

## Mech 2761

### *Chapter 2761 - Joshua's Exploration*

What did expert pilots do when they weren't performing their duties?

Venerable Joshua Larkinson didn't really have a clue. He supposed that dedicated warriors spent all of their remaining time on one productive activity or another, but he didn't really feel as if he counted among their number.

He asked his fellow expert pilots what they spent their off-hours on. The answers weren't encouraging.

"I keep my Shield of Samar company." Venerable Jannzi responded to her ex-boyfriend. "My life is tied to my mech, so it's foolish to neglect it. Don't you feel the same?"

The hangar where the Shield of Samar currently resided was closed off and empty. Ever since it had been converted into a prime mech, the pressure exerted by the mech was too much to bear to the maintenance crews.

Only expert pilots such as Joshua and Jannzi were able to remain at ease while in close proximity to the huge and massive space knight.

"Uhm.. I get why you do that, but mechs are tougher than you think. They know their purpose. Outside of combat, they are perfectly fine with sleeping. Our mechs aren't babies. They don't need any pampering. At least, I'm pretty sure the patriarch intended it to be that way."

"Don't let Ves make decisions on your behalf!" Jannzi burst out! Her force of will pressed against his own as she stepped closer and pressed her finger against his c.h.e.s.t. "Ves may have made all of our mechs, but it is us who spend the most time with them! Our mechs are what we make of them. Treat them well, and they shall return the favor!"

"That's easy for you to say. You're committed to a single mech for your entire life. I'm not sure if that's the right path for me. There are too many mechs I want to pilot to limit myself to a single choice. I don't even have my expert mech yet to do what you are talking about."

He understood Jannzi's viewpoint. Every expert pilot formed a different opinion about the mechs designed by Ves. The obsessions they formed and the principles they held dear colored how they perceived LMC mechs.

Jannzi saw them as partners charged with protecting the Larkinson Clan. At the same time, the mechs needed to be taken care of as well.

As for Joshua, he felt as if he possessed the greatest understanding of the nature of LMC mechs out of everyone aside from Ves. His instincts were highly attuned to the intrinsic life that was locked inside the machines. By interfacing with them, his greater sensitivity allowed him to synergize with his mechs to a high degree!

He already noticed that he was far beyond other Larkinson mech pilots in this regard. Only special cases such as Jannzi and her Shield of Samar were able to exceed him on this front.

This also explained their divergent approaches.

Venerable Joshua didn't need to expend any effort to form an extremely high fit with a living mech.

Venerable Jannzi's ability to attune with a mech was worse, so the only way for her to develop a deeper bond with her mech was to work hard and invest lots of time with the Shield of Samar.

Even though this sounded like a heavy commitment, Jannzi never uttered a complaint. The hard work she put into bonding with the Shield of Samar would definitely pay off in battle.

Of course, that was assuming that the Design Department upgraded the space knight to an expert mech. As a prime mech, much of the Shield of Samar's potential was locked behind the physical constraints of the mech.

Neither Joshua nor Jannzi knew when they would receive their long-awaited expert mechs, but the time was drawing closer and closer. With the completion of the current round of projects, it was only a matter of time before the development of their expert mechs commenced.

The coming period would definitely play a crucial role in their futures!

In the end, Joshua didn't get much help out of Jannzi. She had become so driven that she no longer spent any time on relaxation. She either spent lots of time with her mech or busied herself with keeping up with clan politics of all things.

She expressed disbelief at his disinterest in the latter.

"Are you blind, Joshua? We are figureheads in a clan that already counts more than 50,000 members. From what it looks like, we'll definitely be breaking the 100,000 barrier during our stay here. It becomes more important than ever to ensure that everyone is being treated fairly. If warmongers like Ves remain unchecked, we'll end up in some other devastating battle where we lose at least half of our mech pilots!"

"I don't think our patriarch is as bad as you say."

"You blind fool! You worship Ves so much, but you never look at his downsides. Just look at the facts. In the short history of our clan, we have gone through numerous painful crises. The Battle of Kesseling VIII, the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, the Battle against the Abyss and the Battle of Reckoning are all engagements that our clansmen should have never gone through if Ves hadn't fooled them into joining his venture!"

Joshua blinked. "We all knew the risks, Jannzi. We managed to become second-raters in record time because of the patriarch's hard work. Besides, aren't you one of us? I guess that makes you a fool as well."

Smack!

"I don't have time for your nonsense! Get out!"

His continued presence only reminded her why she broke up with him. Joshua didn't enjoy her company either when she brought up her pet causes. In hindsight, he should have ended his relationship with her much sooner.

"I'm glad I have Ketis now." He smiled as he exited the hangar.

It was too bad that his current girlfriend had gone on an excursion together with other Swordmaidens. Joshua was sad to see her go. He could have spent a lot of time with her in Veoline if she was still with the rest of the clan.

Still, she needed to go on this trip. Joshua had no choice but to support her decision and wished her luck.

He decided he needed some male company and dropped by Venerable Tusa next.

Out of all of the places where the light mech specialist could be, Joshua never expected to find him tutoring a mech cadet.

"Venerable Joshua!" Lanie Larkinson stood up in respect. "Thank you for saving us all. You really helped us out of a bind when you and your Valkyrie Prime defeated so many Fridaymen in the previous battle."

Joshua casually waved his hand. "Thank you for your appreciation, but I was not alone. Tusa here along with many other Larkinsons and allies did their own part. We are all together in this, Lanie. None of us can be heroes without the support of the rest of the clan. You'll know once you graduate and join our ranks."

"I'll look forward to that day!"

After a bit of chatting, Lanie picked up her data pad and left so that the two expert pilots could talk to each other in private.

"I heard you were spending time teaching cadets like Lanie, but aren't they too young for that?"

Tusa shrugged as he leaned against a wall. "I like it. Grown-ups like us are already set in our ways to an extent. I find it easier to get a mech cadet to absorb my lessons because they haven't piloted real mechs yet. They're still malleable."

"Why, though? The Larkinson Mech Academy already has a lot of mech instructors who are experienced veterans."

"A bit of extra help can't hurt, Joshua. I care about the young brats who are being raised to follow in our footsteps one day. The mech instructors are good, but there are some insights that only expert pilots can impart to an audience. If spending a few hours with them will increase their chances of surviving by 5 percent, then that is a worthwhile investment."

"I never took you for a person who cared that much."

Venerable Tusa frowned and crossed his arms. "I'm a Larkinson. That means something to me. Don't believe in any stereotypes you have about light mech pilots. Just because I can't sit still doesn't mean I am solely looking out for myself. My reasons to fight are not that simple."

"Hey, I didn't mean to imply anything." The other expert pilot raised his hands. "I'm just curious at how you choose to spend your time when you are not in training."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I still go out to have fun when I'm in the mood. Just because we are expert pilots doesn't mean we are bots. We are still human, though we clearly possess a few extras."

"I don't think Jannzi will agree with your assertion."

"She's way too serious for my liking." Tusa shook his head in disapproval. "I get why she is like that. She decided to dedicate her entire life to her cause, which essentially means she isn't spending any time living for herself. I guess expert pilots like us come in many forms, but I can never agree with Jannzi's approach. Life is all about fulfilling your own d.e.s.i.r.es."

"Mhmm. I'm much more inclined to agree with you." Joshua nodded. "It's just that I'm afraid of becoming too complacent. While Jannzi doesn't have another life outside service, I can't deny she is growing stronger every day. Aren't you afraid of being left in the dust one day?"

Venerable Tusa chuckled. "Hehehe. What does her success have to do with my self-esteem? This isn't a race, Joshua."

"I thought that people like you always try to be the fastest."

"I like to be the fastest on the battlefield, but I prefer to take it slow when I am out of the c.o.c.kpit. I can't speed up my entire life, Joshua. I need to conserve my energy for when it truly matters. That is how I ensure I can perform at my peak when my services are called for. As for Jannzi, I don't feel the need to compete with her. If she becomes an ace pilot well before everyone else, then good for her. She can reduce all of our burdens."

Joshua didn't entirely agree with Tusa's approach. He seemed almost lackadaisical about his own progression. While Tusa was much more pleasant to be around, it might not be worth it if he ended up in a situation where his strength fell short. If he spent more effort on improving himself, he could have avoided a worse outcome.

Once he got what he wanted, Joshua bid goodbye to Tusa and walked away.

The two expert pilots he met were on the opposite side of the spectrum. Jannzi was way too serious while Tusa was too laid-back. Did that mean that it was best for Joshua to sit in the middle?

"Maybe. I'm not sure. What should I be doing, exactly?"

Fortunately, these periods of self-doubt didn't last long. His confidence as an expert pilot was real, and so was his will. He accomplished so much in the previous battle that it was impossible for him to be worse than others!

He raised his arm and clenched his fist in front of his face.

"I'm strong."

This simple declaration quieted much of his inner turbulence.

In the end, Venerable Joshua never found a solid answer to his question.

What he did gain was the realization that he should be looking less at others. Instead of trying to copy Venerable Jannzi or Venerable Tusa, he should find something that fit him best no matter which direction it took him. This brought him right back to the beginning.

"What should I do?" He asked himself.

*Chapter 2762 - Imon's Request*

Imon Ingvar and Casella Ingvar had grown apart from each other ever since they took on different roles in the clan.

While they both had something in common by becoming expert candidates at the same time, they rarely trained together.

Imon was just an honored member of the Avatars of Myth while Casella Ingvar had become the leader of the Living Sentinels.

He was happy for her sister's opportunity. Ever since the new Sentinel Commander took office, he mostly heard good stories about her. Despite her greater strength, she showed considerably more care and attention for her subordinates. That was something that the Sentinels rarely experienced from Commander Magdalena back when she was in charge.

That was the extent of his interest in her sister's new job. He was not cut out to be a leader. He got way too excited in battle to spare any attention on commanding his troops or keeping an eye on the bigger picture.

He much preferred to let others do the thinking! Imon merely wanted to be pointed in the right direction so he could do what he did best, which was thrashing other mech pilots!

Unfortunately, he was having a hard time doing that at the moment during a simulation battle!

A powerful spear clanged against the c.h.e.s.t armor of a Bright Warrior IB! Imon grimaced as his virtual mech bore another ugly mark.

The two mechs were separated by a short distance in the air. The powerful flight systems of the two identical mechs flared brightly as they kept the simulated machines stable and aloft.

"I'm not a punching bag!" He uttered in frustration.

However, his current opponent anticipated his actions. The spear cleverly jerked out of the way as the opposing Bright Warrior activated all of its boosters, causing the mech and its weapon to throw off Imon's rhythm and calculations.

Clang!

A few more exchange of blows occurred. After Imon found out that it was impossible for him to break the guard of his opponent, he tried to break past it and get close enough for the spear to lose much of its threat.

Yet no matter from which angle he approached, the spear tip was always in the way of his mech. His Bright Warrior incurred more and more holes as he failed to enter a range where his sword could do its work.

Several minutes went by as Imon was being put on the defensive. He had to put all of his concentration on trying to block and parry the relentless spear thrusts.

As several systems of his mech began to falter due to incurring more and more internal damage, his enemy suddenly performed an inexplicable action.

The opposing mech threw away its spear!

Though Imon was befuddled, he knew better than to freeze up in battle. He listened to his instincts and immediately went on the offensive!

"Even if you have another weapon, I won't let you draw it out!"

The weaponless Bright Warrior tilted its frame so that its back started pointing towards the ground.

Just as Imon's mech chopped down its sword, the opposing machine kicked out its legs and slammed the weapon aside!

"Damn!"

Imon immediately commanded his mech to let go of its sword. He made the right choice as the opposing mech was already closing in after performing a kick.

His opponent's mech attempted to grapple his machine with its leg, but Imon's quick thinking allowed him to kick back the lengthy limbs, causing them to go off course.

An aerial wrestling match ensued. The opposing mech no longer fought with just its legs but instead righted itself in order to utilize all four limbs!

The differences between the two sides lessened now that they had lost their weapons. Yet even so, Imon's mech fell into a disadvantage due to the damage it had already occurred and its mech pilot's inability to read all of his opponent's movements!

The latter's faster responses and more skillful movements caused Imon a lot of grief. His mech attempted to punch, grab, kick and perform many other attacks, yet the opposing Bright Warrior seemed to do a much better job at showcasing the strengths of the model by pushing its capabilities a lot closer to its physical limits!

In the end, the enemy mech attempted to maneuver behind Imon's machine. There, the enemy wrecked the vulnerable flight system so that the former sword-wielding Bright Warrior no longer possessed enough power to maintain its altitude.

Secondary boosters and antigrav modules desperately tried to arrest the Bright Warrior's fall, but they were only strong enough to make the crash landing softer and more survivable.

It didn't come to that. As Imon was busy trying to make sure his mech survived the impending collision, the enemy mech dove down until its legs impacted the section where one of the crucial antigrav modules tried to make the falling mech lighter.

The impact knocked it out, causing Imon's mech to fall considerably faster than before! The hefty kick had also imparted significant force to the machine, causing it to be pushed faster towards the ground!

THUD!

The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B was a tough mech, but when many tons worth of metal and machine collided against the ground, it was impossible for it to survive!

Imon Ingvar lost.

"Again! I haven't done my best!"

Unfortunately, his opponent declined to go another round. Imon frustratingly disengaged the simulation and pulled his suited body out of the pod.

A short distance away, another pod slid open its front cover. A woman bearing a substantially thicker and more decorated piloting suit emerged out of it. She noticed Imon's smile and responded with a smug grin.

"You can forget about laying a hand on my mech. You're way too far behind to catch up to my level."

Imon looked crushed. This was an absurd response because the skill levels between the two mech pilots were far apart.

While he was stronger than almost every mech pilot in the Larkinson Clan, his last opponent was one of the few who was undeniably superior to him in everything that was related to piloting mechs!

"Tell me the truth, Venerable Orfan. How big is the gap between us?" He softly asked.

The female expert pilot sauntered over and patted Imon's smaller and more slender shoulder. "Don't sweat it, kid. You're much younger than me and you went through much less crap than me, so it's not strange for you to take your time. I spent years grinding as an expert candidate before I got where I am today. In fact, with all of the crazy inventions that Ves keeps putting out, your chance might come sooner than you think."

"The patriarch doesn't pay any attention to expert pilots like me." Imon muttered. "I hear that he and his fellow mech designers are almost ready to dedicate all of their efforts to design expert mechs. It must feel nice to be at the center of attention."

The former Vandal Commander snorted. "Being a demigod isn't all that sunshine and roses. There's something called responsibility that other people expect you to carry. You should ask your sister."

"I already did. I don't want to follow her footsteps. I want to find my own way."

"Good for you."

"I need your help, though."

"Oh?" Rosa raised a curious eyebrow. "What's up, kid?"

"I... heard stories. About you, and Jannzi, and Dise. Is it true that.. you're connected to some kind of giant lizard?"

The expert pilot turned serious. "I don't know where you heard that, but that 'giant lizard' you are talking about deserves to be addressed with respect. She's called Qilanxo. She's the source behind the glow of the Shield of Samar and the Aurora Titan design. She also has something to do with the Ferocious Piranha, though I'm no expert on the matter."

Imon listened with rapt attention. He couldn't believe Venerable Rosa Orfan was willing to divulge so much in a casual conversation!

"Who is Qilanxo, exactly? Is she truly a god like some of the Vandals and Swordmaidens claim?"

Venerable Orfan snorted again. "She's not really a god, though she comes close I guess. It's just a label. Some idiots on the planet she came from thought she was a literal god, but that is only because the dimwitted natives didn't know anything better. Just think of her as a very powerful friend and helper. She assisted us in battle several times, though I doubt any of you have noticed."

"That's fascinating. So is it true that you and some of the other expert pilots possess a special bond?"

"Yeah. It's not as mystical as you think. If Qilanxo likes you, then you can get close to her. It's as simple as that."

"Could you.. could you introduce me to her?" Imon cautiously asked. "I'd like to see if I can gain her help as well."

The expert pilot pressed her lips together as she stared straight into Imon's eyes. Her expressive will retracted a bit as she fell into thought.

"No."

"No?"

"No." She repeated. "Qilanxo is a big girl. If she likes you, she would have reached out to you somehow. The fact that she didn't means that you'll only return with nothing if you approach her. Tell me. Do you have a protective mindset like Jannzi?"

"Uhm, I guess not. I like to go on the attack."

"Do you like piloting space knights like the Aurora Titan?"

"To be honest, no. They're too slow and sluggish for my liking. I don't like to sit back and absorb attacks passively either."

"Then what makes you think you are worthy to attract Qilanxo's notice?"

"Didn't you and Venerable Dise succeed despite your inclinations?"

"You can't draw any conclusions from our experiences. We went through some very weird stuff in the past. We also fight in a way that Qilanxo approves. Do you remember how I talked about responsibility earlier? That's what keeps me in tune with the big girl."

After Venerable Orfan made it clear that Imon had no chance to earn Qilanxo's favor, he became downcast.

Rosa took pity on him and patted him on the shoulder yet again. "Hey, a strong mech pilot doesn't need anyone's help to get ahead. Other expert pilots like Venerable Brutus over at the Glory Seekers are doing well enough on their own. Besides, there are more 'powerful helpers' like Qilanxo hovering around. Just take a close look at the different LMC mechs and try and see what fits you best based on how comfortable you feel around their glows."

Imon thought about the mechs he came in touch with. Sadly, none of them appealed to him in a strong way. Not even the new Bright Warrior made him feel very special.

"I guess I'll keep looking."

Venerable Orfan was about to turn away, but she stopped when a thought entered her mind.

"Hey, if you really want to find a good helper, I have a tip for you. Go seek out the wreck of the Adonis Colossus. I think the remains are being stored somewhere within the cargo holds of the Spirit of Bentheim."

"Why would I do that?" Imon asked with a confused expression.

"I have a feeling that you might just get along with the helper that made it special. If it could turn a useless bastard like Vincent into a hero, then it might be able to give you a hand as well!"

Though Imon looked skeptical, he might as well give it a try.

He needed this. He needed a way to keep up with Casella. Even though his sister was spending much of her time on managing the Sentinels as opposed to polishing her own piloting skill, she was still growing stronger somehow!

While he was happy to see her having the time of her life, he did not wish to be left behind! Wouldn't he be the inferior sibling of the two if he remained stuck as an expert candidate while his sister was flying high?

"I'm a man, damnit! I can't let my sis get ahead of me, especially when I'm putting so much effort in my training!"

#### *Chapter 2763 - Mantle of Responsibility*

The passing of the Living Prophet thrust Taon Melin into the spotlight.

He didn't exactly know why. The Ylvainan sub-community within the Larkinson Clan held plenty of notable figures.

There were several respected leaders who could have risen up to take charge of the only true Ylvainan believers that remained true to the faith.

One of them was Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon, who was rather low-key but held a position of great responsibility within the clan. While she wasn't outright in charge of all of the sh.i.p.s of the Larkinson Clan, she still had a lot of say in how they were run and where they should be positioned.

With her experience in senior leadership and management, she should have taken to leading the remaining Ylvainans like a fish to water.

Yet when Taon approached her shortly after James Ylvaine exhausted himself to death, the elder woman shook her head.

"I am already preoccupied with managing the affairs of hundreds of different starsh.i.p.s."

"You don't have to manage everything by yourself, ma'am. There are other Ylvainans who can keep everything running. You just need to be there to provide direction."

"I'm aware of that, but I am already wearing one mantle of responsibility. My shoulders no longer have any space to accommodate another."

Taon practically wanted to drop to his knees!

"Please reconsider, ma'am. We need a stabilizing influence at the top who knows what must be done to keep us all together."

"I am not the stabilizing influence you seek."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a Kronon."

"What does that have to do with this issue?"

"The Kronon, Poxco and Curin Dynasties collectively led the Ylvainans astray. Their selfishness and distortion of the records has caused the Ylvaine Protectorate to turn into an unrecognizable state. I don't think it is wise for a descendant of one of the three dynasties to lead the one dynasty that still holds true to the tenets and ideals of the Great Prophet."

Taon paused.

A part of him felt that this reason was ridiculous. However, he knew enough old-timers who probably preferred it if anyone named Kronon, Poxco or Curin didn't ascend to the highest level.

Even though Taon knew that Ophelia was nothing like the corrupted leaders of her dynasty, the optics wouldn't look good at all. Ylvainans tended to be superstitious and s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e to symbolism, so the fleet coordinator was not talking nonsense.

"It's fine, Taon. I am a Kronon. I am a soldier. It is my duty to fight or serve in a military capacity. It is even more important for me to protect the flock now that the Kronon Dynasty is tarnished. The only way we can restore everyone's trust in our names is to perform the mission that the Great Prophet charged us with. Someone else must take the lead, and the closest candidate is you. No one else is fit for the mantle that the Living Prophet has so obviously placed on your shoulders."

"I do not feel ready." Taon softly shook his head. "I know what I am capable of. I am good at piloting mechs. I trained my entire life to become more skilled at it. Give me a Transcendent Messenger or a Transcendent Punisher and I can make it sing. Put me in the shoes of the Living Prophet and I will probably hide behind his statue. I am not ready to lead our people!"

"You're wrong. You are ready."

"How do you know?"

"I know it because I can see it from the Living Prophet's actions before his passing. That is why he invested so much time in you. Out of every Ylvainan, you are the one who can keep our faith alive."

The younger man did not quite agree with her assessment. While it was true that James Ylvaine spent a lot of time with him, Taon never learned anything about leadership and directing the future of the Ylvainan people out of their talks.

He did not feel he was ready!

Since Ophelia Kronon declined to be recognized as the person in charge, Taon stopped by the design lab to catch Oscar DiMartin.

The Apprentice Mech Designer calmly listened to Taon's request before shaking his head.

"The Fleet Coordinator was right to refuse your offer. My answer is similar. I am not suitable to lead our people. I can do much more for our fellow Ylvainans by working hard in the Design Department. Just look at Juliet Stamos. Ever since she started to contribute to our design projects as a Journeyman, the Penitent Sisters gained a lot more attention from the Bright Martyr. He even dedicated a unique mech design to the women!"

"We already hold his favor. We received the Transcendent Punisher a lot sooner."

Oscar sighed. "That is only because our ranged mech pilots are blessed. The Bright Martyr wanted to take advantage of that and developed the Transcendent Punisher as a result. He has not shown great care in our plight."

This was different from what he thought.

"I will do my best to help you and advise you." The Ylvainan mech designer continued. "I have learned much about the mechs that the Bright Martyr has designed. Yet I cannot do anything further because I am not Ylvaine's chosen. You are. You are the heir to the prophet, whether you acknowledge it or not. I do not think that any Ylvainan in our midst will disagree with what I have just said."

"Why are you so certain?"

"I can feel it. Your presence reminds us of the Living Prophet."

"We are drastically different people."

"That doesn't change my judgement. It is clear that the Living Prophet intended his successor to be someone different. You are a soldier, Taon. I believe that your elevation is not a coincidence. The Larkinson Clan will no doubt experience turbulent times, so

we need strength more than foresight. You are our greatest hope. Be strong. Grow stronger. Show every other Larkinson that we can carry our own weight!"

While the expert candidate felt a little bit disappointed that no one wanted to take over the mantle, he realized that they might have a point.

The Living Prophet favored him out of every other Ylvainan. That was undeniable. Whether that made him the next-in-line or not, no one else wanted to compete for the highest seat. That meant that he was the presumptive leader by default.

"Is this truly happening?"

Even though an expert candidate should have exhibited more certainty, Taon did not want to make the wrong decision. The future of the Ylvainans in the Larkinson Clan was at stake, after all. He never envisioned himself as a leader. He much preferred to be a follower.

For some reason, that made him recall one of the Living Prophet's words of advice.

"Live for myself, not for my faith."

Taon took that to mean that he should think and act according to what he wanted instead of blindly looking up to his beliefs.

What did he want?

"I want to do right by the prophet. I want to protect my fellow Ylvainans and see us all prosper. I want to prepare us all as best as possible for the Time of Ascension!"

Problems soon emerged, however. One of the most persistent issues facing the Ylvainan believers was the lack of growth.

When the Larkinson Clan reached the Prosperous Hill System, Ophelia and Oscar met with Taon to discuss this problem.

Compared to before, Taon looked considerably more surer and confident in himself. He already possessed the beginnings of an air of authority, but whether it would develop into anything further was not certain.

He had taken to wearing a white robe that was almost identical to the one worn by James Ylvaine. The simple garment made him look holier somehow. Some people didn't look good in robes at all, but Taon somehow seemed to fit in them like he was born for the purpose.

"Hello everyone." He spoke with greater confidence than before. "Please sit down. I'd like to discuss something important today."

Once the two visitors did so, Taon began to outline his concerns.

"You must have already guessed why I have called you here. The Larkinson Clan has already begun to recruit the first batch of mech pilots and other vital personnel, both to replace the losses we have suffered before and to expand our capabilities further. While I am glad to see the clan prosper, our own recruitment efforts have not maintained pace."

"That is not what happened before." Ophelia Kronon mildly frowned. "Back in the Cinach System, we steadily managed to convert a fraction of the outsiders who entered the clan. What is our current conversion rate?"

"Less than 1 percent." Taon supplied the hard number.

"..."

"...That is indeed a poor figure." Oscar remarked.

The robed expert candidate took a deep breath. "You understand my worries now. While I am glad that a couple of recruits have reacted positively to our gospel, we have failed to reach the heart of the remainder. The second-raters, whether they are Lifers or other people, look down on us. Our proselytizers have continually tried but failed to connect with the vast majority of incoming clansmen."

Both Ophelia and Oscar frowned. This sounded much more serious than they thought.

"If this pattern continues, then the proportion of believers in the clan will dip below 5 percent." Ophelia Kronon predicted. "That will render our influence almost negligible. While we will still be able to maintain a presence in our clan, more prominent groups such as the Penitent Sisters and Swordmaidens will surpass us in importance."

The current leader of the Ylvainans sighed in regret. "If the Living Prophet was still among us, he would have never encountered this problem. He had a way with words that none of us could come close to matching. I doubt he would let the fact that we used to be third-raters stop him from persuading the arrogant newcomers to consider his views."

A few seconds passed in silence. This was one of the greatest losses of their people. Expanding their believer base had always been vital to them. Without enough adherents, how could the Ylvainan Faith remain strong?

Conversion was one of their highest priorities as a group!

"We need to find a strong speaker." Ophelia. "It is unfortunate that we do not count many members of the Poxco Dynasty among us. The Attendants of Ylvaine have always been the best at this type of work."

After considering a few possible solutions, Oscar suddenly thought of an interesting idea.

"Our faith has not lost all of its speakers." He claimed. "We still have an excellent proselytizer among us. His ability to speak to the masses and enlighten the unenlightened is undeniable!"

"Who are you referring to, Oscar?"

"The Bright Martyr."

Both Ophelia and Taon looked stumped.

"He's not called the Devil Tongue by his critics for nothing." Oscar began to grin. "If he takes over the mantle of the Living Prophet, even for a short moment, then I am certain he can convert thousands of clansmen to our beliefs!"

Taon did not immediately agree with the suggestion. "We'll have to convince the patriarch first. You work for him on a daily basis, right? Are you confident that the Bright Martyr will agree to assist us in this manner?"

Oscar's grin dropped. "We should work on that. He is not particularly enthused about our faith despite holding the prophet's trust and blessing."

They spent hours discussing the issue. The Ylvainan Faith had to keep going. Even when their numbers dipped to its lowest point in history, Taon and the rest did not want to fail the prophet's expectations!

*Chapter 2764 - New Toy*

Ves d.e.s.i.r.ed more mutated beasts with spiritual potential.

Being able to find a treasure like Arnold proved that he could find new ingredients among the vast amount of organic products for sale in the LRA.

Prosperous Hill VI sold trillions of different beasts every day. Granted, much of that figure was taken up by tiny bugs and industrially grown organisms bred for medicinal or other production-related purposes, but there had to be a lot of undiscovered mutants out there that were just waiting to be taken!

At least, that was what Ves thought.

He spent five precious days of his schedule touring various different venues.

He visited huge preserves similar to Wexal Park. Each one operated the same way. The only way to distinguish the parks from each other was by observing which beast

designers and beast suppliers they cooperated with. Each group, alliance or faction seemed to operate mostly amongst themselves.

He also entered downtown compounds where high-end beasts were put on display in cramped spaces. The exclusive stores either charged at rip-off prices or put the organic products on auction where the customers themselves drove up their value.

He even visited a few shadier establishments. While Ves wasn't able to find or locate any black or grey markets on Prosperous Hill VI, there were a few sketchier places that were nonetheless tolerated or supported by the local authorities.

These were mostly marketplaces where lots of smaller suppliers sold their low-end products. Beginner beast designers, foreigners looking to make a living and many more struggling people attempted to scrabble for a living in these places.

Quality control was inconsistent in these places. The mandatory checks that every beast had to go through were good at detecting short-term threats, but they weren't sufficient when it came to long-term issues.

What if an exobeast suddenly released poisonous mist when they reached the end of their lives?

What if a designer beast went crazy and attempted to mate with a human when in heat?

What if a beast used for cooking deposited an ill-understood substance inside a human body that turned into a brain-eating substance when combined with another harmless ingredient?

Gourmets happen to comprise a large amount of the clientele. Ves simply couldn't understand their mindset. They paid the equivalent of tens of thousands to millions of hex credits to obtain a special beast only to butcher the precious animals before putting their parts on the grill!

Ves actually held a lot more expectations when he visited these places. The lack of advanced lab equipment and the unwillingness to perform extensive testing should have resulted in more mutated beasts flying under everyone's radar.

Unfortunately, his expectations fell flat.

None of the creatures he observed with his spiritual senses met his criteria. The low-quality beasts for sale were less exquisite than the ones that were sold in places like Wexal Park, and that might have something to do with the low odds.

While the busy marketplaces did indeed sell some mutated products, the specimens that Ves encountered were mostly physically deviant. Their unstable genes went fritz which caused them to grow abnormal limbs or teeth that were three times longer.

These worthless mutations did not interest Ves in the slightest. He sought to encounter a creature that experienced a more profound change, yet despite passing through marketplaces where billions of creatures were available for sale, none of them possessed the spark that made them different from the rest!

In the end, Ves decided to give up his search. The odds of encountering what he wanted was too low. It would have been great if he could delegate the task of combing through the marketplaces for spiritual mutations to his subordinates, but that wasn't possible.

The more time he wasted on this fruitless search, the more urgent it became to cultivate a batch of spiritual adepts. It was beneath him to seek out spiritually strong beasts in person.

His time was too valuable to be spent on menial tasks like this! The security risks were too great as well. None of his bodyguards enjoyed the extra effort required to guard him against threats while he passed through crowded halls and corridors.

"Never mind, then." Ves muttered. "I guess I'll just settle with Arnold for now. I already have everything I require to finish my remaining two mech design projects."

Only two design projects remained in active development, though his design teams already ceased to perform any work on them. The Devious and Blinding Mech were auxiliary mechs, so their technical complexity did not come close to the likes of the Bright Warrior IB or the Ferocious Piranha IB.

The only reason why the two designs remained incomplete was because Ves still had to finalize their spiritual properties.

"I guess I can't delay it any longer." Ves sighed.

He had been putting off this task because the circumstances weren't ideal. He was seriously lacking in ingredients and other amenities such as large spiritual reserves and solid theory.

If he had a choice, he would have wished to complete the two auxiliary mech designs a decade later. He bet that he would have been in a much better position to turn the Devious and Blinding Mech into the products he originally envisioned.

Sadly, he couldn't afford to wait that long. The projects were very time sensitive and the client was already asking for status updates every day.

"I also need to move on to other priorities." He reminded himself.

Development had already started on the five mechs that Ves wanted to prepare for his upcoming design duel. He also had to reserve some time to fabricate the first production copies of all of the designs he completed.

Faced with no other choice, he grudgingly proceeded to perform the spiritual procedures required to turn the Devious and Blinding Mech into usable products.

"I'll start with the Devious first." He murmured.

To be fair, the latest iteration already performed decently in tests. The Superior Mother's dust phase of existence already diminished the presence of the stealth mech in the minds of every nearby person.

It worked, but that was it. The Devious lacked sophistication and didn't possess as much value as his other Hexer mech designs. It was a product that barely made the passing grade, but Ves did not set out to design mechs that were only barely satisfactory.

In order to add something special to the Devious design, Ves decided to employ his latest asset.

He put quite a bit of thought into the idea ever since he acquired Arnold. While the arganid was unlikely to pass on its complete cloning and repositioning ability to any mechs, maybe some other benefits might pass on. There was more to Arnold than just his signature ability.

"Well, I'll just try it and see what happens. I can always reverse the procedure if I don't like the results."

Since this was the first time Ves intended to make use of Arnold as a design spirit, he stopped by Ranya's lab.

As he watched the eight-legged beast crawl contently through a special cave system that had been specifically constructed to make arganids feel comfortable, he noticed a curious new change.

"You fixed his lame legs?"

"Correct." Doctor Ranya nodded. "The two damaged limbs bothered Arnold all the time. They not only unbalanced his body, but also caused significant psychological distress. There is no need to prolong his suffering when simple cloning and regeneration treatments can quickly make the limbs as good as new. I have also addressed all of the aches and shortcomings related to nutrient deficiency. He's as healthy as a normal arganid at his age."

Arnold's joy was very evident. His strong spirituality had grown vibrant due to his happy mood. The male arganid eagerly scurried through the tunnels at speeds he could have never reached if he had to drag two defective limbs.

Though Ves and Ranya didn't plan on making Arnold's life too comfortable, it was still worth it to fix all of the exobeast's health issues.

Not only would the treatments ensure that his physical body would last longer, but all of the favors done to him had completely earned his favor!

When Ranya activated a command that caused a portion of the tunnel to open up, Arnold spotted the two humans standing just behind the observation screen.

The eight-legged exobeast eagerly raced over to the edge of the energy screen!

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

Ves grinned. "I'm happy to see you enjoying your new body."

He briefly chatted with Arnold. Due to the mutated beast's simple simple personality, the conversation didn't last too long.

"Arnold, I'd like your help with something. Do you recall what I explained about your new role a few days ago? Now is the time to see whether it can work. This is going to feel quite strange to you, but please bear with it. I know you can handle it. Just tell me whenever you feel any pain, alright?"

"Squeak."

It was doubtful whether Arnold understood what Ves attempted to do, but that was not important. He just wanted his design spirit to accept the changes that might happen.

Ves activated his comm and projected the Devious design in front of his face. The wireframe model already exuded a subtle character that made it appear less noticeable than notable.

The exobeast on the other side of the transparent screen wiggled a bit. "Squeak..?"

"Ah, you notice something?"

"Squeak squeak."

"It appears you are quite a s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e fellow."

It made sense. While the arganid clisenta species preyed on smaller creatures, it was small enough to serve as prey to many other threats. Due to his previous injuries,

Arnold lived a very high-strung life. He had to remain alert to the most s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e changes in order to ensure he was able to run away before any threat or rival arganid approached.

"Well, let me introduce you to the Superior Mother. She's very powerful, but she won't harm you. I think she might even welcome your company."

After he waited a few more minutes for Arnold to familiarize himself with the mech design and its current spiritual signature, Ves began the process of investing the small beast as its second design spirit.

This was not as straightforward as the other times. Unlike incorporeal entities such as Zeigra and the Superior Mother, Arnold was alive!

How could Ves tie a living creature to a mech design?

The biggest problem he faced was that Arnold's spirituality was fixed in place. Pulling it out and placing it elsewhere would definitely traumatize the poor exobeast.

"Hmmm."

Fortunately, Ves already thought about this problem. He came up with several possible solutions.

The simplest and the one with the highest chance of success was to harvest a spiritual fragment from his source.

Ves hesitated to employ this solution.

Arnold had only come into his powers recently and his spiritual strength was still in the process of developing. Crippling it when he was at this crucial growth period would definitely do a lot of harm!

Harvesting a small mote was much less harmful, but the results would probably be just as unnoticeable. There was no point to infusion just a fraction of Arnold's essence in the Devious design.

What solutions could he employ instead?

After letting his imagination go wild, he came up with an interesting idea that might just actually work.

Ves briefly left and returned with a box in his hand. He opened the box and pulled out a very accurate miniature model of the Devious design.

"This is for you, Arnold. Say hello to your new toy."

"Squeak?"

*Chapter 2765 - Inappropriate Behavior*

After introducing Arnold to his new 'toy', Ves stuck around for a few hours in order to make sure that the beast spent time with his gift.

In the beginning, the stupid creature didn't know what to do with the scale model of the stealth mech. Whenever he wanted to turn away and run back into the tunnels, Ves intervened and blocked Arnold from leaving the miniature Devious behind.

"Not yet. Bond with it first. Immerse yourself in its design and make it a part of you. I won't let you go back to your cave until you do as I ask."

Though Ves maintained a friendly tone, there was an undeniable hint of coercion in his words.

"Squeak..."

Arnold decided it was best to do as he was told. He approached the miniature and began to touch it with its snout and forelimbs.

Once he saw that the miniature wasn't dangerous, Arnold became bolder. He licked the surface of the mech and tipped it over so that he could step on top of the fallen object.

Ves frowned as he witnessed all of this. Arnold still lacked too much understanding. He turned the miniature into his new squeeze toy. If not for the fact that the miniature was made out of high-quality materials, it would have sustained damage from Arnold's rough ministrations!

After l.i.c.k.i.n.g the miniature mech from top to bottom, left to right and front to back, the dumb exobeast did something even more outrageous.

It started to mount the miniature after flipping it over!

"Oh, hell." Ves began to look disgusted. "Is it..?"

Doctor Ranya awkwardly coughed. "Arnold's physical parameters are elevated. They match the levels of arganids that have become excited. I'm uncertain what has led to this result. It might be that a particular material in the miniature stimulated his hormones."

It could also be something else. Perhaps Arnold became more and more fascinated by the weak glow and subtle spiritual presence of the miniature mech.

Ves widened his eyes. Since the Devious carried a touch of the Superior Mother's presence, did that mean that Arnold acted this way because he was stimulated by this aspect?

Before he could order Ranya to separate the excited arganid from his new gift, someone else intervened first!

A giant, semi-transparent hand materialized out of nowhere! It quickly descended in order to pinch Arnold's body before pulling him off the miniature!

"WHAT IS THAT?!" Ranya yelled in astonishment.

"Squeak! Squeaaaak!"

The Superior Mother was very upset! Ves could feel the anger and irritation radiation from the powerful spiritual entity. He was afraid that she might squash his precious asset!

"Stop! Don't kill him, mother! Please tolerate him. He doesn't know any better!"

Whether she listened to him or not, the Superior Mother did not apply any further pressure. Arnold dangled helplessly above the surface while two giant fingers kept him trapped in place.

"I need him." Ves continued to beg to the Superior Mother. "Arnold can be a useful addition to the Devious design. Can you help me out with this? Do it for me and for your worshippers. The Hexers can achieve much better results in the Komodo War if the Devious becomes a more effective stealth mech with his aid. Don't blame him for anything. He's too young. You can educate him if you want."

His words may have taken effect. The Superior Mother was a mother by nature, so she was naturally more tolerant to those who were younger and more ignorant.

While Arnold wasn't a juvenile anymore, his ignorance and lack of any forethought obviously caused him to resemble a naughty kid. His looks and behavior were both adorable in a way.

Eventually, the giant hand put down the furry mammal. Arnold's body shivered as it stayed in place. The frightened exobeast did not dare to move in the face of such a powerful presence.

He already figured out that it was useless to run away from such a powerful entity!

Since the Superior Mother was listening to him, Ves quickly explained his intentions. By openly telling the powerful spirit what he wanted to achieve, he hoped to gain her assistance in this matter.

The words took effect. Ves wasn't sure what happened, but the Superior Mother's giant hand gently poked Arnold's head before tapping the miniature Devious that was covered in drying saliva.

"SQUEAK!"

Arnold's body convulsed as his spirituality suddenly underwent a change that caused quite a lot of distress! His mind experienced a lot of new stimuli that his limited mental capacity wasn't able to process!

"Mother! Ease up on it! Whatever you are doing, don't kill the poor creature!"

As Ves kept observing what the Superior Mother attempted to do, he gained a bit of understanding.

"Don't force it. Let me help. This is my specialty."

He began to concentrate and form some spiritual projections in order to assist in the attempt to bind Arnold to the Devious design.

Ves supplied some of his spiritual energy to the process. It acted like a glue and a facilitator that allowed Arnold's spirituality to bond with the Devious design.

It took a few minutes for Arnold to stop squeaking. His exhausted body slumped on the floor while the giant hand that had tormented him disappeared from view.

The pain had stopped, but the changes were here to stay. With the Superior Mother's help, Ves managed to master another spiritual technique.

While that didn't sound too drastic at first, Ves already began to imagine how else he could apply this new technique.

Was it possible to turn humans into design spirits?

What would happen if he was able to invest one of his expert pilots as a design spirit to one of his mech designs?

Ves could scarcely imagine what that would do to the expert pilot in question! He always considered design spirits to belong to a different class of spiritual entities than expert pilots. Yet maybe this was just a mistaken assumption.

"Didn't I do something like this before?"

He shook his head. The situation back then wasn't comparable. Utilizing a stolen spiritual fragment taken from an expert pilot to create a new design spirit was not comparable to directly investing an expert pilot as a design spirit.

The latter was undoubtedly more direct and extreme!

For now, Ves set aside these radical thoughts. They sounded way too dangerous for him to explore them casually. He at least needed to test this idea with some disposable test subjects before he mustered the courage to extend this idea to his clansmen.

"Let's get back on track." He muttered.

In fact, Ves already became inspired by what he witnessed. He immediately decided to augment the Devious design with a triggered ability. He ignored Doctor Ranya's persistent inquiries and immediately began to form a new spiritual construct attached to the spiritual foundation of his design!

He spent half an hour shaping the new spiritual construct. The inspiration he gained and the satisfaction he felt at accomplishing something new had supercharged his creative process.

Even though he was incredibly enthused with what he had learned, he still maintained enough awareness to exercise restraint.

Arnold was still a weak entity. He simply wasn't able to provide as much assistance to a mech as the Superior Mother.

"I need to minimize energy consumption as much as possible while still adding something useful to the mix."

This was quite a challenging requirement, but Ves already had a workable idea in mind.

Once he finished the new spiritual construct, he wanted to try it out right away.

"Wait, sir! Can you explain what just happened? Why did a giant hand appear from nowhere? Does it really belong to the Superior Mother? Why were my lab sensors unable to gather useful data out of the manifestation?"

Ves simply brushed aside Dr. Ranya as he raced towards the exit.

"I'll explain at a later date! For now, just keep Arnold under observation and stay on the lookout for any distress or unusual behavior. Bye!"

As Ves exited the lab, he began to call a few people in order to arrange and impromptu live test of the prototypes.

Two hours later, Ves stood in the observation room of a familiar testing grounds. The Devious prototypes had already been pulled from their hangar bays in order to prep them for the upcoming tests.

Despite the short notice, the subordinates he called up did complain. They were quite interested in seeing what Ves had done to the Devious mechs for him to look so enthused.

The mech pilots assigned to pilot the prototypes entered the c.o.c.kpits and brought them online like they always did. Once they interfaced with the mechs, they immediately noticed the mech exuded a slightly different presence.

"Describe what you feel." Ves ordered.

"The mech is still as quiet and subtle as before, but there is a nervous quality to it now. I feel as if I'm slightly more s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e towards potential threats."

This was definitely a consequence of adding Arnold to the mix. After receiving some more vague answers, Ves urged the test pilots to proceed with the test.

The first prototype began to get ready to perform an infiltration. The mech had to sneak around an alert mech pilot patrolling a stretch of the testing ground. While the Bright Warrior IB piloted by the guard did not possess any excellent sensor systems, they were still good enough to make a Devious mech wary.

Just before the test commenced, Ves passed on some specific instructions to the test pilot of the Devious prototype.

"Understood, sir. I will do as you instruct."

The first Devious prototype turned invisible as it activated its stealth system. Ves and the other observers were only able to track the mech through special means.

They could vaguely determine that the Devious was inching closer to the patrolling Bright Warrior.

Ves wasn't interested in seeing the prototype succeed in passing by unnoticed. He just waited for the moment when the test pilot finally activated the new addition to the Devious design.

"It's happening now!"

Not a single person or sensor detected what happened next. Only Ves was able to infer that something was taking place by tuning his spiritual senses towards the prototype.

The Devious transmitted a vague spiritual signal to the Bright Warrior. A dozen seconds passed before something changed.

Outside of every observer's expectations, the guard mech abruptly turned to a random direction and started to enter the maze of winding corridors!

The Devious seemed to anticipate this result and briskly started to march forward while still making sure it maintained its stealth.

Since the only guard mech had left the vicinity, it had become trivially easy for the stealth mech to pass this test!

"What.. what happened?"

"It's quite simple." Ves grinned. "The mech pilot of the Bright Warrior was chasing after a phantom mech. The target that he thought he was chasing doesn't actually exist!"

Mental Decoy was the new triggered ability he imparted to the Devious design. It leveraged an aspect of Arnold's ability to instill a mental illusion into the mind of an opposing mech pilot.

While Mental Decoy was unable to affect any electronic systems, it worked well enough against average mech pilots. This was very useful in certain situations and would definitely allow the Devious to stand out from every other stealth mech that the Fridayman and Hexers had encountered before!

"Now this is a mech that I can feel proud of designing!"

His excitement barely dampened a bit after subsequent tests revealed numerous limitations.

Mental Decoy only worked on a handful of people at a time. It only lasted up to two minutes depending on the strength and vigilance of the targets. It didn't work against expert candidates and expert pilots.

"It's fine."

The Devious was already good enough for accomplishing this much. In a way, Ves was glad that it was subject to so many limitations. If Mental Decoy became even more amazing, then he might draw a lot of unwanted attention!

Ves decided to complete the Devious design after confirming the latest additions hit the mark.

He quickly set his sights on the Blinding Mech. This was a trickier design that required a more drastic solution to solve its fundamental problem.

The enthusiasm he gained from his previous success quickly made way for trepidation. The reason why he felt so wary was because his next experiment required him to play with one of the most dangerous assets in his possession.

He drew out a box and opened it up to reveal a P-stone that contained the spiritual fragment of the Unending One.

The remnant of the dark god had remained dormant all this time, but what if that changed one day?

"I... cannot stave this off any further. Sometimes, I have to face my fears!"

No more delays. No more procrastination. Ves was determined to work with the spiritual remnant of the Unending One! He had to harness the former dark god's energy processing abilities in order to solve his growing energy needs!

"Let's begin!"

*Chapter 2766 - Not Quite Alive*

The Unending One represented both extreme danger and extreme benefit.

If Ves was able to harness the possibilities of the dark god's spiritual remnant, then he would no longer be as constrained by his existing energy limitations.

The insufficient supply of spiritual energy constantly hampered his work.

His mechs could be greater if they were able to fuel their spiritual abilities with an additional supply of energy.

He wouldn't be so hesitant about expending his own spiritual energy to perform various useful techniques if he obtained a replacement for his Grand Dynamo.

He might be able to help Gloriana, Ketis and other mech designers unlock their potential by flooding them with energy.

He could even elevate his prime mechs and future expert mechs by giving them the capability to generate spiritual energy independently, thereby lessening their reliance on mech pilots and design spirits!

All in all, there were countless more applications he could think of that all required a supply of energy to function. While he was aware the Unending One was not capable of generating spiritual energy out of nothing, the dark god's formidable processing capabilities made it a lot more convenient to supply it from different sources.

"There are some sources that possess an abundance of spiritual energy and some sources that are starved of it." Ves murmured.

The design spirits of his Hexer mechs and commercial mechs had no problem with keeping themselves flush with energy. The spiritual feedback supplied by millions of

customers continually ensured the design spirits were being 'paid' for the services they rendered.

While it was possible for them to 'borrow' spiritual energy supplied by another friendly spirit, this was not a risk-free procedure. Contamination and incompatibility issues would definitely occur if entities continued to channel energy that did not align with their own attributes.

What Ves wanted to obtain was a means to convert one flavor of spiritual energy into another flavor.

The fragment of the Unending One gave him the best hope of accomplishing this goal!

Just like how the Unending One was able to digest spiritual entities with completely different attributes, Ves wanted to create an energy converter that was keyed to different recipients!

For example, an energy converter that was keyed to his spiritual signature would be able to absorb the excess spiritual energies of spirits like the Solemn Guardian and the Superior Mother and convert them into spiritual energy that completely matched his attributes!

Ves could even establish trading relationships between the different spirits. Their spiritual energy became a form of usable currency that every spiritual entity was able to use. The ones that were rich with spiritual energy could trade favors with those who were starving such as Bravo.

"Hmmm.. that doesn't sound quite right." He frowned. "The rich will get richer while the poor will only grow further into debt."

Economics was not one of his strengths, so he didn't bother to explore this scenario any further. He would deal with the issue when it was possible for him to establish the necessary trade mechanisms.

For now, he set his sights lower. He just wanted to give the Blinding Mech the capability of absorbing spiritual energy from external sources so that it could employ its characteristic ability with more force.

"Let's see if I can do something about this issue today." Ves rubbed his palms.

He spent a few minutes inspecting the P-stone that held the dormant fragment. Ves wasn't really sure what he should do at the start.

Should he feed it with spiritual energy so that it grew more powerful?

That was too risky. He was well aware that spiritual fragments had a tendency to come back to life if they were revitalized. This was an especially great concern when it came to an entity with strange abilities like the Unending One!

"I'll just play it safe." He decided.

This option entailed cutting a portion of the existing fragment. This would weaken the latter considerably. Yet this was a better alternative than the reverse.

"Let's do it then."

Ves already planned all of the steps in his mind. The only reason why he didn't act with confidence was because the consequences of screwing up were too dangerous!

Yet when he finally moved into action, nothing drastic happened.

"Let's proceed to the next step."

Ves wanted to be as careful as possible with what he wanted to do next. In order to control the situation further, he inserted the piece he took and inserted it into a spare P-stone before putting that into his B-stone lockbox.

For now, he kept the lockbox open, but he could always close it and cut off any energy transfer if the process ever ran out of control!

He also held his F-stone with its remaining offensive charge within his reach in order to have a powerful weapon at his disposal!

He even put on his Unending Regalia in order to prevent his own spiritual energy from being siphoned!

On top of all of these precautions, he even contemplated whether he should perform this experiment in the presence of the Statue of the Unending One or one of his prime mechs.

He eventually decided against this option because he was too afraid that the glows they emanated would rapidly feed the Unending One.

After checking that all of his existing precautions were in order, he proceeded with his plan.

He kept the helmet of his Unending Regalia open in order to allow him to observe and manipulate external spiritual energy.

The reason why he harvested more than a mote became evident when he began to draw out and cut a large amount of unknown and ominous-feeling attributes. The piece quickly shrank in size as Ves ruthlessly cut out everything that wasn't relevant.

In the end, he was only left with 20 percent of the original piece. Ves roughly judged that the attributes that remained untouched pertained to the Unending One's devouring and digestion abilities.

"I'm not entirely sure, though."

The Unending One possessed so many different spiritual attributes that it was difficult for Ves to judge what they all did. He had to go by feeling and intuition which wasn't exactly the most rigorous method to identify and filter attributes.

Still, he had cut away so many other attributes that the personality of the Unending One in the remaining piece should be very sparse.

"At least, I hope this is the case."

He had a solution for that, though.

After making sure that the purified piece was as 'clean' as he could make it, Ves proceeded with the most important step of his experiment.

He grabbed yet another P-stone that was currently storing a small spiritual fragment that he had recently taken from the Ill.u.s.trious One.

It was for a good cause, though. Ves did not allow the Ill.u.s.trious One to refuse his demand.

The fragment of the Ill.u.s.trious One was considerably larger and more powerful than the diminished piece of the Unending One.

This was on purpose. Ves trusted the Ill.u.s.trious One a lot more than the Unending One, so it was a given that the former would dominate his upcoming product!

"Here goes nothing!"

Ves began to follow the same steps he followed when he wanted to create a new spiritual product.

He smashed the little piece and the larger fragment into shards!

This wasn't all. In order to ensure greater compatibility, Ves decided to do something he never attempted before.

He harvested a portion of the Blinding Mech's spiritual foundation and shattered it into shards in order to add to the mix as well!

"This is a brilliant idea! I should have thought about it before!"

Before the shards of the three ingredients had time to decay, Ves quickly mashed them all together and supplied his own spiritual energy in order to force them to merge.

Different from other times, Ves did not set out to create a new design spirit. That was still a bit too risky for his liking.

What he wanted to make instead was a more advanced spiritual construct!

Different from a newborn spiritual entity, a spiritual construct wasn't sentient. The latter was more of a machine than a living, thinking lifeform.

Of course, the line between spiritual entities and spiritual constructs wasn't always clear. What Ves wanted to achieve today inched closer to the middle.

He wanted the spiritual construct to be alive enough for his distinctive strengths to take effect, but he didn't want it to wake up and become intelligent enough to make its own decisions!

"I need an obedient puppy, not a clever troublemaker!"

While Ves generally believed that the evil of the parent did not pass on to the child, he wasn't willing to take any risks this time.

This was why he insisted on making a construct!

In order to make sure he did not birth a new abomination, he altered his overall approach by changing several steps.

First, he did not piece together the shards at random. Instead, he attempted to form a predetermined shape as best as possible. Even if the shards only reluctantly stuck together, he pressed them together anyway as long as it conformed to a predetermined shape.

Second, he explicitly thought about making a non-sentient, non-thinking spiritual product. His thoughts played a large role in how his spiritual energy went to work. He knew that it was key to creating new life, so by reining in this aspect, he hoped to avoid the worst outcome.

Third, the quantity of shards along with the quantity of his own spiritual energy was substantially less than before. Creating new life was an energy-intensive process, so Ves thought it was a good idea to withhold a lot of energy.

As the minutes ticked on, it seemed that everything was going according to plan. A new spiritual construct slowly came into shape. It was much less potent, powerful and lively than his previous spiritual products.

Usually, he tried to maximize the life of his new creations, but not this time. All of the restraint that Ves currently exhibited was having the d.e.s.i.r.ed effect.

The grin on his face widened as his new energy converter slowly became more complete. Once Ves affixed the final piece, an unprecedented new spiritual construct came into existence!

"My energy converter is complete!"

No complications or unexpected failures occurred throughout the altered procedure. The energy converter construct looked exactly as he envisioned!

Different from his previous spiritual constructs, the energy converter felt more alive. Ves carefully inspected it again and again to make sure it had not reached a worrisome level.

"Looks like it isn't generating any thoughts."

That was good. He did not need an energy converter that could think and act on its own. He wanted a machine that mechanically accepted input and spat out the correct output without any fuss.

After Ves was satisfied with his checks, he carefully took the newly-created spiritual construct and carefully installed it into the spiritual foundation of the Blinding Mech.

"Fits like a glove."

For the first time in months, Ves felt as if the Blinding Mech was truly complete this time! There was just something about adding an energy converter that significantly altered his expectations of his innovative mech design.

"Now, let's see if you can live up to your promises!"

#### *Chapter 2767 - Energy Converter*

Ves returned to the testing grounds for the last time hopefully. He was still excited about the energy converter he invented!

The conception and realization of this basic component was a critical step forward in his career as a spiritual engineer.

Just like how the human race began to escape the confines of their physical limitations by generating energy from heat, Ves finally took the same step!

To be sure, the energy converter he cobbled together was still rudimentary in form and function. This was normal as Ves had not mastered all of the nuances and theory involved with this kind of spiritual machine.

"In fact, I shouldn't be able to make it in the first place."

The only reason why he managed to create it was because he borrowed the properties of a key ingredient. Without the fragment of the Unending One providing a ready-made 'OEM component', Ves would have never been able to create his d.e.s.i.r.ed end product!

This situation highly resembled his current approach as a mech designer. While he knew how to make basic versions of existing components, it was much more efficient for him to license parts developed by specialists. The latter delivered far greater performance than anything he could cobble up. Ves also saved a lot of time by relying on someone else's work rather than waste an excessive amount of time on reinventing the wheel.

Of course, mech designers developed a worrisome degree of dependence on others if they maintained this approach. It was generally good to master the development of at least one or two key mech components related to a mech designer's specialty.

The problem with Ves was that his specialty was not directly related to a physical aspect of a mech. His core focus lay in spiritual design, and as far as he was concerned, his specialty worked equally well on a first-class multipurpose mech or a third-class rust bucket!

The only true path left for him was to immerse himself in designing and creating spiritual components.

This was quite an enormous challenge as he did not have any prior instruction in this field. He knew that there was a community of spiritual adepts out there that had systematically developed a complete framework of spiritual engineering.

Yet he didn't have access to it! His mother kept denying him and it was impossible for him to knock on the doors of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Therefore, Ves had no choice but to pioneer this field himself.

Even though he felt annoyed that he had to start from the beginning, the advantage of doing so was that it was all his own work. Not even the System could take that away from him! The innovations he accomplished not only provided him with deep insights in

the fundamental nature of spiritual energy, but were also completely attuned to his own design philosophy.

The energy converter he made was a good example of that.

Due to the peculiarities of his life domain, Ves found it easier to 'birth' and 'grow' his spiritual creations rather than to 'build' them up like a normal machine.

In this regard, he shared something in common with biomech designers.

"I guess we are both life manipulators, then." Ves remarked with a chuckle.

Still, he did something different today. Rather than let nature take its course, Ves adopted a more proactive approach and exerted much greater control over the creation process in order to prevent it from becoming alive.

The result was a product that was neither lifeless or fully alive.

It simply sat somewhere in between.

Though the energy converter showed some traits of life, Ves had inspected it extensively and became reassured that it was not about to develop its own thoughts.

At least for now.

"Well, I can always kill it again if it gets too rebellious." He muttered.

It didn't matter too much if the energy converter possessed a lot of faults. It was a first generation product that opened up a lot of new possibilities. As long as Ves was able to build on this accomplishment, he could develop a much better version in the future.

"I can create self-sustaining spiritual constructs with the help of my latest creation!"

The spiritual device he made was not useful on its own. Instead, it came to its full potential when integrated into something else. Engineering was all about combining smaller assets to form a larger asset that was more than the sum of its parts.

A device that supplied energy to the greater construct was an essential requirement to create more advanced products!

Just like how modern human technology such as comms, shuttles, mechs and starsh.i.p.s all required exponentially more energy to operate, countless other spiritual applications needed to be fueled as well.

In order to confirm whether this bright new future was within his reach, Ves had to test the operation of the energy converter in person.

This was why he patiently waited for all of the pieces to be put into place. It took some time to prepare the 40 Blinding Mech prototypes for deployment again. The test also required the participation of an expert candidate and expert pilot in order to prove that his new mech's Blinding Pulse ability was finally able to affect stronger individuals.

Gloriana caught wind of the test and took some time out of her busy schedule to visit the testing grounds as well.

"Miaow!"

"Meow."

"What have the two of you been up to lately?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Miaow?" Clixie innocently blinked at Ves.

Ever since a portion of the Larkinson Clan landed on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI and occupied Gentle Lotus Base, Lucky and Clixie were rarely at the side of their owners. Ves was worried whether they were bothering others. Even if they were skilled in infiltrating other places, the biotechnology employed by the locals sometimes produced exceptional results.

"Don't stir up any trouble, you two." He sternly warned.

"Meeeeoooww..."

Before he could admonish them any further, his wife walked up to him and hugged him. Her floral scent quickly wafted over his nose, causing him to smile and revel in the presence of his spouse.

"Hey, Gloriana."

"Hey, Ves." She smiled into his eyes. "I heard you have finally solved the most serious issue with our Blinding Project. Does it actually work now?"

"That's what we're going to find out. To be honest, I can't guarantee anything. I might need to make some tweaks on the spot in order to obtain the d.e.s.i.r.ed result. Since this is a completely new invention, don't be surprised if it takes a lot of time to get it to work."

"Mmhmm."

Although he was confident in his work, he couldn't help but dial back his words at this time. Living with a demanding wife had taught him not to overpromise. It was better to do the opposite and delight Gloriana when he achieved an unanticipated success than talk big but deliver a fraction of what he complained.

Soon enough, every piece was put into place. The mech pilots of all of the prototypes and the target mechs had arrived. The machines had all come online and were all warmed up and ready to show their capabilities.

Ves commenced the first test. "Let's start with a baseline. I want one Blinding Mech to activate its Blinding Pulse ability on one average mech."

He first had to confirm that the base functioning of his auxiliary mech hadn't changed as a result of his changes.

A randomly-chosen Blinding Mech prototype slowly stepped forward and faced a Bright Warrior IB piloted by a test pilot from the Living Sentinels.

"Commencing test."

Ves paid careful attention with his spiritual senses. He saw the mech responding to the command of its mech pilot and unleashing its Blinding Pulse ability.

"Erm!" The mech pilot of the Bright Warrior IB uttered. "I felt something."

Nothing much had changed. Ves sighed in relief. He was afraid that damaging its spiritual foundation and inserting a semi-foreign component would alter the fundamental performance of the Blinding Mech.

"Is that it?" Gloriana frowned in puzzlement. "I don't see any improvement."

"It's not meant to be, honey. A solitary Blinding Mech shouldn't have the power to debilitate or incapacitate a single mech pilot. Not without some extra assistance."

The energy converter of the Blinding Mech had not gone into action. No matter how amazing it was, it wasn't able to generate any output without supplying some input!

The question was where to source the input. Ves anticipated that the Blinding Mech needed quite a bit of energy in order to fulfill its ambitious purpose, so he needed to link the energy converter to an abundant energy source.

The most obvious choices were his design spirits. The ones that were flush with spiritual energy such as the Superior Mother, the Solemn Guardian and several other entities could all pitch in and offload the excess.

Yet Ves did not solely want to rely on tapping the production of other design spirits to make the Blinding Mech work.

He had a more ambitious goal in mind. He wanted it to become more self-sufficient and be able to fuel its own expenditure.

It was an ambitious goal, though. Ves did not believe the primitive energy converter he made was already at this point.

It would already be good if the mech could supply at least some of its needs.

As for where the Blinding Mech would get its input from, that was what the next test was all about.

"Alright, let's proceed with the main trial. I want all forty Blinding Mechs to get ready. Joshua, please step forward with your mech."

As an entire mech company of Blinding Mechs stood ready, the Valkyrie Prime piloted by its currently-designed expert pilot attracted a lot of attention.

Even though it wasn't an expert mech, it possessed its own qualities that made it appear remarkable. Even Ves couldn't help but feel fascinated by its compelling presence.

"Your orders, sir?" Venerable Joshua dutifully asked.

"I need you to exercise your prime mech."

"Pardon?"

"Just move around and perform strenuous and difficult maneuvers. Pretend you are locked in a duel against another expert mech. I need you and your mech to work up a sweat before we can proceed with the next phase."

"Okay, sir..."

Though Venerable Joshua didn't understand how this was helpful, he executed his orders to the best of his ability. He strained his mind and tried to resonate with his prime mech. A weak resonance field formed around the mech as it began to fly around while stabbing its spear at an imaginary opponent.

This went on for fifteen whole minutes. The techs monitoring the telemetry of the different mechs didn't understand what was going on at all, but they all remained quiet.

Gloriana did not. She frowned deeper and deeper. "What is the point of all of this? Are you trying to test your invention out against a weakened expert pilot or something?"

Ves raised his palm. "Be patient. It's almost time."

After a few more minutes of random exercises, Ves finally called Venerable Joshua to cease.

"That's enough. Good work, Joshua."

Once the Valkyrie Prime returned to rest, the test pilots of the Blinding Mechs finally received the command that they had been waiting for. The mechs all seemed to shine a little brighter than before.

"Commence!"

The Blinding Mechs all began to trigger their Blinding Pulse ability at the same time!

As the person on the receiving end of this ability, Venerable Joshua was already on guard. His intuition had already noticed something unusual from the mechs wielding shields that were studded with luminar crystals.

When all of those crystals simultaneously flashed a light onto his Valkyrie Prime, he didn't experience a light glint this time.

Instead, an entire beam of light seemed to have washed over his mind! It was at least a hundred times stronger than the previous tests!

"Ahhh!" Joshua cried as he held his head. "It's like I'm seeing stars! It hurts!"

The Blinding Mechs successfully affected an expert pilot!

Even though Joshua quickly regained control after a couple of seconds, the fact that the Blinding Mechs were able to get to this point at all was a major turning point!

#### *Chapter 2768 - Energy Sources*

"It works! It works!" Gloriana happily clapped her hands before smooching Ves on the cheek. "You did it, Ves! We finally created a mech that can give expert pilots a hard time! Our work will definitely revitalize the Hex Army and give the Fridaymen and their foreign helpers a lot of grief!"

"Whoa there, don't celebrate just yet." Ves grabbed her waist and gently pushed her back. "The only reason why those Blinding Mechs were able to unleash a pulse that was strong enough to affect Venerable Joshua was because they had been accumulating energy for at least a quarter of an hour. That's nothing in a controlled test like this, but the battlefield is an entirely different place."

Her smile dropped. Gloriana finally looked past the initial success and began to consider all of the other factors that played a role in achieving this particular outcome.

"If I am guessing correctly, our Blinding Mechs are siphoning energy from the environment, am I right?"

Ves nodded. "Correct. They are absorbing the spillover and waste energy released by Venerable Joshua and the Valkyrie Prime over the course of their activities. You can say that the Blinding Mechs have basically borrowed the strength of their own targets."

This was not as impressive as it sounded. The amount of energy gathered through this method was low. This was because expert pilots and expert mechs converted most of their energy into something useful such as generating a resonance field or activating their distinctive resonance abilities.

Only a small proportion of energy spilled over, and that was what the Blinding Mechs s.u.c.k.e.d up. Their energy converters passively attracted any available spiritual energy and converted it into a form that was usable by the mechs themselves.

Naturally, this step reduced the amount of energy even further. Ves keenly observed the energy converters of the mechs at work and noticed that their efficiency left much to be d.e.s.i.r.ed.

All of this explained why Joshua only became incapacitated for 2 seconds in total.

Was this significant? Yes? Was this enough to turn the tide of the Komodo War? Probably not.

As Ves and Gloriana analyzed the data and formed their own thoughts, they both calmed down.

While the results were undeniably a step forward, they were still too far away from their destination!

"Let's see what happens if the Blinding Mechs trigger their ability another time." Ves suggested.

Only a few minutes had passed since the previous activation. The Valkyrie Prime remained on standby as Venerable Joshua hadn't received any orders to do anything.

He had already recovered from the earlier flash he experienced. As an expert pilot, his mental fortitude was as hard as a rock, so he did not suffer any permanent damage from the strike.

Ves wasn't certain whether normal mech pilots would be able to shrug off the flash as well. Theoretically, they were much harder to affect since most of their tiny spirits were hidden away. Yet if they got struck with just a tiny portion of the Blinding Pulse ability, they might not be able to take it! The possibility that a target might incur permanent harm made Ves very reluctant to apply a powered Blinding Pulse to any normal mech pilot.

As far as he was concerned, the Hexers could test that out themselves. There were plenty of unwitting Fridayman test subjects the Hex Army could try to flash.

Once the mech pilots of the Blinding Mechs all signaled that they were ready, Ves issued another command.

"Activate Blinding Pulse!"

The large and hefty mechs pointed their glittering tower shields straight at the Valkyrie Prime. The fragile luminar crystals all flashed the prime a second time!

Even though the light show was just as bright as before, Ves immediately perceived that the spiritual pulses released by the mechs were much weaker.

Venerable Joshua only experienced a mild sensation. "Was that supposed to do anything?"

This time, the Blinding Mechs failed to achieve any substantial results. Almost every variable was the same. The only change was that the Blinding Mechs barely converted a negligible amount of loose spiritual energy to power the second wave of pulses.

Gloriana began to comprehend the fundamental limitation of the Blinding Mechs as well. They were like leeches. If the enemy expert pilot did not perform any strenuous activities, then how were the Blinding Mechs supposed to do their jobs?!

"I was wrong. This isn't what we wanted to make, Ves. The Fridaymen will definitely try to take out the Blinding Mechs before they have time to charge up their special ability. Protecting them will take far too much effort considering they need to be deployed in larger numbers to be effective."

"It's not as bad as you think." Ves retorted and raised a finger. "First, the Blinding Mech doesn't discriminate where it gets its energy from. Any extraordinary source can charge it up. This means that not only hostile, but also friendly expert pilots can also power up our new model!"

"Second, a Blinding Mech should be able to charge up its energy reserves at any time. It doesn't have to be deployed on the battlefield to pre-charge its Blinding Pulse ability. A Hexer expert pilot could perform the same actions as Venerable Joshua just did to make the Blinding Mechs effective."

Gloriana frowned and crossed her arms. "The Hex Army is already running their expert pilots ragged. I doubt they have the time to spare on such activities."

"Ah, but even if the Blinding Mechs are forced to charge their ability on the battlefield, they might not have to wait 15 long minutes to accomplish a desirable result. The more

chaos and fighting that goes on, the more energy is being released. If multiple friendly and enemy expert pilots are clashing against each other, then the Blinding Mechs only have to wait a minute or two before they can unleash pulses at the same magnitude as before!"

There were factors that could diminish the effectiveness of the Blinding Pulse ability as well, though. While Venerable Joshua possessed a lot of promise, at the moment he was still a low-tier expert pilot. He underwent apotheosis not too long ago and still had a long way to go before he was able to match the more m.a.t.u.r.e and developed expert pilots that most military organizations had on retainer.

Even so, this was already a good enough result. The foreigners that the Friday Coalition had 'borrowed' from the third-rate states largely consisted of low to mid-tier expert pilots to begin with. None of them stood out as exceptionally as Ves was aware of. Even if they existed, their quantity should be exceptionally low.

Not even the Friday Coalition and Hexadric Hegemony themselves retained a lot of high-tier expert pilots!

As for ace pilots...

"In my estimation of their power level, not even a thousand Blinding Mechs can affect an ace pilot." Ves spoke with certainty.

Gloriana did not hold any unrealistic expectations over this. "The Hex Army has a greater problem on its hands if the Fridaymen deployed an ace mech on the battlefield. Only another ace mech can block such a powerful foe!"

Every ace pilot was a living legend and an important stabilizing factor of a state. Their symbolic value was just as great if not greater than their inhuman battle prowess. Unless the situation became truly desperate, Ves didn't expect either side to pull the trigger.

He turned his attention back to the testing session. What the Blinding Mech just did was not the extent of its power. Ves only aimed to prove that his new work was capable of charging its Blinding Pulse ability without relying on any freebies.

What would happen if Ves allowed the mech to receive handouts from other sources?

Ves decided to modify the Blinding Mech design on the spot. He already planned it out in advance so it didn't take much effort to add some extra motes sourced from two of his most energy-abundant design spirits.

The Superior Mother and the Solemn Guardian were both tied to the Blinding Mechs. Ves looked carefully at the c.o.c.kpit feeds of the test pilots. He could tell that they must

have felt a change, but the influence of the motes was too small to make a substantial difference.

He didn't pull in the Superior Mother and the Solemn Guardian to add their glows to the mech.

"You two know what to do." He whispered in the air. "I don't expect you to bleed yourselves dry, but I hope you will pitch in and help the Hexers out when my Blinding Mechs need the power."

This was another new development. The Blinding Mech's dependence on energy granted more influence to his design spirits. Ves did not dare to implement any mechanism where the Blinding Mech could forcefully drain energy from the two entities.

It wouldn't work anyway. The Blinding Mech was nowhere near as strong to these two powerful spirits.

Ves felt this was a good solution because it ensured that the Superior Mother and the Solemn Guardian did not drain themselves to death. They had to be picky because the expenditure would be far too great if they had to support the functioning of millions of Blinding Mechs at the same time!

This was why the first test was so important. Ves had to make sure the Blinding Mechs could fend for themselves if no design spirit was willing to lend them a hand.

As Ves explained all of this to Gloriana, she finally understood the overall scheme he had in mind.

"It's not ideal." She frowned and placed her hands on her h.i.p.s. "The Blinding Mechs need to be ready to activate their ability at any time if we truly want to push back all of the enemy mech pilots. Right now, there are too many conditions before the mechs are ready to perform their function."

She could complain all she wanted, but nothing was going to change. The only decision that Ves could still make was whether he should connect the Blinding Mech to other design spirits.

Due to the explosive popularity of the Ferocious Piranha, its three design spirits all earned a lot more spiritual feedback from before.

Qilanxo would probably be okay with this arrangement, but Lufa was too young and Zeigra was too hostile. If Ves only tapped Qilanxo, then she would weaken her position relative to the other two design spirits. This might cause the Ferocious Piranha's glow to become more harmful towards friendlies. Ves did not wish to realize this potential outcome.

He figured that two design spirits should be enough to make the Blinding Mech practical enough. Perhaps in the future he might revisit the design in order to upgrade its energy converter or apply some other upgrades.

"I think it's time to complete this project." Ves announced.

"Really?"

Ves nodded. "I also have a good name in mind for this design. Its codename isn't adequate enough to fit in with other Hexer mechs."

"What name did you come up with, then?" Gloriana asked.

She grew curious. The naming sense of her husband was rather inconsistent, but he did exhibit moments of brilliance sometimes.

"Our Blinding Mech is an auxiliary mech that is meant to be piloted by boys. Conscripted boys to be more precise. Considering the mech's main feature and its projected users, I decided to combine these two traits into a name that encapsulates them both. From now on, this mech design shall be known as the Bright Boy!"

Bright Boy!

*Chapter 2769 - Taking Stock*

The completion of the Bright Boy Project formally put an end to the second round of design projects.

Roughly half a year ago, the Design Department formally commenced work on six mech design projects.

Ves briefly thought back on the designs he managed to complete.

The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B was a necessary mech model that served as the new standard mech of the Larkinson Clan. Even though its numbers were still limited, the reaction from his mech pilots was already positive.

The Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B was a true powerhouse in a deceptively small package. Too powerful to be released to the public, so far only a handful of Larkinson light mech specialists experienced its fantastic battle-changing glow.

The Eternal Redemption, previously codenamed the Giant Killer, not only added a powerful anti-armor unit to the mech roster, but also delighted the Penitent Sisters. The loyalty of these former Hexers was no longer in doubt as far as Ves was concerned.

The three Hexer mech designs that Gloriana poured her heart into were all relatively cheap but useful in their own way.

Ves already had access to preliminary reports that detailed the incredible effectiveness of the Cherub model under a variety of battlefield circumstances!

The ability to communicate securely did wonders in improving the command and control of the Hexer mech division that received the privilege of testing the Cherubs first.

Right now, their numbers were too limited to affect the greater war, but that would undoubtedly change in the future.

As for the Devious design, Ves hadn't heard anything about it once he handed it over to the Hegemony. Part of that was because too little time had passed for the Hexers to do anything with their new stealth mech design, but the Devious mechs weren't supposed to attract attention in the first place.

Even if dozens of them started to get caught by the Fridaymen, Ves doubted that he would hear of these incidents. Perhaps word about the new stealth mech with a highly-unusual triggered ability might spread once the Hexers deployed it in large numbers and allowed it to gain more notoriety.

That only left his sixth and final project, the recently completed Bright Boy design.

Just as its name suggested, the renamed Blinding Mech was a mech that wasn't capable of doing anything except blinding its targets. Its default loadout didn't come with any weapons as the Hexers didn't find it terribly important to arm mechs that were piloted by boys.

The other five recently-completed mech designs didn't strictly need to be augmented with energy converters. Their dependence on spiritual energy wasn't as great and introducing something extra might adversely affect their performance.

For now, Ves intended to monitor the Bright Boy's performance as the Hexers deployed it into battle over the coming weeks and months.

The energy converter's troublesome pedigree and traces of life meant that Ves did not have total confidence in its reliability and functionality. He wanted to be absolutely sure that the energy converter remained stable and reliable.

If there was any sign that the Unending One found a way to return to life, then Ves would pull the plug on the Bright Boy no matter the cost!

That said, Ves didn't expect this to happen. It was too far-fetched for the energy converter, which had already formed its own distinct identity, to contain living traces of its ingredients.

All of the spiritual products that he had developed before didn't exhibit this issue before, so there was little reason that the energy converter would be any different.

Once he confirmed that his new innovation was safe for use, Ves would contemplate using it on other mech designs.

There were a number of mech designs that could obviously benefit from gaining an additional energy source. The Transcendent Punisher was a good example of one. Ylvaine was currently impoverished so he did not have that much energy to spare to enable the Transcendent Punisher mechs from activating their cheat-like Guided Aim ability.

"Adding an energy converter to the Transcendent Punisher design will probably provide a lot of relief to Ylvaine!"

"I doubt this will allow Venerable Joshua and others to exhibit the power of a high-tier expert pilot right away."

Willpower mattered more. Expert pilots only made use of spiritual energy as an amplifier. If an expert pilot's willpower was still underdeveloped, then it wouldn't be able to support so much spiritual energy.

In any case, after the Design Department wrapped up the design work on the last remaining project, Ves felt as if he had passed another checkpoint in his life.

The mechs he designed were all unique and useful in their own way. The Larkinson Clan was about to become a lot stronger now that Ves had supplied it with three clan-exclusive mech designs. The Hex Army should also be happy with mechs that granted their underprivileged male mech pilots an opportunity to make themselves useful.

In fact, Ves could even repurpose the Hexer mechs into forms that were suitable for the Larkinson Clan.

"I'll definitely have to design a Larkinson-friendly variant of the Cherub if I have the time."

He expressed less interest in allowing the clan to adopt variants of his Devious and the Bright Boy designs. The two mechs were typical 'army mechs' that were only practical when utilized by massive military organizations that were capable of fielding millions of mechs at a time.

All three Hexer mechs were explicitly designed with economy and expendability in mind. Unlike the Valkyrie Redeemer that preceded them, the Cherub, Devious and Bright Boy models were all designed to serve the needs of a state under heavy pressure.

"To put it in uglier terms, they are cannon fodder mechs that only exist to make expendable mech pilots useful."

That wasn't his problem, though. He was just a mech designer. Whether the female Hexers were able to convince their male counterparts to pilot these cheap mechs was none of his business.

With the end of every project, one of the most favorite moments in Gloriana's life had come.

"It's time to fabricate the first copies of our new design!" She gleefully exclaimed.

To be honest, Ves did not feel as enthused as his wife. He had way too many things he needed to do that he just couldn't spare as much energy for what was supposed to be a great moment.

He knew that this was unfair to Gloriana. If he let his stress and deflated mood affect the results of their fabrication run, then his beloved would definitely yell in his ears until he turned deaf!

"I need a short break." He announced.

That caused her to freeze. "Uhm, how long?"

"Half a day. Let me clear my mind and put my thoughts together. They are too jumbled for me to concentrate fully on my work."

"Oh, okay. Take your time. I don't want to see the same level of craftsmanship you exhibited when we fabricated the first copy of the Bright Warrior IB. You were awful back then, Ves. I hope you better get your head in order before we begin to fabricate our mechs. We have gone for too long without making a single masterwork mech!"

Ves refrained from telling his wife his true thoughts. Did she really think that masterwork mechs grew on trees or anything? They were quite lucky in their earlier attempts. He considered their current lack of success to be their default condition.

In fact, one of the ideas he wanted to try out most was implanting one of them right inside his mind!

This was not a simple task at all. Ves would have to perform extra research and conduct numerous other tests before he was confident that it was safe to add a foreign object into his head.

"I'll go ahead and double-check our preparations, then." Gloriana turned around. "I need to make sure we have obtained the best samples of all of the raw materials we require to make our perfect mechs."

Clixie followed after his wife, leaving Lucky with Ves.

The gem cat stared after the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat. It looked like as if Lucky wanted to accompany the other two.

"Oh no you don't." Ves spoke as he grabbed hold of his cat. "You're coming with me. I need company as well, you know."

"Meeeeoow!"

"Who are you calling grumpy?! I'm just a bit moody, that's all! I'm just a bit moody at the moment, that's all! Finishing six more design projects is a major accomplishment."

Yet why did he feel dissatisfied, then? Ordinarily, he should have felt happy for completing so many mech designs, but once the joy he gained from succeeding in his innovations wore off, he felt empty and weary.

The place wasn't actually isolated, though. Thousands of Larkinsons populated the rented base. When Ves looked down from his position, he could see and hear the throngs of clansmen moving about.

Different from the previous time he resided on the ground, there weren't as many mechs moving around.

Due to local restrictions, the Larkinsons weren't allowed to field their own mechs outside certain sanctioned occasions. For example, the authorities permitted the clan to use their mechs in the testing grounds, but outside of that the mechs were subject to a lot of restrictions. They not only had to be disarmed and safed, but were also prohibited from being brought anywhere close to Veoline proper or any other urban areas.

The heavy restrictions on mechs should have made him feel safe, but the lack of protection only made him feel more vulnerable. He would rather place his safety in the hands of his own troops than the supposedly-neutral authorities.

"I hope I can move on from here as soon as possible."

As Ves thought about the implications of his upcoming design duel, Ves received an unexpected call.

"Uhm, sir?" Vivian Tsai asked. "Our department has finished going over the available trade offers for the Auralis. We have compiled a number of dossiers of attractive offers that we think are worthwhile for us to integrate into our fleet. I think you'll be very interested in some of these options. While they are all pre-owned second-hand vessels, they are certified as free of bugs and other hidden malware."

Ves automatically discounted the last part. Every ship was bugged. The only difference was the extent to which they were compromised. A certification at least guaranteed that the hidden dangers weren't too blatant.

Regardless, Ves regained some of his good mood. The prospect of acquiring additional capital sh.i.p.s was always exciting!

"I'll be at your office as soon as possible. I look forward to viewing the dossiers."

The Spirit of Bentheim had already changed the way the expeditionary fleet operated for the better.

With more utility-oriented capital sh.i.p.s, the Larkinson Clan became more self-sufficient and less dependent on services provided by the state.

Of course, Ves didn't forget about acquiring combat-oriented capital sh.i.p.s as well. "We can definitely use a fleet carrier or a vessel that can withstand a lot of attacks."

He had a feeling that he would definitely need the capabilities of such a vessel in the future!

#### *Chapter 2770 - Graveyard*

"Meow~"

Lucky flew up to Vivian Tsai and offered up his back for petting and stroking.

The shipwright couldn't resist the cuteness. She grinned and put down her data pad to play with the gem cat.

"You're not as hard and cold as I thought. What is this unusual material? I've never encountered anything like it before. I would love to find out where to get some."

Ves ruefully smiled as he sat down on the chair opposite to Vivian's desk. "You won't be able to find it anywhere else. Lucky is quite a unique existence."

Though Ves hadn't met with Vivian a lot, she already looked more comfortable in her own skin than before. Despite her relatively junior age and experience, she occupied a high position within the hierarchy of the clan.

Being thrust in a position of great responsibility always changed people. Fortunately, Vivian successfully stepped up and managed to organize an entirely new department within the Military Bureau.

With a small army of engineers, analysts, lesser shipwrights and other personnel answering to her, she had made a lot of progress in developing new capital sh.i.p.s

while at the same time evaluating existing ones the Larkinson Clan might wish to acquire to gain an instant boost.

Right now, the meeting revolved around the latter.

After Vivian had her fill with the affectionate cat, she returned to business.

"Ahem, after several weeks of exploration, outreach, preliminary negotiations and investigations, we are ready to present you with a small list of choices that the Larkinson Clan might wish to acquire."

The decision to add another capital ship to the expeditionary fleet was not a trivial one. Making impulse purchases with sh.i.p.s worth more than a trillion hex credits was not done. Every buyer had to study every possible angle of a ship for an offer in order to make sure it fit their needs.

Starsh.i.p.s, especially larger ones such as capital sh.i.p.s, were often individualized. These were expensive assets that were usually put to use for fifty, a hundred or even two-hundred years!

With such a long service time, it was well worth it to invest money to modify them to better suit a specific purpose.

Over time, as new generations rolled in that introduced better technology and new innovations, owners might also choose to upgrade specific parts and systems to keep up with the times.

Starsh.i.p.s never remained static. A good crew and owner constantly invested in them and cared for them so that they delivered reliable performance.

However, the opposite also happened. Plenty of starsh.i.p.s suffered when dysfunctional crews and awful owners handled them improperly. These vessels exhibited greater problems that caused their total lifespan to shorten considerably.

The dossiers that Vivian prepared for Ves happen to fall under the latter category.

"The conditions you have set have made it rather difficult for us to attract good offers." Vivian patiently explained. "You chose to retain the two long-range FTL drives in order to upgrade the Spirit of Bentheim. While this is your prerogative, the value of the Auralis is severely diminished now that she has lost her greater advantage."

"She's still a very good fleet carrier. It's not as if she has become worthless after losing her long-range FTL travel capabilities. She possesses excellent armor coverage that is completely intact and there are a wealth of modern military-grade systems and components inside her hull. Her capacity is also good at 600 mechs."

"The supply of good, armored fleet carriers like these is considerably higher than the supply of deep strike fleet carriers, sir. We are working in a much less favorable market environment. This has caused us to receive a large number of sketchy offers."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Sketchy in what way?"

"Whatever you can think of." Vivian shrugged. "The people and organizations that reached out to us were opportunities trying to see whether we were gullible enough to fall for their tricks. While the capital sh.i.p.s they showcased all seemed like good value at first glance, our inspections revealed many issues. Worn-out FTL drives, improperly-repaired hull structure, prem.a.t.u.r.e stress fractures in the keel, contorted software and most egregiously unannounced downgrades. My men and I have witnessed too many instances where quality parts and systems were replaced by cheaper variants without doc.u.menting the changes."

"And this actually works?"

She nodded. "I have grown up in the shipbuilding industry and I have listened to a lot of stories from my father and his colleagues. They have all encountered instances where the clients fail to do their due diligence. There are all kinds of reasons for that and there are also sellers out there who explicitly fish for these customers. What we needed to do was show that we aren't gullible suckers. Once we rejected the outright scams, we were left with more decent offers that are actually made in good faith."

"I see. Tell me what you have encountered."

"Oh, there is quite a decent variety of second-hand sh.i.p.s on offer. Most of them are non-combat oriented though. Organizations tend to cling to their fleet carriers a lot tighter so there is less on them in the market. Another issue is that the capital sh.i.p.s on offer are usually several decades old. The worst are over a century old. While they are technically in working condition, the outdated tech, worn construction and other issues mean that they require lots of time and effort to keep them in good condition."

Ves was familiar with this condition. It happened to mechs as well. "It's not worth it to acquire sh.i.p.s that are in the latter stages of their product life cycle. The upfront cost might be cheaper, but we will be bleeding a lot of money to replace their failing components and perform deep repairs."

"Those are our thoughts as well, sir. This is why we are left with only a modest selection of dossiers after we have ruled out all of the vessels that exhibit an excessive degree of maintenance issues."

"Do you have any favorites you want to start off with first?"

"Here." Vivian waved her hand. Two separate projections appeared over her desk. "There is one party who is actually willing to exchange our Auralis with another fleet

carrier. Since the value of their ship is substantially less than our modern military capital ship, they have also put a smaller capital ship on the table in order to make up for the difference."

Ves didn't feel very good about trading a good capital ship for two not-so-good capital sh.i.p.s, but there weren't many sellers out there who offered vessels of comparable value.

Most private organizations that were capable enough to own capital sh.i.p.s still tended to go for cheaper ones. It was too much of a risk to invest too much in a single expensive vessel only to lose this expensive boondoggle in a space accident or pirate attack.

The price to performance ratio of cheaper capital sh.i.p.s was also a lot more favorable. Customers had to pay exponentially more to gain a marginal degree of improvement. Any company would go bankrupt if it blindly chased after goods with the highest level of performance!

Because better vessels commanded such a high premium, it was more than fair to exchange the Auralis with two complete capital sh.i.p.s.

Ves immediately became attracted to a large and heavy vessel that was obviously built for war. Her hull construction looked odd. She resembled a junkheap at first glance due to all of the different materials adorning her exterior.

"What am I looking at here?"

"This is the Graveyard." Vivian introduced. "She looks odd, but there is a reason for that. First, you need to know that this is a dual-purpose capital ship. The genius part about this ship concept is that the two roles tie to each other. In combat situations, her thick armor belt allows her to act as a very sturdy shield against mass bombardment. Outside of battle, she possesses the capability to process and break down salvage."

"So she's a salvage ship with very thick armor?"

The shipwright grinned. "The Graveyard is more than that, sir. She's a salvage ship that can continually bolster her own armor plating. The reason why her exterior looks this way is because it is made out of lots of debris from fallen mechs and starsh.i.p.s. She has been in operation for quite some time which is why her outer layers are actually made out of parts taken from thousands if not tens of thousands of different vessels and machines."

"And this actually works?"

This sounded like a ludicrous way to build up a vessel to Ves! While it sounded nice to be able to turn any piece of hardy space trash into additional armor plating, the Graveyard probably came under a lot of strain for this reason!

Due to all of the variety and inconsistency, the parameters of the ship were highly inconsistent across her hull. One section might be overburdened with mass while another side lacked protection. Ves also found it hard to believe that all of the salvaged parts were able to stick together so well.

He put much more faith in the protection offered by a uniform plate!

Vivian obviously knew what she was concerned about. "I know this ship looks dodgy, but the Graveyard is worth a deeper look. While she looks a bit rickety from the outside, she's actually quite solid. The Graveyard was built to be used this way from the start so her design incorporates many accommodations that support the use of armor plating made out of recycled space junk."

She pointed at the projection, causing it to grow in size. She tapped it again, causing a lot of different internal parts to light up in yellow.

"These are all systems that perform many different functions that keep the Graveyard balanced and her eclectic armor plating as solid as possible. The Graveyard can dynamically shift her center of mass in order to balance out her hull."

This was quite a good function. As Vivian pointed out several more critical systems that helped the defensive salvage ship maintain her function under difficult circumstances, Ves began to recognize the charm of the vessel.

"The Graveyard is a scrappy ship." He concluded. "She's not the most sophisticated or expensive capital ship, but she is definitely one of the most robust. She's adaptable and can endure a lot of rigorous circumstances."

"I agree with you, sir. Let me put it this way. If I need a combat vessel to fight against powerful opponents in civilized space, I would take the Auralis over the Graveyard any day. However, if I need a combat-oriented capital ship to function as the core of an expeditionary fleet in frontier space, then I would gladly give up all of the luxuries provided by the Auralis in favor of the more basic but less demanding Graveyard."

In other words, the Graveyard was much more suited to venture into the Red Ocean!

Ves nodded in agreement. "A salvage ship is always useful in those places. We can't always fill up our cargo holds and travel to the nearest industrial system in order to sell or process our salvage. There are times when it is much better to process them on the spot ourselves in order to obtain usable raw materials that we can use to replenish our battle losses or upgrade our assets."

"Exactly, and the best part about the Graveyard is that she can upgrade and repair her own hull without relying on any outside help! It is not a big deal if her thick, resilient but disposable armor belt incurs heavy damage. As long as the more delicate internal compartments remain untouched, her crew can renew the armor belt using the ship's own salvage processing capabilities!"

The ability to mount a ship with patchwork armor was very valuable when advanced services were unavailable or too far away. While it was possible to perform the same types of emergency repairs on the Auralis, the ship wouldn't be able to cope as well.

Yet... not everything about the Graveyard was all sunshine and roses.

"Alright, enough about the upsides of the Graveyard." Ves said. "What are the downsides? What do we have to take into account if we adopt this vessel?"