

Mech 2811

Chapter 2811 - Answering the Question

The saboteur beetles didn't last very long.

As the crowd began to utter their disbelief in a heated fashion, Ves paid careful attention to the critters he endowed with life.

He noticed that the arena was gently shoving them away. No doubt, the officials wanted to perform detailed examinations on them in order to figure out why they rebelled against their own programming!

This was bad! While he didn't think the Lifers were capable of figuring out that Ves had tampered with them, he had no idea what might happen.

He had to get rid of the evidence!

Fortunately, due to various reasons, he was able to extend his mind towards the beetles he had recently gifted with the ability to think for themselves.

The stupid bugs were just beginning to explore what that meant. They were so innocent and naive that Ves felt it wasn't right to ruin what he had made.

It was too bad his safety came before any of his ideals!

"Sorry, little ones, but this is only a trial version. If you want the complete product, then pay me next time!"

As a giver of life, Ves was also able to take it away.

Normally, this was quite difficult to accomplish because sentient life forms possessed various intrinsic methods to protect their spiritualities.

This was a special moment, though. The beetles had just been changed and their newly-expanded spirits were still in flux.

This made it easy for Ves to yank away the spiritual energy that he had originally invested in their minds. Due to their weak and imm.a.t.u.r.e minds, the beetles were hardly able to prevent their benefactor from robbing them of what they had gained!

The abrupt deprivation was so disruptive to the saboteur beetles that a quarter of them died! The other creatures had practically turned comatose.

Their conditions were worse than before they turned sentient! The trauma of losing their spiritualities was so damaging that the other beetles would probably turn completely blank as their damaged minds were constantly deteriorating.

Ves didn't care. He did what he had to do and got rid of the most incriminating evidence. It was highly unlikely for the Lifer scientists to be able to figure out what had taken place out of the remains of the saboteur beetles.

As Ves relaxed, everyone else became more emotional.

The attendees in Ruuzon Arena still managed to restrain themselves to an extent. They shouted their anger and disbelief but did not cross the line. Any that did would quickly get paralyzed by a stun blast or blessed by a sticky web!

There wasn't much they could do in their positions anyway. The viewing platforms didn't contain that much stuff to vandalize. The angry mobs would have to descend to ground level and head into the city to vent their frustrations, but they weren't even allowed to leave at the moment!

This was because there were many other citizens who were expressing their rage!

"This is a travesty! How could we lose seven matches?! We should have won five at least! Any less is a mistake!"

"Dr. Navarro is a donkey! He's the laziest and most incompetent Journeyman in our state! He should be sued for deceiving us and pretending that he can win!"

"Our biomech industry is rotten! The radicals are right. We were always behind. We just didn't see it. This match has made it clear that any random Journeyman outside our borders can beat our biomech designers with ease! We were just too blind to recognize the truth!"

The Lifers uttered a lot of nonsense in an attempt to explain Dr. Navarro's defeat, but there was no question that many of them took this outcome personally!

The unrest in Veoline and other cities in the LRA intensified. A lot of people got caught up in the mania that had descended over the public.

The opposition was too strong for that to work. The fact that the opponents of the conservatives were able to force the broadcasts to continue was a sign that this was not a spontaneous operation.

The Life Research Association had truly entered into one of the darkest moments of its history!

The authorities were trying their best to quell all of the problem areas, but they were vastly overstretched. Too many people in too many different places had gone crazy, and it took far too much time for law enforcement to forcefully calm them all down.

In a normal situation, the design duel should have been suspended a long time ago. Yet because of all of the interests working behind the scenes, Ves saw no sign of that. The Lifers all acted as if letting the entire duel run its course was an unbreakable tradition!

Master Werther Cline radiated concern at times, but at this moment he had carefully schooled his face. He stood up and left the company of the other Masters in order to walk to the front of the VIP viewing platform.

"Dr. Navarro. Mr. Larkinson. Please step forward. It is time to announce the results."

The Master issued his request as if he was announcing a disaster. Those who valued stability were desperately hoping that sanity would prevail, but there was no sign of that today.

Ves tried to plaster a pleasant smile on his face. He knew that he was probably being watched by trillions of people. While he was used to attracting the public eye, he usually did it on his terms.

"Well, here goes nothing."

The pair of Journeymen stepped forward until they stopped right behind Master Cline. Both of them looked quite presentable in their formal clothes, but their presence was incomparable to that of a long-established Master.

Many Lifers were familiar with Master Cline's appearance. The old man had been alive longer than almost any person in the star sector!

Due to his high position, he had been in charge of various functions throughout his centuries-long life. His face practically symbolized the conservative faction considering how often he acted on behalf of the government of the LRA!

Yet now, the people looking up at him no longer held as much respect towards this sagely figure. With the help of agitators, the citizens of the state began to see Professor Cline's caution and restraint in a bad light.

"These old fogeys at the top are far too slow. If younger folk were in charge, we wouldn't have ended up in this position!"

"Professor Cline should have retired at least a century ago! In fact, all of those old Masters should have made room for their heirs. Their minds are all stuck in the past, so all of their decisions are at least several centuries out of date!"

As the arena buzzed with insults and snide remarks, Master Cline raised his palm.

The crowd silenced.

No matter what they thought, they still respected the identity of a Master.

"Peace, everyone. Please stay calm. We are aware of your complaints, but please maintain control of yourselves. We are not savages. We are Lifers. This day has already sparked enough destruction. Do not shame ourselves any further. The entire star sector is watching us as I speak."

Shame was a powerful motivator. The Lifers were very willing to act out if they were solely trying to channel their rage. They were a lot less willing to go crazy if they turned into monkeys in front of foreigners!

Master Cline was not an incompetent speaker. The riots that were taking place across Prosperous Hill VI were slowing down. While people were still angry, they were a bit more willing to stop and listen.

"Our state is founded on furthering the development of biotechnology." The old biomech designer explained. "We live to support the brilliant researchers who do their best to push their respective fields forward. The development of biomechs falls within our core focus areas. Since the founding of our state, we have never stopped investing in our biomech industry."

Many Lifers already knew that, but it was helpful to give them all a reminder.

"Today, this industry has flourished. Yes, our market is mostly confined to our state, and yes, Dr. Navarro's products haven't fared too well against the works of Mr. Larkinson. Yet is this cause for us to determine that four centuries of effort into developing biomechs has been wasted? Be reasonable. Our biomech industry is much greater than any single biomech designer. Numerous Master Mech Designers preside over our sector today and there are many talented Seniors who will carry on the torch tomorrow. We have not reached the peak of our growth."

Ves didn't buy into the speech. It sounded overly vague and pointed towards an uncertain future. However, many Lifers bought into it. Master Cline was easily able to lend weight to his reasonable-sounded words due to his high regard. His reputation and prestige were still high enough to make himself heard!

Fortunately for Ves, Cline did not lecture the entire crowd forever.

Ten people passed through the entrance of the VIP platform. They had all been moved to the top of this particular tree structure in order to issue their personal verdicts.

The mech pilots still wore their piloting suits, as if to emphasize as if they had just fought a thrilling battle.

"Come." Master Cline beckoned to the mech pilots. "Each of you have piloted two different mechs. There are no other mech pilots who have experienced the mechs of both these young mech designers. Since you have the rare p.l.e.a.s.u.r.e of being able to compare your piloting experiences, you are well-placed to determine which of them are more alive."

This was indeed the case. Up until now, Ves had not published any of his second-class mech designs to the public mech market. None of his mechs were for sale in the Life Research Association.

While he did design a bunch of third-class mechs, none of them aroused any interest in this state. They were too fragile and weak to compete against actual second-class mechs!

This meant that it was very likely that the ten mech pilots standing before Ves were truly the only ones who were qualified to issue a judgement on this matter!

"Before you speak, please remember that the central question is not about which mech is stronger or better." Master Cline reminded the mech pilots. "Instead, you are being asked to determine which mech is more 'alive'. You can interpret this word in any way you wish. Just be honest."

Everyone directed their attention to the first pair of mech pilots. Captain Alazar Ipsich and Kelly Gidon looked a lot more grizzled than Ves expected. They looked a little tired but held up reasonably well considering how many people were paying attention to them at the moment.

"I will start." Captain Ipsich stepped forward. His eyes were solely directed at Ves. "I had already made my choice at the end of the first phase. I have piloted many biomechs. The Epsilon Mosar designed by Dr. Navarro is a little different from what I have experienced before. While it brings a few novelties, it is familiar territory."

A grim smile appeared on his face. "The Bright Warrior is different. It is made of metal, yes, but it is anything but dead. Unlike a biomech, the Bright Warrior has a quality that immediately stood out to me. In fact, when you study what mech pilots say about Mr. Larkinson's mechs, you'll find out that what I've experienced is not unique. Let me say to you that all of those mech pilots aren't exaggerating. The hype is real. To me, the Bright Warrior is alive. It is more alive than the Epsilon Mosar. In fact, now that I have experienced the former, I can never convince myself that any biomech can be an equal!"

Chapter 2812 - Misinterpreting

Captain Alazar Ipsich's verdict was very clear! He spoke with such certainty and conviction that no one doubted that he was telling any falsehoods.

The entire audience remained silent as they processed the mercenary captain's words.

Many already speculated that Captain Ipsich would favor the sword-wielding Bright Warrior over the Epsilon Mosar. After all, he won a glorious victory with the former but lost handedly when he was forced to pilot the latter.

It didn't help that he piloted the Bright Warrior when the Larkinson mech was fresh and in its best condition.

By the time he piloted the Epsilon Mosar three days later, Dr. Navarro was only able to remedy a limited amount of issues. Aside from its odd tentacle legs, Epsilon Mosar didn't have any property that conveyed an advantage to the half-fixed biomech!

All of these factors meant that Captain Ipsich experienced a biased perspective on both mechs. If he was assigned to pilot the Epsilon Mosar first, his opinion might have differed, although it may very well not if the Bright Warrior lost in the initial bout.

While these circumstances did not sound fair to Dr. Navarro, there were other mech pilots who possessed the opposite perspective, so it all balanced out in the end, at least in theory.

Of course, no one expected them to issue a completely impartial judgement. Aside from their nationality and their personal biases, their wins and losses most certainly colored their opinions.

This was what the Lifers were truly worried about. If the matches ended at a score of 5-5, then there were as many mech pilots who gained a positive experience with a given mech as those who gained a negative experience.

Neither mech designer enjoyed an inherent advantage in this case!

Yet because the final score was 7-3, the citizens of the LRA were deeply fearful of what the mech pilots might say. What if their positive experiences with Ves' mechs clouded their judgement? What if the rush of victory was so overpowering that the mech pilots forgot about the charm of biomechs?

Recency bias also played a factor. If a mech pilot won both matches with different mechs, the individual might favor the latter because the memories of piloting it were more fresh.

What was important to note in this context was that the first phase ended with a score of 3-2 in favor of Ves, while the second phase produced a score of 4-1 in favor of the same mech designer!

This effectively meant that eight mech pilots experienced Ves' mechs in a good light while only two mech pilots went through the opposite.

All of this happened within an hour from this moment!

The audience's worst fears seemed to be turning into a reality from the moment they heard Captain Ipsich's judgement. The Lifer who possessed a wealth of experience in piloting biomechs did not just lean towards the living mechs designed by Ves, but he practically threw himself into this direction!

The man looked so enthused about LMC mechs that he came across as a religious convert! Perhaps he might be one step away from kneeling in front of Ves. Such a sight would have dealt a heavy blow to the reputation of the LRA's biomech industry!

Master Cline maintained a stoic face. It was clear that he already expected this response. Not only was he aware of all of the factors that Ves just considered, but he was also familiar with what LMC mechs did to mech pilots.

Out of every other kind of classical mech, the mechs designed by Ves were some of the best when it came to providing a fantastic user experience!

While this did not directly make the mechs stronger, they were certainly more well-received by their users!

Captain Ipsich's case happened to be one of the most extreme cases where everything fell into place for Ves. It would have surprised many critics if the mercenary captain voiced his support for a mech he defeated during the first phase and lost with it in the second phase!

"Madame Kelly Gidon, you are next. Please voice your opinions without any reservations. Each of us deserves to know the truth."

What Master Cline did not mention was what would happen if anyone was caught lying. In fact, there was no way for anyone to speak any falsehoods under these circumstances because second-class lie detectors were scarily effective.

The LRA excelled in many aspects of biotechnology, and one of those areas happened to be human augmentation. Their understanding of human physiology and so on was so high that they probably developed the best lie detectors in the entire star cluster!

Even if Master Cline and the conservative faction wanted to pervert the results, the five Masters belonging to the other factions wouldn't let that happen!

Ves briefly turned his head. He noted that Master Brixton of the combinants was paying very careful attention to the proceedings. The glowing pupils signified that the old but ambitious cybermech designer wasn't even hiding the fact that he was employing his most advanced methods to check whether the mech pilots were being influenced in any way!

"I struggled to make a choice. As you know, I piloted the Epsilon Mosar first. Even though I lost with the mech, I don't believe it is the fault of the biomech at all. It's not the easiest mech to get into considering that it is optimized for dual-wielding, which I do not excel at. Other than that, it is a fine biomech. As for the Bright Warrior, all I can say is that piloting it is a new adventure. While I did enjoy piloting it and winning with it, I think the novelty of piloting something different has caused me to think more positively about it than I should. If I try to detach myself from that glowing halo, I think I'm more inclined to go with what I am familiar with. To me, biomechs are my bread and butter and they continue to be dear to my heart."

The audience all seemed to sigh in relief at the same time.

Dr. Navarro wasn't getting steamrolled!

Even though Kelly Gidon's experiences with Dr. Navarro's biomechs weren't positive, the Bright Warrior failed to overcome her inherent love of biomechs!

The Lifers all saw hope. If Gidon was able to remember her love for biomechs, then so could the other mech pilots!

Perhaps the win-loss record was not as pivotal as everyone thought.

Ves grimaced a bit. He took this outcome as a personal failure. He was so convinced by the attraction of his mechs that he was certain that he could have won over someone like Gidon!

Besides that, Gidon's reasoning made it clear that she didn't strictly answer the central question. She adopted a different interpretation of the issue and merely told the audience which mech she liked more without any deep consideration of whether biomechs felt more alive.

If Ves directly challenged her on this point, she might have issued a different answer.

He refrained from doing so. He was confident he had won over a lot more mech pilots. He just hoped the rest wouldn't misinterpret the question as well!

"Mr. Trip Oxxon. Please step forward and issue your verdict."

The youngest mech pilot of the bunch responded. He looked stiffer and more formal than the others. His relative inexperience in these settings caused him to grow very nervous all of a sudden.

It was one thing to pilot a mech in front of the entire star sector. As a mech pilot, he was trained to excel at it. Yet addressing trillions of people in a public broadcast was another matter!

"Uhm, In my first match, I rode the knight mech version of the Bright Warrior to defeat." Oxxon slowly began. "In my second match, I achieved the only victory of this phase with the help of the Dragonscale Warrior. While I did not get to pilot the former at its best, I've witnessed enough to form an opinion about it. I can't say which one is better because both mechs have their merits. However, if I had to choose which one is more alive, I think that the Bright Warrior is really something special. It supported me from behind throughout the first match, and I never really felt as if the fight was doomed until my mech could no longer keep up. I never experienced that from any biomech and I think this quality alone is remarkable enough for me to vote for Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves received his second endorsement! Even though Oxxon's arguments sounded a bit weird, it was undeniable that he had become another fan of LMC mechs!

The crowd grew a little rowdy. Dr. Navarro failed to sustain his momentum from earlier. With Ves ahead by one vote, it became harder for the biomech designer to overtake his opponent!

Zenon Dia Bavros spoke up next. As Oxxon's opponent, his experiences were opposite.

"The Dragonscale Warrior is a great mech. I love its scale-regenerating ability. I lost when I piloted the Bright Warrior. While the mech makes me feel great, it's an illusion. What does it matter if I feel good if my mech is still behind in performance? I would rather pilot a mech that brings solid benefits to the table! To me, the mechs that are more alive are biomechs because my chances of surviving are greater if I pilot something more powerful!"

What kind of crappy argument was that?! Ves couldn't believe that Bavros would utilize such twisted logic in order to hand over a victory to Dr. Navarro. The worst part about all of this was that it appeared that Bavros genuinely believed in what he said!

While Ves had his misgivings, the rest of the audience didn't see any problems with Bavros' answers. The score evened up again!

Rez Killigan stepped up next. He looked much more presentable than the prior two mech pilots due to his military bearing.

"Just as Mr. Bavros has said, results matter. Performance matters. I had a great time with the Ferocious Piranha. This mech is so strong and special that it's a game changer

for light mechs. Piloting it made me feel as if I was cheating while fighting against it caused me to feel as if I was going through a nightmare. I don't have anything good to say about the Faerie Stinger. The Ferocious Piranha is the best out of the two mechs. No question."

The military scout didn't even mention which one was more alive to him, but if he was forced to give an answer, he would probably favor the Ferocious Piranha.

It couldn't be helped!

The Ferocious Piranha fared so well that the Faerie Stinger didn't have a chance to show what it could do at its best!

Katarina Volsemar quickly followed suit. "I agree with Mr. Killigan. The Ferocious Piranha is something else. I don't think the Faerie Stinger is bad. I piloted it first, so I know that its performance is quite good. It's just that the Ferocious Piranha causes me to disregard everything I favor about the biomech because they can't do anything against 'glows'. I feel as if if the Faerie Stinger was more alive, it would have been able to protect me against the Ferocious Piranha's distracting effect. Since it didn't, I'll just vote for Mr. Larkinson."

Ves gained two votes at once! This was a serious turn of events that prompted a shocked reaction from the crowd.

Even though it was true that the Ferocious Piranha performed well, the two mech pilots who experienced it showed no hesitation in favoring it! The light mech was truly something special if it could win over two military specialists at once!

Chapter 2813 - Downside of Living Mechs

The final score abruptly widened to 4-2 in favor of Ves!

While the result was a bit predictable in hindsight, a lot of people still reacted negatively to this outcome.

"Are they even Lifers? How could they choose a metal mech over a biomech!"

"It's over for us if the mech pilots base their decisions on the win-loss records!"

"Traitors! Why didn't they give the Faerie Stinger a chance? It's clearly the better-looking of the two mechs!"

"I need to see what the fuss is all about. Are the Ferocious Piranha's truly special?"

The audience sounded more perplexed than angry for the moment. They never experienced the two mechs up close, so they found it very difficult to understand why the Ferocious Piranha merited so much praise.

Only by coming close to the mech in question would they be able to learn why Rez Killigan and Katarina Volsimar kicked the Faerie Stinger to the curb!

Once the discontent voices died down a bit, the show resumed.

Six mech pilots had issued their verdicts by now. Four still had to voice their opinions.

The likelihood of that happening seemed very bleak, but Ves didn't rule out any possibility. An upset might very well happen if the remaining mech pilots all misinterpreted their orders and used flawed logic to come up with their answers.

This was the problem with receiving any feedback from mech pilots. Their highly-specialized mech academy training turned them into great mech pilots but not much else. They didn't learn any advanced sciences, learned nothing about culture and probably didn't even know how their own government worked!

Many states believed that mech pilots had to be pure soldiers. Forcing them to learn non-combat subjects not only reduced the time they spent on developing their fighting skills, but also inserted their minds with potentially-dangerous thoughts!

If mech pilots became more political or assertive, then they might very well pose a threat to their states one day!

Therefore, the overall consensus throughout human space was that mech pilots had to be raised as grunts. If they were subjected to any intellectual courses, then they should purely be geared towards turning them into qualified officers, not great scientists or other professions that required great thought.

For this reason, many mech pilots weren't exactly clever outside of battle. Unlike scientists and engineers who studied the scientific method and learned how to anticipate and compensate for many different biases that were capable of skewing the results, mech pilots didn't bother with all of that. They simply spoke what was on their mind regardless of whether their answer was related to the original question.

This was the accepted practice towards any study that involved mech pilots. Their initial answers were always the purest ones that best reflected their true feelings and thoughts.

Any attempt at coaching them or guiding them to answer a question more correctly would put undue influence on their judgement.

Therefore, despite all of the shortcomings related to the current approach, it was still considered better than the alternative.

"In my first match, I lost with Mr. Larkinson's mech. In the second match, I lost with Dr. Navarro's mech. My experiences with both the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Frokyn could have been better. I.. I don't know if I'm the right judge for this, but what I have gone through while losing with both mechs is different."

The recently-graduated mech pilot looked quite bummed because of this. His two losses not only reflected poorly on his piloting skill, but also denied him the opportunity to experience the mechs at their best.

At least there was a bright side to this outcome. Carter Day displayed a sheepish smile.

"Mechs are supposed to win, but not every fight ends in your favor. What I have just gone through has taught me that mechs can make a huge difference when you are on the losing end. In this regard, I did not feel as if the Frokyn had my back. It failed to perform as well as in the first match, and that was a big letdown to me. I know it was in a rather exhausted state when I got my hands on it, but I expected more."

The male mech pilot shrugged. "I heard a few stories about the Valkyrie Redeemer model. It's supposed to be a mech that is exclusive to Hexer women, though this particular mech was altered. I don't know how the original version is supposed to work, but I think I know why Hexers fell in love with it. The Valkyrie Redeemer is like a second partner to me. Even though I lost badly against the Frokyn while I piloted it, I always felt as if my mech supported me to the very end. It made me fight harder and always kept me company to the very end."

Carter Day then proceeded to voice his most devastating words.

"When I piloted the Frokyn.. I lacked all of that. The biomech was pretty much dead to me. I was left on my own, and I can't get over that. The only mech that is alive of the two is the Valkyrie Redeemer. Hexer mech or not, the version I piloted is a p.l.e.a.s.u.r.e to use! I wish I was a woman, though. I could have gotten much more out of it if I wasn't a man!"

His answer depressed the crowd even further. Carter Day's arguments were much better thought out, and that left the Lifers with little means to reject them. That left many people frustrated!

It didn't help that the Frokyn hadn't performed up to expectation during the second phase. The recency bias must have amplified his negative experience.

With five votes in total, it was impossible for him to lose the design duel at this point! The worst outcome that was possible at this moment would be to lose the next three votes, thereby resulting in a tie.

There was no way that would happen! Ves didn't believe that all of the remaining three mech pilots would choose to favor Dr. Navarro. Not when Ves' mechs achieved more wins than losses!

"As Mr. Day's opponent, my time with the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Frokyn went differently." Mireilla Linschoten spoke when it was her turn to issue her verdict. "I piloted the Frokyn when it was at its best and I piloted the Valkyrie Redeemer in a less-than-ideal state. Ordinarily, that should have given me a better impression of the former. I do have to admit that I think highly of the Frokyn's combat ability. It is one of the finest biomechs I've ever piloted. The ability to grow out all of that hair and use it to entangle and frustrate other melee mechs is very useful."

She sighed. "The Valkyrie Redeemer is better though. While I wish I had piloted it when it was at its best, what I managed to get is still convincing enough for me to become a fan of this model! While I'm not a Hexer, there's something about this mech that just brings out the best of me, not just as a mech pilot, but also as a woman. I think this is what a living mech should truly be like. No matter how powerful the Frokyn felt in my hands, the Valkyrie Redeemer actively worked with me to achieve victory, and I appreciate that. I think every mech pilot would feel better if their mechs supported them in battle!"

Mireilla Linschoten dealt another heavy blow to Dr. Navarro and the Lifers who rooted for him! With the eight mech pilot speaking out, the total score turned to 6-2. With this kind of disparity, it was impossible for Dr. Navarro made a comeback, and everyone was aware of this reality!

"Is this a mistake?"

"This can't be!"

"Traitors! Hang them all! They're no Lifers anymore. They're working for the enemy!"

Although this outcome was not an unanticipated one, Ves noticed that Dr. Navarro mournfully lowered his head. The biomech designer's reaction showed that he had genuinely tried to achieve victory. He had just picked the wrong opponent.

Of course, this wasn't enough for Ves to drop his suspicions towards Frederico Navarro. No matter how sincere he might have been, Navarro had to know that he was facing an uphill battle!

The show wasn't over yet. Even though victory and defeat had basically been decided at this point, two more mech pilots were waiting to voice their opinions.

What they were about to say could either widen the disparity between the two mech designers further or offer some redemption to Dr. Navarro.

Gwineth Ulser slowly stepped forward. "I think highly of both the Transcendent Punisher and the Swarm Monarch. Both have their good points. The Transcendent Punisher is a powerful heavy artillery mech, and I managed to win with it. However, there was just something about it that always rubbed me the wrong way. I felt as if I'm not the right mech pilot for it. I'm sure it's a great mech, but if it holds back because it doesn't like me, then I'm not sure if I want to condone this kind of machine."

She smiled. "The Swarm Monarch is a lot different. It's a biomech, and a multi-layered one at that. I think its features best represent the potential of biomechs. Even if those saboteur beetles got hacked for some reason, I don't hold it against the Swarm Monarch. In my opinion, a mech should be dependable and usable to every mech pilot with the right skills. If living mechs are capable of rejecting their own mech pilots, then I don't think that's good. I would rather pilot a silent mech like the Swarm Monarch that responds exactly according to my intentions."

Her answer was confusing. On one hand, she acknowledged that the Transcendent Punisher was likely the one that was more qualified to be called a living mech.

On the other hand, she explained her misgivings about Ves' interpretation of living mechs. Her concerns were valid. If Ves had designed more mechs, then he could have made use of more neutral mech models for this design duel, but because he was too young, he didn't have much choice! Adapting the Transcendent Punisher to a foreign mech pilot was the best he could do to fill up the fifth slot of his dueling mech roster.

Since Gwineth Ulser's reply wasn't entirely clear, someone had to decide how to adjust the score.

Master Cline broke the silence.

"I will interpret Madame Ulser's answer as a vote in favor of Dr. Navarro."

Everyone waited for the final mech pilot to issue her verdict. Ilse Lieberman had already listened to the answers of nine mech pilots. That caused her to approach this issue from multiple angles.

"I think the mech pilots who spoke before me already touched upon many of the points I wanted to say. They all have a point. Mr. Larkinson's mechs are truly amazing. I can even see why they are called living mechs. While I agree with what Ulser said about mechs, I don't see that as a reason to reject them. Mechs are our partners. As long as we treat them well, they will definitely return the favor when we need it most."

Her eyes turned a little dreamy. "I think that you need to develop a relationship with mechs like these. I really wish I had months to do so with the Transcendent Punisher. I would have probably fought a lot better if I did! As for the Swarm Monarch... I'm sorry, Dr. Navarro, but I don't see why it should be called alive. I know for certain that the mech will largely remain the same even if I invest months into developing a relationship

with it. No matter if it's a biomech or a classical mech, nothing will come from befriending it as long as it's not designed by Mr. Larkinson!"

Her answer was loud and clear. She voiced her support for Ves, thereby changing the final score to 7-3 in favor of Ves!

This score happened to mirror the outcome of all of the matches!

Now that the mech pilots made their opinions known, the design duel had formally come to an end.

As much as Master Cline wanted a different outcome, he had no choice but to recognize reality.

"Of the ten mech pilots, seven of them have voted in favor of Mr. Larkinson. Three have offered their support for Dr. Navarro. The outcome is clear. Ves Larkinson... is the winner of this design duel."

A momentary silence ensued. The Lifers already received a lot of forewarning, but when it finally happened, they were still stunned!

Some of the conservative-leaning mech designers and officials immediately began to get angry! "I object!"

Chapter 2814 - Culmination

In the end, Ves won the design duel.

Even though a lot of important-sounding people began to voice their objections at the proceedings, Ves momentarily tuned them all out. After he received the backing of most mech pilots that took part in the design duel, both he and his competitor accepted the outcome in their hearts.

The objections didn't matter. They could say what they wanted, but the mech pilots spoke honestly. The design duel was not supposed to be a tool for other forces, so everyone else's opinions were irrelevant.

An air of doom and gloom enveloped Dr. Navarro's form. Right now, the biomech designer didn't think about the humiliation he suffered after losing the design duel. He didn't think about disappointing the expectations of the LRA. Whatever political considerations he had in mind did not come forward at this moment.

Before all of that came into consideration, he first had to process the loss as a mech designer.

The high-stakes design duel prompted both Ves and Dr. Navarro to put their beliefs on the line. The central question on which kind of mech was more alive played a central role in how they viewed their own products.

Were biomechs truly alive? For a very long time, Dr. Navarro always assumed this was true. Unlike mechs made out of metal and other lifeless materials, biomechs were made out of the same building blocks as living organisms.

Since biomechs shared so many similarities to other life forms such as humans and exobeasts, why shouldn't his products be considered alive as well?

For a long time, he worked with the belief that the biomechs he designed and birthed were all alive in a sense. They might not be capable of independent thinking, but his mechs always bloomed when they were put to use.

Yet now that he had finally challenged this assumption against someone who claimed to design better living mechs, Dr. Navarro suddenly experienced a crisis in his mind!

The devastating outcome of the design duel not only caused him to recognize that his biomechs were inferior to that of other mechs, but also caused him to question the very foundations of his design philosophy!

"Are biomechs truly alive, or have I always lied to myself?" He whispered to himself.

Although he was afraid of answering this question, he couldn't avoid it! His head began to ache as he began to contemplate answers that he never wished to confront!

"What is true? What is false?"

While Dr. Navarro had to deal with an existential crisis, Ves went through a different ordeal.

It was as if he entered a high. Something similar to an inspired state swept over his mind as he finally basked in the recognition that he had proved the superiority of his living mechs!

Biomechs, which were often regarded as the ultimate representatives of living mechs, no longer had a leg to stand on when it came to this issue!

From now on, Ves would be able to refute anyone who claimed that biomechs were the actual living mechs by referencing this design duel!

In a well-developed second-rate state which actively supported a biomech industry and embraced biomechs on a wide scale, Ves managed to overcome numerous disadvantages and decisively defeat the Lifers at their own game!

Numerous talks with higher-ranking mech designers such as Master Willix and Master Cline caused him to make a few new realizations about his design philosophy.

A strong and viable design philosophy should never be squirreled away!

Mech designers constantly had to push themselves in order to improve. If Ves didn't publish his mechs or never put them into actual use, he would never be able to know where he stood relative to the competition!

This was not confined to his mech designs. While it was important for his products to be adopted by others, the design approach and principles that tied them all together were also important!

If no one recognized or appreciated his individual approach, then was he truly on the right track?

Useless mech designers never made it far! Every successful mech designer had to be able to fulfill the core purpose of their profession, which was serving the mech pilots who utilized their products!

While an individual mech design might flop for any kind of reason, that did not necessarily mean that Ves was a failure or that his approach was wrong.

As long as his design philosophy is useful and desirable, then Ves would always be assured that he was heading in the right direction!

"Every mech designer craves recognition."

Now that he received it in spades, his design philosophy seemed to undergo a minor sublimation process. While Ves couldn't describe what had changed, he felt so good at the moment that he was certain that he was one step closer to becoming a Senior!

When Ves finally pulled his attention back to the present, he noticed that the conservatives who objected to the outcome of the design duel had all been silenced!

Master Cline might not like the result, but as an authority figure within the mech industry, he was obliged to maintain fairness. It was beneath a Master to lie or manipulate the results of a fair design duel, and anyone who thought that he would be persuaded to rob Ves of his victory didn't understand what it meant to be a mech designer!

"The format of the design duel may not make sense to you, but this is what Mr. Larkinson and Dr. Navarro have decided upon." The Master spoke in a definitive tone. "While I agree that the rules could have been better, it is too late to request a change. The only way to conduct a better design duel is to start a new one. This particular event

is over, and our institution has already registered the results. We will not tarnish our credibility by altering the outcome in full view of the entire star sector!"

Everyone recognized that this was the right decision to make, but that did not sit well with the most ardent supporters of the conservative cause.

Finalizing this defeat meant that the Life Research Association officially suffered a humiliation on home grounds!

Even if people disregarded the confusing question of which mechs were more qualified to be called alive, the record of the matches already spoke for themselves!

As the defeat of Dr. Navarro sank in, the public largely responded with resignation and dismay.

Hardly any of them were in the mood to lash out. They already did that a while ago when Dr. Navarro's mechs were performing badly. Enough time had passed for them to come to terms with the biomech designer's defeat.

This was good. While Ves tried his best to defeat Dr. Navarro as convincingly as possible, he didn't want to drive the Lifers into a frenzy. He wanted to be able to leave Ruuzon Arena in peace!

Both of them already attracted way more attention than they could handle. Now, they just wanted to leave and process what had happened.

Dr. Navarro needed a long time to adjust his mentality. The foundation of his design philosophy suddenly turned shaky after his loss caused him to doubt the assumptions that were at the heart of his work.

Ves had to go over his gains as well. His design seed became more vigorous than ever. While he was happy with his upgrades, he still had to figure his total gains. His design philosophy had definitely taken a step forward when it came to realizing the concept of a living mech!

He was so excited that he almost missed what happened next!

"Master Cline!" An old voice suddenly interrupted the conservative Master's droning speech! "Will you continue to deceive our fellow Lifers, or will you and your fellow conservatives finally disclose the truth?"

"The truth is much more ambiguous, Master Brixton. The Life Research Association cannot afford to be affected by misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings? HAH? WHO ARE YOU KIDDING?!" Master Brixton boomed!

"Look at what your caution has wrought! The outcome of this design duel is indicative of the stagnation that has settled on our biomech industry!"

"This is not the time to hold this debate, old friend."

"On the contrary! If not now, then when? Our entire state is paying attention now. There is no better time than to announce the news that you have kept under wraps for all this time!"

Something about Master Brixton gave Ves a very bad feeling. He quickly reunited with Lucky, Jannzi and Vincent.

"I don't know what's going on, but we better leave as soon as possible." He whispered!

No one objected to his suggestion. They quietly left their places and moved to the exit.

Unfortunately, the guards didn't let them pass!

While all of this went on, Master Cline and Master Brixton were locked into a staring contest. The air between the two apex biomech designers grew tense. Sparks seemed to fly between the two. Even Ves experienced a bit of spiritual pressure from their invisible confrontation!

"Don't do this, old friend." Master Cline whispered. "We have not reached the point of no return. Hope is still alive."

"Hope is currently on life support!" Master Brixton angrily spat back as he stepped closer to his rival. "Isn't that right?! One-and-a-half years ago, the Supreme Sage and the leader of our state conducted a dangerous experiment and encountered an accident! Ever since then, you and your cabal have continually tried and failed to wake him from his awful condition. The truth is that he has not exhibited any brain activity for all this time, even activity that is necessary to sustain his life!"

The entire public was shocked?! Ves was shocked as well! To hear that the most foremost scientist and leader of the Life Research Association was braindead was so astonishing that many people couldn't wrap their heads around this news.

For four continuous centuries, the Supreme Sage was the idol of every researcher and the patron of every citizen of the LRA. The man had been alive and well for such a long time that none of the Lifers believed that he could ever die. With his extensive expertise in biotechnology, the brilliant visionary probably possessed at least a dozen ways to extend his life!

This was what made Master Brixton's announcement so unbelievable. Yet when people turned their attention to Master Cline, the orthodox leader did not issue an immediate denial.

Was Brixton.. telling the truth?

"For all intents and purposes, the Supreme Sage is braindead." The challenging Master provocatively declared. "According to our rules, our government should have convened a council to declare a successor. It is clear that our current Supreme Sage has already died more than a year ago! What is left is simply an empty husk that the conservatives don't know what to do with! Each second his carcass is subjected to another experimental treatment is another second the conservatives are defiling his bodily remains!"

The plot was finally baring its fangs! Many of the oddities that Ves had noticed in the past few weeks suddenly made a lot more sense.

It turned out that the design duel was just a precursor to a much more shocking announcement!

In turn, Dr. Navarro's loss combined with Master Brixton's unexpected revelation were both part of a greater plan to discredit the conservatives!

The goal of the opposition was nothing less than to topple the current regime! Robbing the dominant conservative faction of their support was an essential step to depose it from its throne!

If it turned out that the Supreme Sage had truly died in mind and spirit, then the conservatives no longer enjoyed the backing of their strongest and most powerful leader!

This left them vulnerable and more exposed than ever before!

The entire Life Research Association was shaking at the moment! Change was in the air, and no one believed that the conservatives would be able to control the situation at this time!

Chapter 2815 - Age and Temptation

The bombshell that Master Brixton had dropped was such an enormous shock that it rippled through the entire state!

Even the Lifers who hadn't been paying to the design duel quickly heard about the explosive news.

"The Supreme Sage, dead?"

"Why did they hide this from us?! What have the upper ranks been doing all this time?!"

"What will happen to us?! How are we supposed to be able to move forward without the guidance of the Supreme Sage?"

Virtually every citizen in the LRA grew up under the calm and reassuring stewardship of this legendary figure. He was no different from a god to many people, whether they were lowly mech technicians or respected researchers.

Entire generations had lived and died under the constant presence of the Supreme Sage. People were so used to looking up at this mythical biotech visionary that their heads were permanently pointed upwards!

Yet no matter how brilliant the Supreme Sage turned out to be, he was still a human, not a god!

An authentic god would have been able to transcend the limitations of his mortal coil, but the Supreme Sage had not reached that level.

Even if he had touched upon some of the mysteries of spirituality throughout his long lifetime of studying remarkable lifeforms, how much could he have accomplished by himself?

It was highly plausible that the Supreme Sage could die from an accident. Experiments were fraught with uncertainty. Cutting-edge research often required researchers to take a lot of risks! Those who adopted an overly-cautious approach might be good at verifying results and refining existing applications, but they were never good at innovation!

From what Ves had heard about the Supreme Sage, the ancient man was definitely an innovator!

Ves briefly wondered what kind of experiment caused the Supreme Sage to suffer a personal accident. Ordinarily, someone like him would maintain a suitable distance from a dangerous experiment. The pinnacle labs he utilized would surely be stuffed with protective measures.

The only realistic way for the Supreme Sage to be affected by his own experiment was... if he was the test subject himself!

Ves widened his eyes.

Even as Master Werther Cline and Master Leehay Brixton hurled competing narratives at each other, Ves was already fantasizing about what kind of experiment could take such an esteemed and successful researcher down.

He instantly recalled the case of the NuMan. The giant humanoid biomech that Prescott Museum put on exhibit symbolized the failure of an unknown mech designer to escape the end of his life.

In his first meeting with Master Cline, Ves learned that biotech experts were capable of performing many horrible and taboo experiments. They constantly had to resist the temptation brought by their knowledge.

Usually, biomech designers and other professionals were able to maintain their composure. The punishment for failure or getting caught was too great. Any rational scientist wouldn't want to ruin their lives by performing an unnecessary experiment.

"What if it becomes necessary?"

That was a good question.

When researchers reached the end of their lifespan and weren't able to procure any means of extending their lives, what then?

The ordinary punishment of imprisonment or execution no longer held sway over their hearts! Since they were already about to die in a few years, why should they value what little they had left?

From a rational perspective, performing a crazy experiment that would most likely fail but had a tiny chance of giving them a new lease of life made a lot of sense!

Any punishments or accidents the researchers suffered was no worse than dying in their deathbeds shortly afterwards! Instead, by letting all of their restraints go, they might be the first ones to come up with a brand-new treatment to effectively prolong a human's life!

Ves could see this happening to many researchers who possessed the necessary expertise to conduct such experiments. From what he had observed about this society, the LRA's emphasis on science and rationality conflicted with its attempts to impose morality and ethics onto its researchers!

While Ves had no doubt that the institutions of the LRA succeeded in swaying the majority of biotech researchers onto the right path, the problem was there were too many scientists in the state!

Even if only 0.1 percent of all of those researchers turned out to be bad apples, that still represented many thousands highly-competent experts who could create all kinds of biological horrors if they stopped holding back!

Who was the best, smartest, most successful, most experienced and most resourceful scientist in the LRA?

The Supreme Sage!

With his wealth of knowledge, his grand vision and his control over the pinnacle labs, he could conduct far grander experiments than the NuMan Project!

Perhaps the Supreme Sage secretly collected all of the research data on illegal life extension and consciousness transfer projects that intermittently took place in his state.

After all, even if all of those experiments ended in disaster, the data and results they produced were still of great value to other biotech experts!

Human civilization didn't abide by the concept of tainted research. Even if some crazy doctor performed heinous and cruel experiments on his own patients, data was data.

It didn't matter if thousands of patients were killed or mutilated under the twisted machinations of the doctor. As long as the research data was sound and corrected for any incorrect methodologies and biases, millions of other doctors would have no qualms at all in utilizing these valuable gains for their own ends!

If the Supreme Sage was a pure scientist like Ves suspected him to be, then this old but brilliant man would definitely feel tempted to use the wealth of tainted data to form his own grand experiment!

No matter how much of a role model he was to the entire LRA, if his body exhibited problems and if every other method of extending his life had been exhausted, then Ves did not believe the Supreme Sage could remain a saint!

Ves sighed. Even the greatest figures of humanity were fallible in the end. Gods didn't exist, and humans could never be gods as long as they were slaves to their baser d.e.s.i.r.es.

After realizing these underlying dynamics, Ves believed he figured out how the LRA worked. He no longer believed that the biotech-oriented state was so sincere about pursuing its noble mission.

The stated aim of propelling biotech sciences forward and convincing the rest of humanity to switch to an organic tech base was nothing but a smokescreen as far as he was concerned!

Starting right from the top, a cabal of selfish scientists merely formented a thriving research environment in order to further the progression of 'alternate' life extension studies!

The conspiratorial part of his imagination even came up with the notion that the higher-ups secretly tolerated experiments in this forbidden field. The LRA's regime might look

very strict, but researchers actually possessed a lot of leeway as they climbed up the ranks!

There were many ways an administration could subtly encourage old researchers to take the plunge and perform a taboo experiment. Even if these attempts inevitably ended up in failure, the institutions that recovered all of the data that remained behind would slowly be able to build up a considerable body of knowledge!

It was as if the Supreme Sage performed a thousand horrendously illegal and immoral experiments himself, but miraculously kept his name and reputation squeaky clean!

As long as the rate of incidences remained controlled, then no one would even know that the Supreme Sage and his cronies were the ultimate beneficiaries of illegal research!

"What a brilliant scheme!" Ves sighed in utter admiration. "This is how a true master acts!"

He always performed all of his experiments in person and by himself. This left him open to getting caught by the Big Two or exposing himself to runaway reactions.

This was an awful approach!

Unfortunately, Ves had no choice but to act in person to perform his risky experiments. The Larkinson Clan was nothing like a proper state such as the LRA. Ves didn't have thousands of scarily-competent spiritual adepts and spiritual engineers under his command.

Perhaps that might change in the future, but for now, Ves could only look up at the Supreme Sage's methods and admire the LRA's grand design.

Of course, Ves was not just a bystander at the moment. He was in fact caught up in the middle of an oncoming storm!

"What do you mean we can't pass through?!" Venerable Jannzi's force of will flared up and pressed against the bio-suited guards blocking the entrance. "Our patriarch has already concluded the design duel. Since an internal political dispute is developing, we have no business being here. Let us leave right away!"

"Our apologies, Venerable, but our orders are strict. We are not allowed to let anyone pass through this exit without explicit instructions from our superiors."

"Then call your superiors!"

"We have tried, but we have only been met with silence. Until we receive word, we cannot make any exceptions!"

The LRA was a hierarchical state where the lower ranks were expected to unquestionably obey the instructions of their superiors. Bending the rules sounded alien to them and breaking them entirely was strictly unacceptable!

While that led to a well-regulated state in times of peace, Ves had seen how such a rigid structure could easily become hindrance in times of chaos!

Considering the escalating political fight happening not too far away behind him, Ves was growing more and more concerned.

He wanted to be gone before anything happened!

Yet because the guard officers were indisposed or distracted by the unfolding arguments, Ves remained stuck in place.

What was worse was that his guards were stuck on the other side!

Nitaa and his new honor guard were all armed to the teeth, but that didn't matter if they were too far away to come to his aid!

"Oh hell. Screw this all. Jannzi, let's suit up and bunker down!"

"Got it." She replied.

Even if she detested his leadership and wanted to put someone else in charge of the Larkinson Clan, this was not the time to argue with Ves.

Having been with him for a long time, Venerable Jannzi had gone through enough crises to develop her sense of caution.

Both Ves and Jannzi approached the backside of Vincent's hover chair. Ves opened up a hidden panel and inputted a brief code that caused a hatch to slide open.

The pair of trueblood Larkinsons then proceeded to pull out dense metal coffer-like objects. After they verified their identities, the metal objects expanded on their own and enveloped the forms of the two humans!

In no time, Ves suited himself up in his Unending Regalia. He finally felt safe now that he was covered head to toe with Unending alloy.

Out of a sense of caution, Ves did not choose to extend a cape from his back this time. That would only cause his form to become more eye-catching, thereby turning himself into an attractive target to anyone with an itchy trigger finger!

While Venerable Jannzi didn't enjoy the same degree of luxurious protection, her high-quality protective suit was certainly one of the better infantry gear that the Larkinson Clan had recently procured.

The only reason why Jannzi didn't wear anything heavier was because they required special training and wouldn't fit inside Vincent's hover chair.

"Hey, what about me?! Where's my fancy suit?" The chair-bound Larkinson complained.

Ves sneered behind his faceplate. "You're already wearing a suit."

The hover chair possessed a special function that caused the occupant's form to be covered by something akin to a hazard suit when activated. Vincent was already covered by it when he noticed the actions of his fellow Larkinsons.

The only problem was that this hazard suit looked woefully inadequate!

"This isn't fair! I'm an expert candidate! I should be wearing something more solid. At least give me a codpiece!"

Chapter 2816 - Disappointed

While the Larkinsons were gearing up for war, the arguing Masters failed to come to an accord.

"We have a duty to maintain the prosperity of the Life Research Association." Master Cline firmly said. "The changes you propose are too radical and risk upending the structure that has provided stability to our people for centuries. While we are open to compromise, we must come together and decide together how we should proceed."

That seemed to trigger Master Brixton!

"The time for compromise is long past, old friend! The possibility of cooperating with you and your compatriots has ended from the moment you conspired to hide what had happened to the Supreme Sage! Not only did you break the law by preventing the public from learning about his passing, you also lied about his true state! While you conservatives were merrily taking advantage of the pinnacle labs that were previously under the Supreme Sage's control, you also had the temerity to desecrate his body!"

"Do not twist the truth, Master Brixton! The Supreme Sage is alive, not dead! As long as his heart still beats and his lungs still breathe, there is always a chance to restore him back to health. We treated him as a patient, not a carcass that has been donated to science. The reason why we have withheld the details of his current condition is to respect his privacy and maintain stability. We did not wish to give any excuse for agitators like you to upend our entire state!"

"Hahahahaha!" Brixton laughed in a maniacal manner. "Excuses upon excuses! How shameless can you be? The only people who benefit from this conspiracy are high-ranked conservatives such as you! Your high-minded talk is nothing but a thinly-veiled excuse to keep your people in charge and press everyone else down. Do you think we're idiots?!"

"What do you want?" Master Cline asked in an exasperated tone.

"We demand an end to your abuse. Stop experimenting on the Supreme Sage's body and put it to rest already. Step down from your positions of power and let a new generation of leaders take over our state. Your actions and your schemes already make it clear that you are not suited to be in charge any longer. One way or another, you will pass on the torch."

"We can discuss some of your demands, but do not presume to take the Supreme Sage's place. If we have to appoint a successor to our honored leader, he or she will come from our ranks instead of yours. We are still the majority in our state!"

"Are you certain about that, old friend?" A sly grin appeared on Master Brixton's face. He pointed at a group of conservative biomech designers and other important officials. "Come. Show him how out of touch he is. Show him what you think about his misdeeds."

To everyone's surprise, over half of the Lifers who previously aligned with the conservatives stepped out and joined Master Brixton's side!

"This!"

Master Cline couldn't believe what was happening! While the conservative faction was large and encompassed many subgroups, they were all united by common goals.

No matter how much internal disputes took place within their ranks, the conservatives were firmly united against chaos and the opposition!

Yet before his eyes, conservatives belonging to many different subgroups all stepped out and signalled their change of heart in the most direct fashion possible.

There was no turning back for these defectors! They had pretty much thrown their lot with the opposition!

Master Cline looked disappointed at his former comrades. He trusted them once. Now, he had to face the prospect of treating them as his opponents.

"I can believe that some of you have lost patience with our current direction. It has been too long since we have achieved any significant progress. However, why would you

throw your lot with these radicals and fringe groups? Don't you realize they are just using you all to bring our state into turmoil?"

A Senior known as Professor Bluder scowled. "Look at where a slow and gradual approach has taken us! We have accomplished none of our goals. Instead, we have either remained in the same place or fallen behind! Nothing less than true change is needed to right the ship of our state. While I don't necessarily agree with all of the pet causes of our new friends, at least they are being proactive!"

Master Brixton grinned. "Do you see how many comrades that you have disillusioned with your mistakes? You so-called conservatives have been burying your heads in the sand for so long that you haven't even been paying attention to your own people! I don't think there is a better way to illustrate how little you care about others. Not everyone is content with the lack of progress made by our state. Isn't that right, Dr. Navarro?"

The loser of the design duel hadn't drawn any attention in the last few minutes, but suddenly attracted a lot of attention!

An ambiguous expression appeared on his face. Frederico Navarro hesitated for a few seconds.

"You too, Navarro?"

The Journeyman looked resigned. "Master Cline... I believed in your vision. For a long time, I believed that all was right with the LRA, and that we were slowly closing the gap with the conventional mech industry."

"What happened?"

"I began to look past our borders." Dr. Navarro said, becoming more assertive as he did so. "I took a very good look at the Komodo War and how the metallic mechs of both sides were pushing the limits of what they could do. I observed how ground-breaking mechs designed by Mr. Larkinson changed how mech warfare was being waged by virtue of their innovative features! When I looked at all of those impressive Fridayman and Hexer mechs and compared them to our own body of work, I feel... let down."

"Our state is different from the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony." Master Cline explained. "The two states were gearing up for war for many centuries. The pressure of confronting a strong opponent has stimulated them into designing the most destructive mechs they can realize."

"Then what does that make us, sir?! Why are our biomechs so lackluster compared to the military mechs of other states? Why have we wallowed in mediocrity for so long? I am a biomech designer, Master Cline. I did not embrace my calling just to design adequate mechs that are merely competitive at best. My ambition is much greater than

that! Yet as the recently-completed design duel has taught us, my biomechs are far from being able to compete against the products of a classical mech designer!"

"You have no reason to feel ashamed of yourself, Dr. Navarro. You are comparable to many of your peers in other states. Mr. Larkinson is an outlier. Even if he is technically a Journeyman, his products are as strong as the mechs designed by Seniors or higher-ranking mech designers. You are using the wrong tool to measure yourself!"

Dr. Navarro thumped his c.h.e.s.t with his hand. "I know that, sir, but that does not change my point! I have always set my sights to the top. If I wish to aim for the top, how can I compare myself to ordinary mech designers? Only by challenging someone as formidable as Mr. Larkinson will I know where I stand. You know the results. In the current environment, it is extremely unlikely that I will ever be able to catch up to rising stars like Mr. Larkinson!"

"Then work harder, Navarro! A biomech designer like you should never place too much emphasis on outside help. If you want to realize your design philosophy and reach my level, you won't be able to do so by destroying the stable infrastructure that has allowed our biomech industry to flourish for many years!"

"It won't come to that, sir." Navarro shook his head. "Master Brixton and the others don't wish to plunge our state into civil war. They just want to accomplish change. As long as enough people support this cause, I hope you will act sensibly and recognize that you and your fellow conservatives are not wanted anymore."

As Dr. Navarro stood by the side of Master Brixton, many people sympathized with his choice.

He was one of the many biomech designers who had become disillusioned with the majority! As a reluctant defector, he didn't necessarily support the opposition, but nonetheless found common cause with the movement!

There were a lot more Lifers like Dr. Navarro in the LRA. Biotech experts and other citizens were following everything through the broadcasts. Navarro just happened to serve as a great example of what they might do as well if they followed suit!

At this point, Master Cline's momentum had stalled. From the moment Master Brixton spoke out, he pulled out card after card that successively weakened the reputation and prestige of the conservatives and the ruling authorities.

The problem of being in charge for such a long time was that they always took the blame for every mistake!

Ves, who had been watching the events unfold from the rear, didn't feel as if the conservatives were totally wrong on the matter.

Even the numerous times they 'desecrated' the Supreme Sage's body could be excused. If his close friends and subordinates thought they could revive him, then it made sense to try their best. No one wanted to pull the plug on the life of a great and irreplaceable researcher! As long as there was a non-zero chance of pulling him out of his brain dead state, then many people would feel they had a duty to try their best!

Yet.. after one-and-a-half years of fumbling around, it didn't seem that the conspirators made any progress.

The air between the two Master Mech Designers had grown more and more tense. They not only competed with each other with their words, but also with their powerful mentalities!

The pair had reached an impasse.

Master Cline did not wish to meet the biggest demands of the opposition. He was confident that the conservative faction still held enough sway over the LRA to remain in charge.

Master Brixton believed he had succeeded in doing the opposite. All of his revelations and other actions should have weakened the conservatives to the point where they were more vulnerable than they had ever been throughout their existence!

This was the best time for the radicals, combinants and other opposing factions to make their move. If they did not take advantage of this opening, then the conservatives would definitely utilize their institutional power and command over the established media to propagate a counter-narrative!

As long as public support for change started to dip, then all hope of effecting change would evaporate!

Master Cline keenly spotted Brixton's momentary hesitation.

"You can still calm down. Don't do this. We can work this out when tempers have cooled."

The leader of the combinant faction let out a deep breath. He knew he was at the cusp of a transition period. Even if he had second thoughts, it was too late for him to stop at this point. The opposition consisted of way more factions and groups than his own influence.

"The revolution cannot be stopped." Master Brixton declared with a firm voice. "It has already begun from the moment Dr. Navarro lost the design duel. No matter what you say, you cannot deny the fact that we have grown weak under the leadership of your group! Only a complete turnaround will allow us to cure the malaise that has settled over our state!"

With those final words, the Masters had spoken their piece.

After glaring at each other one last time, both Masters suddenly disappeared from view.

"Huh? Where did they go?"

"According to my sensors, they have just teleported away!"

"Why would they do that...?"

Master Cline and Master Brixton weren't the only ones who left in this manner. The four other Masters who had been content to watch from the side had followed suit as well. Only a minor blur surrounded their forms before they shifted many kilometers away from Ruuzon Arena!

The other people on the VIP platform began to smell trouble.

A Senior Mech Designer who looked like a middle-aged woman pulled out her pistol and fired at her colleague sitting to her left!

Bright energy beams lanced against an energy shield, preventing the unsuspecting victim from dying!

"What is the meaning of this, Theresa?!"

"You are an obstacle to change! As long as you are alive, you'll block all of our initiatives. The revolution cannot proceed unless you are gone!"

The victim helplessly pulled out his own gun and began to fire back.

The pair weren't the only ones to do so. Many different VIPs got caught up in the frenzy as well and began to pull out weapons left and right to assail their real or imagined enemies!

Ves wasn't left out of the party either.

In one moment, the gate guards helplessly expressed their inability to contact their superior.

In the next moment, they simultaneously pulled up their heavy assault rifles and fired their weapons onto Ves with unmatched speed!

Chapter 2817 - Madness

A total of seven heavily-armed guards opened fire on Ves! They all acted in unison and without warning!

The good news was that not every guard was in on the scheme. Thirteen more infantry soldiers from the Planetary Guard reacted with stunned shock at the unprovoked actions of their colleagues.

Why did they act without authorization?! Who told them to attack their foreign guest?!

"We must wash away the humiliation of our defeat!"

"Don't let him leave this arena alive!"

"Watch out for the cat!"

The rogue guards wearing heavy organic suits were hardly holding back in their attacks. They prioritized taking out the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan at all costs!

Due to the relative proximity of Venerable Jannzi, they refrained from utilizing any destructive area weapons, but that did not restrain them much as their biorifles were already potent enough by themselves!

Numerous positron beams, gauss rounds and explosive shells impacted Ves from the front!

"AHHH!" The poorly-protected form of Vincent uselessly raised his arms while desperately commanding his hover chair to move away. "Don't shoot me! I'm an invalid! I'm not a threat! I surrender!"

The crippled expert candidate did not wish to get caught in the expanding cross fire!

As the weapons held by the rogue guards finally fell silent, Ves' armored form remained standing.

The Unending Regalia did its job. Aside from ruining the vulnerable coating on the surface, the underlying metal layers did not incur any damage!

The rogue guards all paused for a moment. Even if Ves wore an excellent suit of armor, it was too ludicrous that not a hint of actual damage was visible!

Yet before they could resume their fire, a very slippery cat snuck up behind their formation and began to claw the back of one of the guards with an energy claw!

The potent energy claws tore right through the organic plates and directly cut the spine of the unlucky soldier in half!

"MEOW!"

"Behind us!"

Having slipped into the latest version of his Misfortune Harness, Lucky had turned into an incarnation of feline death!

For some reason, the remaining thirteen guards no longer stood silent. Perhaps out of a mistaken sense of needing to back up their comrades, they began to open fire at the Larkinsons as well!

"You brainless idiots! What is the point of attacking me?! I'm not your enemy, damnit! Stop firing at me and let me leave in peace. I just want to go!"

None of Ves' complaints had any effect. The outbreak of open hostilities happened so unexpectedly that many people caught in the storm simply didn't know what to do. Some of the panicky ones tended to look at the people they knew and blindly followed suit!

Ves abhorred this stupid response. It showed that for all of their training, the Planetary Guard troops were not that good at responding to a genuine crisis!

Even though he was confused and angry with the latest developments, he couldn't afford to waffle at this stage!

Anyone who shot him was an enemy. No exception. No matter who the Planetary Guard troops answered to, as long as they pointed their guns at him, they were already dead in his eyes!

The short battle soon turned into a slaughter once the Larkinsons got serious. Jannzi fired at the guards with an integrated wrist-mounted laser blaster. Even though her attacks were too weak to overcome the armor of her opponents, she still exerted a considerable degree of pressure!

Ves did not remain still either. He pulled out a kinetic pistol and pulled the trigger, causing the c.h.e.s.t armor of one of the guards to splinter from all of the damage it withstood!

"Don't shoot me! Get me out of here!"

Vincent on the other hand flew his chair further and further away from the heat of battle. Even though various projectiles and beams whizzed near his form, none of them hit him so far.

He wasn't important enough!

The battle at the exit did not last long. While Ves and Jannzi's attacks were only moderately effective against the combat armor worn by the elite guard troops, there was one more entity who sowed death left and right!

"MEEEEOW!"

Lucky furiously darted back and forth, clawing every hostile guard that he passed along the way. None of his opponents succeeded in blocking his powerful energy claws!

The only instance where Lucky failed to take the life of a hostile soldier was when his claws slammed against the energy shield of a Planetary Guard captain.

The officer was equipped with fancier gear!

Lucky yowled in frustration.

To be honest, Lucky could have eliminated the opposition a lot faster. Ves had ordered his cat to hold back, though. There was no reason for Lucky to expose his phasing ability.

The energy shield that enveloped the rogue officer's form did not last long. It turned out that his energy shield was a vastly inferior model that was generally issued to valued middle-ranked personnel!

Ves continually depleted the shield with his kinetic rounds. Lucky attacked the shield from the other side. The combination of pistol and claw attacks quickly exhausted the compact battery powering the mass-produced shield generator!

It only took a single claw to decapitate the rogue captain!

With his death, every hostile guard had died. The remaining Planetary Guard troops were frozen as they witnessed their comrades being massacred.

They didn't know what to do! Perhaps some of them wanted to assist their comrades, but the speed in which the Larkinsons demolished their foes prompted them to think twice!

As more Lifers were continuing to fight each other across the entire VIP platform, any sense of order had disappeared.

Normally, these respected experts and officials would calmly discuss their disagreements over a meal or something. If they wanted to resort to harsher methods, then they would never take action in person.

This was what their underlings were supposed to do! Why take risks at all when they were capable of dispatching plenty of disposable minions to do the job in their stead?

None of that was apparent at the moment. For some reason or another, Seniors, ministers and other important Lifers decided there was no better time to get rid of their opponents by pulling out their guns and opening fire in person!

Since all of their bodyguards were stuck at the other side of the fortified exit, none of the VIPs could leave the fighting to someone else. They all took action in person!

"This is crazy! This entire state has gone mad!"

Fortunately, none of the powerful Lifers spared any attention to the Larkinsons. Most of them were too caught up in their personal vendettas to spare much attention to the foreigner who briefly humiliated their state.

What worked in Ves' favor was that he had exhibited plenty of power. None of the Lifers qualified to enter this platform were suicidal. They did not want to become the next idiots who died after an energy claw tore out their throats!

"Open the gates and let us pass already!" Ves aggressively demanded the surviving guards.

"We can't! There are hundreds of bodyguards on the other side. If all of them engage in hostilities at once, this entire tree structure will collapse!"

"It's well on its way of burning down at this rate!"

Ves really didn't want to shoot these neutral guards, but their continued obstruction was grating on him. Did he have to shoot his way out of this warzone?

Before he could argue any further, the tall and giant tree structure shook. Massive groaning sounds echoed throughout the air as Ves and everyone else felt as if the floor underneath their feet was tilting.

The fighting quickly died down. A couple of bodies were littered on the platform, but most VIPs were still okay. Hardly any of them possessed military training, so they were unable to overcome the energy shields worn by their opponents.

"What's going on?!" Someone asked. "Are we under attack by mechs?"

"It doesn't seem like it. It's as if.. the tree structure itself is moving."

CRACK!

Just a few seconds later, the platform abruptly split in half! The tree structure g.r.o.a.n.e.d and convulsed as its entire trunk was splitting into multiple slender trunks!

It was as if someone animated the giant tree. The split trunks began to bend and swirl as if they were massive tentacles. Even though their movements were agonizingly slow, their humongous size meant that their movements were extremely violent!

"Fly!"

Everyone on the VIP platform activated their antigrav modules or other means of flight! The guards who were stationed on the other side of the top floor had taken flight as well.

At their level, none of them lacked the means to levitate themselves.

However, being able to float was one thing. Being able to fly away fast enough to escape the convulsions of enormous tree tentacles was another thing!

"AHHHHH!"

One VIP suddenly went splat as he got smacked by the tip of a tree tentacle!

A dozen guards launched into the distance as another tree tentacle collided against armored forms! The powerful impact most certainly exceeded the inertial dampeners of their protective armor, which meant that their bodies had definitely turned into a bloody soup!

Every survivor looked horrified at what had happened. The worst part about this was that this wasn't the only tree structure that had gone crazy.

All of the other ones were going berserk as well!

Hundreds of thousands of Lifers who went out to witness the design duel in person were suddenly caught up in a nightmare as their own elevated seating platforms turned hostile!

Since many of them were ordinary citizens, a considerable portion didn't possess any flight capabilities.

Tens of thousands of innocent civilians dropped to their deaths!

If the giant tree tentacles hadn't crushed or smacked them to death, then they most certainly lost their lives after impacting the ground!

Screams of women, children and other uninvolved people echoed throughout the entire disaster area! Yes and many other survivors couldn't process the madness of this act of slaughter.

What was the point!?

Since Ruuzon Arena's entire design revolved around surrounding the arena grounds with a crown of twisting tree structures, virtually every spectator got caught up in this tragedy. Those with flight capabilities started to cry and howl at all of the traumatic sights they witnessed.

In just a couple of minutes, all of the surviving Lifers had lost many friends, family and fellow citizens!

"Patriarch!"

Nitaa and the rest of the honor guard finally reached Ves and surrounded him in every direction. Venerable Jannzi and Vincent floated awkwardly outside the tight protective envelope.

"Meow."

Lucky felt more at ease. With the arrival of the bodyguards, his job of protecting Ves had become a lot easier.

"We need to get you out of here!" Nitaa insisted. "Let us fly to the landing zone. The Infinity Guard has already prepared their armored transport for evacuation."

"Where are their infantry troops? Where are their Guard Master mechs?!"

"The underground landing zone has turned into a battlefield as well! Mechs and soldiers belonging to different factions are fighting at ground level as we speak. The mercenaries are trying their best to extricate themselves from the crossfire, but it will take time!"

Damnit!

Ves gnashed his teeth.

"Lead the way! Get us away from these crazy trees before they start to launch wood ch.i.p.s at us or something."

A lot of other people had the same thought. They carefully maintained enough altitude to escape the reach of the tree tentacles and began to head to the sides in order to distance themselves from Ruuzon Arena.

Yet just as Ves and his group advanced a couple of hundred meters away, the air in front of them turned bright and hot as a giant laser beam inflamed the space in front of them! The beam was so bright and massive that the optical sensors of their helmets had to compensate for the brightness!

"The violence is spreading! There are mechs fighting below us! It's too dangerous to fly in the air!"

A revolution never remained calm for long!

Chapter 2818 - Pressure Release

The revolution had begun!

After centuries of peace and stability, the Life Research Association became embroiled in a conflict that could only be described as a civil war!

As a society that had long operated under the stable but stagnant order of the conservative faction, a lot of grievances had built up over the centuries.

The opposition factions resented the dominance of the conservatives.

Rival biomech designers hated their direct competition.

Minor bureaucrats wanted to get rid of their incompetent superiors.

Mech pilots wished to prove their skills in actual battle.

In hindsight, the citizens of the LRA accumulated so much pent-up urges and desires that many of them welcomed the outbreak of violence!

Finally they obtained an opportunity to unleash their darker side!

This was why the initial outburst produced so much death and destruction. When the adherents of the respective factions opened fire on each other, many other citizens who didn't share any relations to the ongoing political turmoil took the opportunity to pursue their own agendas!

Because the vast majority of people hadn't received any advance warning about the start of the revolution, these brazen acts of violence were largely devoid of planning and forethought.

After all, no one expected the Supreme Sage to experience an accident that pretty much left him dead!

The abrupt exit of the long-time ruler of the state caused a lot of people to believe that a void had formed at the top. With the conservatives split and besieged from all sides, the government was in complete disarray!

Without sufficient guidance or instructions, the overly-rigid government institutions were far too slow to respond to the rapidly unfolding chaos.

Let alone suppressing the troublemakers, the authorities weren't even able to defeat the defectors from within!

"Johnny! Why are you attacking us?! We're brothers in arms! We formed a pact with each other!"

"Hahaha! What a joke! I only s.u.c.k.e.d up to you because you're the district commander's crony. I never liked you from the beginning. The corrupt regime must fall, and getting rid of you will help my buddies in taking over this city!"

"You're mad! You won't get away with killing me. This is treason!"

"Hiding the Supreme Sage's death and experimenting on his body is true treason! Compared to the crimes of your friends, our cause is righteous!"

Everyone formed a different idea of what was right and wrong. As long as someone wanted to enact a plan, they came up with many possible rationalizations to justify their actions.

Perhaps even the madman who activated Ruuzon Arena's war mode came up with his own excuse!

Around two-thirds of the people who bought a ticket and witnessed the design duel had died! Most plunged helplessly to their deaths, while others got smacked to pieces by the berserk tree tentacles!

Only those with flight capabilities had a chance to escape the initial onslaught, but their suffering had not yet passed.

Below and above them, hundreds of biomechs began to battle each other!

Throughout the long centuries of stable development, many institutions had already become politicized. The lack of war caused many mech units to experience little upwards mobility. Aside from becoming more competent, the best way to attain a higher position was to play the game of politics!

This caused many Planetary Guard members to develop second loyalties. Aside from answering to their nominal superiors, they also answered to their patrons, faction leaders and other helpers.

Now that the regular hierarchy had become paralyzed, some of these law enforcement units no longer executed their primary missions.

Instead, they listened to the instructions of others who weren't above killing their own comrades in order to further their grand ambitions!

While the mechs that went rogue only amounted to less than 10 percent of their respective units, the unfolding chaos quickly swept in other combatants!

Neutral or ignorant mech pilots were suddenly compelled to hit back after their mechs mistakenly got hit by stray attacks.

Others felt compelled to assist their buddies, not realizing that they inadvertently signalled that they had joined a side!

Some just listened to the orders of their captains and commanders without hesitation, thereby turning themselves into unwitting tools.

More Planetary Guard mechs attempted to suppress attackers from both sides, only for them to be regarded by an enemy of every group and faction!

In fact, Prosperous Hill VI was not the only planet that exploded into violence, though it was certainly the worst due to its population density, economic interests and development level.

The other planets of the Prosperous Hill System became affected as well. Intermittent conflict broke out in major cities and sites with considerable value such as beast preserves and biomech production facilities.

No one knew how long this revolution would last or what the next day might bring, but some far-sighted leaders were already attempting to secure valuable infrastructure and war assets in order to prepare for the long haul!

Fortunately for most citizens, the conflict outside of Prosperous Hill was much more limited. Many planets didn't host as many competing interests or valuable industries. Some regions that fell under the sway of a strong and authoritative leader had remained fairly calm as loyal troops quickly suppressed any troublesome elements.

Of course, none of that was relevant to Ves and the other survivors who escaped Ruuzon Arena.

With the crown of giant tree structures coming to life, blood stained the air as people were still dying left and right.

This time, it wasn't the berserk arena that was killing them, but attacks from mechs that had become embroiled in their own conflicts!

"The authorities have gone mad!" Vincent shrieked as he clung on his floating hover chair with his muscular arms. "Aren't they supposed to fight the bad guys?!"

Venerable Jannzi sneered behind her combat helmet. "Everyone has become a bad guy in their eyes. Their fellow Guards are not excepted!"

No rebellion was worth slaughtering over half of the arena visitors! It was even worse as there didn't seem to be a useful purpose to killing so many innocent people. Whoever was responsible for turning Ruuzon Arena into a deathtrap deserved to die!

"We need to get down as soon as possible!" Ves commanded to everyone. "We can't stay up here and remain exposed to anyone who recognises me and wants to kill me. While I'm not responsible for all of this, I doubt everyone will think the same way."

He had witnessed so much stupidity and irrationality from the Lifers that he wouldn't put it past them to think that Ves caused it all due to agreeing to a design duel. As far as many people were concerned, the LRA would have never descended into chaos if Ves and Dr. Navarro never met!

"The fighting is more intense on the surface." Nitaa critically observed as her heavy combat armor continued to maintain altitude. "It's become a playground for landbound mechs."

"I know that, but there is an extensive tunnel network beneath the surface. As long as we slip inside, we won't be easy targets anymore for the hundreds of mechs that are fighting around us at this moment."

They all descended to the surface, making sure to control their fall so that they did not lose control.

It helped that many of the spectators also chose to take their luck on the surface. Hundreds of floating people had already been smashed to paste or vaporized into carbon as various beams, projectiles and explosives devastated their ranks!

Screams and cries of panic continually echoed throughout the air as this tragedy unfolded. Biomech after biomech forgot their original purpose of protecting people and instead put them at risk as they desperately fought to defeat their enemies, whether they were real or imagined!

Due to the high-quality suits of armor worn by Ves and his entourage, their descent was faster and more stable than that of other people. Run-of-the-mill antigrav clothing was particularly susceptible to shocks, gusts of winds and other environmental variables.

None of the mech pilots had time to squander on hunting down Ves. Not when there were hostile mechs right next to them that posed a much more immediate threat!

It was also fairly difficult to pick out Ves and his group among the crowd of escaping people. Even though not everyone wore armored suits, there were still plenty of arena personnel, VIPs, guards and other people who looked similar enough to make it difficult to distinguish their identities.

The heavy combat armor worn by Nitaa and the other guards also possessed moderate ECM functions. This did not prevent a determined enemy from detecting their presence, but made it a lot more difficult to identify them unless subjected to targeted scanning!

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky's black-clad form stuck closely to Ves. While he was a terror against infantry, he could do nothing against mechs, especially when they were kilometers away.

"Hang on, buddy! We're almost to the surface!"

The group descended at an angle away from the arena. Ves didn't want to go anywhere close to the out-of-control tree tentacles. While they were randomly whipping around in the air, they could easily whip the ground around the arena at any moment.

They seemed to have landed in one of the rear areas of the arena grounds. This was the place where the majority of spectators arrived and left. Various shuttles and passenger transports were parked in a large and open landing zone.

Right now, many visitors were flocking to these vehicles. They all wanted to get in and leave the premises as soon as possible!

BOOM!

However, the fighting had not left this area untouched! Ves turned around to see a large transport with a capacity of 500 people getting crushed into half after a mech had slammed against the side of the vehicle!

Not too far away, two swordsman biomechs were swinging their blades at each other, uncaring whether their feet trampled any shuttles or humans who failed to run away in time.

The power of mechs was too terrible!

Vincent's crippled body was already shaking. "What are we doing? Let's get out of here! Ves, can't you hack one of the shuttles and fly away?"

"None of these vehicles are safe." Nitaa retorted. "We won't make it far with all of the fighting that is going on. We need to get onboard the armored transport prepared by the Infinity Guards."

They had to go underground to do that as the Infinity Guards assigned to escort Ves didn't dare to poke their necks out. Their escort mechs mainly consisted of Guard Masters, which excelled at defense but possessed little offensive capabilities!

They quickly found the nearest entrance that led to the underground complex. Hundreds of panicking Lifers were already trying to escape the violence on the surface, which caused the passageway to become congested.

It turned out that the gate up ahead had been locked and sealed!

"GET OUT OF THE WAY!" Nitaa boomed through her suit.

No one listened to her command. Instead, they pressed their bodies forward even harder as if they thought that could get them inside!

Nitaa and some of the honor guard started to arm their rifles and point at the backs of the mass of people. Their intentions couldn't be more obvious.

Yet before they opened fire, Venerable Jannzi's armored suit jumped in front of their muzzles and pressed them down.

"STOP! Don't shoot!" She urgently called. "We are Larkinsons! We don't spill innocent blood!"

Nitaa narrowed her eyes but didn't argue with the expert pilot. Instead, she shifted towards Ves.

"Your orders, sir?"

Chapter 2819 - Fortified Tunnel Complex

More than a hundred meters ahead of the wide corridor, a large and solid gate barred the way of fleeing arena visitors.

The people who had reached the front of the passageway knew that there was no way forward, but the latecomers who were further back didn't weren't aware of this! They just thought that the people in front were targeting them or taking their sweet time to pass through a narrow entrance.

Whatever the case, since none of the people appear to be in threat of getting attacked by mechs at the moment, they were highly unwilling to turn around and go outside!

Obviously, this wasn't good for Ves and his group. The sheer crush of people was so dense that not even their armored forms could bull through so many bodies. Not without inflicting severe harm on them at least!

It was too risky to do that, though. Even though it was unlikely that any of these random people could harm armored soldiers, letting them get very close was a risk that Nitaa did not wish to take!

To her, the solution of the problem was very clear. If the panicking civilians weren't willing to listen to her request, then she had to open up a path by force if necessary!

Her mission trumped nearly every other consideration. If keeping Ves alive meant killing the people in front of her, then she would do so without hesitation!

Yet Jannzi had different ideas.

"Get out of the way." Nitaa growled. "We are too exposed at the moment. This tunnel can collapse at any moment."

"I know that, but that doesn't mean we have to turn ourselves into butchers!"

"Then how else will we get through!"

"Let me try! We don't have to kill them all to reach the other side!"

As Jannzi and Nitaa argued, Ves took a step forward, causing the two women to halt.

"You have thirty seconds to open a path, Jannzi. If you can't do it, then don't blame us for what happens next."

"Consider it done."

With every step, her momentum grew. Despite not interfacing with a mech, her force of will expanded, causing every single person in the crowded corridor to stop and turn towards the rear!

"Make way." She spoke. Her suit amplified her voice. "The entrance to the tunnels below are blocked. Let us proceed forward and we will make an opening."

Amazingly, the people formed a path. They pressed to the side and even took the initiative to take a few steps back in order to make room for others.

Her force of will possessed a reassuring quality that somehow lessened the panic and hysteria of the crowd. While Ves and plenty of Larkinsons were already accustomed to Jannzi's presence, the same was not the case for average civilians!

None of them experienced the profound influence of an expert pilot before. They hadn't even come in touch with glows, so their sensitivity towards any mental pressure was still high.

The first impression was always the most profound. The Lifers didn't even know who Venerable Jannzi was or what her true motives were. Yet due to the power and authority she exuded, the civilians instinctively trusted her and looked up to her. Her presence imposed a much-needed sense of calm over the crowd.

While the Lifers were still aware of the unfolding chaos on the surface, they somehow felt that the expert pilot in their midst would be able to lead them to safety.

The blockade had parted. Venerable Jannzi opened up a path without resorting to any excessive means. She turned to Ves and exerted a bit of pressure at him. She did not like the fact that she had to intervene in person to prevent a needless massacre.

"Let's go." Ves simply commanded.

He ignored Jannzi's silent challenge and walked all the way forward until he stopped right in front of the barred gate.

The entrance was built like a vault door and looked like it could withstand a direct attack against a mech. The bone metal surface showed that it had been grown into shape. Ves didn't sense any living mechanisms though.

Vincent's hover chair stopped right next to him. "Who would build such a ludicrously strong entrance? Is there a fortress behind this gate or something?"

"Meow."

Lucky was confused as well.

Ves thought about it for a moment. "I think Ruuzon Arena was originally built to serve as a disguised fortress. It would explain why the tree structures were able to turn into killer tentacles. Whoever was responsible for activating them didn't turn them into killer machines. They were already designed to possess this hidden mode from their inception. They just never revealed their true capabilities since there was no war to be fought."

Until now.

Instead of being employed to repel foreign invaders, they were instead killing the very people they were supposed to protect!

This was the tragedy of a civil war. Comrades turned into opponents and fellow citizens bore the brunt of a conflict that had no easy division of friends and enemies.

The lack of internal order allowed any unhinged person to hatch their schemes. Ves had no doubt that Veoline had turned into a giant warzone at the moment!

"How will we get through?" Jannzi impatiently asked.

"Let me see."

Ves integrated a decent hacking module into his Unending Regalia, but that didn't mean he could crack any electronic security system. A true professional could do ten times more than someone who was mainly versed in mech programming.

After a bit of exploration, Ves looked a bit puzzled.

"While the security system isn't military grade, it's much better than I expected."

"Does that mean you can't get through?"

"I didn't say that. I am just telling you that the underground tunnel complex might be more sophisticated than I thought."

No one had noticed that Lucky had quietly slipped away. He flew underneath Vincent's hover chair and phased through the floor.

Once the gem cat left everyone's sights, he snuck up to the door mechanism and recognized how to tamper with the systems.

During his time with Calabast, he learned a lot about messing with security systems! She even dumped a massive amount of data on how to recognize critical parts and how to sabotage them to achieve specific outcomes.

Soon enough, the entrance beeped and began to slide open. The corridor rumbled a bit as something heavy impacted against the surface not too far away, but Ves and everyone else didn't care.

Once the gate fully slid open, Ves and his fellow Larkinsons passed through with their weapons at the ready. The crowd of civilians behind them didn't dare to follow too close.

"It's quiet." Nitaa said through their short-ranged communication channel. "The interior is laced with dampening materials. Our onboard sensors aren't able to resolve any details."

Ves suddenly recalled the Odineye mounted on his Unending Regalia. He had transferred it from the Valkyrie Prime to his personal combat armor a short time ago, but never thought about activating it until now. The Odineye was absurdly effective, but it drained an immense amount of power.

Still, considering the current crisis, Ves really needed to know what was up ahead. The tunnel complex underneath and around Ruuzon Arena was massive and winding. Who knew whether someone prepared an ambush.

"Wait a moment."

Ves cautiously activated the Odineye and inputted some custom settings. A small pulse immediately started to emanate from the System-bought object.

The pulse was short and weak enough to minimize the power consumption of the omnidirectional sensor. While it only provided Ves with a snapshot of his surroundings, he could still glean a lot of intelligence from the limited data.

The low power setting combined with the dampened surroundings severely limited the effective range of the Odineye. Beyond a couple of hundred meters, the sensor data quickly began to degrade. Trying to study it was like looking at pure signal noise. Trying to glean any useful pattern out of this mushy data was impractical without a supercomputer at his disposal!

"Accept this feed."

A massive amount of weak signals milled behind them. The crowd of civilians had passed through the entrance but maintained a respectful distance from Venerable Jannzi and the other Larkinsons.

Above them, a gathering of random vehicles lay dormant on the open ground. Some of them had already been hit by various weapons.

None of that interested Ves and the rest. Instead, they paid attention to what was ahead and below them. They noticed plenty of details.

Perhaps a range of several hundred meters was nothing outdoors, but within a cramped and winding tunnel complex, this could allow them to avoid many dangers!

"Look! There's a mech storage unit four stories down." Vincent exclaimed. "If we can get Jannzi into one of those machines, we won't be helpless against other mechs. In fact, I can pilot one as well in an emergency. I don't have legs anymore, but that doesn't stop a true man from piloting a mech. Let's head over there and hijack those fighting machines!"

Ves stretched out his palm. "Those are biomechs, not the mechs that you are used to piloting. Some of their paradigms are radically different, which is enough to require special training in order to master their use. I have no idea how to prepare them and I am not sure you'll be able to gain control over them without the required training."

"Oh come on, Ves! She's an expert pilot while I'm an expert candidate! There's no way an odd mech can stump us! Don't you want to increase our chances of making it out alive? I'm telling you we need as many mechs as we can grab. I say we go for it. It's better than trying to sneak past all of the mechs without any form of defense against their firepower."

While Ves didn't like to admit it, Vincent made a good point. Prosperous Hill VI was a planet with very restrictive policies against private mech ownership. This prevented the Larkinson Clan from bringing down and utilizing their new second-class mechs on the surface of the trade planet.

This meant that even if Ves and his entourage managed to slip back to Gentle Lotus Base, he would still be vulnerable against enemy attack due to lacking enough mechs to ensure his safety.

Considering that Ruuzon Arena was the biggest mech arena in the star system, a lot of mechs were parked in the vicinity!

Ideally, Ves wanted to grab some metallic mechs, but his Odineye failed to pick any of them up within its effective range. He also had no idea where the arena operators stored his damaged dueling mechs, but they were probably placed way too close to the violent tree tentacles for him to risk retrieving any of his own work!

"Let's try and take a look." Ves reluctantly decided. "If the mechs are usable, then I won't say no to hijacking them. Just take into account that it probably won't work out. From what I have learned about biomechs, they're so different that it's like dealing with alien technology."

The group of Larkinsons briskly navigated the tunnel complex in an attempt to reach the biomechs in storage.

Since they were able to spot many potential threats in advance, the Larkinsons didn't worry too much about encountering any unknown surprises. They managed to take out automated defense systems in advance and silence any alarms before they had a chance to trigger.

A few panicked guards and arena personnel occasionally passed through the tunnels up ahead, but the Larkinsons always stopped and stayed out of sight before they exposed their presence.

While Ves didn't think that the arena personnel would do anything to him and his group, it was better to be safe than sorry. He wanted to avoid as much trouble as possible.

Unfortunately, halfway to reaching the site, some sort of crew had entered the space. The unknown individuals approached a couple of biomechs and began to prep them for deployment. Either they were acting under orders or they just wanted to secure their own safety.

Regardless, their presence complicated the situation. Should the Ves and his men proceed or turn elsewhere?

Chapter 2820 - Roving Hunters

Ves and the others decided to continue forward. While it was a bit worrisome that an unknown crew was trying to activate the biomechs, they weren't necessarily enemies.

From the way they moved and how they interacted with the entrance and the various devices in the hall, they were probably authorized personnel.

Vincent made a surprisingly insightful comment. "The unknowns are likely employed by Ruuzon Arena or one of the competitive teams that regularly compete here. In fact, I think it's the latter. Notice how every biomech is different? I think they're all units prepared for team matches."

The others studied the details pointed out by Vincent and agreed with him. The group of unknowns consisted of both mech pilots and mech technicians and possibly other personnel.

Maybe they were scheduled to take part in a match scheduled in the evening, but the sudden outbreak of violence convinced them to activate their mechs early in order to fight their way to safety!

When the Larkinsons reached the entrance of the underground mech hall, they encountered a locked gate.

There was no way the crew of unknowns were stupid enough to leave the entrance open! With trigger-happy idiots shooting at anyone they didn't like, there was no way that any group could trust other groups. Even their own comrades might turn out to be enemies in disguise!

"How do you wish to handle this situation?" Nitaa asked.

"Don't kill them." Jannzi warned from the side. While she held a weapon, she emphatically pointed it to the floor. "It's easy to regard every stranger as an enemy in these crazy times, but that is exactly what we need to avoid. Most Lifers aren't our enemies. They are simply unlucky citizens who got caught up in the fighting. While they might be jumpy, they won't act unreasonably once they recognize that we aren't their enemies. In fact, we might be able to cooperate."

Not everyone was as optimistic as Jannzi. Ves was skeptical, but he was not entirely closed to the idea. While it was risky to talk to a group of people who were potentially able to get their mechs to work, he doubted that he'd be able to get the biomechs to work by himself.

"You're the best person to initiate the conversation, Jannzi." Ves turned to her. "From the way you subdued the crowd earlier, I think the people inside will react a lot more

positively towards you than if I take the initiative to speak to them. I'm a very controversial figure in the LRA these days."

The people inside might shoot at him outright if they formed the mistaken perception that he was the instigator of all of the fighting!

Though Venerable Jannzi didn't like the feeling of being used, it was the only way for her to make sure that the upcoming contact proceeded on her terms.

"I'll send Lucky ahead as a hidden scout." Ves promised.

"Meow?"

"You heard that right. Now go out and make sure that the people inside aren't secretly preparing an ambush or something!"

The gem cat grumbled a bit but did as told. He phased through the floor and secretly passed underneath the entrance. Along the way, he tampered with the security system and unlocked it so that the rest didn't have to shoot their way inside.

They waited half a minute for Lucky to get in deeper before Venerable Jannzi took the plunge. She pressed the button that caused the entrance to open. She stepped inside while keeping her weapon holstered.

Her entry didn't go unnoticed.

"INTRUDERS!"

The crowd of mech technicians and other people dropped what they were doing and scrambled for cover. The panic in their voices was very evident. Their arms shook as they held pistols or tools.

Clearly, the majority of the group weren't trained for combat. They weren't even armed!

"Peace! I mean no harm." Venerable Jannzi declared.

She slowed her pace but continued to step forward. While her armored form looked intimidating, her empty and outstretched arms was a good sign that she didn't mean any harm.

Of course, there were plenty of combat armor models that incorporated integrated weaponry, but it was the thought that counted.

Twenty seconds passed before the group of Lifers calmed down. While Jannzi hadn't come close enough for her force of will to reach out to their minds, she still possessed an extraordinary presence.

While Ves didn't entirely ascribe to this theory, he could see that his cousin definitely had a talent for capturing people's attention.

It reminded Ves of himself, actually.

A man wearing a more formal suit than everyone cautiously stepped out from the crate he was using as cover.

"Who are you?" He asked suspiciously.

The man held a pistol in a steady grip. Even though he exposed himself, his posture and the tension of his body showed that he was ready if the situation went ugly.

Jannzi tapped the side of her helmet, causing her faceplate to turn transparent. "I am Venerable Jannzi Larkinson of the Larkinson Clan."

A couple of seconds passed before the group of Lifers processed her words.

"She's an expert pilot!"

"Larkinson? Isn't that the name of the guy who won the design duel?!"

The crew didn't appear to be too disciplined, because they openly speculated without exhibiting too much care for their words.

Their leader raised his fist. "Shut up! Let me handle this!"

The mech technicians quickly did as ordered.

"Are you involved in what is going on right now?"

Jannzi shook her head. "We are victims just as you. My fellow Larkinsons and I just want to leave this warzone. While we were trying to make our way out, we noticed the mechs here. Do they belong to your crew?"

The man nodded. "That's right. Let me introduce myself. The name's Captain Cecil Rivington. I'm in charge of the Roving Hunters. The mechs behind me all belong to my team."

"Roving Hunters?" Vincent spoke up from behind. For some reason, he threw caution to the wind and drove his hover chair forward. "You're a prime division team, right? Last I saw, you're a middle-of-the-pack team."

"We're a top team! We are just in a slump! As long as we figure out how to respond to the new strategies, we can climb our way back up to a playoff spot!"

"That doesn't seem likely. The current top teams have built up quite a lead over the rest. While I haven't watched any matches myself, their success suggests that their strength is on another level. Even if you reach the playoffs, your team will just get steamrolled by an opponent who has a lot more practice at winning a match!"

"They're already getting complacent! There is always a chance a lower-ranked team like ours will be able to achieve an upset!"

"I can believe that, but are you sure you can keep going? Even if you win against one of the seeded competitive teams, what about the one that comes next? The further you go, the tougher the opponent. You might be able to succeed once, but there's no way you can keep winning three or four times a row!"

For some reason, Vincent and the captain of the Roving Hunters got embroiled in a heated discussion about the strength of the latter's team.

Everyone seemed to forget about Venerable Jannzi. Expert pilot or not, the members of the Roving Hunters were fiercely prickly over their competitive success.

None of them seem to have realized that their competitive season was likely suspended due to the civil war that broke out! Didn't these idiots realize that their passion was completely misplaced at the moment?

Ves couldn't handle this inane discussion any longer. He stepped out along with the rest of his bodyguards.

At this time, Ves performed enough examinations to know that the Roving Hunters didn't possess anything deadlier than a handful of pistols. They were also quite far from activating their stored biomechs.

The entry of Ves and twelve heavily-armored guards quickly caused the locals to shut up and grow nervous again. They all knew they stood no chance against the newcomers!

Vincent managed to break the ice, though. While Captain Rivington grew tense again, he didn't exhibit any outright panic. That was good. Ves had encountered too many people who had lost their sanity. It felt nice to be able to talk with someone who kept their head on their shoulders.

"Captain Rivington, I presume you know who I am."

"Who hasn't heard of Ves Larkinson, the mech designer who precipitated the revolution?"

"I'm not a part of this madness. This is all the fault of the opposition groups. Think, captain. Would I be here with just a small group of guards if I was a part of some nefarious plot?"

"...Well, if you put it that way, that does sound stupid."

Ves gained a decent handle on Captain Rivington. Even though he was the head of a fairly successful team of mech athletes, he possessed a grounded mindset.

At the very least, Captain Rivington and the Roving Hunters were not involved in any political struggles. They were merely bystanders who were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Let's get to the point. Time is short and the chaos of war can reach our position at any time. I want to borrow some of your biomechs. Not much. Just two. I hope we can use the strength of your organic machines to safely take us away from here. It seems like downtown Veoline had turned into ground zero of this conflict, so having a couple of extra mechs around is quite handy!"

The Roving Hunters remained silent. Captain Rivington carefully considered the proposal.

Ves expected to be met with rejection. No one liked to give away their mechs, especially at a time where military might was more important than ever!

"Our biomechs are custom jobs that are precisely configured by my teammates." Rivington replied. "They aren't tools. They are personal steeds. I would hate to hand any of them over. They were never meant to be piloted by other people. Besides, are your mech pilots even qualified to pilot a biomech?"

"Look at the situation we're in. Do you really think you're going to play another match at this rate? The arena where your matches are held has just turned into a literal deathtrap that has already eaten thousands of your fans! The citizens of this planet don't even need to attend an arena match in order to witness actual mech fights. They just need to watch from their windows to get the show of their lifetimes!"

Ves crossed his arms. "Besides, reserving your competition mechs for a season that will likely be canceled is a pointless endeavor. There are much more important priorities, such as preserving your life and the lives of your team! I see you have more biomechs than mech pilots. Let us utilize any spare machines that you have left. Together, we stand a much greater chance of fighting our way past the chaotic fighting. Do you really want to expose the lives of your fellow people because you were so fixated on maintaining the purity of your biomechs?"

According to his scans and Lucky's secret examinations, the Roving Hunters only had three mech pilots in their midst. There were twelve mechs stored in the back so the competitive team had plenty of machines to spare!

Captain Rivington was aware of this as well.

"Look, if you really aren't involved in all of this, then I am open to lending our biomechs to you. I want them back after we make it out. You have to help us all escape."

"We can agree to that." Ves smiled and relaxed. "You've made the right choice. We stand a much greater chance of fighting our way out if we pool our strength!"