

Mech 2751

Chapter 2751 - Migration Waves

When Ves and his wife returned to Gentle Lotus Base, they ate a simple dinner before splitting up. Gloriana wanted to spend time with the Glory Seekers, which wasn't that unusual.

Ves had some free time on his hands. He moved over to the balcony of his temporary office and began to look at the darkening skies.

Night time was a vastly different experience on Prosperous Hill VI. The trees lit up the surrounding spaces in a different manner than ordinary structures. Their leaves glowed in different colors of the rainbow as they illuminated the areas below them. Their luminosities were kept low in order to prevent anyone's biorhythm from thinking it was daytime.

From a distance, the forest of glowing leaves looked like an alien landscape. Ves could hardly imagine that he was looking at a distant human city.

"What a weird place." He muttered.

Weird was an understatement. The NuMan and the biomech boneyard were so odd that Ves felt as if the locals were aliens instead of humans. Their culture diverged so much from the galactic norm in many areas that he felt as if Lifers belonged to a different species.

Fortunately, they still possessed enough human traits to remind him that he was dealing with fellow humans. People like Master Cline were very aware of their place in human society. As long as the Lifers remained within the boundaries set by the rest of humanity, they did not pose a risk to the current order.

Ves wondered what would happen if the Life Research Association became unconstrained. What if the MTA collapsed? What if the LRA moved to a different galaxy or reality where the Big Two no longer held sway?

"Well, I doubt that biomech designers are the only ones we should be fearing."

If the current rules no longer applied, then everyone became unconstrained.

Mech designers were able to impart their mechs with city-destroying weapons of mass destruction.

Shipwrights were allowed to mount massive weapons on their starsh.i.p.s.

Ves could easily imagine hundreds more horrifying consequences. He hadn't realized until now how much restraint that humanity showed these days. The Big Two exerted so much deterrence that few had the courage to flout the rules!

"Maybe it's a good thing the Big Two are hanging above our heads."

He never thought he would make this conclusion. As a mech designer, he felt awfully constrained by the MTA's meddling. The Association was like an overprotective nanny who treated everyone else as irresponsible children.

Yet once he elevated his perspective beyond his case, he started to see the MTA in a better light. By suppressing any excess behavior, the organization that Ves loved to complain about was actually making life harder for anyone with dangerous ideas.

"I can live with that, I suppose."

That didn't mean he became a full-throated cheerleader for the MTA. He merely preferred the status quo over the alternatives. Ves would never be able to do business at his current level if the MTA didn't regulate the mech market. He also wouldn't be able to travel across the galaxy and venture into the Red Ocean without a unifying authority forcing every human state to play nice with each other.

As Ves contemplated the benefits of the current order, he received an unannounced visitor.

"Meow!"

Lucky perked up as the door slid open. He jumped from the desk and soared in the air before entering Calabast's open arms.

"Hehehe. I missed you too, Lucky." The woman grinned as she embraced the gem cat like a baby. "Are you hungry? Here's a snack."

"Meow meow!"

Ves turned away from the balcony and frowned. "Lucky already had his dinner. You're spoiling him at this point."

"I doubt a creature as remarkable as Lucky can grow fat."

"You never know."

Calabast sauntered forward and began to lean against the side of his desk. She looked around the office. There was hardly any decor to be found as Ves hadn't bothered to decorate this place.

"This is hardly an office that befits the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan."

"I don't intend to meet any foreign guests here. In fact, I didn't intend to meet anyone at all. Why the visit, Calabast?"

"Can't I drop by for a simple chat?"

Ves threw a suspicious glance at the black-clad woman. "You never do anything simple. What's this about?"

"Oh, Ves. You're too stiff, you know. Don't you do anything for fun? You should get a hobby. It will do wonders in relieving your stress."

"I don't have any time for hobbies." Ves crossed his arms. "Every second of my life is valuable."

"What are you doing now, then? If you truly think you need to spend all of your time on a productive activity, then you should be working on a mech design right this moment."

"You don't understand. Our remaining mech design projects are already close to completion. I have already provided sufficient guidance to three of them. As for the other two, I am still in the process of figuring something out to help them reach their maximum potential."

"You could have started another design project."

"That would complicate my schedule and put everything out of order. I prefer to organize my projects by rounds. It's not time yet for me to start the third round."

Calabast eventually dropped the topic. She really thought that Ves should engage in something fun instead of spending his free time remaining idle where his mind tended to wander and develop strange ideas.

She decided to get serious. "You're right. I didn't come to chat. I waited for Gloriana to leave before approaching you. What I am about to impart to you is tangibly related to her, so I think it is best to leave her out of this discussion."

"What are you talking about?" Ves grew suspicious. "Is it about the Hexers again?"

"Sadly, you're right. I have picked up indications of a plan hatched by the council of matriarchs. Let me tell you what I know."

She spent the next five minutes explaining the various clues she gathered and what they point towards.

"I don't believe the Hexer trainers of the Spirit of Bentheim will leave once we reach the Red Ocean. Every crew member from Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken down are highly-competent elites in their own professions. Don't you think that's strange? The Hegemony is not a charity."

"The Indigo Tremor is a relatively new fleet carrier that is set up with a colonizing function. Why would the Wodin Dynasty invest in such an expensive capital ship? Did the Wodins even commission her in the first place? It is highly unlikely that they did considering their current level of power, wealth and influence in the Hegemony."

"Many other Hexer dynasties have started to form their own expeditionary fleets to the Red Ocean. Some of the best and most talented Hexers along with a considerable population of well-behaved families are assigned to leave the Komodo Star Sector and are being told to prepare to set up a new life in a different galaxy."

In isolation, these clues and observations didn't amount to much. Yet when Calabast strung them together into a single narrative, the pattern became very clear.

"The Hexers.. are trying to start over. Is that what you are suggesting, Calabast?"

She nodded as she put Lucky on her l.a.p. "My former state is doing exactly what I would do in its place. In the event the Hegemony loses the Komodo War, its people must live. The Hexers should have started to send out their expeditionary fleets a long time ago. The fact that they are starting late shows that they have not formed a thorough plan. Nonetheless, the simultaneous movement indicates that there is a greater authority at work."

"And that matters...?"

"If the Hexer fleets are able to attain passage through the beyonder gate, what will they do once they reach the other side? Will they spread out and found their own little kingdoms, or will they seek each other out and converge in order to form a superfleet?"

A grim face appeared on his face. "I see. I suppose the Glory Seekers aren't exempt from this Hexer scheme, right?"

"That is likely. The Glory Seekers aren't a part of our clan, unlike the Penitent Sisters. Their greater loyalty is always towards the Wodin Dynasty, not our clan. If they ever receive orders from Matriarch Xiaphna or Minister Constance, you can bet they will accept their new marching orders."

"Even if the two sides are separated by hundreds of thousands of light-years?"

"The Hexer cause is more important than any of that, Ves. The Hegemony may fall, but its people must not die out. Preserving the Hexer culture is more important than any individual goal."

"I see..."

Ves knew that the Hexers were quite collectivist as a society. While their individuals may hold personal ambitions, they were always expected to put the interests of the state first.

"Whether you are willing or not, you are a part of this Hexer contingency plan. Your ties to the Wodin Dynasty along with the elements of your fleet means that you are inexorably involved in any attempt to found a Hexer state in the Red Ocean."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit? I really doubt the Hexers have to rely on someone like me to gain a foothold in the dwarf galaxy."

"I'm being very serious, Ves."

"I'm just a mech designer!"

"You're the son of the Superior Mother. You're the most successful Journeyman of our star sector. You have plenty of Hexers in your clan. All of these reasons and more means that you are essentially in their camp!"

"What does this all mean, then?" Ves began to feel distressed. "I don't want to get involved in all of this Hexer crap! If the Hegemony falls, then let the survivors sort out their own mess! I don't want anything to do with founding a state."

"You don't have to. Now that we are aware of this possible scheme, we can enact some measures that will make it clear that we have no intentions of associating ourselves with a new Hexer colony in the Red Ocean. I doubt your wife will be okay with this, though."

Ves snorted. "I'll handle her if she becomes a problem. Wife or not, I'm not about to let my clan become a vassal to a Hexer successor state."

He and his clansmen already suffered dearly from their association with the current Hexer state. They did not want to be chased by the enemies of a second Hexer state when they roamed the Red Ocean!

A different thought came to mind.

"What about the Fridaymen?" He asked. "Will they be heading into the Red Ocean as well?"

"Of course. They began to organize their evacuation and colonization fleets before the outbreak of the Komodo War. When the Hex Army started making significant gains, the Fridaymen accelerated their preparations. They have a head-start on the Hexers."

"Great." Ves spoke with very little enthusiasm. "It seems we'll be meeting another bunch of old friends over at the other side of the beyonder gate."

Calabast suddenly grinned. "I have good news for you on that front. Unlike the Hexer dynasties, the Coalition partners are all moving separately. I think there is a high chance that their expeditions will all remain split once they reach the Red Ocean. Regardless of whether the Fridaymen win or lose the Komodo War, the Coalition partners wish to pursue their individual ambitions in the new frontier."

That meant that the Friday Coalition would not exist in the Red Ocean. This was good news as a scattered Coalition would never pool all of its resources to go after the Larkinson Clan.

Perhaps Ves might even be able to make peace with some of the partners.

If not... well, as long as their colonies remained separated, it may be possible to attack them one by one when they were still in their infancy!

Chapter 2752 - Wexal Park

In hindsight, Ves shouldn't have been surprised. The Hexers may be bigoted, but they showed plenty of moments of foresight. It was a given that they were plotting an ambitious fallback plan related to the Red Ocean.

The dwarf galaxy opened up for colonization represented a new start to anyone who was discontent with life in the old galaxy.

While the Milky Way was the root of human civilization, many futurists predicted that their race would one day expand into the greater cosmos.

However, the distance to other galaxies was unimaginably far. Both the Andromeda Galaxy and the Triangulum Galaxy were millions of light-years away.

That hadn't deterred ambitious colonists from building ultra-durable generation sh.i.p.s in order to reach all of that untold wealth and plant their flag first, but it was far too difficult to expand to those distant stretches.

For now, the dwarf galaxies orbiting around the Milky Way became the new frontiers of human civilization, and the Red Ocean was the first that people could realize their ambitions.

The Hexers and Fridaymen weren't the only people who harbored dreams of starting over. Many other people throughout the galaxy wanted to take part as well! This was one of the few opportunities where every pioneer started off from nothing.

With no established states and only a few remnant alien survivors scattered around the Red Ocean, lots of lucrative star systems were just waiting to be developed!

Of course, competition was fierce. The entry barrier set by the Gate Consortium ensured that only the best of the Friday Coalition, Hexadric Hegemony and many other states would get the opportunity to venture into this new territory.

It was all well and good for Ves to dream about crushing the nascent colonies set up by the different Coalition partners, but how could they possibly be weak? He had no doubt that the Fridayman fleets would all have Master Mech Designers and other powerful people among their ranks.

With the backing of a state, these fleets would probably be several times more prepared to face the challenges of the Red Ocean than his own expeditionary fleet!

"The key to succeeding in the Red Ocean and possibly ruining the colonies founded by the Coalition partners is to expand your power and influence." Calabast summed up her thoughts. "Our clan alone is not enough to contend against every threat we face, so it is vital that we seek to expand the Golden Skull Alliance. Only by pulling more organizations into our orbit will we be able to pursue our greater ambitions."

She held a slumbering Lucky in her arms as she spoke. The cat had grown completely comfortable in her presence.

Ves thought about the current state of the alliance.

"How are the Glory Seekers and Crossers doing? Their ranks are severely depleted. How do they plan to make up for their shortfall in numbers?"

"They're already in the process of recruiting new personnel, just like us." She answered.

"Are they succeeding?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Calabast smirked. "Why do you sound so confused? Did you think that our allies are incompetent? The Glory Seekers may not seem attractive to you, but there are enough women on Prosperous Hill VI who are attracted to an organization that gives them primacy. It's a powerful ego boost to anyone looking for affirmation. The Wodin Dynasty has also dispatched reinforcements from the Hegemony. Their quality isn't the best and they will take some time to reach the Prosperous Hill Star System, but their arrival will do much to relieve some of the shortages."

"What about the Cross Clan? It's already in decline. Even if it shows signs of recovery, I doubt that anyone would pick it over ours."

"You're letting your impressions color your judgement of them. While their recruitment effort was indeed lackluster at first, they took a lot of cues from you. Professor Cortez is personally interviewing every mech designer who comes to their recruitment hall while Patriarch Reginald Cross and his fellow expert pilots occasionally drop by to show their faces to any mech pilots who wish to join."

"What?!"

Ves never expected that those two men would deign to show themselves to the masses like this. Both of them held a very high opinion of themselves.

It seemed that Patriarch Reginald truly wished to revive the Cross Clan. There was little doubt that many mech pilots would flock to the Cross Clan's recruitment hall over the coming weeks. The opportunity to meet a high-tier expert pilot was too irresistible!

Despite that, Ves wasn't sure if the Cross Clan would be able to handle the influx. The Crossers didn't possess anything comparable to the Larkinson Network so there were bound to be troublemakers among the new recruits.

After discussing the Larkinson Clan's existing allies, Ves briefly inquired about any new candidates.

"Are there any local organizations or powers who might be a good fit for the Golden Skull Alliance?"

"We are still looking," Calabast replied. "There are hundreds of different organizations in the LRA that have caught our eye, but... you know how it goes. The candidates that are desirable in our eyes are either too demanding or have already made their own arrangements. The ones that remain all have their own shortcomings that make them more trouble than they are worth."

The latter was a particularly huge stumbling block for many ambitious dreamers! Hardly anyone was able to earn a million MTA merits in their lifetimes. If they didn't have anyone who was powerful enough to earn merits with ease or if they didn't have the guts to take on any high-risk missions, why should they even be considered?

Even if the Golden Skull Alliance was still short on members, Ves did not want to let anyone in who suffered less than his Larkinsons!

His clan had bled much to earn almost 40 million MTA merits. Its sacrifice had to stay meaningful in order to keep his clansmen stable.

In addition, Ves only wanted to join forces with those who already experienced hardship and possessed the right mindset to succeed in the Red Ocean.

After setting all of these requirements, very few organizations managed to make it through. Ves knew that he had to be patient in order to expand the alliance and gather the MTA merits necessary to redeem a beyonder ticket.

"I'd love to keep you company further, but I have work to do." The spymaster eventually said. "We are still in the process of scoping out Prosperous Hill VI. While I haven't found any signs that any local power is targeting us, that doesn't mean we're safe. This is a foreign environment and we are still strangers here. We'll get into a lot of trouble if we inadvertently step on someone's toes."

After patting Lucky's head a final time, Calabast departed the office.

The next day, Ves and Gloriana spent the morning going over their mech design projects. The Ferocious Piranha IB and the Cherub designs were the closest to completion. The design teams just needed to perform more checks, develop some minute refinements and add some optional components in order to put an end to the projects.

The Giant Killer design would take a little more time to complete its final round of optimizations due to its greater complexity.

As for the Devious and Blinding Mech Projects, the design teams weren't able to address all of their problems without the personal intervention of Ves.

In order to solve the issues plaguing the projects, Ves decided to go on a special excursion.

Gloriana didn't accompany him this time. She wouldn't be very useful on this trip and she could contribute much more to the projects if she worked in the design lab.

That was why Ves boarded the rhino-headed shuttle with just Lucky and his guards at noon. The vehicle lifted off and flew away from Veoline while flanked by two different Infinity Guard mechs from yesterday.

This time, he wasn't heading to downtown Veoline. The place he wanted to visit was located in one of the many nature preserves of Prosperous Hill VI.

His shuttle reached its destination after half an hour of flight. Ves called up a projection that showed an aerial view of what appeared to be carefully-managed biomes surrounded by near-transparent energy screens.

When the shuttle descended onto the landing zone, Ves and Lucky encountered a waiting attendant immediately after exiting their vehicle.

"Patriarch Larkinson. We have been expecting your arrival. I am Trisha Iv Lanon and I shall be your personal guide today." A uniformed woman greeted Ves with deference. "I bid you welcome to Wexal Park, the most popular destination for high-end exobeast and designer beast lovers. We offer exclusive tours where you can experience the wonders of nature and the ingenuity of our beast designers with complete security."

Ves smiled at the woman. "Please lead the way, Trisha."

The woman turned around and led them past the main gates of the park. Despite making a reservation in advance, Ves and his guards still had to undergo extensive checks.

Enclosed in a pit that was surrounded by a dormant energy field, Ves and a number of other visitors looked down on a pair of ferocious-looking dragons.

The dragons possessed vivid red scales, four strong limbs, a pair of broad leathery wings, spiraling horns and an air of dominance that made it seem as if they were the true rulers of the galaxy!

There was no way these red dragons were products of nature.

Trisha confirmed his thoughts as she began to explain the creatures.

"The two designer beasts before you are part of the Draco Magnus species developed by ATA Genetics. They are the third version of the Draco Magnus line. Compared to the previous versions, the current iteration requires less care and is slightly more obedient to individuals who they have genetically imprinted upon."

"What is genetic imprinting?" Ves asked.

"It is a complicated procedure that ensures that every genetic beast is loyal to its new owner. Beast designers such as those working for ATA Genetics have applied special bioprogramming to their organic products to add this functionality to the beasts they cultivate. Once a customer wishes to purchase one, a beast designer will use sacred methods to stimulate certain genes so that the beast recognizes you as its master from their very bodies."

That.. sounded quite extreme! This went beyond ordinary indoctrination. Ves couldn't imagine what it would be like to be unquestionably loyal to someone because his very genes compelled him to do so. The potential for abuse was enormous if it could be applied to humans!

Trisha evidently noticed his reaction. "You do not need to be concerned about this technique. It is strictly regulated and never applied to humans. In fact, it is exceedingly difficult to add this kind of bioprogramming to existing people. It has to be active right from the moment of conception."

That meant that only designer babies were vulnerable to this illegal treatment. Someone who was already an a.d.u.l.t like Ves wouldn't be susceptible to this kind of sabotage.

Even if someone altered his genes somehow, it would definitely be noticeable enough to trip alarms!

Ves relaxed after realizing all of this. "How ubiquitous is genetic programming?"

"It depends on the state. In the LRA, it is quite widespread as it is a proven and effective method to control designer beasts. However, other states either restrict or prohibit genetic loyalty programming entirely due to unfounded fears about their usage. You can rest assured that our biotech industry has never applied this measure to any humans. The LRA cracks down hard on any who think of growing an army of genetically loyal subordinates."

"...That's a relief. I think."

"Meow..."

Even Lucky expressed his doubt!

Chapter 2753 - Mutated Beasts

It turned out that genetic loyalty programming was very controversial in many parts of human space. People were deeply afraid of having their freedom robbed without even knowing it because their genes made them this way.

Abuse of this tech occurred in the past. Trisha was quite transparent about that as they walked past the dragon pit.

"During the Age of Conquest, a number of star nations rose up that stood out for their absurdly loyal populations. When other nations investigated, they eventually found out that the people who lived there were genetically instructed to give their loyalty to certain rulers."

"What happened once this became known?" Ves asked.

"The controversy generated near-universal indignation from other humans. The star nations in question were wiped out." Trisha straightforwardly answered. "The rulers were hunted down to the last man while the rest of the population were cleansed in its entirety."

"What?! They killed all of those poor citizens who didn't know any better?!"

"That is correct, Mr. Larkinson. While we have developed means to counteract genetic loyalty programming, at the time it was still too new. Extensive debates took place

between biotech researchers and various leaders. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that it was too dangerous to let any human who possessed the tainted genes to propagate any further. They chose the lesser of two evils by erasing them from existence while they were still contained."

"They really killed everyone?"

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson. Every star nation in the vicinity even extended their search into starsh.i.p.s and their own territories in order to catch and eliminate any tainted humans who had traveled away from their home states. The hunters spilled a large quantity of human blood in those days, but no one voiced any protest. No matter how wholesome these genetically-altered individuals behaved, their lineage could not be allowed to spread!"

Though Ves initially felt horrified, he slowly settled his emotions after realizing that it was probably the best decision to make at the time. By acting decisively, the death toll was kept to the lowest possible level. It was the least-bad choice out of a selection of several awful options.

Another mitigating factor was that genocide and wiping out trillions of humans at a time was not that big of a taboo back then. While slaughtering so many people was certainly frowned upon, the ones responsible this time had a righteous cause backing them up. Ultimately, the people involved in this massive operation were celebrated as heroes. This was a pretty good indicator that a lot of people supported this extreme measure during this period.

"In the Age of Mechs, the use of genetic loyalty programming is even more restricted." Trisha said as she guided Ves to a forest dome where various feathered and unfeathered birds flew among and over the tree branches. "For example, the designer birds that are residing in this biome are still wild. They hold no affection for humans and it will take many generations to tame them through selective breeding alone."

A careful mix of small-sized exobeasts and genetic beasts lived in a single enclosed space that was several square kilometers in size. Ves noticed that the temperature inside was kept hotter than usual. The strange energy screen that covered the entire space was not strong enough to block attacks from mechs, but it was more than sufficient to keep the beasts inside while also regulating the local climate.

"Meow."

Lucky looked rather interested in the birds. His tail swished excitedly at the thought of hunting a couple of them down.

"What purpose do these birds serve?"

"They are not designed to serve a singular purpose." Trisha answered. "The birds in this specific biome are kept as 'wild' as possible to meet the needs of clients who dislike signs of artificiality in their own menagerie. Our customers may choose them to enrich their gardens, hunt down challenging prey, put them on display or fill their stomachs. Some species are more suitable for certain purposes than others, though. We can provide you with detailed advice and recommendations if you are interested."

"Hmmm. I'd like to keep looking. These birds look interesting, but they seem a little.. dimwitted for my tastes."

"Avians generally aren't known for their intelligence. Oh, they can be smart, but the incidences of intelligent and sentient avian creatures is actually quite low compared to other types. The lack of articulating limbs of most bird species means that they are not as stimulated to perform complex actions."

Ves had been staring into the enclosed forest for over ten minutes without detecting any hint of a spiritual mind. It was clear that he needed to be more specific in order to encounter a creature that might meet his needs.

"I hold a particular interest in sentient and near-sentient lifeforms. Could you guide me towards the exhibits that feature more intelligent beasts?"

"Why certainly." The attendant nodded and began to walk deeper into the expansive park. "We feature a broad mix of exobeasts and designer beasts that are capable of higher forms of thought. Do note that the intelligence of the species we host are limited. Beyond a certain range, an exobeast stops being a very clever brute and starts becoming a sentient alien species that is capable of developing a civilization. The former is classified as humanity's prey while the latter is regarded as a competitor of the human race."

Any alien race that could threaten humanity's dominance in the universe had to be wiped out or restricted as much as possible! This was a universal rule in human space that everyone abided by. Even the LRA abided by this restriction!

This was why even highly-sophisticated designer pets like Clixie were so cat-like despite their high potential. Rubarthan Sentinel Cats were made to be smart enough to protect and provide emotional companionship to their owners, but they were not capable of performing math, writing speeches or designing mechs!

A cat must be a cat. If any of them acted like a human, then they were no longer no longer pets, but potential threats!

Since the distance they needed to traverse was a little further away, Trisha guided them to a transparent platform that speedily transported them tens of kilometers deeper inside the expansive park territory.

Several different biomes flitted past. Ves kept his senses out for any unusual presences, but he failed to detect any spiritually strong lifeforms comparable to Zeigra or Qilanxo.

He knew that this search was a bit of a long shot, but he was determined to look anyway. It wasn't as if he had any other option if he wanted to gather the ingredients he sought.

If Wexel Park wasn't able to provide him with any useful prizes, then Ves would just visit the other venues that sold various beasts.

Eventually, the platform soaring through the air slowed down to a stop. It hovered right over a biome that featured a frozen climate with many steep, jagged rocks.

Trisha began to explain the circumstances of this specific area.

"The arctic, mountainous environment below us is home to a number of designer species designed by Snow Life, which is a subsidiary of Donovan Bioengineering. While they can be a bit difficult to see from this distance, the most popular species are the snow foxes that are constantly being improved by Snow Life. The snow rabbits have also proven to be popular among women."

This wasn't enough to Ves. He needed an indicator of their positions below him in order to examine them closer with his spiritual senses.

"Can you mark out where all of the animals are located below this platform?"

"Why certainly, sir. Please wait a few seconds."

Soon enough, the invisible platform began to highlight hundreds of tiny shapes below his feet. Ves looked fascinated as he could discern the distribution of different snow beasts.

Some of them huddled in warrens as family units. Others prowled the jagged rocks by themselves.

Now that he knew their positions, Ves began to extend his senses in order to sweep over them one by one. While that sounded rather tedious, he only needed a fraction of a second to determine whether an animal possessed a strong spirit.

"Can you fly lower? We are so high up that I can hardly spot any beast with the n.a.k.e.d eye."

Trisha did not immediately say yes. "We can do that, but do note that this is not a recommended course of action. Any harm or death that befalls you or your entourage is solely your responsibility. While we endeavor to keep our guests as safe as possible,

we cannot make any promises as certain exobeasts and designer beasts may hide unusual abilities that can bypass our safeguards. As with any other forms of life, we cannot account for any mutations that might occur."

Ves turned around to face her. He became a lot more interested in what she said. "How often do these mutations occur? How dangerous are they?"

"These mutations only happen a couple of times a year." His guide answered. "In most cases, the mutations are quite harmless, but there are some cases where they pose a threat to our guests and to our other organic products. They are usually taken back in order to investigate whether their changes are replicable and controllable."

"Have these attempts succeeded?"

"I cannot say, but from what I have heard, most mutations are products of very unique circumstances. Attempts to replicate them have always failed. You must understand that living organisms are always inherently unstable. They grow. They age. They change. They adapt. All of these processes and more result in constant physical developments that generally proceed in a predictable direction but can occasionally go astray."

Trisha began to explain some other interesting facts about these so-called mutated beasts.

Whenever any powerful mutations occurred, the beast in question became very valuable. Yet every time a team of biotech specialists studied the nature of their mutations, they were never able to cultivate an identical mutated creature.

"It is no secret that the biotech researchers of our state have only succeeded in replicating a modest number of weaker and less powerful mutations." She admitted. "Life is very interesting in this way. Mutations can make any beast become more powerful and lethal than their genes allow them to, but we are unable to replicate it on an industrial scale, let alone inside a biolab. Almost every beast designer in the galaxy yearns to crack the secret behind replicating mutated beasts. This is why these specimens are sold for astronomic sums despite the lack of progress in these studies."

The various properties mentioned by Trisha caused Ves to be more and more certain about the nature of mutated beasts.

While the weaker examples were probably beasts who mutated in an ordinary fashion, he suspected that the more powerful ones may have mutated in a spiritual aspect!

Just like how a small amount of humans developed spiritual potential, smarter beasts were probably subject to the same phenomenon!

In order to verify his suspicion, he asked a highly pertinent question.

"What kind of beasts are more prone to develop these mutations?"

Trisha did not hide anything. "In general, these unanticipated mutations occur more frequently among more advanced and genetically complex specimens. Natural exobeasts are more prone to mutation than designer beasts."

"Do sentient beasts mutate at a higher frequency than non-sentient beasts?"

"That is correct. Sentient beasts, whether they are natural or artificial, possess much more genes. They are also more complex creatures. Both of these factors introduce more variables which are all vulnerable to random changes."

This was interesting! If Trisha was right, the biotech industry probably didn't understand the truth behind these 'mutations'. However, beast designers figured out enough clues to increase the chance of mutations if they wished!

"Could you show me the species that have produced these mutations in the past?" Ves eagerly asked. He acted as if he found a new toy! "I'd like to see what makes these beasts special."

"Sir, I can lead you to them, but please do not expect anything out of the norm. Mutations at this scale are rare and we always take them out of our biomes once we detect anything amiss."

"I understand, but please show me to them regardless."

Chapter 2754 - Low Probability

It turned out that Ves didn't need to travel far in order to view his first species that had produced a mutant.

The snow foxes ignorantly frolicking in the frozen biome underneath the floating platform were quite remarkable. Despite their modest physical sizes, they were quite clever in their own way.

The mischievous foxes were designed to be very s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e to emotions. They served as active companions to any traumatized humans who needed to learn how to have fun again.

The snow rabbits on the other hand were designed to be as harmless and cuddly as possible. They possess an extraordinary gentle temperament. They were so unthreatening that they could cause even the most hurt and untrusting individuals to lower their guard!

Trish pointed at the projected snow foxes. "While the snow rabbits have not produced any mutations of note, one of the previous versions of the snow fox species once

counted a mutated specimen among them. The creature in question generated a small sensation in our park."

"How did this snow fox mutate? Did it gain any special abilities?"

"The mutated fox required 60 percent less sleep than other snow foxes. We extensively examined whether it suffered from any sleep deprivation. We failed to find anything detrimental. The fox was completely healthy, or at least as healthy as a snow fox living in this biome should be. We went on to auction it after our examinations failed to yield any further useful data."

Ves became disappointed. That was it? A mutation that allowed a single creature to cut down its sleep was hardly the ingredient he sought!

This example highlighted the fact that mutations, whether they were physical or spiritual, were not always useful!

The definition of mutation covered both major and minor changes. Some mutations caused the organism in question to grow weaker while other mutations imparted them with extraordinary powers!

The outcome was highly randomized. Perhaps certain species were more slanted towards specific categories of mutations, but even then it was still a lottery.

As Ves honed his senses on each and every snow fox, he failed to encounter any creature that possessed more than a negligible spirit.

Perhaps there may be a snow fox that had managed to develop a physiological mutation, but there was nothing extraordinary behind such a change.

Growing an extra toe, becoming a little taller or being able to count to 20 instead of 10 hardly constituted design spirit material.

Ves needed to find creatures like Zeigra. Now that was a creature that had the potential to grow into an immensely dangerous entity.

Even though it was impossible for the Crown Cat to escape the fate of getting hunted, Ves always wondered what life the huge cat would have lived if left on an untamed planet.

What if Zeigra developed even further? Perhaps his body might start to fail after a millennia of life. Perhaps the huge cat would probably die once his body failed, but what if he was able to exist behind in another form?

What if he was able to live on in an incorporeal form? Would he transition into an entity comparable to the dark gods?

Probably not. Any mutated beast who developed a powerful spirit would have to meet a large number of requirements. If they fell short in any way, then they could forget about transcending their mortal coil!

In this regard, it was nearly impossible for any mutated beast to go all the way. The only exceptions that beat all of the odds were incredibly lucky for avoiding all of the pitfalls.

Ves did not hold any ambitions of picking up a mutated beast that had already evolved a powerful ability. From what he had seen so far, monitoring was ubiquitous in Wexel Park. Anytime a creature exhibited an unusual capability, it would immediately get flagged and taken away.

All he wanted to look for right now were mutated beasts that had only begun to become extraordinary. If they were still in the process of growing their spiritualities, then they may not have developed any powers as of yet. As long as Wexel Park wasn't aware of these special developments, then Ves would probably be able to buy the specimens without any opposition.

This was very important! So far, the LRA only extended basic privileges to him that every foreigner enjoyed. Ves and his clan were not allowed to purchase many valuable products. A mutated beast definitely qualified as one due to their rarity and research value!

Fortunately, Trisha did not harbor any suspicions towards him. She merely thought that Ves was dazzled by the prospect of owning a mutated pet. Plenty of rich people exhibited the same behavior. She was used to this kind of request.

Once Ves dismissed the snow foxes, they moved to a nearby biome that featured a swampy environment.

"The genodin palma is a hard-shelled alien species that lives in shallow swamps like these." Trisha introduced. "While they resemble turtles, they do not possess any limbs or heads. Their senses are limited. They solely live by s.u.c.k.i.n.g in water through one of the cavities in the side of their shell."

"I see. They seem quite.. simple. How could these creatures produce a powerful mutation?"

His guide responded with a smile. "That is a question that we have asked as well. So far, we failed to generate an answer."

"What mutation did the specimen in question develop?"

"The abnormal genodin palma was able to produce water out of nothing."

Ves looked impressed. "Is that true?"

She nodded. "I am not referring to condensing moisture from the air in order to generate flows of water. That is something that many organisms are capable of doing. I am referring to spontaneously generating body fluid that resembles water."

"Something has to be lost, though." Ves grew a bit skeptical. "We might as well throw the conservation laws in the trash if a random giant exobeast is able to break reality to this extent."

"You're correct, Mr. Larkinson. After performing an extensive series of examinations, our researchers concluded that the mutated genodin palma is able to extract energy from its body, the surrounding environment and possibly other sources. After accumulating a sufficient amount of energy, the creature directly converts it into matter in the form of the fluid that I have just described. It's quite magical!"

It was too absurd to know that a stupid shelled creature like this was capable of replicating high technology!

Trisha understood his befuddlement. "That is mutation for you. No organism is more worthy than others. While the more clever and sophisticated beasts have a higher chance to develop a notable mutation, theoretically every lifeform past a certain threshold is able to develop great powers."

"Including humans?" Ves curiously asked.

He had his own answer to this question, but he was curious what a representative of a biotech company had to say. How much did they equate humans to other lifeforms who were able to mutate?

Trisha looked serious at Ves. "This is a delicate topic that has always sparked contentious arguments. Wexal Park officially holds no stance on this topic. Speaking on a personal basis, you should refrain from bringing this topic up with any of our beast designers and other professionals within the biotech industry. All I can say is that everyone has a different opinion on whether humans, aliens and other beasts should be lumped in the same category or not. What people believe usually shapes their approach towards their work in a highly profound fashion."

Ves understood what she was talking about. It was a core philosophical question that pointed biotech specialists in different directions.

Those who put humans at the same height as exobeasts would not treat either of them special. A human was just another beast that just happened to wear clothes, use tools and form complex thoughts.

As Ves thought about whether humans were more special than other organisms in the galaxy or not, Trisha guided him to numerous more species that once produced mutations.

None of the creatures he inspected with his spiritual senses yielded any positive results.

Whether a given species produced one mutation was not necessarily an indicator that a second one would follow.

"We have rarely detected multiple mutations in the same species." Trisha supported this argument. "The only instances where subsequent mutations took place concerned species that we have hosted in Wexal Park for decades."

"I see."

This basically meant that every beast he bought from Wexal Park had an equal chance of developing a mutation. If he wanted to increase the odds of obtaining a creature with powerful spirituality, then he would just have to purchase more.

In fact, the best solution was to take over Wexal Park entirely! If he owned hundreds of thousands of different exobeasts and designer beasts, he wouldn't have to be so circumspect about looking for mutations.

If any mutated beast emerged, then Ves wouldn't have to compete against other biotech experts to obtain it. He also wouldn't generate as much suspicion either, as it was hard to explain why a mech designer like him was interested in studying organic creatures.

As Ves thought about taking over an entire beast institution, he began to grow more and more in favor of it. He might not be able to buyout a company as large and strategic as Wexal Park, but he should definitely be able to take over a smaller organization!

If the Larkinson Biotech Institute was able to absorb such an organization, then Ves could dictate all of the rules. He could set up biomes that increased the chance of organisms developing spirituality. He could perform all of the studies he wanted on a mutated beast in his possession. He could decide to fatten it up and slaughter it when the mutated beast had developed its powers to the desired level.

He could even keep the powerful creature alive and use it as a design spirit!

Of course, the latter sounded rather extreme. Ves would already be happy if he could setup a 'spiritual ingredient farm' where he could regularly harvest spiritual fragments or whole spiritualities of a diverse collection of beasts.

He would need a lot of space, however.

It was one thing to build a nature preserve on a planet. As long as he set it up on a rural planet where there was an abundant amount of land for the taking, he could erect a private zoo that was several times larger than Wexal Park!

Yet if he wished to take his private zoo with him on his travels, then he would have to resort to other solutions.

He needed a capital ship that was dedicated to studying and cultivating beasts!

He winced. Such vessels were not only expensive, but also exceedingly difficult to run properly. There were many challenges to maintaining different biomes on a ship that only had so much space to spare.

What was even worse for Ves was that adding a biotech research vessel to his expeditionary fleet would take up a limited slot in his capital ship quota. How would he be able to justify the addition of a science ship over a fleet carrier to the rest of his clan?

Chapter 2755 - Arganid Clisenta

Ves inspected the beasts residing in over thirty different biomes. Trisha brought him through an expansive tour through Wexal Park. Each time, she pointed out different beasts ranging from giant reptilians to tiny bugs that had once produced a mutated specimen.

Yet after sweeping his spiritual senses until he ran it ragged, he became more and more disappointed at the results.

None of the exobeasts and designer beasts he inspected possessed any remarkable spirituality. Not even the creatures whose bodies had grown in an abnormal fashion possessed any unusual traits that caught his interest.

Ves felt disappointed. As he swept his eyes and spiritual senses through a biome that consisted of stacked layers of soil, he dismissed the giant worm species that burrowed through the ground like it was their own playground.

"All of these species which once produced mutations are quite random. There are hardly any patterns aside from surpassing a certain level of complexity."

The dutiful attendant assigned to him by Wexel Park nodded. "That is correct. There are theories in circulation that claim that mutation can occur in even the most rigid, immutable organic species. Of course, there are also experts who disagree with this notion and developed other theories to explain this phenomenon."

That was all Trisha said about the matter. She was very careful not to say anything that put Wexal Park in an awkward position. Even though it was one of the most famed exobeast preserves on Prosperous Hill VI, its owners did not wish to spoil their relations with half of the beast designers working in this region.

As Ves continued to observe the different beasts on display and for sale in the park, he combined his observations with the information provided by Trisha. He developed some theories of his own after he drew from his own knowledge and experiences.

The most important one was that the reason why he hadn't encountered any mutated here was because the biomes did not provide the ideal conditions for them to emerge.

The one that Trisha had brought him to next was a good example of that. It simulated an arid environment where the temperature at daytime never fluctuated beyond 42 to 53 degrees Celsius. Even the timing of rainfall and other weather phenomena was put on a fixed schedule!

The plump, furry rats that scoured through this dry environment never had to worry about dying from thirst. They only had to wait until rainfall finally replenished all of the watering holes.

"We have perfected the climate cycle of every biome." Trisha proudly stated. "It is impossible to preserve the life of every beast that is put into a given environment. Whether it is natural or artificial, creatures can lose their lives for all sorts of reasons. Outside of death by predation, mating rituals or old age, every other cause of death or infirmity represents a severe loss of value. We have spent decades accruing experience so that we have minimized unnecessary waste as much as possible. Many beast designers feel assured with putting their prized designer beasts in our care as we are able to guarantee the lowest rate of avoidable attrition on this planet."

So that was why. Wexal Park was not set up to cultivate mutated beasts, though it didn't mind if it gained any. However, its main business was the exhibition and sale of ordinary beasts. This was the bread and butter of the company and everything its operators did served to maximize their revenue while minimizing their losses.

Relying on mutated beasts to generate a profit was an incredibly unstable business model. The rate of mutations was low and very few measures were able to increase it. While the value of a mutated beast could be a hundred, a thousand or even a million times more valuable than a regular animal, they showed up so infrequently that it was no different from playing the lottery!

Ves realized that Wexal Park was far from the ideal site to look for a beast with active spirituality. The biomes maintained by the company were so comfy and cozy that the beasts didn't have too many worries. The goal was to keep them happy and alive. Even the prey whose presence served to keep the predators fed didn't have to worry about running out of food, getting infected by strange diseases or seeing their usual haunts broken up by mudslides or other disasters.

Life in these stale and supposedly 'perfect' biomes was not really a life at all. It was all an illusion. The wild and ferocious beasts living ignorantly inside their own invisible cages did not even know they were nothing more than free-range cattle.

The beasts quickly learned that wandering off was a bad idea. Over time, they no longer developed any thoughts of exiting their designated territories. After all, why abandon their ideal living conditions for something completely unknown?

The lack of hardships never drove these beasts to desperation. Just like mech pilots who spent their entire careers in harmless simulation battles and live training sessions, they never experienced the full inconveniences and threats of true war.

Ves found it ironic that while the Lifers of this state obsessed so much about living organisms, they did their best to turn every application into another form of commodity.

The exobeasts of Wexal Park were all treated like products instead of lifeforms that could turn into something greater if they weren't subject to so many artificial arrangements.

Ves began to think he would be better off with gathering the ingredients he sought by visiting an untamed planet. At least the exobeasts living on an alien planet untouched by humans wouldn't have all their needs taken care of as if they were nobles!

"This park is quite nice, but I am accustomed to environments that are larger and wilder. Are there any places where beasts live in a more expansive area or where people such as myself can hunt them down?"

"Why certainly, Mr. Larkinson. PQT Management, the parent company of Wexal Park, also managed an even bigger nature preserve on Prosperous Hill IV. Semross Park divided in several large territories where a large variety of exobeasts and designer beasts live in environments that more closely match the conditions of wild planets."

"What makes the beasts sold at Semross Park different from those on offer here?" Ves asked.

"Prosperous Hill IV is the true center for beast design in our region, so all of the most remarkable exobeasts and best designer beasts developed by our local beast designers are put into places like Semross Park first. They are more savage, more unstable but also more beautiful if you prefer this sort of charm. Many Lifers appreciate these powerful beasts, so Semross Park especially caters to their demand."

Ves inwardly sighed. The sixth planet from the sun was no good. He needed to gain access to the fourth planet in order to gain access to all of the good stuff that Lifers largely kept to themselves.

"Is there any way that your company can arrange access to Semross Park to me?" He asked. "I am in the market for more impressive beasts than the ones I have just viewed."

Trisha shook her head. "My apologies, sir, but we cannot overcome the rules set by the state and the local government. Foreign guests are ordinarily restricted from entering Prosperous Hill IV unless they are vouched by a prominent Lifer or have earned passage in some other fashion. We are unable to provide any assistance with regards to this issue."

He expected this answer. Everytime a local talked about Prosperous Hill IV, they always mentioned that it was a restricted planet. That made Ves want to step foot on it even more!

As Ves started asking several questions about Semross Park, he briefly paused for a moment.

He felt a presence tingling against his spiritual senses.

He subtly paid more attention to his current surroundings. Trisha had led him to a rocky environment that featured lots of cliffs that were host to an extensive cave network. Numerous projections showed off eight-legged mammals scurrying about in dimly-lit caves that were illuminated by bioluminescent plants.

"What are these odd little octopods creatures?" He curiously asked.

"They belong to an exobeast species called arganid clisenta. The arganids are relatively short-lived mammals who prefer to live in dusky conditions such as this. What is interesting about them is that they are rather clever despite their diminutive size. They know how to set up traps and corral their prey in unfavorable terrain in order to catch them while expending less energy. This is quite important to them as they originally lived in an environment where their prey is scarce. They have to live the equivalent of weeks without the opportunity to fill their stomachs. Their digestion systems are highly-developed as well."

Yet that was not why he paid attention to them. He set his sights on a projection that depicted an arganid that was a bit smaller. According to the accompanying text, the exobeast in question was male and suffered some sort of disease on his native planet prior to his capture and transportation to Prosperous Hill.

The beast that Ves was eying was supposedly 7 years old. Since Arganids were recorded to live up to 17 years, the specimen should be in the prime of its life.

Yet as Ves observed the arganid further, he noted that two of the creature's eight limbs were not responsive. They were lame or damaged to the point where they were crippled. Not only did they not support any weight, they also caused the arganid to drag them across the cave soil. This caused the creature to generate noise and vibrations, which did not help the exobeast whenever he wanted to hunt!

This was exactly the kind of pressure that could cause an exobeast to mutate!

Ves did not dare to inspect or pay any special attention to the arganid in question any further. He knew what he felt. The small and weak-looking exobeast somehow surpassed his fellow arganids by developing a decently-powerful spirit, thereby breaking into the ranks of the extraordinary!

So far, he wasn't sure what powers the mutated arganid gained. The creature wasn't doing anything special aside from digging holes to prepare his next trap.

The arganid's spirit was also a lot weaker than that of Zeigra's when the latter was still a living cat. Whether this was due to differences in size, intelligence, territory or other factors, Ves didn't know.

All he thought about was that this wasn't the time for him to be picky. He did not want to leave Wexal Park empty-handed. After all of this touring, he finally found a potential ingredient. Ves was not about to let it slip from his grasp.

Ves turned to Trisha. "Please show me another biome. Do you have any fish or aquatic beasts?"

"We do maintain a number of underground aquariums. The nearest entrance is a short distance away."

He quietly followed Trisha as she brought him to a sloped tunnel that led into a chamber that featured transparent walls that showed breathtaking sights of aquatic biomes.

As Ves pretended to admire the sealife inside, he never forgot about the arganid that caught his attention.

He did not dare to buy it outright at the moment. Ves did not want Wexal Park to catch on that he might possess the means to detect a mutated beast. He also did not wish to let them know that the arganid he chose was special.

What if the caretakers working for Wexal Park found something out when they inspected the arganid?

If Ves wanted to maximize his chance of obtaining a mutated beast, then he had to give everyone the impression that he was only vaguely interested in owning an exobeast!

Chapter 2756 - Wasteful Purchase

Ves patiently spent two more hours viewing all of the biomes and exhibits that Wexal Park had to offer.

He pretended to be captivated in the beauty of the light of the aquariums. Different shades of light shone over the waters, causing the fish and other sea creatures to look more colorful than they already were.

He made all of the right noises as Trisha led him to a special chamber which simulated the conditions of space in order to offer a friendly living environment to tiny astrobeasts the size of fingernails.

He even showed interest in the icky insects that were crawling their way through the tunnels of giant terrariums. The different species of insects had been warring against each other since Wexel Park came into operation. The soldier creatures fought and died while their queens bred more and more replacements by laying lots of eggs.

At the end of the tour, Ves pretended to be a little dissatisfied. "It's a shame I haven't encountered anything that resembles a mutated beast."

Trisha smiled back in an apologetic fashion. "This is the usual state of affairs, Mr. Larkinson. We constantly try to identify any mutants as quickly as possible in order to isolate them. The biomes cannot guard against every newly-developed ability, so it is irresponsible to keep them here. We do not wish to subject our guests to any harm."

"That's understandable, I suppose." Ves nodded and relaxed. "I guess I'll stick to my original plan, then. I have quite a few gardens on my flagship that are awfully barren of wildlife. I'd like to purchase batches of harmless, exotic-looking creatures to populate these areas. I have made a few choices, but could you provide me with some additional suggestions?"

"Why certainly. That is what I am for. Please tell me your requirements and I shall make sure to point you to the right species."

They spent over half an hour on considering and selecting different species. With the help of Trisha, Ves selected several dozen individual creatures of every species, no matter whether they were natural or artificial in nature.

Ves made no distinctions in this regard. While he suspected that wild exobeasts had a higher chance of developing spirituality, he knew that artificial creatures also possessed a chance. Otherwise, Zeigra would have remained stuck as a dumb cat that could only threaten mechs with its physical prowess.

Along the way, Ves picked up a batch of arganids that he had previously eyed.

"These mammalian octopods are adorable. They're like kittens with eight legs." He said. "Am I right, Lucky?"

"Meow." The gem cat responded flatly as he lay on Ves' shoulder.

"So you agree! I'm sure they will provide you and your fellow cats aboard the Spirit of Bentheim with good company."

It was as easy as that for Ves to purchase a number of arganids without drawing any special attention to the creatures in question.

Ves did not let Trisha or the other staff of the park choose the specimens. Instead, Ves pretended to be a bit of a control freak and insisted on viewing and inspecting the data on every individual creature.

Out of a selection of hundreds of individual arganids, he picked out ten who were either younger or cuter than the a.d.u.l.t population.

The arganid with the crippled limbs happened to be among this little group.

When Trisha saw that Ves casually tapped his finger at the specimen's profile, she made a remark.

"This individual creature is defective. According to the degree of inadequacies this male beast exhibits, we provide a 27 percent discount on the list price. Is this acceptable to you, Mr. Larkinson?"

If Wexal Park knew that this harmless-looking mammal actually possessed a spirit that almost matched that of a newly-ascended expert pilot, they would have never offered any discount, let alone sell the mutated arganid at all! The researchers working for the park would be crawling all over the poor creature in order to study the unique phenomenon further.

Ves did not reveal any of his excitement. He carefully suppressed his growing anticipation and merely waved his hand as if he didn't care about any discounts.

This should be his natural behavior considering his status. Even if his clan had lost a lot of strength, his mech company was still going strong. After the LMC abandoned its operations in Coalition-aligned space, the Fridaymen had no means left to hinder its growing business activities!

While Ves was mindful of the fact that the Larkinson Clan was spending enormous sums of money on purchasing raw materials to build its mechs and other necessities, it was still remarkable how much money he had at his disposal.

Even if he had to save trillions of hex credits to fund the development of his expert mechs and the procurement of capital sh.i.p.s, no one cared if he spent a few hundred million hex credits here and there.

He bought way more animals from Wexal Park than necessary, but this was a small price to pay to keep his target acquisition as unremarkable as possible. The arganid would have attracted a lot more attention from the staff if he bought the undetectant mutant alone. Now that Ves had ordered hundreds of exobeasts and designer beasts at once, the chance of discovery should be minimal!

After making his selection of beasts, Trisha guided him to an office building where he formally signed a contract that set the transaction in stone. Ves transferred the necessary amount of money on the spot.

Even though he had to pay a bit more than the list price due to the need to convert hex credits to the local currency, Ves didn't even look at the final price tag.

All he cared about was securing his little Arnold as soon as possible.

Yup. He already named the critter he had his eye on. Perhaps his naming sense wasn't on point today, the name of the mottled grey creature was less important than his potential abilities.

No entity who developed spirituality was average. Not when they grew this strong.

As Ves finally bid farewell to Trisha and entered his shuttle, he continued to keep himself under control.

While he was very excited at securing his new prize, he still had to wait until the exobiologists working for Wexal Park performed a final health check before transporting the batch of beasts to Gentle Lotus Base.

As Ves returned to his base of operations, he waited an entire day before a branded transport finally shipped over the goods.

Since the purchased beasts had to be cared for by the Larkinson Biotech Institute, Ves summoned Dr. Ranya Wodin to his side in order to discuss the exact arrangements.

"You should have consulted me before purchasing any of these beasts. None of our sh.i.p.s are set up to support a large and diverse population of different species." She told him. "I've read the properties of each species you've bought. Half of them will die by the end of the year if you just dump them in the gardens aboard the Spirit of Bentheim."

"It doesn't matter. Let the creatures die if they can't make it. I only care about one specimen in particular. You need to do your best to accommodate the creature and keep him alive unless ordered otherwise."

"Pardon?"

Ves turned to the exobiologist. "You heard me. All of the other creatures I've bought have no value in my eyes. You can do whatever you want with them. Putting them in the garden compartments is just one suggestion. If that's too difficult, then use them as test subjects if you wish."

"None of our experiments require the use of animal testing. Simulations and testing on cloned flesh are more than sufficient to test our treatments. Even if we resort to

something as barbaric as this practice, we would choose animals whose genes resemble the human genome more closely. An ordinary laboratory mouse has worked well enough for thousands of years. Alien creatures and designer beasts are too different to serve as suitable surrogates.

Disapproval dripped from her tone. A modern biolab engaged in proper research never performed any experiments on live test subjects! Only madmen and incompetent scientists resorted to this inferior, low-tech solution.

Ves merely shrugged. "Then check whether they are edible and butcher them if declared safe. I think we could all use some more diversity in our meals. The LRA happens to be a mecca for gourmets I hear."

"And what if they aren't edible?"

"Throw them into an incinerator or something. We don't need to waste any resources on useless assets."

As the transport unloaded the enclosed cages that precisely regulate the temperature and other environmental conditions in their spaces, a crew of Larkinsons moved them over to loading vehicles that would bring them to a storage site.

Ves and Ranya accompanied the loading vehicles to a warehouse. As the crates were all placed inside, a number of exobiologists working for the Larkinson Biotech Institute went through them one by one to inspect the beasts slumbering inside.

In order to minimize the disruption to the lives of the animals as much as possible, Wexal Park had already sedated them. The beasts wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

"Where is the beast you are interested in? I'd like to take a look for myself." Ranya said.

"You will have ample opportunity to. Let me seek him out."

He pointed at a specific crate. "Please lift this one out for me and put it under my care."

Fifteen minutes later, Ves stood besides Ranya as she operated a scanner that thoroughly peered into the furry body of a sleeping Arganid.

"Meow."

Lucky looked curious at the alien critter as he hovered a short distance away. He behaved a bit ambivalent towards the new beast. Did Ves intend to adopt a new pet or something?

"Have you spotted anything that stands out?" Ves asked as the initial scans came to an end.

"I'm not sure, sir." Ranya admitted. "I only have a passing familiarity of the arganid clisenta species. I do not specialize in studying small mammalian exobeasts like these. I'm more into flora myself. I have exobeast specialists under my staff who can provide you with more detailed judgement."

"No. Don't let anyone else study Arnold. Only you are allowed to handle him." Ves declared.

"My subordinates can be trusted! It is unreasonable to leave this task up to me when I am not the most suitable specialist! I am already preoccupied with a number of research projects and administrative duties. I'm also doing my best to hire the biotech experts we need to expand the capabilities of our research institute!"

Ves looked at her with a measuring gaze. "While I trust every Larkinson, I don't want certain secrets to be spread any further than necessary. Right now, I am presenting you with an opportunity. I know you are aware of some of the more unusual and extraordinary phenomena our clan has exhibited. Have you ever been interested in studying the more esoteric aspects of what I do? Do you want to hear the answer why this random exobeast is related to my work?"

Ranya paused her work. "Are you saying..."

"I'm offering to turn you into one of my confidantes of sorts." Ves carefully spoke. "I have already let you handle some s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e materials beforehand. I'm quite satisfied with your discretion. I'm willing to let you in on a couple more secrets in order to point you in the right direction with regards to the beast lying on your testbed. All I am asking from you is to share everything you learn with me and no one else."

"Not even your wife?"

"Not even my wife." Ves confirmed. "The secrets that I am talking about are very dangerous if word of them ends up in the wrong ears. Now, do you agree or not? I am offering to enlighten you into one of the fundamental truths of reality. All you need to do is to keep your mouth shut."

Dr. Ranya did not hesitate for a second. She offered Ves an accepting smile. "As a loyal member of the Larkinson Clan, I am at your disposal. I would be glad to be of service to you, my patriarch."

Chapter 2757 - Arnold

Even though Ves decided to share some secrets relating to spirituality to Dr. Ranya, he only shared a few surface aspects for now. All she needed to know was that there was

an unknown and difficult-to-detect form of energy in existence that served as the source to many extraordinary manifestations.

"Why have I never heard of these theories?!" Ranya voiced her astonishment. "You are talking about nothing less than the origin of high-ranking expert pilots!"

"That's why I have always been careful with spreading this knowledge. You can't imagine how many people in the galaxy will want to silence us if we are too careless with what we say. Now keep listening because there are a number of other implications that you should know."

He proceeded to tell her about how every form of sentient life possessed a quality that he called spirituality. He didn't add too much detail because he wasn't completely sure about them. He also wanted to prevent Ranya from taking over too many of his biases.

In order to make Ranya as useful as possible, he wanted her to develop her own perspective towards spirituality. As an exobiologist, she approached the phenomenon from an entirely different direction. That was useful as time went on because she might be able to make observations that Ves would never make.

Two heads were better than one, especially when they differed from each other!

Explaining the gist of spirituality already took an entire hour. Ranya listened with rapturous attention and asked questions whenever she needed clarification.

Overall, she absorbed his theories remarkably quickly. She did not question his assertions. As a young and highly-learned academic, she possessed the capacity to absorb ground-breaking new theories without rejecting them by reflex.

Even if she held doubts concerning some of what Ves had shared, she knew better than to offer critique to someone who knew much more about this subject.

While Ves left plenty of material out, Ranya learned enough to know the nature of design spirits. She even found out where some of them came from!

"This is amazing." She uttered as she turned around to observe the slumbering Arganid in a whole new light. "So if you are correct, this small and furry organism has the potential to power the glows of millions of mechs."

"That's correct, but potential alone is not enough." Ves added. "We still have to find out whether Arnold has developed any usual powers or traits that fit with certain mech designs. For all I know, this furry beast simply stands out by being able to eat sand or something. That's not usable."

"I see."

Now that Ranya gained a portion of secret knowledge, she felt more driven than ever. She did not wish to disappoint his expectations and began to study Arnold from several different angles.

"The specimen's brain activity is indeed higher than the other slumbering Arganids." She pointed out. "I can't detect any specific activity that stands out. The deviation is not very considerable."

"That's to be expected. Arnold's body isn't the focus here. It's his more intangible properties that catch my attention. I merely want you to study his body because I want you to see if his mental strength affects his physical development in any way. I also want you to keep him alive as best as possible."

Even after Ranya learned about spirituality, she hadn't been able to gather any data that was undeniably tied to Arnold's remarkable strength in this aspect. Ves did not hold any high expectations for now. He knew that plenty of scientists had tried and failed to tie the tangible and the intangible together.

"Don't worry about it. Just let what you learned inform you of anything unusual Arnold might do." He told her. "Let's wait until he wakes up and gets his bearings before we proceed with deeper examinations. I have other duties to attend to so I'll leave you with my latest prize. Keep him under observation and inform me if he does anything outside of the norm."

"Yes, sir."

Ves did what he said. He performed his usual duties and attended various meetings with different clansmen.

He never really paid too much attention to what was going on, though. He only spared a portion of his focus on the matter at hand.

What he really cared about was Arnold. He wondered about the planet where the arganid clisenta species came from. Was it nearby? Would he be able to pay a visit to it? What caused the little critter to injure two of his limbs? How did Arnold manage to mutate his spirit when so many of his fellow arganids were rather simple cave dwellers?

Above all else, Ves wondered what kind of attributes Arnold possessed. He inspected the slumbering exobeast's spirituality many times. He tried to avoid getting too close for fear of frightening or injuring the beast, so he wasn't able to get a deep impression.

What he did know was that Arnold wasn't simple. The arganid possessed a murky spirituality that did not exude any strong or straightforward impression.

"He's different from Zeigra." Ves muttered.

Zeigra was a Crown Cat. He lived and thrived in an environment that was specifically set up to turn the huge cat into an apex predator that was powerful enough to defeat mechs!

In contrast, Arnold was many times smaller and only a fraction as powerful. Let alone smacking mechs, the arganid wasn't even capable of scratching the coating of a mech with its diminutive physical body!

When Ves finally returned to Ranya's groundside lab the next day, he noticed that she had rearranged the interior to provide a comfortable living environment for Arnold.

One of the chambers had been converted into a cave-like environment where the lighting, temperature and other conditions were carefully controlled. This was good because the arganid species did not do great in well-lit places.

"He's awake." Ves said. "Has he done anything out of the norm?"

"So far, I have not detected anything that stands out to me." Ranya replied as she inspected a panel that described the environmental conditions inside the chamber. "I can tell you that 'Arnold' is quite aware that he's been moved to a completely different place. He is nervous and is in the process of digging a new safehold for himself."

Ves gazed at a projection that showed the creature using its working limbs to remove soil and small rocks in order to widen a new area inside the tunnel.

"He's kind of cute. He doesn't know anything better." Ves chuckled.

"What do you wish to do with him now that we have housed him? If you wish to observe him, then you will need to settle for the long haul."

"I don't want to waste too much time. I have a better way of learning what I need to know. Pull him out and bring him forward. I'd like to speak with Arnold in person."

"Are you serious? An arganid possesses decent intelligence but they are not known for their ability to communicate with humans."

"I'm different. I can communicate with animals, especially ones who possess stronger spritis." Ves casually revealed. "Just trust me on this. Please pull him out so that I can have a frank talk with him. The best way for me to learn what he is capable of is to make direct contact with him. I don't see the need to give him the illusion that he is living in his own little world."

Perhaps this was a little too hasty and risky, but Ves didn't have time to take it slowly. According to all of the clues that Ves had gathered about Arnold and the arganid species, he had a good hunch that the exobeast might be able to contribute to the solutions of one of his current problems.

It took several minutes for a lab apparatus to lock onto Arnold and lift him out from his hidey hole by manipulating gravity.

Poor Arnold panicked as an invisible hand grabbed his furry body and moved him through the tunnels until he passed through a port that was normally blocked and camouflaged as ordinary rock.

After the invisible hand carefully placed Arnold onto a transparent cage that didn't offer much room for maneuver, two upright bodies who appeared as giants to the arganid's weak eyes suddenly came close.

All of the fur on the eight-legged beast's stiffened up as he thought that he was being preyed upon by a pair of greater predators!

Ranya stayed few steps back. She was curious how Ves would establish communication with an alien creature.

He simply talked at first.

"Hello, Arnold." Ves smiled. "Do not be afraid. You have nothing to fear from me. I did not take you from your old home because I want to eat you. You are safe."

"Squeak!" The small exobeast voiced in panic. "Squeak! Squeak!"

The dumb arganid still believed he was in mortal danger. Ves saw that his initial attempt had completely failed. He decided to resort to more drastic measures in order to calm Arnold down.

He quickly concentrated his mind and channeled a portion of Lufa's glow.

A gentle and peaceful aura formed around Ves. Ranya widened her eyes as she experienced a sensation that she ordinarily felt among LMC mechs. Plenty of wheels were turning in her head!

When it came to most life forms, feelings spoke louder than words. Ves designed Lufa to neutralize any negative pressure and exude a sense of tranquility that made others feel as if they were completely safe.

While this was just an illusion, it was enough for Arnold to subside his panic.

The exobeast started to grow curious at Ves instead. "Squeak.. Squeak..?"

Ves smiled and widened his arms. "I am your friend, Arnold. You have nothing to fear from me. While I do not resemble any of your fellow argonids, I am not a predator. Just look at my flat teeth. Do they look like they are suited to bite into flesh like yours?"

The fact that Arnold did not understand human speech was of no consequence. As Ves spoke out, he communicated with both his voice and his unique Spirituality. Due to his life attribute, he was able to make an intrinsic connection with anyone he addressed.

Somehow, Ves knew for certain that Arnold comprehended his meaning.

"Squeak.. squeak... squeak..."

Ves frowned. From Arnold's initial response, he quickly ascertained a problem.

Arnold was only 'intelligent' in the vaguest sense of the word. Compared to the likes of Zeigra and Qilanxo, the arganid fell considerably short in this department!

It shouldn't have been a surprise that this was so. Arganids like Arnold lived their entire lives in a small stretch of caves and underground tunnels. They rarely moved and were never exposed to a lot of environmental variables.

Well, no matter. A simpler exobeast was easier to handle. Ves quickly adjusted his planned approach and tried to coax Arnold into trusting the strange, tall lifeform with no fur except for a single mop of hair on his head.

"You are special, Arnold. It's the reason why you have been chosen by me. You are worthy of my consideration."

"Squeak.. squeak..?"

"I am sure you know what I am referring to. Demonstrate your ability. Show me your blessing. Only by proving your capabilities will you be able to live a better life and rise above all of your fellow arganids. Show me your ability!"

Ves retracted Lufa's aura at the end. He wanted to see Arnold in his natural element, not when he was drugged out from an external glow.

Several seconds passed as Arnold hesitated. The eight-legged creature was both afraid and uncertain. His instincts and limited knowledge didn't teach him anything on how to navigate this strange situation.

In the end, Arnold simply did what he was told. His furry face scrunched up as he seemed to call upon something.

As Ves and Ranya paid close attention, the small exobeast's body suddenly began to blur!

Chapter 2758 - Blur

When Arnold's eight-legged body started blurring, Ves and Ranya knew they were about to witness something special.

The sensors pointed at Arnold couldn't really make sense of what was happening. They registered the blur and detected a number of odd fluctuations in numbers that weren't supposed to wobble in the first place.

Unlike Ranya, Ves had no fancy lab equipment to help him measure and record the details that he wished to examine. He had to rely on himself to perceive what Arnold attempted to accomplish.

Just before the arganid's body started to blur, Ves already perceived the small exobeast exciting something from his head. This pretty much proved that his latest acquisition was definitely performing some sort of spiritual trick as opposed to activating a purely racial ability that every arganid clisenta possessed!

Ves perceived a lot of new sensory input that he had never come in touch before. His curiosity spiked even higher as he became incredibly eager to see what Arnold could accomplish that other spiritual entities could only dream of. As the spiritual activity from the blurring body rose to a crescendo, it seemed as if something drastic was about to take place!

Both humans held their breaths, only for Arnold's body to stop blurring and come into plain view again.

The arganid innocently blinked at Ves as his body came to a complete rest.

"..."

"...That's it?" Ranya whispered.

Ves scratched his head.

Ranya shuffled her posture.

Several deflating seconds went by. Ves kept his spiritual senses active, yet he detected no lingering spiritual activity. Arnold's spirituality had grown a little weaker. This was a clear indicator that the little exobeast expended his energy somewhere, but right now it wasn't clear what had happened.

"This.. is this a joke?" Ranya asked in confusion.

"No. I don't believe so. Something has definitely happened, but not all applications are straightforward. We can't make any conclusions unless we carefully study the data. I

suggest we comb over the sensor and scanning data and mark out any parameter that has spiked."

Ves and Ranya proceeded to do so. They did not bother with calling up projections but directly fed the data feeds into their implants in order to process them faster.

Even though the incident only lasted for a dozen seconds or so, scores of different sensors had made very detailed observations of every single moment. This amounted to entire libraries worth of raw data!

The normal way to process this excess data was to have an AI or algorithm look for abnormal patterns or to pin down a time interval where the most notable event took place.

This was not quite possible because neither Ves nor Ranya knew what they should be looking for. When Arnold's body blurred, the sensors already recorded a heap of abnormal data, but much of it only explained the most superficial phenomenon.

What the pair of observers wanted to know was the root cause as well as the ultimate effect of Arnold's confounding ability.

Ves was unused to parsing through the types of data that Ranya's lab had recorded. They measured all kinds of biological parameters that he wasn't familiar with. He didn't know what was normal, what was abnormal and what kind of measuring stick he should use.

It didn't help that the arganid physiology diverged substantially from the human norm! Mech designers like Ves weren't trained to take all of the changing variables into account.

Fortunately, Ranya was a trained exobiologist. Accounting for the unique properties of highly unusual alien creatures was as easy as breathing to someone of her profession.

After analyzing all of the data, she eventually collected some unusual observations that might give them a clue of what took place.

She tapped Ves on his shoulder. "While I cannot say for certain whether Arnold's extraordinary nature is responsible for these unusual readings, I think they are highly suspect."

Ves took a look at the snippets of sensor readings that she marked out for him. They pointed out something very odd.

When Arnold's body blurred, his body actually stayed completely normal. His blood circulation, his body heat, his neural activity and countless other parameters remained normal.

The only signs of elevated activity was a slight increase in heat radiating from Arnold's head.

Yet why did Arnold's body blur in the first place?

The explanation was simple. The optical sensors detected multiple instances of Arnold superimposing over his original body!

It was as if someone attempted to project multiple images of someone at the same coordinates as the original!

This was generally seen as an amusing trick that didn't do anything. The projected images that overlapped in the same coordinates only jumbled together without doing anything except confusing someone's vision.

Ves couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Was that it? After all this anticipation, was Arnold capable of doing nothing more than conjuring up an optical illusion of himself?

"I don't think it's that simple." Ranya voiced her opinion. "I believe that Arnold here is constrained by the cage that is keeping him in place. Let's give him some more room before trying again. Maybe there is more to these illusions than we thought."

"That's a reasonable suspicion." Ves slowly nodded as he accepted her logic. "Arnold is a little tired, though. I think he can only pull off his ability a single more time before he needs to rest."

"Squeak squeak."

"Yeah, I thought so. I know you are tired but please show your worth properly this time. Don't hold anything back. I can give you a brand new life where you don't need to starve anymore. We will be bringing food to you. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Squeak!"

He knew this offer would attract the simple exobeast. Arnold lived most of his life running away from bigger arganids and other potential predators while waiting for days and weeks for prey to run in his section of the cave network.

The prospect of having food delivered to his doorstep whenever he felt hungry was too irresistible to a creature that had never lived a complex life.

Ves found it odd that Arnold did not even show any doubt or skepticism. The exobeast was far more naive than anticipated.

It would be just like raising Goldie!

Of course, Ves wasn't willing to go through all of this trouble for any spiritual entity. If all Arnold could do amounted to summoning a couple of weak optical illusions that could easily be replicated by a projection device, then Ves was more inclined to butcher the arganid so that he could use the harvested spirituality as an ingredient.

As Ves contemplated whether he should butcher or raise Arnold, Ranya soon completed her adjustments.

Arnold was no longer pressed into place. He was able to move a couple of meters in every direction. For a while, the easily-distracted arganid reveled in his ability to waddle his six functioning limbs!

"Ahem!" Ves coughed. "Don't forget what I asked you to do. Please demonstrate your ability again. Impress me. The more powerful it is, the more food you get. You don't want to starve to death, right?"

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

Arnold became so motivated that he began to activate his ability straight away. Ves could see that the exobeast was putting in a lot more effort than before.

"Look! His body is blurring again!"

As Arnold's body blurred, Ves could perceive more clearly that the alien's original body remained in place. What actually showed up were more than a dozen different intangible images that only existed for a fraction for a second before disappearing.

"They're moving!"

The different images no longer disappeared once they stepped outside Arnold's body. Fifteen different copies of the exobeast started to waddle in different directions. They moved to the sides of the expanded cage before stopping.

"Give him more space! Quick!"

Even though it wasn't entirely safe to do so, Ranya grew curious as well. She quickly activated the command that caused the energy screen to expand further. Once that happened, the images proceeded to take advantage of the freed space and spread out even further.

Something was obviously suspicious about these illusionary bodies. They walked in a jerked and accelerated fashion as if someone was watching a recording at 1.5x speed. While that made the fake Arnolds look wrong at first glance, they were able to traverse faster than the original.

"The extra bodies are fake." Ranya spoke with certainty. "They don't displace any air, they don't emit any heat or other signals and they don't exert any weight on the floor. What's strange is that they can't pass through the energy screen for some reason."

That did not sound good. If this was the extent of what Arnold could do, then he wasn't worth investing in. Ves was already starting to think about what he would do with the ingredient he could harvest from Arnold's body.

Should he use it as an ingredient for a new spiritual product or should he use it as an augment of one of his existing ones? Even though Arnold's ability was a little lackluster, it could produce a remarkable result when combined with other abilities.

After 40 seconds, the phantom bodies began to destabilize. Arnold was no longer able to maintain them. As they all faded out of existence, only a single Arnold was left.

"What?"

"Huh?"

For a small period of time, there were 16 versions of the arganid in the testing area. Ves expected 15 of the fake bodies to disappear while the original stayed in place.

What actually happened was that the original disappeared at the same time as 14 phantom bodies.

That left only 1 phantom body in place. Yet was it really a fake?

Ranya gasped as she double-checked the data. "He's real! The Arnold that is left is the actual one!"

"What?!" Ves rubbed his eyes as if there was something wrong with his vision. "How? I thought for sure the Arnolds that had spread out were fake."

"According to all of our sensor readings, that is true. I'm pretty certain that if someone were to attack the Arnold in the center, he would get wounded for real. It's just that upon the moment where all of the fake Arnolds disappeared, the real one seemed to have taken one of its places!"

"..What happened to the original Arnold, then?"

"I'm not sure. This is too new for me. I have to study the data a bit further."

Ves looked at Arnold in a brand new light after this little demonstration. The arganid looked awfully tired and hungry. Fortunately, Wexal Park already supplied the Larkinson Clan with a shipment of food that was tailored to the arganid clisenta species.

After Ves called for a bot to bring in a meal for the exobeast, Ranya revealed even more befuddling information.

"I did not detect any rapid movements from the original Arnold or his false bodies. The real body just seemed to... take the place of a copy."

"Did you detect any tangible signs of teleportation?" Ves inquired. "I would have expected some air to be displaced at least."

"That's the thing.. that didn't happen. It was.. it was as if the false Arnold in the corner was the real one all along while the Arnold in the center had always been fake."

???

Ves looked perplexed at Ranya.

"Don't ask me. I'm trying to interpret the data as best as possible, but there are some contradictory elements in it that really don't make sense when put together."

What did all of this mean? What was Arnold's actual ability? Which of his bodies were real and which ones were fake?

Ves had no idea!

He was practically tearing his hair out as he studied the same portions of inconsistent data that Ranya had just pointed out. The contradictory readings just made him even more confused.

He turned around and looked at Lucky. "Do you know what's going on, buddy?"

"Meow."

Chapter 2759 - Mutant Ability

Hours after Arnold gleefully filled his stomach before falling asleep, both Ves and Ranya sat side by side as they methodically combed over the sensor readings.

Since a surface-level analysis yielded too few answers, the pair decided to spend precious hours diving into the huge quantity of raw data.

They had to know exactly what the sensors managed to record. They also had to question the reliability of the sensors in question. Ves even spent some of his time performing physical inspections on them in order to make sure they were properly calibrated.

None of the sophisticated lab devices generated any skewed readings. Ranya had only acquired them recently and she had already calibrated and configured them a short time ago. It was extremely unlikely for one of the lab equipment to malfunction, let alone over fifty of them at the same time!

Ves no longer questioned the integrity of the lab equipment. After ruling them out as the reason behind the inconsistent readings, they tried to analyze the data from different angles.

If the sensor readings were accurate, then the original body that had stayed in place simply turned fake without any odd disruptions.

The exact timing of this transition happened at the same time as one of the Arnolds in the corner had turned into a real body!

What drove the exobiologist and mech designer crazy was that there was no indication that such a swap had occurred!

The sensors detected no outburst of signals, no explosion of heat and no displacement of air. It was as if real turned fake and fake turned real at the snap of a finger.

Ves was reminded of one of the exchanges that he held with a mech designer he met in the past.

Truth was relative. What people observed was not necessarily real. People interpreted sensory data differently. Many mistakes did not arise from possessing inadequate or faulty senses, but rather resorting to biases and flawed theories to explain something.

He suspected that he was in such a situation right now. Due to various limitations, Ves was unable to come up with a satisfactory explanation of what happened.

Teleportation seemed to be the most obvious answer, but Ves had a feeling that this was too simplistic.

He would have been able to test this possible answer by performing a third test. It was too bad that Arnold was asleep now. If he was awake, Ves could have told the exobeast to repeat his trick, but this time Ves would mark the original's body with a harmless marker.

Would the Arnold that emerged in a different place boast the same marker on his body? If not, then that would have great implications for Arnold's potential!

"Do you really think that might be the case?" Ranya looked skeptically at Ves. "It sounds far-fetched. While I'm not a physicist or anything, even I know that the ability to call upon alternate reality versions of yourself and eventually importing one of them to our

current reality while putting your original self in an alternate reality to balance it out is ludicrous!"

"It's just a theory, doctor. While it sounds ludicrous, high-ranking mech pilots are known to have pulled off even more exceptional feats."

"I'm very much aware of those examples, sir! I seriously doubt that that a weak and otherwise ordinary exobeast like Arnold is capable of pulling off the same feats as exceptional ace and god pilots who have the support of powerful supermechs!"

She had a point. Even though physical strength was not necessarily correlated to spiritual strength, Ves already made an estimation of Arnold's spirituality. Almost every design spirit was able to overpower the arganid when it came to this quality.

It was quite difficult for him to imagine that a spiritually-active lifeform like Arnold was capable of breaking the boundaries between alternate realities.

The more Ves thought about it, the more silly he felt. Why did he propose this theory in the first place? He didn't have any proof. If he had to supply an answer, then he shouldn't let his imagination go wild. There were several more restrained possibilities that did not delve into something as fantastical as alternate realities.

As Ves tried to find a more realistic explanation, Ranya sighed and pushed herself back from her desk.

"I don't think we are engaging in productive activity. Does it matter if we know exactly what occurred?"

"Uhhmm...."

"There are too many uncertainties in cutting-edge science." She reminded him. "The strange sample of fluids you once supplied me still puzzle me to this day. I often put them under my scanners in the hopes of gaining some more clues, but I think it will take me years to crack more secrets. I don't let myself get bothered by that, though. You take what you can and leave the rest for another time. Even if we can decipher Arnold's odd powers, what can we do with what we've learned?"

"Not much, I guess." Ves admitted. He began to view this situation from a more sober perspective. "To be honest, I don't know how much of the applications of my design philosophy works. I've figured out a few mechanics and interactions, but I've only scratched the surface of what is possible. One of the reasons why I resorted to borrowing the powers of external sources to begin with was because I needed access to more powers than what I can provide on my own. I'm no Arnold, but as long as I can access his abilities, it doesn't matter."

He began to let go of his unrealistic expectations. Once he did, he felt as if he removed a weight off his shoulder. He no longer saw Arnold as a source of lots of problems. Instead, he started to view the remarkable little exobeast as a potential addition to his collection of design spirits.

Once Ves began to turn his thoughts in this direction, he began to frown.

He seriously doubted whether Arnold was capable of granting a mech the ability to swap its position with one of its phantom clones.

Even though the term 'swapping' was not an accurate description of what Arnold did, it was the most convenient term for Ves to use at the moment.

Yet no matter what he called it, he seriously doubted whether his intrinsic ability translated completely to mechs. The energy requirements were likely astronomical!

"Perhaps only expert pilots and higher are able to leverage this ability with a mech." He muttered.

While that sounded incredibly useful in certain situations, Arnold became a lot less practical if this was true.

The only reason why he didn't give up on Arnold outright was the realization that the exobeast was only just coming into his powers. There were other spiritual entities that lived a lot longer and expanded their abilities.

Obtaining a spiritual entity at the start of his development was both a blessing and a curse to Ves.

On one hand, he was able to nurture, feed and instruct Arnold in ways that caused him to grow in a form that Ves d.e.s.i.r.ed.

On the other hand, this process could take years or decades to yield desirable results. While Ves felt that it was already possible to use Arnold as a design spirit right away, there weren't any mech designs that matched well with him. Which mechs needed the ability to generate useless and easily-detectable clones? An ordinary projector module could easily do the same!

Ves doubted that anything more would happen unless he was able to supply the mech with additional spiritual energy. That just returned him to another familiar problem. He still hadn't solved the energy supply problem of the Blinding Mech.

While he already formed a plan to utilize the spiritual fragment of the Unending One, there were too many risks associated with it. Ves did not feel he was fully capable of handling the remains of the most powerful dark god he had ever encountered.

What he truly needed was another exobeast or designer beast that also possessed the power to gather or manipulate energy. If that mutated beast happened to be just as naive and unsuspecting as Arnold, Ves would be able to manipulate the creature into another loyal and committed pawn to his cause!

Yet that goal came with its own problems. Ves suspected that he wouldn't be able to encounter a suitable mutated beast on Prosperous Hill VI. All of the best exobeasts and designer beasts were kept on Prosperous Hill IV, which many people viewed as the regional capital of biotechnology.

Gaining access to it wasn't easy. The only convenient solution that Ves could think of right now was to win his upcoming design duel against Doctor Frederico Navarro. The notable Journeyman ought to possess enough influence to give Ves an exclusive pass.

"The delay is too long, though."

Gloriana and the Hex Army were running out of patience. They didn't want to wait any longer to receive the next batch of Hexer mechs designed by the Miracle Couple.

Ves found it hard to make a decision on how to proceed forward. Should he publish his long-overdue mech designs despite not reaching a level of performance that made him satisfied?

"Ugh. I'll think about it later."

After Ves and Ranya wrapped up their examinations, they took one last look at the sleeping little exobeast.

"It's hard to imagine that this arganid is more powerful than most humans in the galaxy."

"Arnold is only powerful in a narrow sense." Ves replied. "Even if your spirit is weaker, your mind is far more developed. You're in control of this entire lab. You can utilize the power and knowledge at your disposal to do anything you want to his body. You can cut him up, put him in a coma, transplant extra limbs and who knows what else you can come up with. Spirituality is not the only measure of power."

Ves briefly swept her with his spiritual vision. He spotted no notable spiritual potential in her mind, which meant she was unlikely to develop any extraordinary traits. That was not a big deal as her profession was not reliant on spirituality.

"How do you wish to treat Arnold?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I'll visit him occasionally, if only to remind him who's in charge. I can't visit him every day because I probably don't have the time to spare for that. I'll leave him in your charge."

"Me?"

"You can assign someone else to this task if you need to. All I want is for Arnold to be taken care of. I don't want to visit you again after you notified me that he died under your purview."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen." Doctor Ranya replied with a determined voice. "How well do you wish to treat the exobeast? Too much pampering is not necessary good for a wild beast."

"Hmm... treat him decently. Let him feel somewhat comfortable, but not too much. While it may be better to subject him to some pressure, I don't think we need to bother with all of that in order to stimulate the arganid's growth."

"..Alright. If that is what you want, I will see to it that Arnold will be kept in some comfort according to his species."

Without the external pressure that Arnold experienced before, the mutated beast wouldn't be pressured to grow his abilities any further. Ves was well aware of this dynamic, but there were plenty of other ways to make up for this shortcoming.

Ves did not acquire Arnold because he wanted to own a mutated beast.

He bought Arnold because he wanted to expand his spiritual options!

There were already several ways that the oblivious exobeast could be of use. Ves just came up with another good idea.

Wasn't he looking for a test subject to test whether it was possible to merge with a processed fragment of the Unending One without going crazy?

This looked like a great opportunity to proceed with such an experiment!

"Hahahaha!" Ves burst out in laughter, surprising both Lucky and Ranya.

The reason why he couldn't control himself was because he just made an even greater realization.

Mutated beasts could serve as test subjects as well!

Not only that, but there were definitely more creatures like Arnold in the Prosperous Hill System. Ves just had to seek them out!

Chapter 2760 - Forceful Salvation

Ves kept thinking about whether he should acquire a ship dedicated to bioresearch.

The recent developments concerning Arnold and the need to acquire more exobeasts altered his previous calculations. If there were more mutated beasts for sale in human space, then Ves would be a fool to dismiss them just because his fleet lacked the room to accommodate their presences!

While it wasn't a problem to keep a little furry mammal like Arnold in his office or something, there should be plenty of other mutated beasts whose sizes rivaled that of Qilanxo.

"The bigger creatures also tend to be more powerful I think." He guessed.

This theory might not be true. After all, one of the dark gods he encountered during the Nyxian Gap Campaign was a former luminar alien. Ves knew that luminars were originally tiny humanoids who constantly complained about how small they were relative to the other sentient alien species that populated the galaxy at the time.

Yet despite this handicap, the Blinding One eventually developed into a supremely powerful spiritual entity whose visual manifestation practically towered over mechs!

The tiniest lifeforms could develop devastating powers while the largest exobeasts may not amount to anything beyond the strength of their flesh.

Ves could only scratch his head in this chaotic circumstance. There didn't appear to be any rhyme or reason that determined whether a human or a beast developed spiritual potential aside from external pressure, and even that relation was rather weak. It was as if every living being took part in a cosmos wide lottery and drew a ticket every month.

While the chance of winning was astronomically low, a few lucky bastards who had nothing in common always won every now and then. Arnold just happened to be one among many of the arganids and exobeasts at Wexal Park who lucked out.

The lack of control and predictability infuriated Ves. Many people he knew such as Melkor never had the opportunity to reach a new level of power. They deserved more, but due to a complete lack of control and understanding of how spiritual potential came to be, this avenue was closed to them. How was that fair?

Then again, it wasn't as if spiritual prowess determined success in human society. Outside of mech designers and maybe mech pilots, most people didn't need any 'superpowers' to rise to the top or achieve enough success to be content.

For example, the Galactic Mech Council consisted of both mech designers and non-mech designers. It was highly unlikely that all of the latter consisted of spiritually powerful individuals.

What did this mean?

Average people were also capable of ruling human civilization!

"Rather than obsess what you don't have, you should focus on the qualities you do have."

Norms weren't useless. Ves had to remind himself of that. He had been spending so much of his time and attention on different applications of spirituality that he had begun to lose sight that he lived in a society where ordinary people still ran most of human society.

"I'm starting to get a god complex." He shook his head.

"Meow." Lucky concurred as the cat landed on top of Ves' head.

"Hey! Awareness is the first step towards prevention! I'm not letting myself get out of control. I'll be careful this time."

He didn't have to engage in any reckless experiments this time. He wasn't under as much time pressure as before, which meant he could stick to a more methodical and systematic approach to his research.

Of course, it would be ideal if he obtained more test subjects. The upside to experimenting on exobeasts was that no one cared what happened to them. While experimenting on animals was frowned upon in the scientific community, it was not an offense that was worth punishing to the Big Two.

While there were numerous states that prohibited experimenting on animals, Ves didn't have to abide by them unless his fleet passed through their territories.

Even then, Ves would just have to keep his experiments out of sight. If he got caught anyway, then he would just use the Larkinson Clan's sovereignty as an excuse.

"Well, I don't think I have to worry about this problem. I should think of where to house my test subjects instead."

He was still reluctant to obtain an entirely new capital ship dedicated to bioresearch straight away. For now, Ves developed a preference for acquiring a more modest sub-capital ship that was capable of maintaining multiple different biomes. This was a less extreme solution that was more wasteful but required much less upfront investment.

"I bet there are lots of sh.i.p.s like that for sale here." Ves guessed.

Once Ves composed and transmitted a message to Vivian Tsai, he reunited with Gloriana and retired for the night.

Over the next couple of weeks, he invested a lot of time in rushing his remaining projects to completion.

Since the last round of prototypes hadn't revealed any significant issues or defects with the Giant Killer, the Ferocious Piranha IB and the Cherub designs, they only needed a small amount of refinement before Ves was ready to declare them final.

Ves, Gloriana and Juliet all gathered to inspect the design schematics of the three mechs one last time before they finalized the projects.

"It's been a long time coming." Gloriana huffed. "I still have issues with all three mech designs, but I can live with completing them as is. The Cherub is good enough to produce no issues with the Hex Army while the other two mech designs... well, our clan isn't as picky as the Hex Army."

Juliet only had eyes for the Giant Killer. "My fellow Penitent Sisters will definitely embrace this powerful mech. With the blessing of the Superior Mother, we will never allow an enemy comparable to the Charlemagne or the Jeanne D'Arc bring us to our knees again!"

Ves crossed his arms. "If neither of you feel the need to tweak these designs any further, then let's wrap them up. We can keep the name of the Ferocious Piranha IB the same but we should replace the codenames Giant Killer and Cherub with proper labels. Do you have any ideas?"

"Cherub is an adequate name for a communication mech." Gloriana stated. "I don't see the need to alter it. I already consider the design to be called the Cherub in my heart."

"What about you, Juliet?"

"Will our clan be making use of the Cherub ourselves?" The other lead designer asked.

"I'm.. not sure." Ves hesitated. "The Cherub is set up as an auxiliary Hexer mech that is piloted exclusively by males. I don't think that will sit well with our clansmen."

"This mech is useful, though."

"That's undeniable, but I don't want our clan to adopt it in its current form." Ves fell into thought for a moment. "Let's do this. If there is time in the future, we can design a variant of the Cherub that is tailored to the Larkinsons instead of the Hexers. The quality of the mech has to become a lot higher as well because I don't want any of our mech pilots to utilize a cheap mech again."

The Larkinson Clan had already gotten rid of its cheap second-class commercial mechs. While it would take more weeks for the PHTS to off-load all of the useless mechs from the expeditionary fleet, not a single Larkinson was sorry to see them go.

They had performed far too poorly against the Friday Coalition to win any clansman over.

When it came to the Giant Killer, Juliet already thought up a proper name for the cannoneer mech.

"Eternal Redemption."

"..Pardon?"

"The Penitent Sisters would like to refer to the Giant Killer model as the Eternal Redemption from now on." Juliet said.

Ves did not look pleased. He disliked calling his mechs with religious-sounding names. At least the name of the Transcendent Punisher fit the design. He found it difficult to imagine how a cannon-wielding mech had anything to do with redemption.

The Penitent Sister Journeyman noticed his confusion. "The name that Commander Chancy and I settled upon reflects one of our highest principles and aspirations. Each Penitent Sister seeks redemption, and the best way to do that is to fight against your enemies. Our debt is great, but the best way to reduce it is to eliminate any powerful enemy that stands in our way. By killing the evil and the wicked, we are not only working towards our own redemption, but also helping our opponents attain salvation as well!"

"You've lost me there." Ves spoke.

Gloriana bumped her elbow against his side. "It's not that difficult to understand. Hexers such as myself constantly seek to prove ourselves. Those who owe a debt to society must work even harder to avoid damnation. One of the best ways to contribute to society back in the Hegemony is to convert others to the cause."

"Somehow, I doubt that is easy."

"You're not wrong, Ves. There are at least two forms of redemption we are talking about here. There is the normal kind of redemption where people like myself can convert others such as you to embrace Hexer culture."

"Pff! As if that would ever happen!"

"Then there is the other, more convenient but also the more permanent kind of redemption."

"And that is...?"

"Why, killing, of course!" Gloriana answered with a grin. "Those who stand in the way of Hexers and do nothing but hinder us are in effect damned. For example, all of the

Fridaymen are damned because they want to wipe us out. This is why they need to be saved."

"Saved?" Ves questioned.

"I'm being serious, Ves! The Fridayman may be our enemies, but they are only worthy of hate when they are alive. When we kill them, they are no longer able to hinder the Hegemony or the Hexer people in any way. That means that they are no longer damned and therefore absolved of the sin of opposing our people. We have given them redemption! Isn't that great? Not only have we done the galaxy a favor by getting rid of evil, we also earn more merit because we have redeemed someone!"

"..."

Ves didn't know what to say. Gloriana's logic was as warped and twisted as any Hexer belief. It made no sense to him. The charlatan that invented this illogical outlook should have been fired for doing an awful job!

Yet the fact of the matter was that Juliet and the rest of the Penitent Sisters practically lived and breathed this custom!

This instance was yet another example that not even the Larkinson Network was capable of reversing lifelong brainwashing.

Ves was too tired to argue against the new name for the Giant Killer.

"Fine. If that is what you want to call it, then so be it. The mech is designed for your sisters in the first place, so if calling it the Eternal Redemption makes you feel comfortable, then it's fine. I expect good results, though. It costs twice as much to make as the Valkyrie Redeemer. While I don't expect your Eternal Redemptions to perform twice as good, your sisters better make sure it doesn't perform any worse!"

"Please rest assured, sir." Juliet smiled in satisfaction. "Our sisters will thoroughly cherish and master our new mech. You will not regret the work you put into it and the trust you have extended to us. With the Eternal Redemption in our hands, we shall redeem an ocean of enemies who have damned themselves by opposing us! No champion or expert pilot will avoid salvation at our hands!"

"...Okay. You go celebrate or something. We'll discuss how to slot the Eternal Redemptions in our production schedule later. We are still having some trouble securing additional mech production facilities so we can only rely on the production halls of the Spirit of Bentheim to supply your sisters with the first batch of our new mech."

Fortunately, his factory ship worked fine. His clan were already starting to put the Bright Warrior IB into service!

