasn't worth it to invest too much in its locomotion on land.

The legs and mech engine of the Ferocious Piranha were comparatively weak. They were strong enough to allow the Ferocious Piranha to maintain a modest jog, but that was mostly to facilitate movement on starsh.i.p.s and bases. It was too dangerous to allow mechs to fly in confined spaces.

This meant that while it was possible for the mech to fight on land, it was not recommended to do so. It ran slower than dedicated landbound light skirmishers and was comparatively weaker in other aspects as well since it wasted a lot of capacity on its flight system.

"If the mech can't fly, it's not in its element." Ves concluded.

If he wanted to field a better light skirmisher, then he should design a dedicated landbound mech like the Crystal Lord line. He could also invest some time in developing a variant of the Ferocious Piranha IB that removed its flight option.

Under these circumstances, it was no problem for the Ferocious Piranha to keep itself aloft for a decent amount of time.

However, it would have a serious problem in trying to do the same on a heavy gravity planet. The Ferocious Piranha wouldn't even be able to lift off if the force pulling it downwards was well over 5 g!

Ves snorted. "The performance of my light skirmishers is the least of my problems if I'm on a heavy gravity planet."

Every other mech fielded by his clan would get into serious trouble as well!

As Ves had already observed most of what the Ferocious Piranha was capable of during the Battle of Reckoning, the test results held no suspense. The only new information he gained was specifically related to the light mech's performance in aerial situations.

He did not need to pay anymore visits to the testing facility. After personally witnessing the performance of all five nearly complete models, he did not spot anything egregious enough for him to go back to the drawing board.

"The only problems that remain is solving the problems related to the Blinding Mech and the Devious."

Both Hexer mech designs performed below expectations due to their inadequate spiritual configurations.

Ves couldn't solve their problems by utilizing his existing spiritual resources or techniques. He had to act more proactively and create new spiritual products that could meet a need that he hadn't addressed before.

After spending some time in the markets of Veoline, the Swordmaidens purchased all of the goods and supplies they thought they would need for their upcoming trip to the Heavensword Association.

"Meooow."

"Oh, Lucky. I'll miss you too, cutie!" Ketis giggled as she picked up the cat and snuggled against him for a moment.

Ves felt rather worried about letting her go off on her own, but he tried his best to suppress the urge to stop their departure.

There were too many reasons why they should attend the Greater Omanderie Festival. He did not want to deprive these tragic women of their opportunity to rise up after a long period of rapid decline.

Besides, the Swordmaidens used to be pirates. They could take care of themselves, mercenary escort or not. Majestic Teal was not comparable to the frontier or the Nyxian Gap either. As long as the Swordmaidens stuck to the main trading routes, they shouldn't encounter any trouble.

Once Ketis finished kissing Lucky's head, she tossed him over her head.

"Meow!"

Both Ves and Ketis ignored Lucky's complaint.

"I'll miss you." Ves said in a softer voice.

"Me too. I think it's for the best, though. I need to get out of your shadow in order to fully find my own way."

"I hope you'll be able to return as a Journeyman."

"You never know, Ves." She shrugged. "While I'm eager to catch up to you, I've learned that it doesn't help if I'm anxious. I'll just go forward and see where that takes me. If I am meant to break through while I am out, then I'll be happy for that. If I return while I am still an Apprentice, then I'll just continue to grind until I succeed."

"That's a good mindset to take, but don't forget about your ambitions. You need to have enough drive in order to push yourself past your limits. Becoming a Journeyman is the true start of any mech designer. You must completely dedicate yourself to this profession if you want to start designing real mechs."

Ketis took in his words for a moment and nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

Ves briefly talked to Commander Sendra and Venerable Dise before waving all of the Swordmaidens goodbye.

They all boarded their shuttles and flew back to orbit. There, they boarded another transit vessel that took them back to their combat carriers.

After settling into the vessels which had already been loaded with mechs and supplies, the Swordmaidens detached from the main fleet and began their first solo adventure.

Chapter 2743 - New State

Colonel Ariadne Wodin did not think much of her assignment at first.

As a proud branch member of the Wodin Dynasty, she dedicated her life to serve in the armed forces of the Hegemony.

There was a time when she was a young and brash mech officer. She eagerly piloted mechs and enjoyed taking charge of other women.

Those days were behind her. While she sharpened herself in battle, the Hex Army remained stubbornly in place.

While she took part in plenty of practice sessions and interdivisional war games, the falseness of it all grated on her. The hundreds of thousands of mechs she blew up consisted of virtual bits. The opponents she fought against were other Hexers.

This was not what she wanted out of her mech piloting career. She yearned to take the fight against the Coalition, smash its glorious mech armies and drive the Hegemony's stake right through its heart!

Yet too much time passed without anything taking place. The Hegemony was still in its centuries-long process of building up its troops, material reserves and infrastructure.

The matriarchs in charge of these top-level decisions lived for centuries, and they possessed at least that much patience. While there was no doubt that the matriarchs wanted to satisfy their grudge against the Fridaymen once and for all, the time was not yet right, apparently.

So it came to be that Ariadne Wodin accumulated more training without gaining too much actual experience.

It frustrated her. It frustrated her fellow Hexer soldiers. They served diligently and obeyed the commands they were given, yet that didn't result in anything.

As decades of continued service went by, her rank steadily rose higher but the acuity of her body and mind was starting to fade.

She spent her prime years as a mech pilot wasting away her golden years. Even with an early application of life-prolonging treatment, the deterioration of her reflexes and her mental evolution meant she was unable to compete with younger, faster and more vigorous mech pilots.

To be honest, the difference wasn't too big. With the treatments she enjoyed and the augments she possessed, she could still put up a good fight. Her greater experience and polished skills could even keep up with many of the young stars in the Hex Army.

It was just that it became harder and harder to do so. She had to rely more and more on her wits in order to compensate for her slowing mental reflexes. This was an unstoppable trend. No matter how much she kept her body in shape, her mind grew more sluggish and complicated with age.

A younger mech pilot didn't have to think in order to perform a rapid reaction. Their instincts and lack of greater considerations meant that they fought without any burdens.

This was not so for Ariadne. She not only became burdened by a multitude of choices and considerations, she was also responsible for commanding her subordinates, thereby filling up her mind even further with distracting thoughts.

At some point, it became clear that she was much more suitable to command troops than piloting a mech in the field.

Her rising qualifications in the former eventually got her promoted out of the c.o.c.kpit. While she could still pilot a mech if she had to, it was a waste of her prodigious command ability if she did so. She knew it. Her superiors knew it. Putting her behind a desk was the most rational choice to make.

Intellectually, she accepted her fate.

Emotionally, she resented the fact she missed her opportunity to earn glory in battle.

As much as she wished to concentrate on her duties, her regrets and resentments hampered her ability to serve in the Hex Army.

She eventually decided to take a step back and retire from the military. She chose to return to the Scimitar System and take up a senior position in the household troops of her dynasty.

At least there she was able to exert greater power. She was just a cog in an immensely huge machine back when she was in the Hex Army. Taking over a unit of the Wodin Warriors granted her much greater leeway in implementing her vision.

It was then that the Komodo War broke out.

"What a great irony!"

Just years after she retired, the council of matriarchs finally lost their patience and decided to strike at their archenemies.

The war that decided the future of the Komodo War had broken out! Every Hexer soldier had to answer the call and fight against the evil and immoral Fridaymen!

Though Colonel Ariadne inwardly regretted her decision to retire from the Hex Army, she quickly consoled herself.

The Wodin Warriors were also strong. While they weren't quite on par with a true Hexer mech unit, they came close enough to put up a good fight against ordinary Fridayman mech units.

Every Wodin Warrior knew that there was a great possibility that they would be called to the frontlines.

Yet just as the Wodin Warriors fully mobilized, Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin handed Colonel Ariadne a different assignment.

She.. was not going to the frontlines?

She.. had to pay babysitter to a foreign boy and Constance's spoiled daughter?

Suffice to say, she had difficulty accepting such a sudden long-term assignment. While the Glory Seekers sounded like a fine unit, she had no intentions of running away from the Komodo Star Sector!

She also possessed a demeanor that was less prone to come into conflict against foreigners like Gloriana's husband and the various other misguided boys she might encounter during her travels.

Sometimes, being too smart, competent and reasonable was not good.

Colonel Ariadne grudgingly accepted her new mission. The Wodin Dynasty needed her as the head of the Glory Seekers. She was the best choice to ensure the Glory Seekers remained pure Hexer even when they were surrounded by fools who believed in the false notion of gender equality.

As she took charge of the Glory Seekers, she did her best to hold on to her professionalism.

At the start, she only saw her mission as a necessary task.

It wasn't until she started to stay in the company of the Larkinson Clan that she realized why the Wodins held it in high regard.

The Battle of Reckoning was enough to show her that Ves Larkinson had the potential to revolutionize the way the Hex Army fought!

She witnessed sights that she never dared to dream about. She glimpsed the amazing potential of LMC mechs and wished that the boy who was responsible for designing them would stay loyal to the Wodin Dynasty and the Hexadric Hegemony!

Additionally, the Komodo War wasn't going well for the Hexers these days. While the war was far from over, the possibility that the Hegemony might no longer exist became more and more probable.

"We may be asked to carry the torch of Hexer civilization." She spoke.

"I hope it doesn't come to that, but we need to be ready for every possibility." Another older Hexer woman said.

In a grand stateroom aboard the Indigo Tremor, two high-ranking Hexers sat together.

Colonel Ariadne Wodin invited Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken to discuss some light and heavy matters.

The current topic at hand was definitely a heavy one. No Hexer dared to speak lightly of the potential outcomes of the Komodo War.

"I fear what will remain of our people if the Fridaymen overrun our territories. Even if many Hexers fled in time, they will become scattered wanderers who will constantly be hounded by the Fridaymen and their allies."

"I share your concerns, colonel. The Fridaymen will never allow us to make a comeback. We won't be able to settle anywhere within the Yeina Star Cl.u.s.ter. I doubt our defeated people will be able to recover quietly in the neighboring star cl.u.s.ter as well."

Both Hexers grimaced. Their unique and righteous culture was not well received by others. The Hexers might become persecuted by the entire galaxy once they lost the foundation of their strength!

"This is what our contingency plan is for." Captain Vraken softly sighed. "The Red Ocean is large and open enough for your Glory Seekers to found a new colony if there is any d.e.s.i.r.e to do so. Our people and culture will not die out if you succeed in lighting our torch in the dwarf galaxy."

"What is the point? I mean no disrespect, but we are too small and inadequate to shoulder the burden of reviving an entire state."

Daria-Maria grinned. "You aren't the only ones to carry on this mission. I have recently been in contact with my superiors in the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty. The Hegemony is preparing to dispatch more fleets to the Red Ocean. Whether they will be able to make it or not is still a question, but at least some will succeed in getting through."

Colonel Ariadne quickly realized the implications. It was one thing to send a few scattered and voluntary expeditions to the Red Ocean. It was another thing for the government to put their full backing in this initiative!

"Have the matriarchs stopped vacillating?"

"I wouldn't say that, colonel. They have merely become willing to invest more resources in opening up an escape route for our people. It's just that now we have a greater plan in the works. No matter which fleets eventually make it to the Red Ocean, they cannot be allowed to wander in this dangerous region of space by themselves. They must consolidate in order to concentrate their might and allow their colonies to start off strong and united right from the start!"

"And we are part of this collective endeavor as well?"

"Of course." Captain Vraken nodded. "We Hexers have remained united in the Komodo Star Sector, and we must keep pooling our strength in the Red Ocean. You have read the stories. There are too many dangers there. No colony or pioneer is safe."

Shouldn't we spread out then? The dangers may wipe out any Hexer colony fleet, but there will always be backups."

"No." Daria-Maria firmly shook her head. "That's not the right approach according to the council of matriarchs. Even if a single colony survives and thrives, their low starting base will hamper their growth and limit their development. There are many pioneers who are bigger and more powerful than us in the Red Ocean. Their colonies and prospective states will rise up faster and swallow our development state before any of us have a chance to found our own state. Only by uniting every single Hexer expeditionary fleet will we be able to found a second Hexer state in the new galaxy!"

There was something about Captain Vraken's explanation that caused Colonel Ariadne to develop some ideas. Her eyes slowly widened.

"Wait a minute. Are you saying...?"

The grand captain nodded. "It is indeed as you think. If your Glory Seekers contribute significantly to the establishment of a new Hexer state, your Wodin Dynasty may be able to become one of its matriarchal dynasties! The old order in the Komodo Star Sector no longer applies over there. While I'm sure that us Vrakens and other matriarchal dynasties will try and hold on to power, not all of us might be able to get our colony fleets through the beyonder gate. There will definitely be space for upstarts such as the Wodin Dynasty to get a seat at the new council of matriarchs. The only requirement is that you must succeed."

Colonel Ariadne Wodin was left breathless for a moment. Ambition swelled inside of her as she thought of what she might be able to accomplish on behalf of her dynasty.

The Glory Seekers might be able to make history!

Chapter 2744 - Prescott Museum

Veoline was called the City of Trees.

While it was not the only city in the LRA to feature massive tree-like structures, it was definitely one of the largest in the region.

The combination of growth buildings and organic vehicles gave every visitor the illusion that Veoline was some kind of alien forest.

A sparse forest with very huge trees, but a forest nonetheless. The leaves hanging over everyone's heads provided an adequate amount of shade without blocking too much light.

Many organic caretakers in the form of beetles, butterflies and other colorful insects tended to the growths. They meticulously followed their bioprogramming by removing

litter, inspecting the health of any trunks and branches and perhaps keeping an eye on any humans who wished to perform any mischief.

The result was a pleasant, clean environment that completely lacked the artificial atmosphere of conventional cities.

As the armored shuttle bearing Ves and Gloriana slowly flew along an air corridor reserved for VIPs, Ves continued to admire the view.

"This is a very different place from Bentheim, that's for sure." He muttered.

"That's natural." Gloriana responded as she scratched Clixie's ears. "The Lifers reject any aesthetics that look cold and artificial. Some are more extreme than others. They even developed organic starsh.i.p.s."

These biosh.i.p.s were amazing sights. Ves would have loved to see one of these majestic vessels up close, but there weren't many opportunities to do so amidst all of the restrictive rules. No one was allowed to mill around in orbit. Visitors either had to stay in the outer system or make their way to one of the planets.

Not that he complained. There were plenty of novelties on the surface Prosperous Hill VI that attracted his interest.

He would have loved to walk on the streets, but that was irresponsible for someone of his stature. He could only view the streets of Veoline from above where a pair of aerial mechs from the Infinity Guards flanked his shuttle.

In fact, they weren't the only ones to travel in this fashion. There were numerous other VIPs moving around the capital city while being escorted by a varying number of mechs.

Ves could judge the relative power, importance and origin from studying the mechs on protection duty.

The quantity of mechs denoted the relative power and importance of the passengers.

The greatest number of mechs he had seen at the same time was when a squad of twelve avian biomechs surrounded a luxury passenger transport from every cardinal direction.

"It's probably a prominent local official or business magnate." Gloriana guessed.

"Maybe, but those avian biomechs look quite unique. Such an honor guard probably fits a powerful biomech designer."

There were many more biomech designers than Dr. Navarro in the Prosperous Hill System. Granted, most of them resided on the fourth planet from the sun, but Prosperous Hill VI was where most mechs got sold.

The reason why Ves and Gloriana decided to go out today was to experience different varieties of biomechs in person.

They just arrived at their first destination. Their shuttle along with their escorts landed in a secluded, guarded landing zone. Ves and his group exited their vehicle and floated upwards until they reached a restricted entrance that led into some kind of huge horizontal tree hall.

A uniformed attendant scanned their bodies and waved his arms in welcome.

"Mr. and Mrs. Larkinson. We have been expecting you. Your tickets are in order. Please enter our great halls and enjoy our historic exhibitions. The Prescott Museum offers its visitors the most interesting and innovative biomechs that the Life Research Association has ever developed. Each of the biomechs on display are representative of fully-realized models that have achieved great success in the mech market."

Ves tuned out the standard marketing spiel and simply flew forward until he entered the first great hall.

As a museum that exhibited a large number of biomechs, its structures were huge. The Prescott Museum tied several interconnected halls that looked like giant tree trunks that had been grown in a horizontal orientation.

The interior inside was nice. Smaller trees and other growths brought a breath of fresh air to the visitors. The average folk walked from exhibit to exhibit with their feet. The richer and more well-to-do people flew above everyone's heads.

While there were floating benches and other fixtures that allowed the wealthier guests some reprieve, there were no other places that could give flying a place to shut off their antigrav clothes.

He supposed that if anyone ever fell, some kind of safety system in the museum would make sure that no one plunged to their deaths.

"Look at this tiger mech! Doesn't it look adorable?" Gloriana tugged Ves' arm and dragged him over to the side.

"Meow?"

"Miaow!"

Lucky and Clixie were attracted by the exhibit as well. Lucky had no problem with flying by himself, but the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat had to be fitted with a customized flight harness in order to keep up with everyone.

Fortunately, Clixie was a clever cat. She easily mastered the controls once she spent a few hours getting used to flight.

The tiger mech in question looked like an actual tiger, but scaled to the proportion of a bestial mech.

The majesty exuded by the organic mech instantly reminded Ves of Zeigra back when the Crown Cat was alive and in his prime!

A projection came online that briefly described the mech and provided follow-up choices if the visitors wanted to hear its history or view footage of its most notable moments.

[Markev-Johanna Bioproducts Incorporated Hollow Claw 7333-TNZ, nicknamed 'Tiger King'.]

"Tiger King is a very apt way to call this mech."

It turned out this was Markev-Johanna's only Hollow Claw mech that had been given a rich and luxurious tiger hide. The other Hollow Claws made by this biomech company had to make due to duller grey hides or no hides at all depending on their pricing.

Many uncovered mechs looked like skinless organisms because it was cheaper and made it easy to perform assisted 'repairs'.

However, an option existed to cover up n.a.k.e.d flesh with a hide or skin. While these skins could be fairly tough, their defensive parameters were not very impressive compared with hard bone plating that was customary to covered mechs.

The hides weren't needed to protect the flesh against bacteria and other environmental hazards because they were already incomparably resilient against germs.

Therefore, causing a mech to grow a hide only added to their cost and maintenance burden while providing a minimal defensive boost. It was only added to custom mechs for special clients.

"Look! According to this description, this tiger mech can not only rend through mechs with its claws and teeth, but it can also fire lasers from its tail!"

The Tiger King possessed more goodies. It incorporated biological antigrav systems that enabled it to float in the air. It could release special particles from its maw that weakened the effectiveness of energy weapons. Yet the most noteworthy aspect that

allowed it to garner a lot of fame was that it was able to eat and digest parts from other biomechs to a limited degree!

"What a bold idea!" Ves looked impressed. "The amount of design work and forethought required to develop and integrate the digestion and upgrade systems is immense. There are many ways this can go wrong."

Just like classical mechs, biomechs incorporated lots of strange exotics and other materials. A single biomech did not require so many different varieties of materials. In some cases, adding more was detrimental as the exotics reacted or interfered with each other in dangerous ways.

This was how his Devil Tiger was supposed to work. His personal experience in developing his first masterwork mech gave him a greater appreciation of how difficult it must be to design the Hollow Claw.

Unfortunately for the designer of this model, the mechs eventually fell out of favor.

While it was very tempting to grow the biomechs through consumption, the digestion capabilities of the Hollow Claws were woefully inadequate. The stomach of this tiger mech model couldn't process too many materials but demanded lots of energy to sustain its processes.

Customers found out that while it was useful to enable a mech to upgrade itself in the field, it was generally cheaper and faster to purchase a better mech or perform a regular assisted upgrade with the help of a biomech designer.

The Tiger King happened to be the strongest of the Hollow Claws. Its owner and pilot stuck to it for over two decades. It even went through several rounds of customizations to tailor its performance even further.

"Why is it stuck in a museum, then?" Ves wondered.

"It says here that the original mech designer has died. Since he was a Senior, that meant his design philosophy became unmoored."

"Ah."

The fall of a mech designer mostly led to a reduction in effectiveness of any mech that he or she contributed to. The Tiger King could have continued to evolve to greater heights, but without the support of an active design philosophy, it could no longer keep up with comparable mechs on the battlefield.

"Is this still a functional mech?" Ves curiously asked.

Gloriana shook her head. "No. It's too old for that. The mech was already starting to decline when its owner sold it to the Prescott Museum. It's been treated so that it is permanently in this shape."

"A shame. This is the closest example of a living mech that I have seen so far."

The Tiger King possessed an old and subtle spiritual character. Ves could tell that the mech had gone through a lot over the years it was active. While the life it developed was not comparable to any of his living mechs, Ves still admired it for achieving so much progress without the help of his design philosophy.

The bestial proved that living mechs were not exclusive to Ves' products. As long as a mech existed long enough, it had the potential to develop as much life as one of his regular products.

Still, it was unlikely for any mech to last so long. The Tiger King could have probably functioned for a couple more decades, but its decline would definitely hasten at that point.

Every biomech possessed a finite lifespan. This was something that every biomech contend with. The fact that they could decline and die of old age was one of the biggest reasons why hardly any biomech designer bothered with adding continuous growth functions to their products.

Despite their organic forms, biomechs were just as disposable as classical mechs. Once they became obsolete, their owners had no qualms of getting rid of them in order to make room for newer, younger and more effective battle machines.

"If this mech was still functional, then I would have tried to see if I could gain it for myself."

"Huh? Why would you ever want this antique?"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged. "I just feel like I could do something."

The Tiger King still possessed a seed of life. The accumulated history did not go away even when it was transformed into a museum piece.

In fact, Ves even felt he could strip this quality from the former mech if he wanted to. He never thought about doing so, though. It would be disrespectful to the mech, its deceased designer and its past owner.

"I hope there are more interesting exhibits up ahead."

Chapter 2745 - Avarra Tomar

Ves and Gloriana calmly toured the other exhibited mechs in the first hall they entered.

They encountered a variety of covered and uncovered mechs. Sometimes, the latter was covered in skin or hide, but there were also several who showed off their supple flesh that was kept slightly moist.

The first time he saw these mechs up close, Ves felt as if he was watching a monster from a horror show. Pairing the size of a mech with a purely biological appearance made him feel as if he was standing in front of a vastly-superior monster or alien!

Such a terrible being only had to make one quick move to lift his body and shove him into its mouth!

"What are you thinking about, Ves?"

"I just feel like these biomech designers could use some more marketing lessons. What gave them the bright idea to sell mechs that look like grotesque, skinless bodies?"

No matter whether they were bestial or humanoid, Ves felt a bit squeamish about getting close to any of them with their tightly-bonded musculature on display.

Sure, bioengineering aspect looked impressive, but most ordinary people would probably become terrified at the monstrous appearances of these fleshy machines.

Normal mechs looked much more friendly up close. While they were just as deadly as their organic counterparts, their distinctly mechanical appearance made them look like every other war weapon that human civilization used in the past millennia. Every human was already accustomed to living alongside guns, armor, starsh.i.p.s and other dangerous mechanical constructions.

That caused most people's reactions towards biomechs to elicit a distinct degree of disgust.

Ves wasn't the only one who felt this way.

"Meow!"

Lucky couldn't stand the sight, and there were plenty of foreign visitors down on the ground who avoided standing around too long at any of these uncovered biomechs.

The only people who were comfortable around uncovered mechs were Lifers themselves. They had grown up in a society that celebrated every form of biomech. While a foreigner might think of uncovered biomechs as abominations, a local mainly thought of them as noble creations that should have been more ubiquitous.

"The covered biomech exhibits are more popular among foreigners." Gloriana pointed out. "Look at this heavy mech for example."

[BZE Biotech Avarra Tomar Mark III AT-S0001-3400]

Now this was a fierce-looking biomech. The Avarra Tomar was a heavy landbound hybrid mech that was stuffed with weapon systems underneath its heavy bone-covered form.

The sheer amount of bone plating grown by this mech made it look like a knight mech!

What was interesting about this Avarra Tomar was that it carried at least twelve different organic weapon systems. Aside from being able to extend claws from his hands, the humanoid biomech was also able to fire biomissiles from its shoulders, laser beams from its c.h.e.s.t and arms, some kind of entangling nets from the sides of its torso and bone-like projectiles from its c.h.e.s.t!

Each of the weapon ports were ordinarily covered by heavy plates, but they could be moved aside at any time.

Of course, all of this wasn't enough to earn the Avarra Tomar a spot in Prescott Museum.

The Senior who designed this heavy hybrid biomech implemented it with a so-called 'War God Mode'.

While it was not possible for the display copy to demonstrate this potent mode in reality, there were plenty of projections that showed how a single Avarra Tomar turned around a losing battle.

One recording showed an Avarra Tomar surrounded by over twenty other biomechs. While the latter were all lighter and cheaper organic machines, the starring mech was still in a very bad position!

Its heavy bone armor dented and fractured at an alarming rate as the opposing mechs wanted to take down this formidable hybrid mech as fast as possible. The mech pilot must be feeling a huge amount of stress as he desperately tried to prevent his opponents from penetrating deep into the vulnerable portions of his mech.

While the Avarra Tomar tried to counterattack as hard as possible, its various armaments only inflicted moderate damage to a couple of mechs.

It was not powerful enough to fend off twenty opposing mechs!

"If I'm going down, I'll make sure to drag you all down as well!"

At some point, its mech pilot activated the most powerful feature of the Avarra Tomar. The mech stopped firing its weapons at the enemy mechs. Instead, it paused and let a couple of attacks hit its deteriorating form.

After three seconds of preparation, the mech heated up to the point where the surrounding air grew hazy!

"KILL!"

The mech suddenly leaned over and began to thunder forward like a gorilla. The Avarra Tomar somehow moved three times faster as its musculature exerted much more strength than before!

An enemy biomech standing directly in its path had attempted to turn around and run away, but the Avarra Tomar leapt and soared ahead until its four limbs directly crunched on to the back of the running machine!

When a heavy mech pressed its entire weight onto a medium mech, the latter almost never survived!

"Your mechs are too thin!"

This was no different. The two mechs crashed onto the ground with a powerful thud. An ugly squelch sounded out as well as the enemy biomech was literally squashed into a bloody mess!

Highly-enriched blood splattered out of the poor organic machine as its torso was completely ruined by the weight of the burning Avarra Tomar.

This was just the start!

The Avarra Tomar raised its c.h.e.s.t and began to fire numerous energy beams and flaming projectiles at a number of enemy biomechs.

"BURN! BURN! BURN!"

It got so bad for the enemy mechs that their pilots would rather eject prem.a.t.u.r.ely than risk getting killed by a slaughtering mech!

Yet whenever the hard-shelled c.o.c.kpits launched out the backs of the biomechs, the Avarra Tomar responded instantly.

"Don't think of escaping with your lives intact!"

Much of the mech's ranged armament still remained functional.

It fired overloaded laser beams that rapidly burned and heated up the c.o.c.kpits until the mech pilots sheltering inside literally got cooked!

If any of the c.o.c.kpits got hit by a flaming projectile, then they always broke open like eggs. The sheer force of the impact was already enough to kill the mech pilots before their bodies fell to the ground.

"Blood! I need more blood!"

Once the crazed hybrid mech was done with firing a volley, it galloped forward and caught up to one of the mechs it damaged.

The wounded biomech looked exceptionally gruesome as its limbless form. The Avarra Tomar finished it off by tearing into its c.h.e.s.t before running off to intercept the other enemy mechs!

As the massacre continued, the Avarra Tomar slowly shed its overheated bone plating. It gradually turned into an uncovered mech but with a substantially weaker structure.

While the enemy mechs tried to take advantage of the n.a.k.e.d state of the Avarra Tomar, the rampaging biomech gained an even greater burst of speed now that it had removed its c.u.mbersome armor!

The burning biomech rapidly acc.u.mulated more damage, yet it was still functional enough to continue its frantic chase. Its musculature visibly thinned and wilted as the seconds went by, but the power released from these reactions was incredible!

By the time the Avarra Tomar brutalized its eighth victim by pounding its c.h.e.s.t until the mech pilot inside died by getting hit by a flaming fist, the former hybrid mech had lost over half of its body mass!

With the decrease in musculature, it became easier for the surviving opponents to cripple the rampaging mech.

The legs went away first. Yet even after the Avarra Tomar lost its primary means of moving around, it still attempted to close in on another enemy mech by dragging its surviving frame forward with its arms!

Those limbs went away next.

Now left with just a torso and a head, what remained of the Avarra Tomar was no longer able to put up a fight.

The enemy mechs kept their distance but held their fire. Rather than smashing the spent biomech apart, they simply watched as the former hybrid mech continued to burn up at an increasingly rapid pace.

Soon enough, only bones were left as anything fleshy had expended all of its potential energy in a self-destructive manner.

Not even the c.o.c.kpit made it out intact. Its desperate, unhinged mech pilot had interfaced with the mech all the way, causing him to suffer the same burning sensation that ate up his machine.

Ves bent his head in respect for the brave warrior. "That was a noble last stand. The mech pilot of the Avarra Tomar knew he was a goner, but still tried to contribute as much as possible before he died."

Gloriana looked a lot more horrified than him, though she tried her best to put up a brave face.

"You won't see any classical mechs doing something like that anytime soon. It's nearly impossible to burn your own mech in exchange for greater power."

There were ways to overload a mechanical mech, but the power burst was not comparable in might and duration.

This kind of implementation could only be done to a biomech, which consisted of organic components that were packed with lots of potential energy throughout its entire frame!

"Maybe some biomechs do have some unique points that justify their existence." Ves opined.

He quickly read the history of this mech design. While the Avarra Tomar's had proven to be very popular among a modest group of customers, it eventually went into disuse because buyers no longer wanted to obtain this machine.

It was substantially more expensive than biomechs without anything like the War God Mode.

Another reason to avoid the mech was that its mech pilots tended to become too eager to activate this final solution. There were plenty of situations where the Avarra Tomars could have escaped a battle intact by stalling their opponents for a few minutes.

Instead, as soon as their mech pilots thought they were losing, they impulsively activated the War God Mode and traded temporary power for a chance to kill as many enemies as possible!

While the War God Mode indeed led to a lot of enemy casualties, once its properties became known, it became a lot more difficult to accomplish anything meaningful.

No one dared to fight against an Avarra Tomar up close!

Instead, opponents kept a healthy distance and tried to grind it down with a multitude of ranged attacks.

If the Avarra Tomar ever started to heat up, then its enemies would instantly split up and run away from each other!

In case this wasn't possible because the enemy mechs had to defend a fixed position, then they would pour as much firepower towards the legs of the mech as possible.

Taking out the legs always put an end to the Avarra Tomar's killing degree ahead of time!

These developments and more all caused the once-notorious hybrid mech to fall out of popularity. It was an effective biomech in its heyday, but failed to adapt to the changing environment.

Ves discerned a lesson from this story.

"Survival of the fittest. The Avarra Tomar started off strong, but its designer evidently failed to help his work adapt to the countermeasures that its opponents came up with. It seems that biomechs don't inherently possess an advantage in this aspect."

He encountered several more display biomechs that provided him with interesting lessons or ideas. While Ves had no intentions of designing anything like the Avarra Tomar, learning that it was possible to design such a monster already broadened his perspective of biomechs and mechs in general.

The creativity on display in this museum enriched his mind. After seeing some of the best of what the biomech industry had to offer, his perception on biomechs had shifted.

A part of him even wanted to try and design one. He had seen many different organic mechs, yet he had never encountered one that was truly alive.

Chapter 2746 - Novel Recruitment Material

The Larkinson Clan hadn't taken long to start up a recruitment hall.

They rented an entire tree office building in the center of Veoline and decorated it so that it showed their splendor.

A giant logo of the Larkinson Clan overlooked the gates leading into the hall. Ves specifically crafted it out of Breyer alloy and turned it into a totem of the Golden Cat. He carved the head in the logo in a way that made it look more dignified and a bit less cute in order to generate more awe.

That wasn't all. He also inserted a mote of Lufa in the giant medallion so that it also caused visitors to feel calmer and more comfortable when they passed through the entrance.

No matter what troubles ailed them, it all went away for a moment once they passed through the entrance.

While the glow of the ornament quickly faded as the visitors walked deeper, the good impression would still linger.

It was a clever bit of manipulation. Even if the visitors were aware of their changing moods, it was not that easy to deny their own emotions. If they didn't possess any hatred towards the Larkinson Clan, then this little experience would definitely be able to spark a yearning towards becoming a part of it. No other organization was able to make them feel anything comparable.

Inside, every curious entrant became immersed in a different world. The interior had turned metallic. The Larkinsons deliberately covered up the organic interior and tried to replicate the scenery of life aboard their starsh.i.p.s, particularly the Spirit of Bentheim.

It was a completely different experience. Banners, statues and ornaments with Golden Cat motifs were interspersed throughout the spaces. Projections featuring carefully-edited battle footage showed off the might and prosperity of the Larkinson Clan in various ways.

For example, one projection showed off the Larkinson Clan's struggle against the Gravada Knarlax.

Even though the Larkinsons mainly utilized third-class mechs in the Battle against the Abyss, it was still fascinating to fight against a genuine warship!

Another projection showed what happened to the Auralis after all life had been wiped out. Even though the projection did not exhibit the energy attack that had swept over the Fridayman mechs and fleet carrier, that only caused the viewers to imagine all sorts of horrors in their mind. The eerie sight of empty compartments and comatose bodies lying uselessly on the decks made a very profound impression to those who underestimated the power of this upstart clan.

Of course, the recruiters didn't think that showing off the short but brilliant battle records of the clan was enough to win people over.

The strongest advantage of the Larkinson Clan had always been its abundant wealth!

The recruitment hall already reflected some of that. Not only was it one of the most desirable structures in the heart of Veoline, but the interior also featured numerous

displays where people could admire scale models of current and upcoming Larkinson mechs.

It would have been better if the Larkinsons were able to exhibit actual copies of the Bright Warrior IB, the Ferocious Piranha IB, the Transcendent Punisher and so on. Sadly, the authorities didn't want anyone to bring down mechs for trivial reasons. The security risks were too great and the clan didn't possess enough influence to request an exemption.

In any case, the scale models had all been prepared so that they exuded a weakened version of the glows of the originals. This was despite the fact that their internal structure was completely hollow and devoid of any actual parts.

The Larkinsons weren't stupid. Showing off their mainstay mechs to spies and potential enemies was a good way to expose all of the weak points of their mainstay mechs.

This was also why there weren't any depictions of prime mechs. Not a single scale model or footage showed any hint of the powerful machines.

The Larkinsons were confident they could attract recruits without showing off their trump cards.

It didn't matter too much. There were plenty of other attractions that were capable of dazzling the visitors. One of the center halls projected a large depiction of the Spirit of Bentheim. The display did a good job of showing off the size and majesty of the cat-headed factory ship.

After every visitor passed by these sights, they had to make a choice where to go first.

The organizational structure of the Larkinson Clan had grown more complex since its humble beginnings. The Living Mech Corporation, the Larkinson Biotech Institute, the Larkinson Mech Games Circuit, the Military Bureau, the Black Cats, the Larkinson educational institutions and many more sub-organizations each aimed to hire hundreds if not thousands of talented new recruits!

No matter if the visitor was a civilian or a soldier, mech pilot or norm, Lifer or non-lifer, there was a place for anyone as long as they possessed useful skills!

It was too bad that incoming traffic was rather slow in the initial days. The recruitment hall may have looked dazzling enough to give anyone who stepped inside a good show, but too few people in Veoline bothered to pay a visit!

After the recruiters conducted a study, they found out the reason why only a tiny fraction of the job seekers in Veoline visited their recruitment offices.

"Our reputation is too obscure in this region of space!"

The name and brand recognition of the Larkinson Clan, the LMC and the Miracle Couple may have been massive in the Komodo Star Sector, but hardly anyone in Majestic Teal looked up to them. This was especially so in second-class states like the LRA which never really came into touch with LMC mechs.

Not even the advertisements spread by the Larkinsons made any impact on their target audience. There were so many other companies vying for talented recruits that it was too difficult for a clan with no significant reputation in the region to stand out of the crowd.

This problem required a different solution. How could the Larkinsons outcompete other rival organizations and capture the attention to the recruits they urgently needed to replenish and expand their ranks?

After a number of human resource and marketing executives came together, they soon came up with an unusual but highly-promising solution.

This instantly ignited a small storm in the local mech community!

Mech pilots started to pass through the entrance of the recruitment hall in droves. While a portion of them were freelancers, the majority were already employed.

Despite that, they still showed willingness to defect to the Larkinson Clan!

What was even more astounding was that non-potentates wanted to meet with the expert pilots as well! Many people in the galaxy simply never enjoyed the privilege to see a demigod in the flesh.

"What is this clan doing? Expert pilots are honorable heroes!"

"Who cares? I'm going no matter the cost!"

"What gives the Larkinsons the right to parade their expert pilots like trophies? It's unseemly! Someone should stop them. They are tarnishing the prestige of these heroic soldiers as we speak!"

"Heh, you're only angry because you're jealous. Your mercenary corps is too average to retain an expert pilot. I bet if you had one, you would be doing the same thing as the Larkinsons!"

While there were plenty of people on Prosperous Hill VI who disapproved of this measure, the Larkinsons paid no mind to them. As far as people like Ves were concerned, there were no rules against using their expert pilots as recruitment material! just because the military were too prideful to do the same was not a valid excuse!

Tens of thousands of people flooded into the recruitment halls each day!

Security had to be beefed up and the staff applied harsher criteria to filter out those who were merely sight-seeing. In order to avoid testing the patience of the expert pilots, only those who were genuinely interested in applying to join were granted the opportunity to meet one of the heroes!

Of course, the expert pilots in question did not enjoy their latest duty. First, they were compelled to take part in some of the testing sessions of the last prototypes. Now, they were 'expected' to meet lots of strangers in the hopes of luring them into the clan!

In order to placate them, Ves promised to compensate them for their time. They earned several Larkinson merits each hour they spent on duty. This was quite a generous reward as it could quickly add up to hundreds of merits as long as they continued to show their faces!

Larkinson merits reflected their contribution to the clan. Everyone could issue special requests or obtain special goods and privileges with enough merits. No one said no to having too much of it, not even the expert pilots!

One of the assumptions that the expert pilots kept in mind was that they might be able to exchange Larkinson merits for a better expert mech.

No one wanted their future machines to be weaker than the ones piloted by their fellow peers.

This was why even Venerable Jannzi Larkinson deigned to take on this distasteful duty!

Even though she disapproved of this vulgar stunt, she cared for her Shield of Samar. She was cognizant enough to know that her relationship with Ves wasn't the best right now, so she needed merits even more to make sure her needs were still met.

Besides, the Larkinson Clan truly needed more members. While she felt a bit ambivalent about bringing in more people who might possibly die for someone else's cause, the existing members of the clan were also at risk.

Her conflicting feelings resulted in an odd sight. When a batch of mech pilots and other talents were allowed to enter a small auditorium where Venerable Jannzi stood in front, the entrants quickly became engulfed by her unsettling force of will.

The will manifested by Jannzi adopted a guarded posture towards any outsiders. Her bad mood caused her presence to gain a bit of sharpness.

Yet despite conditions, plenty of people raced to the front seats! The mech pilots among them were more eager and better able to withstand Jannzi's turbulent aura. They eagerly claimed their seats and looked at the young expert pilot with pure admiration?

Jannzi crossed her arms. "Do you know what you are getting into by coming here?"

"Please instruct us, Venerable Larkinson!"

"I'm warning you. Don't join our clan unless you are willing to gamble your lives away. You have at least 50 percent chance of dying if you fight on our Patriarch's behalf. He is an ambitious and greedy leader who doesn't hesitate to spend his soldiers like currency. Even if I do my best to protect you all, the enemies we face are too great. We are already enemies of an entire second-rate state. In the future, we will doubtlessly provoke more terrible foes. If you don't have the courage to fight against a military force without any state to back you up, then stand up and turn away now while it's not too late."

No one stood up. Each of them had gone through a lot of trouble to meet an expert pilot. Why would they possibly leave when only a couple of minutes had passed?

This unique opportunity was enough for them to brag about this great experience to their buddies for weeks!

"Please tell us how you crushed the pirates in the Nyxian Gap!"

"Will we be able to pilot fantastic mechs like your Shield of Samar?"

"I heard that you are tutoring mech pilots! Will I be able to learn how to pilot knight mechs like you if I become a clan member?"

Venerable Jannzi grew more and more irritated. The Larkinson Clan's manipulation knew no bounds. These star-struck idiots were completely dazzled!

Chapter 2747 - Richard Arkan

Every expert pilot went on a rotation to the recruitment offices. Their tolerance for entertaining strangers was only so much. It was not a lie to say they did their duty in a begrudging manner.

Even Venerable Joshua found the job to be tedious. He would much rather spend his time on training his skills, piloting his Valkyrie Prime and spend time among his fellow clansmen.

However, he also happened to be the most popular and effective recruiting mascot out of the Larkinson mech pilots!

His friendly demeanor and approachability quickly cemented him as the most ideal expert pilot to meet.

This was why he found himself surrounded by mech pilots and other people. They asked all kinds of serious and not-so-serious questions. More personnel stepped into place in order to maintain order and prevent Joshua from getting mobbed.

Still, the job was rewarding. He met plenty of skilled and talented mech pilots that the Larkinsons would love to have. If he could help win them over, then his clan would gain another elite mech pilot!

"You're so charming." A Lifer mech pilot sighed. "Would you like to go out on a date?"

Joshua did not look amused. "I have a girlfriend, miss. Please do not mistake me as available."

The eyes of several female mech pilots lit up as they clung to Joshua's every word!

"You're not married, then? Great! We should hang out! I can give you a much greater time than anyone."

"Hey! I was here first! Get in line, you cow!"

"Pff! I'm prettier than you. Venerable Joshua Larkinson deserves to be with the best. Second-hand goods like you should tumble off. I hear that the Glory Seekers have a boy who is single. Maybe you should look over there!"

"Oh, you did not just say that. Do you dare to repeat your words in the dueling arena?"

"Who says I don't dare?! Tell us the time and place so that Venerable Joshua can decide who of us is more deserving of his attention!"

Venerable Joshua may be an expert pilot, but he looked completely helpless at this moment. What was it with all of these women?

Regardless, expert pilots like Joshua definitely had a good effect on the recruitment effort. Thousands of applicants were already being put through the pipeline.

Since it appeared that the Larkinsons would have plenty of people to choose from, the recruiting personnel decided to conduct rigorous examinations meant to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Just because the applicants were Lifers or citizens of other second-rate states didn't mean they were suitable for the Larkinson Clan!

Some of them possessed problematic beliefs.

"The Anti-Matter God shall annihilate our reality!"

Others weren't competent enough.

"You are making a serious mistake! I only failed to pass my final courses because I wasn't rich enough to afford any intelligence-boosting augments. If you provide me with

a decent cranial implant, I will definitely catch up to the likes of your patriarch! I'm a genius!"

There were also plenty of people who had to be turned away because they were too attached to local powers.

"I don't see how my previous job as a senior marketing executive of Trifold Life Machines disqualifies me from joining your clan. I spent fifty years running one marketing operation after another. I have helped TLM release over 150 different mech models to the market, many of which have gone on to generate a substantial amount of profit."

While it was hard to resist the urge to recruit these talented and experienced professionals, the instructions from Ves were very clear. The recruiters had to be wary about hiring former senior personnel who dedicated a significant portion of their lives to another company or institution.

Just like before, the Larkinson Clan still maintained its preference for hiring younger and more impressionable talents!

They didn't have to be too skilled or competent. As long as they amply exceeded the minimum requirements, the recruiters began to consider other aspects such as personality traits and cultural views.

While the Larkinson Clan was quite open and accommodating towards different views, there was a limit to everything.

What hampered the recruitment effort a bit was that Lifers were substantially different from people who lived elsewhere in the galaxy.

Their preference for biotechnology made it rather difficult for them to get accustomed to living in an environment that was almost entirely mechanical.

"Your clan doesn't field a single biomech?"

"Correct."

"Will that change?"

"I cannot say."

"Then why are you Larkinsons even bothering to recruit on this planet in the first place?"

Most Lifer mech pilots had to be turned away when they heard that the Larkinson Clan had no intentions to field biomechs. Other Lifer personnel either left on their own accord

or had to be pushed away because the examiners judged that they would not be able to cope with living in an environment devoid of biotech.

Only less than twenty percent were deemed tolerant or open-minded enough to adjust to living on a metal starship.

While that was not exactly a high ratio, the huge crowds the expert pilots were pulling in every day meant that the recruiters still needed to do a lot of work.

Besides, it wasn't the Lifers they were after. It was the foreigners.

As an open port system, Prosperous Hill attracted personalities from all over Majestic Teal. Sworders, Harmons, Fire Worshipers, Telves and many other foreign-born people heard about the Larkinson Clan and visited to see what the fuss was about.

Certain divisions in the clan soon developed their own preferences.

For example, it was a given that the Swordmaidens eagerly tried to woo citizens of the Heavensword Association.

The LMC's Design Department which had been tasked with recruiting lots of new assistants began to pay more attention to the Telves.

One of the Telve hopefuls attracted enough attention to schedule a meeting with Miles Tovar.

With Ketis gone with a detachment of elite Swordmaidens, Miles Tovar was the only assistant mech designer left who was senior enough to make decisions on behalf of the Design Department.

"Mr. Arkan, is it? Normally, we do not recruit mech designers who used to work for a military organization, but your profile is interesting enough to give you a chance."

Richard Arkan held himself with a straight back and a confident demeanor. He looked like a natural fit for the Braves.

"I dedicated my life to the Telva Association." He replied honestly. "I only found out later that the Telva Association did not want me. I was told to leave by no uncertain terms."

"It would help if you describe the circumstances of your involuntary departure."

"Let's just say that I got in a disagreement with some rivals within the research institution I was working for. My adversaries had powerful enemies. Rather than taking my views seriously, they decided it was best to push me out so that I wouldn't.. 'disrupt' the harmony of the research group."

"I see."

This wasn't the first time that Miles Tovar encountered such a case. Majestic Tealers apparently possessed a fondness of exiling and driving away those who stood in their way. While this happened in every star sector, he found it strange that it was at least five times more prevalent in this region.

The relative lack of wars and open conflict also resulted in different treatment. Without huge conflicts to vent people's grievances towards each other, citizens needed another way to get rid of their rivals and competitors. While outright killing people was too barbaric most of the time, there was no harm in kicking them out of a state.

As Richard Arkan elaborated on his story, the other mech designer gained a better sense of what happened to Arkan.

As a former member of the Tovar Family, Miles was not blind to internal struggles. Good friends might turn into archenemies if they chased after the same promotion opportunities. Even brothers would point their fangs at each other if they had to compete for a single lucrative chance!

After Miles discreetly checked the lie detection suite for any irregularities, he became a bit more reassured that Richard was telling the truth.

While there were ways to fool lie detection systems, that was not his problem. The Black Cats were more than capable enough to catch any irregularities. New recruits also had to gain the approval of a living mech that embodied the clan such as the Bright Warrior in order to become true Larkinsons. That was the moment where even the most competent spies and saboteurs fell through!

After inquiring about Richard's background, Miles moved on to the applicant's skills.

"We don't see many mech designers like you around here. Your specialization is quite remarkable. Many colleagues would love to be in your place."

"Thank you." Richard responded. "I merely inherited my know-how from my father. It is also how I gained my certificate from the MTA. I have worked hard to build up my theoretical knowledge so that I could participate in the more important military mech design projections of the Telva Association."

"How much practical design experience do you possess?"

"I have not designed a lot of mech designs by myself. I have mostly worked in a design team after my graduation. I am quite accustomed to designing mechs in a team environment, but I am eager to design my own mechs at some point."

Miles nodded in understanding. Many assistants were in the same position.

He began to ask the most important question. "Have you ever designed your own neural interface?"

Richard smiled back. "I have only designed a few rudimentary neural interfaces for practice, but I have participated in the development of over half-a-dozen advanced neural interfaces. One of them even includes a custom neural interface that is tailored to an expert pilot. I cannot share any more details with you. Even if they exiled me, I am still bound by confidentiality agreements."

"We have no interest in stealing the secrets of another state." Miles quickly said. "Just to be clear, can you explain your design philosophy?"

"Certainly." The applicant replied. "Officially, I have formed a Class VIII design philosophy, though I am still in the process of fine-tuning it. I specialize in deep immersion neural interfaces. This is a rather delicate and dangerous research direction as the neural interfaces that I am fond of can inflict substantially more brain damage if anything goes wrong."

"Why would you specialize in something so dangerous?"

"Because it is the future of high-end mech design!" Richard Arkan insisted! "While neural interfaces that are limited to shallow immersion are very safe, they don't bind mech pilots to mechs as deeply as they are capable of. Too many mech designers and neural interface specialists are too scared to go deeper and explore the limits of what neural interfaces can do. My insistence on pushing the boundaries was what turned my former colleagues against me! If they weren't so short-sighted and protective of their own cozy positions, they should have embraced my proposals!"

"I... see..."

Miles Tovar could see now why Richard Arkan was driven away from his state. While the Design Department urgently needed a neural interface specialist, he wasn't quite sure whether the man sitting in front of him was the right choice.

"Just for curiosity, what is your aim? What goal do you wish to accomplish?"

"I want to accomplish an immersion that is so deep that the borders between man and machine are gone! I want to see a future where mech pilots essentially possess two bodies, their organic one and their mech one. When mech pilots are able to disassociate themselves from their organic bodies and put their all into controlling a mech, then I believe that mechs will become something entirely different!"

"...That is.. quite an ambition."

Chapter 2748 - NuMan

As Ves and his wife continued to tour the Prescott Museum, he received an interesting message.

"Curious."

"What is it?" Gloriana asked as she stopped and turned around.

She let go of Clixie, who managed to remain aloft and avoid falling to her death with the help of her antigrav harness.

"Miaow!"

"I just received a message from Miles Tovar. We finally managed to hook a neural interface specialist."

That instantly aroused Gloriana's interest.

"Really?! That's great! Having a mech designer on our staff who has received MTA approval to study and design neural interfaces is a great addition to our Design Department. That was one of the major specialties that we have always lacked. Now that we have someone like that onboard, we have gained one of the requirements to design expert mechs. We can also fine tune the neural interfaces of our other mechs so that they facilitate better connections. This is perfect!"

Ves raised his palm. "Hold on for a moment. Don't celebrate too quickly. Let me give you the mech designer's record and interview transcript."

He transferred over the documents to her comm so that she could skim through them in her mind with the help of her implant.

Her smile still held strong.

"I don't see anything of concern, Ves. Mr. Arkan's record looks clean enough. Even if he is a loyal citizen of the Telva Association, he hates his former employers, so it is unlikely that he will cling onto old loyalties once we bring him to the fold. His MTA certificate is still valid so he is authorized to develop new neural interface models without requiring any extra permissions. As long as his neural interfaces doesn't result in mass casualties, his services are ours to keep!"

Ves became a little more strained. "Gloriana, don't you see the problem here? Sure, Richard Arkan seems like a bright Apprentice who possesses a rare and valuable specialty, but did you hear what Miles had to say about the fellow?"

"Mr. Arkan sounds like an ambitious mech designer. He certainly dreams big. That is a trait that every successful mech designer possesses. I am sure he will make it far in his career. He kind of reminds me of you in that regard, hihi!"

Ves didn't see what was funny about this situation. As far as he was concerned, the comparison to him made Arkan even less desirable in his eyes!

As someone who frequently engaged in risky experiments, Ves was more aware of the potential risks and dangers than anyone. While there were plenty of times when he engaged in radical experiments, he always tried to stay away from them unless the situation was too dire.

At other times, he tried his best to limit his impulses and adopt a slower approach. He developed plenty of crazy and risky ideas as time passed. That didn't mean he should investigate them all. He was still capable of exercising restraint.

At least he thought so. He hadn't killed himself so far, so he must be doing a good job, right?

Ves dealt with these kinds of temptations every day. It was frustrating for him to think up a good idea, only to put it in the freezer because he was too incompetent to explore it further.

Yet what about others? Would other mech designers like him be able to make the decision to shelve a dangerous idea because the risks were too great?

His trust in other people was relatively poor. He may trust himself to hold back from performing a ruinous experiment that was associated with too many risks, but that didn't mean he was willing to give others the benefit of the doubt!

Perhaps some might argue that Ves should be more sympathetic towards a like-minded mech designer, but he was the opposite. He became more wary towards those who had the urge to engage in reckless experiments!

"There are too many warning signs in Mr. Arkan's materials. I don't think it is a good idea to bring such an unstable factor into our Design Department." He declared.

Just as he was about to transmit an instruction to strike the applicant off the list, Gloriana placed her palm on his shoulder.

"Don't be so quick to throw this opportunity away. Haven't you been looking to recruit a neural interface specialist for at least a year? Now that someone is at your doorstep, why are you thinking of chasing him away? You're missing a golden opportunity here!"

"Gloriana..."

"He's young. Well, young enough. He's still an Apprentice. We can mold him, Ves. We can shape his methods and approach like we did to all of our Braves and Erudites. I'll personally take him under my wing so that I can encourage him to slow down and be more thoughtful about his implementations."

Ves sighed and pushed her hand off his shoulder. "There is a limit to how much you can indoctrinate a mech designer. Even if Mr. Arkan is an Apprentice, it looks like he has already chosen his direction."

"We should try anyway. We can always reassign him if he turns out to be as you feared."

"I don't want to take the risk."

"Then at least keep him on hold for the rest of the month!" Gloriana quickly suggested. "We have no idea if another neural interface specialist will apply to join our clan! We should keep our options open just in case Mr. Arkan is the only choice."

She made a good point. Even if Ves felt that taking in a personality like Mr. Arkan was troublesome, he did not want to rely on external consultants to solve his neural interface needs.

A neural interface designer introduced a lot of new possibilities to Ves. Out of his d.e.s.i.r.e to come away from the Life Research Association with at least one of these specialists in tow, he accepted his wife's advice.

He transmitted a brief message back to Miles. The recruiters shouldn't reject Mr. Arkan's application, but they shouldn't be in a hurry to complete the necessary checks and examinations either.

Gloriana grinned. "You've made the right choice. In order to design a more perfect mech, we need to move away from our dependence on standard MTA-provided neural interface models. Their potential is too limited in order to ensure maximum safety."

Technically, that wasn't entirely true, but Ves didn't need to share this little detail.

"Let's just move on. There are still exhibits that we haven't seen yet. I've been eying that human mech over there for a while now."

Upon his urging, they floated over to a mech that looked more human than many of the other machines they had viewed. They stopped next to an older dignified-looking man who was also studying the fleshy mech.

As they flew closer, Ves began to feel strangely uncomfortable in the presence of the biomech.

[Devin & Devin NuMan Beta Version]

The so-called NuMan was a humanoid mech that didn't appear to have any obvious weapons or inclinations. The uncovered mech's entire body was tall and lanky. Its thick and resilient flesh was covered by pale human-like skin.

In order to prevent giant human mechs like these from looking too o.b.s.c.e.n.e, their designers usually left out their genitals and other unnecessary characteristics such as n.i.p.p.l.es, hair and even facial organs.

Not so for this disturbing mech. Its designer seemed to have eschewed the customs of the biomech industry and attempted to translate the human form into the organic machine as accurately as possible!

There was a bit of hair on the c.h.e.s.t of the biomech, which helped cover up the giant n.i.p.p.l.es that Ves had no d.e.s.i.r.e to see, even if it was in a male form.

What was even most outrageous was that the museum curators equipped the NuMan with a codpiece of all additions!

It was definitely a later addition. The metal codpiece looked completely at odds with the aesthetics of the rest of the mech.

Ves and Gloriana couldn't help but stare at it for a time.

"This.." Gloriana trailed. "Do you think.. there is something underneath this codpiece?"

"It.. kind of looks that way." Ves lamely said.

The old man floating a small distance away began to chuckle. "This mech is definitely equipped with a 'weapon' underneath its belt."

Gloriana turned around. "How do you know, sir?"

"I knew the designer who concocted the NuMan." The older man replied. "There is more to this mech than meets the eye."

Both Ves and Gloriana noticed that the other person's man was very unusual.

"Who may you be, sir?"

"Werther Cline."

Gloriana suddenly straightened her back. "It is an honor to greet you, sir!"

Ves already knew that Werther Cline was a Master Mech Designer the moment he came close. The older man not only exuded the unique kind of grace and wisdom that was common to old geezers who were over two centuries old, but also possessed a mind that was blindingly strong to his spiritual senses.

No one else but Master Mech Designers possessed minds and spirits that were at this level!

Yet despite the fact that Ves was in the presence of one of the greatest mech designers of the star system, he kept his emotions in check. He had no entanglement with Master Cline. They were just passerbys.

"Can you tell us why this mech is so.. Human-like?" Ves curiously asked as he drew his attention back to the odd monstrosity.

"That's because it is human."

"What?"

"It's in the name." Master Cline slowly explained. "Nu. Man. New Man. If you scan the insides of this 'mech', you will notice that it not only possesses the organs of a typical biomech, it also holds the organs of a true human. The NuMan possesses a heart, a pair of lungs, a liver, a pair of kidneys, a stomach and so on. While they are present in a more miniaturized form, the NuMan is truly designed to contain the full capabilities of a human."

That.. sounded crazy! Many human organs had no place in biomechs! They merely took up space while bringing almost nothing to the table. Biomech designers developed far more efficient organs that could keep the organic machines running at much greater efficiencies.

"What is the point of this mech?" Ves frowned in doubt. "A war machine doesn't need to contain so many redundant organs."

"That is because the NuMan wasn't designed for combat. It was designed to replace the ailing human body of my colleague. What you are looking at is a giant visual replica of one of my best friends when he was in the prime of his life!"

"WHAT?!"

Neither Ves nor Gloriana could remain calm anymore. The NuMan's absurd purpose astonished them both. They never thought that a biomech designer was extreme enough to design a new 'replacement' body that also happened to look as if it could wrestle against other mechs!

Ves couldn't imagine living a life with a body like this. How would he ever be able to get around indoors?

"Did.. the mech designer responsible for developing the NuMan succeed in his goal?"

"Absolutely not." Master Cline sternly responded. "This mech is an abomination and a severe threat to the continuation of the LRA's biomech industry. Still, before the Planetary Guard barged into his secret lab in order to stop him from completing his self-developed consciousness transfer procedure, it was too late. He already transferred his mind to the NuMan, or at least that was supposed to happen."

"What exactly occurred?" Gloriana asked.

The Master sighed. "We don't know, but the NuMan wouldn't be here if it housed the consciousness of an actual human mech designer. After performing an extensive series of examinations, we concluded that the experiment failed. The NuMan is still an empty shell."

That.. sounded unfortunate. Even if the experiment violated all kinds of rules, Ves couldn't help but admire the daring behind it all. It took a special kind of courage to take this unprecedented step.

"If this is a prohibited experiment, why show it off? Shouldn't the NuMan be incinerated or something?" Ves asked.

The old Master shook his head. "That is a short-sighted decision. The mech designers of today must remember the mistakes of the past. In order to prevent subsequent generations from attempting a similar mistake, we decided to preserve the NuMan and let everyone witness the folly of its designer."

The NuMan was a symbol of a biomech designer's failed ambition!

"What was its designer trying to accomplish, exactly?"

"Why, longevity of course." Master Cline smiled at them. "The two of you are too young for this, but when you approach my age, you become more willing to do anything to live a longer life. My old friend.. tried to extend his life through unorthodox means. You see, the NuMan... is immortal."

"Immortal?! How is that possible?!"

Chapter 2749 - Monument to Folly

Ves and Gloriana regarded the NuMan biomech in a completely different light once they listened to its backstory. Even their two cats had stopped playing around.

The NuMan was not a mech at all! The as-of-yet-unnamed designer who developed this abomination did not have mech pilots in mind at all. Instead, he willfully ignored the rules of his profession and broke all kinds of taboos in a bid to preserve his life!

Ves couldn't imagine what kind of mindset a highly-accomplished biomech designer adopted to bring himself to come up with such an extreme plan. Apparently, it wasn't enough to develop a clone. The biomech designer in question wanted to fashion a body that towered over people just like other mechs!

"Do you think the designer of the NuMan is crazy?" Master Werther Cline looked straight into the NuMan's dull eyes. "Do you think that the rest of the biomech industry hasn't thought about transplanting their minds in similar bodies?"

From the way the Master phrased his question, Ves couldn't help but let his imagination go loose.

Gloriana also gained some suspicions. "Are you hinting that.. the NuMan isn't the first attempt by biomech designers to create new bodies for themselves?"

"It is not that much of a secret in our circle, young miss. You are indeed correct to think that the NuMan is hardly the first attempt of such. The only difference here is that its designer is the most accomplished from the Life Research Association. This 'biomech' is more refined and advanced than the rough and rudimentary attempts by others. It had the greatest chance to succeed."

"How so? What makes the NuMan better than the other examples?"

"I've combed over the data and research notes in detail." The old man generously answered. "The NuMan incorporates many brilliant innovations that should have solved several problems relating to mind and consciousness transfers. Despite its size, its human-like organs are almost identical to his old body. The genetic and physical resemblance of the NuMan and the designer's original body is quite high, which should theoretically lower the chance of rejection to an acceptable level. What is even more absurd is that the NuMan also attained immortality!"

"How?" Gloriana widened her eyes.

The Master gave her a regretful smile. "I cannot go into the details. I can only tell you that the NuMan is a unique product that is cultivated from tissue samples harvested from a unique alien organism that is extremely rare. It is a miracle in itself that my old friend succeeded in transforming the alien cells into NuMan cells. There are probably only two or three biomech designers in the LRA that can replicate this feat."

There were too many secrets behind the development of the NuMan. Master Cline only scratched the surface of what had been done to make the NuMan as great as possible.

"What does immortal mean in this context?" Ves asked. "Is the NuMan impervious to damage? Is it able to regenerate endlessly?"

"This organic body is not so fantastical. Its cells are endlessly replicable, courtesy of their alien origin. As long as they are supplied with energy and matter, the body cells will continue to renew themselves after they start to decay."

"If this biomech designer was able to create an immortal biomech, why not apply it on a more human-sized level?"

The older man grew grim.

"The answer is complicated, but to put it in the simplest possible terms, the human body is too small to contain so much power. Why do we wage war with machines the size of mechs? Why do we not opt to deploy armies of cheaper and less cumbersome infantry?"

"The amount of equipment and firepower that infantry can bring to bear is too limited." Ves supplied the standard answer he learned at school. "The ratio of human body to machine is too high. Since the latter is mostly a weakness, that means the overall package is inefficient on a volume basis. The equipment itself is also weaker due to constraints on size and mass. A single mech can easily trample hundred heavily-armed infantrymen with ease."

Master Cline nodded. "That is true. Now extend this concept to our current situation. What do you think about my old friend's attempt to continue his life in a new body?"

Gloriana's eyes lit up. "I see! All of the stories on the galactic net about dying people futilely attempting to live a new life by transferring their mind and consciousness into clones of themselves never mentioned a single success. There's something terribly flawed about this process. If the clone is too weak or limited, then maybe you'll be able to succeed with a larger and more powerful body!"

"There are indeed many biotech researchers who ascribe to this unsupported theory. Biomech designers are highly proficient at developing massive organic machines that are packed with more power than any normal human body can bear. Since humanoid biomechs closely resemble bodies like ours, it is easy to draw the conclusion that such a creation can also serve as a superior replacement body for our race. Nobody has ever proven that this theory has any merit, but when you are desperate, you don't tend to stop at these questions."

Ves understood this approach. He adopted it many times when he was also driven to proceed with his reckless experiments. Who cared about scientific rigor when the barbarians were at the gates?

"I take it that none of these wild experiments have succeeded."

"That is a given. If it was possible to transfer your consciousness to another medium, whether it is a processor, an identical clone, a biomech or any other physical shell. If it was that easy for individuals to stave off death in this manner, we'd be living in a radically different society."

That was true. There would be way more undying bastards around. Accomplished people wouldn't work so hard to make accomplishments, and upwards mobility would become a lot more limited as the existing rulers had no intention of making way for the next generation.

For better or worse, human society was made of mortal lives. Every single individual was subject to the cycle of life and death. Ves could not imagine how messed up it would be if lots of people succeeded in attaining immortality.

"I think I understand now why the NuMan is put on display." Ves said after a moment of thought. "Biomech designers are both biotech experts and mech designers. One of these professions is already dangerous on its own. Combining the two in a single individual opens up a lot more possibilities, but not all of them are proper to pursue."

The Master nodded gravely. "You cannot imagine how many mech designers lose sight of this truth, Mr. Larkinson. We have great power at our disposal. Our knowledge and expertise affords us the choice to create mechs, but they could also be used to create other terrible creations. While there are rules in place to limit what we can do, these are invisible shackles that can easily be ignored. As long as one of us has no scruples, we can easily develop weapons of mass destruction and other harmful inventions behind everyone's backs."

Ves knew this more than everyone else. He once developed a gamma laser rifle. He also modified a doom crawler design so that it was able to accommodate taboo weapons. The latter went on to nuke a lot of cities on a random planet, thereby killing billions of innocent civilians.

While Ves never felt he was culpable of these misdeeds, he wished he had been a little more discerning about who he entered business with. He didn't care what others did with his products, but he didn't want to be judged guilty by association by the MTA!

"If classical mech designers such as the two of you are already capable of developing weapons that can inflict untold devastation to human society, then biomech designers can invent even greater horrors. I am not talking about purely destructive inventions such as viruses that can depopulate entire planets."

"Then what are you referring to, sir?" Gloriana asked.

The Master looked more weary than ever. "The Age of Conquest has taught us that humanity's worst aspect isn't our savagery. While it is true that there is a beast behind

every civilized facade, we have moved beyond living on our instincts. What we should actually be afraid of is our greed."

"Greed?"

"Correct. Greed, d.e.s.i.r.e, yearning, ambition. No matter how you choose to interpret it, greed is a terrible force. While every human must possess a measure of greed in order to propel them forward, greed can easily lead to catastrophe if taken too far. The power-mad admirals of the Age of Conquest let their greed run wild and committed genocide on a galactic scale in order to attain the unattainable."

"The Age of Conquest is over." Ves remarked. "We live in an age of moderation. Mechs are much weaker than warsh.i.p.s, so the channels in which we can vent our d.e.s.i.r.es only allow for a limited degree of destruction."

"Is that what you think, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Well.. maybe there are mechs that cross the line."

"There are." The highly-accomplished biomech designer firmly said. "They are not what you think, however. Destructive potential is not the only criteria we use to judge dangerous mechs. The NuMan over here is actually quite weak against other mechs. While it can wear a suit of armor and wield a handheld weapon, the Numan essentially suffers the same weakness as other infantry."

"Then.. what is the true danger?"

"Temptation. Any invention that can tempt individuals to abandon their support for the current order is a threat to human civilization. Just imagine if my old friend succeeded in transferring his consciousness to the NuMan. If it becomes known that an ailing human that approaches his last years is able to gain an unlimited lifespan as a giant humanoid aberration, then what do you think will happen?"

It only took a second for Ves to plot out the frightening chain reaction.

"Our society would be upended. A lot of wealthy and powerful people would definitely jump at the chance to live forever, even if they have to leave their humanity behind!"

"Exactly. The human body is weak. Compared to other human races, we are smaller, shorter-lived and possess limited potential. Our only saving grace is our relatively high population growth, but for those with greater greed and ambitions, this is no advantage at all."

"It is exactly because of our relative weaknesses that our race has succeeded in dominating the galaxy." Ves pointed out.

"That is a high-minded view." Master Cline responded. "In my long years as a biomech designer, I have met many colleagues and other individuals who are incapable of comprehending the bigger picture. They are so consumed by their own ambitions that they never think about the consequences of their own actions. Many people would abandon their humanity and consign others to damnation if they are able to transfer to a more powerful form."

This conversation was already way too profound for Ves. "We're far from that point, I think. No one has ever succeeded in accomplishing what you've described. Our race still has a lot of breathing room."

"I disagree, Mr. Larkinson. You cannot imagine the sheer amount of ingenuity that my old friend has put into the NuMan. Even I derived some useful methods from studying its design. Yet I would rather not be given this opportunity in the first place. The NuMan is a monument of my old friend's folly. I force myself to visit this biomech every month in order to remind myself why limits are there. Just because I can, doesn't mean I should. Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots, nothing more. Despite our industry's attempts to hammer this lesson home, there are still colleagues who have abandoned this principle."

"What sad people." Ves commented.

Chapter 2750 - Inhospitable Environment

The old Master soon had his fill of teaching the younger generation. After taking one last wistful look at the NuMan, the esteemed biomech designer flew away with his extensive guard duty in tow.

Ves and Gloriana watched the old man depart.

"According to the galactic net, Master Werther Cline is over three centuries old." Gloriana broke the silence.

"Damn." Ves looked impressed. "He must have experienced a lot of ups and downs."

Anyone who was able to live this long was a legend as far as everyone was concerned. Though Master Cline didn't seem all that impressive due to his restrained demeanor and ordinary garments, the brilliance of his mind and spirit was the real deal.

Ves yearned to reach this level of power. When would he be able to pass on profound lessons to ignorant youngsters?

Not anytime soon, that was for sure. There was no way for Ves to catch up to the likes of Master Cline within a century. Not unless he resorted to unconventional means that had a very high chance of backfiring on him. He had too little confidence that he'd be able to merge a portion of the Unending One's formidable powers.

Perhaps one day, that might change. As long as he kept building up his knowledge, he might one day be able to absorb the power of a dark god and become a greater mech designer in the process!

"Biomech designers have quite a few skeletons in their closets, it seems." Gloriana remarked as she finally turned away from the NuMan.

"That's the price of knowledge, I guess." Ves replied. "The more you learn, the more possibilities you can choose from. It becomes harder and harder to cling to your morals and stay true to your original purpose."

Those were steps that Ves would never be able to take. He was not a biomech designer and it was too late to start when he had already developed his own style and approach towards mech design. He would just become very mediocre at designing biomechs.

As Gloriana started to float towards the remaining exhibits, Ves took one last look at the silent and unmoving NuMan.

When he listened to the story behind this aberrant organic machine, he couldn't help but develop a novel theory about the failure behind the attempted consciousness transfer.

What if.. the mech designer in question hadn't taken his own spirituality into account? What if this essential quality that was essential to sentient life remained behind in the old body, thereby leaving the transfer incomplete?

According to his own rudimentary theories on spirituality, this might very well be the case!

Did this mean that the experiment could have succeeded if Ves was involved?

His body shuddered.

He firmly shook his head to throw aside this radical thought. Even if he held the secret behind allowing people to transcend their human existences by transferring to a greater body, there was no way he was crazy enough to pick up where the designer of the NuMan left off! He was not a degenerate!

Ves eventually caught up to Gloriana and began to view the remaining display models. While the diversity in biomechs opened his eyes to several more possibilities of biomechs, his attention wavered.

"We're so limited in comparison to these biological architects." Ves sighed. "We are only ever able to create machines. Even if I can do a little more, I'm all on my own while these biomech designers have an entire community of their own."

"You don't need to feel jealous, Ves. The grass is always greener on the other side. You're fantastic in your own way. The mechs we'll be able to design in the future will blow all of these biomechs out of the water."

She wasn't wrong, but Ves still felt he was missing something. He might be able to steer his design philosophy in a much more interesting direction if he started to work with biomechs.

Yet even though he didn't care too much about the MTA, he still had to be careful about staying within the confines of the rules.

The Age of Mechs was an era where most of humanity lived under a single order, after all. For better or worse, the MTA and the CFA dictated the rules that all humans must abide by. Those who scorned them did so at their own peril.

Ves did not want to end up like the Skull Architect. Even if the wily war criminal managed to change his coat and regained a 'legal' identity, Professor Cortez still had to restrain his work so that it did not exhibit any of the distinctive traits of his previous works.

That was not the kind of life that Ves wanted to live. He wanted to design his mechs with as little constraints as possible. If that meant playing by the rules of the biggest bullies in the playground, then so be it. He had no greater ambitions that required him to break the rules.

He and his wife visited a number of other places that prominently featured biomechs. They visited another exhibition hall which prominently featured current bestsellers in the biomech market.

The hall was a great place for the pair to get up to date on the current trends. They also gained a deeper insight on how biomechs performed compared to classical mechs.

"Biomechs have a distinctive advantage in atmospheric conditions." Ves observed as he looked at a spaceborn biomech. "This mech here doesn't look like it belongs in space."

Gloriana concurred. "There are astral lifeforms that are natively adapted to life in space, but many of them are too big to be adapted to the scale of a mech. That makes it a bit more difficult for biomech designers to derive their spaceborn mechs from existing life."

This was a rather interesting phenomenon in the biomech community. A lot of designers preferred to copy successful works of nature rather than come up with a brand-new biomech from scratch.

Granted, it was a waste of time to start from scratch. Just like how classical mech designers resorted to licensing existing mech components, biomech designers plagiarized the products of evolution in order to obtain a winning formula.

While an unending amount of exobeasts resided on planets throughout the galaxy, the amount of unique lifeforms living in space was substantially less!

It was not hard to imagine why. Space was inherently hostile to many forms of life. Humans themselves would quickly suffocate and freeze to death if they entered space without the protection of a suit. Many other alien races were subjected to the same restriction.

Yet there were always exceptions. Just like how ancient sea creatures slowly evolved to be able to live on land, a relatively modest amount of alien creatures managed to overcome all the odds and succeeded in adapting to life in space.

This was the origin of most but not all astral beasts swarming in the galaxy to this day.

Since gravity and other constraints no longer exerted a limit on their size, they tended to balloon in size. They also adapted in other ways that made it difficult to transplant their evolutionary successes to biomechs.

All of this meant that it was several times harder to design a spaceborn biomech than a classical one!

As for the spaceborn variety, the organic machines could still put up a good fight, but there were considerably less models to choose from. Ves noticed that every spaceborn biomech was designed by either a Senior or Master.

The exhibition hall featured only a single exception! Evidently, the only Journeymen who were qualified to design spaceborn biomechs were the direct disciples of Masters who specialized in them to begin with!

Gloriana thought this situation was a bit absurd. "This is a major weakness of the biomech industry. Are most Journeymen truly incapable of designing space-capable biomechs?"

"I don't think the problem is that exaggerated." Ves responded. "There should be a shortcut or something that allows lesser biomech designers to design something that can fight in space. It's just that the barrier to entry is so high that their products are not competitive enough to sell in the market. Their inferior products are so bad that they would have to sell them at a price that is below the cost it takes to grow them to maturity."

Classical mechs did not face the same constraints. Their b.a.r.e metal construction performed okay enough in the harsh environment in space as long as they were made of the right materials.

While certain exotics and other metals degraded when brought to space, no mech designer was stupid enough to incorporate any of them in their spaceborn mech designs.

In fact, these materials were so unpopular that they never showed up in landbound mechs either. There were plenty of times where landbound mechs had to be transported from one star system to another.

After taking note of this odd quirk, Ves and Gloriana visited one last location before they were done for the day.

"Meow...?"

"Miaow.."

Both Lucky and Clixie clung close to their owners as soon as the group stepped onto a hill that overlooked an enormous field that was situated hundreds of kilometers away from Veoline.

Scattered groups of other tourists gawked at the astounding sight before their eyes.

Thousands of giant skeletons poked out from what appeared to be a literal sea of bones. While there were plenty of humanoid and bestial bones strewn at random, the caretaking organization of the boneyard fixed the skeletal structure of a large number of former biomechs together.

This resulted in an incredible sight. Ves could imagine the contours of many different biomechs by looking at the skeletons that remained of them. The fact that there were thousands of them caused the boneyard to take on a much more macabre atmosphere.

"Look, Ves! There's a half-rotted biomech lying over there!"

She was right. Ves spotted what appeared to be a light skirmisher whose flesh was already starting to decay. The organic cells that made up the fleshy parts of the biomech all needed to be fed and taken care of in order to survive.

Once they were deprived of these resources, they would go into hibernation.

The biomech was still recoverable at that point.

Yet if this period of absolute neglect stretched on too long, then the outermost cells would begin to die off in order to transfer energy and nutrients to the core cells.

The light skirmisher in question was roughly at this phase. Its core cells that were buried deeper were still relatively healthy, but the exterior looked like a rotted mess.

"What a sad way for a biomech to die." Ves curled his mouth in disapproval. "Why are the locals letting these mechs decay like this? A recycler can extract plenty of usable resources from these corpses."

"Maybe it's not cost-effective to do so. Their organic makeup doubtlessly make it harder to salvage any usable parts and materials from these machines."

Even if it was a bit more troublesome to recycle biomechs, Ves didn't see this boneyard was needed. He bet that all of the bones lying here could be broken down in order to separate usable materials. Yet instead of doing so, the local biomech designers decided it was fun if they dumped their trash in an open landfill.

It looked damn impressive, though.

"Maybe biomechs deserve to be buried in proper graves."

"Are you kidding? Biomechs are too big. Planets would run out of available space in no time. You'd have to stack the graves!"