

Mech 2841

Chapter 2841 - Too Threatening

Ves did not induct any other Lifers into the Larkinson Clan. While he was aware that a number of other groups such as the Trezin Showstoppers and the Right Siders wanted to defect from the LRA as well, he had to deal with other priorities.

Besides, it was not a bad thing to force the others to wait. Everyone had witnessed how the majority of Roving Hunters had formally joined the Larkinson Clan. While the ritual was a little hasty and lacking in terms of spectacle, the spiritual activity that took place caused everyone to feel the weight behind the changes.

From the way the new members gained instant respect from existing Larkinsons to how they were warmly welcomed inside the base, everything that happened generated a considerable amount of envy among the onlookers!

Ves inwardly smiled at the sight. While he could not browbeat doubters like Oliver Vlambeer into joining his clan, he could employ all kinds of other tricks to increase the attraction to joining his clan!

Marketing textbooks were filled with tactics and methods designed to exert psychological pressure onto consumers. Some of them were benign, but others were much less innocent!

"You guys haven't seen anything yet." He softly said.

"Meow."

Lucky patted his paw against Ves' helmet.

"Hey! I am not breaking the rules! I already told Jannzi that I will stick to softer methods of persuasion."

Ves never forced anyone to pilot his products. He just heavily encouraged the market to do so. Considering that tens of millions of mech pilots were utilizing his mechs to this day, he was doing quite well in this regard!

After handling a few issues concerning the placement of the refugees, Ves and several others proceeded to enter a structure in the center of the base before entering a conference room.

A lot of familiar faces already showed up along with a few new ones. While Ves vowed to never pull his body out of the Unending Regalia until the crisis had passed, he felt secure enough to retract his helmet.

"Ah, fresh filtered air."

"Meow."

The stern-faced woman softened a little as the gem cat settled on her l.a.p and looked up at her with his glowing green eyes.

"Oh, poor fellow." She spoke as she stroked his smooth back. "You must have gone through a lot of difficulties to make it back. Did the patriarch treat you well?"

"Meow!"

While Lucky received his regular dose of pampering, Ves briefly gathered with the three expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

Due to the vulnerability and incredible value of the Larkinson Fleet, it was irresponsible to station every expert pilot to the surface. Ves and General Verle had to make a hard decision on who to transfer to Gentle Lotus Base.

Eventually, the two settled on Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson.

The former was of limited use in spaceborn battles while the latter fared great in many different circumstances.

In fact, Venerable Joshua was an even more versatile and adaptable expert pilot, but he was much less useful in this situation.

There, the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers weren't restricted from fielding hundreds of mechs. This meant that Venerable Joshua could always join forces with lots of Valkyrie mechs in order to evoke the Hexer battle network!

The power of this extraordinary attack allowed Ves to feel completely assured about the fleet's safety. Together with the main fleet of the Infinity Guards, it didn't matter if the Golden Skull Alliance had yet to replenish its battle losses.

When Ves approached the pair of expert pilots, Tusa looked teasingly at the female Larkinson.

"I heard you got into quite an ordeal. Are you missing your Shield of Samar?"

"Shut up. At least the inspectors recognized that my prime mech is stronger!"

While Master Cline somehow convinced the authorities to allow the Larkinsons to bring down additional mechs, the inspectors did not allow any mech to make landfall!

They were especially vigilant towards big and intimidating mechs. It just so happened that the Shield of Samar looked way too formidable!

The irony was that Tusa did not suffer the same problem. Even though the Ferocious Piranha won a brilliant victory during the first phase of the design duel, the mech looked too small and light to suggest it was capable of inflicting mass destruction.

For this reason, the Piranha Prime along with a pair of other Ferocious Piranha's managed to make it past the inspection!

It helped a lot that the inspectors only examined one of the regular Ferocious Piranha's. After approving one machine, they didn't bother to examine the other two, thereby allowing the much more dangerous Piranha Prime through!

"Don't gloat too much, Tusa." Ves admonished him. "Greater power conveys greater responsibility. Since you're piloting the only prime mech on this planet, I'll be counting on you to repel our toughest opponents."

Venerable Tusa's smile dropped. "You can count on me. I don't fear any opponent aside from expert mechs."

"The odds you'll encounter them in battle are low. From what I have gathered, the main military forces intend to stay out of this wrestling match. Most of their expert pilots are way too honest and principled to take part in a civil war that just inflicts more misery to the citizens caught up in the crossfire."

This was not a unique phenomenon. There were many other examples in history where a lot of military troops firmly stayed out to the fighting.

From a practical standpoint, this was necessary to preserve a state. If the troops started to fight each other, the amount of destruction they could unleash was too great! It also weakened the state's ability to resist its neighbors from invading and rolling over the depleted defenders!

However, the second angle was just as important. Many mech pilots looked up to expert pilots. If these heroes and role models saw no justifiable reason to intervene in a civil war, then a lot of military mech pilots automatically followed their example!

Due to their strong principles, expert pilots were regarded as the moral consciousness of a military organization. Anyone who acted differently had to bear a stigma for doing so. This was enough to prevent all but the most ambitious and selfish soldiers from breaking their neutrality!

Both Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa reacted in relief.

"I hope it stays this way." Tusa said. "While I don't fear any opponent, defeating an expert mech without piloting one myself is as difficult as fighting a dark god."

Jannzi scowled. "Don't mention that."

The emergency meeting began shortly afterwards. Once everyone sat around the oval table, Ves briefly nodded at everyone.

"Thank you for staying calm and doing your part. We're in a difficult situation right now, but we can still make it through as long as we work together."

Everyone expressed their understanding of the situation.

"Now, I have developed a specific strategy to ensure our continued survival on this planet. Much of it has to do with the refugee train I've led. I'm sure you've noticed them all. They're all parked outside the base but haven't made any moves to leave. If I have my way, many of them will become a part of my clan."

"What?" Captain Serena Valeis of the Glory Seekers looked shocked. "Are you being serious? Much of those Lifers outside are degenerates! I don't need to look up their background to know that at least a third of the outfits are small-time gangs that consist of undisciplined mech pilots and other members. Adding them to your ranks is an affront to the honor of your clan!"

Ves coughed. "You're not a Larkinson, captain. I don't see how it is your business to suggest how I should run my clan. I'm in the business of survival right now, and that means grasping onto any form of increasing our strength as possible."

"Why not make our own mechs, then?" Commander Casella Ingvar asked. "Ordinary, we are restricted from fielding too many mechs, but the Planetary Guard can't enforce those rules anymore. Why not look for a mech factory or something and produce some much-needed for ourselves? We still have plenty of mech pilots in our midst who are still lacking machines to pilot."

Captain Rivington shook his head. "It won't work. I am guessing that you are thinking of making your own classical mechs, right? Have you forgotten where you are? If you want to make or appropriate biomechs, then there are plenty of sites I can highlight for you. If you want to produce classical mechs, then tough luck. The amount of manufacturing sites that can produce conventional mechs is very low on this planet. I certainly haven't heard of any that are near."

The newly-inducted member of the Larkinson Clan made a good point. They were not in an ordinary second-rate state right now. The existing infrastructure on the planet was so geared towards biomechs that it was simply too uneconomical to produce and sell classical mechs!

"I agree with Captain Rivington." Ves stated. "When in Rubarth, do as the Rubarthans do. Our current environment doesn't allow us to field more of our own mechs, so we need to adopt local solutions. I understand that it's tough for many of our mech pilots to adapt to biomechs, so that is why I am turning to the locals. Only they can pilot the most ubiquitous kind of mechs on this planet."

"Isn't that dangerous? Even if they don't betray us, they will certainly mess up how we run our affairs around here. We don't have enough space and personnel to provide proper guidance to all of these potential newcomers."

"Tough luck. We need to deal with it. I would rather have more mechs than maintain the stability of our forces on the ground."

Once the people invited to the meeting became accustomed to the idea, their objections weakened. While plenty of people still expected problems, they saw that Ves already formed a full plan.

"We need to allocate a lot of personnel to survey and guard against all of the refugees. We can't have them stirring any trouble or picking fights amongst themselves."

"I'll take care of it, sir." Commander Casella Ingvar said. "I am currently in charge of all of the base affairs so I already know who to tap for this priority."

"Work together with Captain Reina Ember and Captain Cecil Rivington. They are both Lifers, current or former, so they can prevent any unfortunate misunderstandings."

Both of them looked at each other.

"Captain Reina."

"Yes, sir?"

"You're a former Lifer who is used to living in dire and desperate circumstances. I want you to take charge of the refugees that are outside our doorstep. I am aware it is a great challenge to keep them all in line, but don't hesitate to borrow the power of our mechs to get your point across."

The former pirate and Xona Stalker did not look too overwhelmed.

"I will do my best, sir."

"Notify me if anything goes wrong." Ves turned to Captain Rivington. "Your help is needed as well. While Captain Ember will take care of any affairs concerning the refugees that haven't joined our clan, I want you to take charge of those that do. Since you are one of them, I believe you will do great in making newcomers feel at ease."

This was a logical decision. While Captain Rivington didn't even have a good idea of what it was like to be a Larkinson, his loyalty was already assured. He was the right person to help other Lifers adjust to their new circumstances.

"All of this sounds fine, sir, but what if we get attacked by a larger force?" Captain Ulmond Cross of the Cross Clan quizzed. "From the intermittent news we receive, there are already reports of hundreds of mechs clashing against each other, and they're not even backed by any of the political factions. What if an organization that is capable of fielding twice as many mechs as the refugees attacks our base?"

That was a good question. No one had an easy answer to that.

Chapter 2842 - Limited Strength

Every plan and course of action required a certain amount of strength to complete.

Ves wanted to accomplish a lot of goals. Currently, he wished to blast off straight into orbit and fly back all the way to the outer system where he could reunite with his expeditionary fleet.

Theoretically, some of the vehicles in the refugee train were able to accomplish this. Perhaps their range was limited since they were primarily designed for atmospheric travel.

Due to their organic nature, the small and medium-sized biotransports suffered from a lot of problems once they ventured into space. They suffered from oxygen deficiency if they spent a prolonged time in space. Extreme temperatures assaulted their exteriors. Stellar radiation damaged their cells. The list of issues went on and on. It was much harder to make a biovessel spaceworthy.

That said, as long as the journey didn't take too long, Ves could easily cope with these issues. While he wasn't able to modify a biovehicle directly, he could grab some spare materials and augment the vehicle with conventional parts.

He could armor up a biotransport so that it wore its own 'spacesuit'.

He could hollow out such a vehicle and install conventional parts in their place that did the same job but much better.

He could even fabricate his own shuttle as long as he had access to a decent workshop along with sufficient raw materials!

In fact, the most ideal solution would be to steal a vehicle that was spaceworthy from the start.

Sadly, pretty much every vessel that satisfied his conditions was in the hands of the Prosperous Hill Transportation Service. Due to their monopoly on interplanetary transportation and logistics, all of these excellent biovessels were either in the hands of powerful factions or locked inside highly-defended bases!

"It doesn't even matter if we grab one of those vehicles." Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson snorted. "Anyone and their grandmother can shoot it down as long as they have a gun."

He was right. Right after the Supreme Revolution broke out, many citizens with means attempted to escape Prosperous Hill VI by launching into space!

Even though the fighting had also extended into orbit, as long as any vehicle managed to reach deep space, they would probably get shot down by one of the many thousands of ranged mechs in the surrounding area!

In fact, this had already happened plenty of times! Thousands of flaming wrecks rained down from the skies in the first hour alone. Not just shuttles, but also mechs attracted a lot of fire as long as they flew high enough to be noticeable!

This was why aerial mechs consistently lowered their altitude throughout their engagements. They didn't want to get sniped by a ranged mech that was situated on the other side of a city!

The only way a vehicle would be able to survive the passage into deep space was if it was heavy-protected or capable of maintaining stealth.

The former was only reserved for bigger factions while the latter was very challenging from a technical aspect.

As a result, it was not feasible for the Larkinsons and their allies to just pack up their bags and leave the planet at the moment!

This realization weighed heavily on everyone. They each had the means to flee, but the environment was too dangerous to make the attempt!

"We indeed need more strength." Captain Ulmond Cross said. "No one on this planet is our friend. Aside from the people in our base, we can't trust anyone, not even the refugees that are parked outside of our walls."

The refugees had already begun to settle down. Some of them even deployed temporary structures in order to offer some rest or create a workspace to fix their equipment.

Yet despite their docile demeanor, everyone in the conference room knew that the refugees could easily turn into enemies. The base occupants had to manage their relations with other people carefully.

This applied to every organization and faction on the planet. In a situation where they were cut off from reinforcements and expected to fend for themselves, Ves and his people could hardly afford to provoke too many enemies!

The more enemies he attracted, the greater the chance of getting defeated by an overwhelming attack of enemy mechs!

"We can't make it on our own with our current level of manpower, supplies and assets. We are especially short on mechs. If we want to expand our strength, we need to go out to acquire what we need to increase our security and work towards a possible escape route from this planet."

Expanding their strength meant getting their hands on more mechs and everything related to them. Ves understood this very early, so he proactively made the first steps by trying to attract refugees.

Ves wasn't interested in picking up ordinary strays. The stupid Lifers could kill themselves for all he cared.

What he truly wanted was to gain the allegiance of existing armed groups!

Any small and absorbable organization that possessed mechs like the Roving Hunters were prime targets in his eyes. As long as they weren't too troublesome or aligned to any troublesome factions, then they were acceptable additions to the Larkinson Clan!

He highly preferred absorbing these strong but not too stubborn Lifers into his clan over merely forming a temporary pact with them. He had no faith in verbal agreements and he had gotten screwed by them plenty of times in the past.

Only an agreement with guarantees could make him feel assured. Goldie's vigilance along with the influencing mechanism of the Larkinson Network were ideal in making sure that the new recruits wouldn't do anything detrimental once they joined!

When the discussion turned to attracting more refugees, the Larkinsons themselves were okay with it, but the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance did not maintain the same level of confidence.

"This is a reckless course of action." Irvine Spedan of the Infinity Guards remarked. "You are gambling on being able to control many different strangers. Your Larkinsons are very different from the average citizen of the LRA. This makes it very challenging to absorb so many Lifers at once. You can easily lose control of the situation when the amount of newly-added people and biomechs exceed that of your original numbers."

The Infinity Guard liaison made a good point. The problem was that Irvine's judgement did not take the Larkinson Network into account.

Captain Valeis and Captain Ulmond Cross briefly exchanged glances. They had been traveling with the Larkinson Clan for some time now. They had observed first-hand how relentlessly the Larkinson Clan expanded its ranks. Despite the insane pace of recruitment, the Larkinsons, both old and new, remained remarkably cohesive!

It was insane! Only the oldest and most traditional organizations were able to maintain such harmony over so many people.

Both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had tried to find out how the Larkinsons were able to convert their recruits so easily. They even suspected that the clan made use of illegal brainwashing tech, but the results of their findings turned out to be a bit more nuanced.

They learned that glows somehow played a large part in how newer Larkinsons easily blended in with the older ones. The glow of the Bright Warrior models were particularly key to this process.

Did this count as brainwashing? Perhaps, but only if someone considered every form of glow to be brainwashing. This would obviously make LMC mechs illegal, but so far the Mech Trade Association declined to make this judgement.

In fact, with how often Master Willix supported the Larkinson Patriarch in public, it was clear that the MTA had no intentions of getting in the way!

While the Glory Seekers didn't have much trouble in accepting this outcome, the Crossers were not as comfortable.

There was something profoundly wrong about subjecting people to an invisible influence in order to alter their behavior. The only reason why the Cross Clan didn't confront the Larkinsons about this issue was because Patriarch Reginald Cross didn't really care.

The leader just wanted Ves to assist in the design of his ultimate expert mech. Every other issue was secondary to this goal!

Since both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were already aware of the Larkinson Clan's unique advantage, they both agreed to the strategy that Ves had set forth.

It didn't matter if the envoy from the Infinity Guards looked confused.

The mercenaries weren't completely useless, however. Even if Irvine wasn't aware of how well the Larkinsons were able to absorb newcomers, the Infinity Guards developed numerous connections with local institutions and companies.

"If I may make a suggestion, I think we should try to band together with foreign organizations who are in the same predicament as yours." Irvine spoke up. He waved his hand to activate a projection of their current area. "As you know, this remote region is filled with bases that are rented out to foreigners on a regular basis. While they may not have as many mechs as you wish, these strongholds are filled with useful supplies and equipment. In addition, the mechs they possess are largely made of metal, which is doubtlessly more helpful to a classical mech designer such as yourself, patriarch."

Ves nodded. "That's indeed the case. While I have several ideas on how to augment biomechs, I am heavily limited in doing so. I can do so much more with regular mechs, but this is not an urgent priority. The mechs we already possess are already enough to keep myself busy."

He activated a projection that listed out the mechs at their disposal.

The Larkinsons currently possessed 3 Bright Warriors, 2 Ferocious Piranha's, a single Piranha Prime and 2 Eternal Redemptions.

"It's too bad we weren't able to bring any Transcendent Punishers." Ves sighed with regret.

The heavy artillery mechs were way too destructive! While the Transcendent Punishers did not excel at area bombardments, their direct armaments could still deal a devastating amount of damage to any city district!

This was why the authorities strictly forbid the use of any artillery mechs on the surface!

Ves turned to Captain Valeis. "At the entrance, I only saw 6 Valkyrie Redeemers. Is that all of the mechs you were able to bring?"

The Glory Seeker officer grimaced. "We requested to bring more, but the inspectors weren't so friendly towards us. They told us that we can't be trusted to control ourselves. The insolence! Those boys should look at themselves in the mirror. The chaos that has swept over this planet is the perfect example why they are wrong!"

Having heard similar remarks from Gloriana, Ves automatically filtered out the nonsense. While the Valkyrie Redeemers were strong, they were ultimately limited by their numbers. Six mechs wasn't enough to form a battle formation.

"What about you?" Ves asked the Crossers.

"We have managed to ship 8 of our aerial mechs to the surface. We currently have 3 axeman mechs, 3 rifleman mechs and 2 light skirmishers. Unlike your multi-environmental mechs, each of our war machines are optimized for aerial combat."

Captain Ulmond Cross sounded especially proud of that, and he was right to feel this way. Ves was keenly aware that his multi-environmental mechs performed best in space. On land and in the air, they suffered from various constraints.

This was an especially serious problem for the Eternal Redemptions! They were so heavy and cumbersome that they were better off planting their feet on the ground!

As Ves studied the composition of his main mech force, he began to think what he could do with all of this strength.

Chapter 2843 - Proven Me Designer

After a lot of discussion, Ves and the others hadn't managed to come up with a solid plan to evacuate from the planet.

They knew too little to commit to any ambitious plans. The entire planet had just descended into chaos and nothing was right anymore.

For now, the stranded people focused on more immediate goals. Everyone recognized that they urgently needed to expand their strength. Acquiring more mechs and resources sat at the forefront of their minds.

The Infinity Guards were already in the process of establishing contact with their local contacts and business partners. The mercenaries had visited this planet plenty of times in the past, and according to the usual methods of large mercenary companies, built up relationships with reliable service providers in order to fulfill routine demands.

Ves didn't have much hope that the Infinity Guards would succeed. While the Star Strider Security Group was a massive organization, much of that was irrelevant right now!

Much of the strength of the 14th Fleet of the Star Striders was located elsewhere. Right now, the Infinity Guards on the surface only had eight mechs at their disposal. This was hardly enough to earn the respect of serious partners!

This was why Ves banked much more on gathering the power of a collective. There were many different individual forces on the planet that were having difficulty keeping their heads on their shoulders with all of the fighting going on. Having a handful of mechs allowed these groups to lord it over regular citizens, but they were unable to resist any of the serious players rampaging across the surface!

Not everyone believed that this was a viable plan. The difficulty of organizing so many different groups increased drastically as their numbers increased.

Ves didn't pay too much mind about everyone's doubts. He had confidence in his clan's ability to absorb so many newcomers.

Of course, that did not mean that it was easy to expand his clan with lots of new members. Ves and the Larkinson Clan were very controversial among the locals.

He knew that in order to succeed, he had to pass a very difficult test.

"The refugees outside our doorstep must become a part of my clan!"

This was not going to be easy. While some groups already pledged to join, there were plenty more who expressed misgivings about upending their entire lives. People like Oliver Vlambeer were so attached to their states that they had no intentions to leave!

Right now, Ves hadn't figured out the right approach yet. This was why he left this issue to Captain Reina Ember and Captain Cecil Rivington. Both of them were originally Lifers who knew their own people a lot better than any other Larkinson.

After the meeting, Captain Ember approached him in order to discuss potential solutions.

"I've gone through the descriptions of who the refugees are and where they hail from. I've noticed that all of them are city folk."

"What do you mean by that?"

"They're quite picky." The Black Cat officer emphasized. "Compared to people who live in more remote areas, the refugees you've picked up may be in a sorry state, but they still have the pride and arrogance of a Lifer who live in one of the greatest cities of their state. Veoline is not only a major population center, but also an iconic cultural center as well. It's a city where many local dramas take place. The people here are quite proud of their city, their planet and their star system."

"Oh."

Ves encountered people like that before. A lot of Bentheimers used to obsess about how they were better than other Brighters and how the central government was stealing their wealth.

The strong feelings of some citizens of Bentheim sometimes became so extreme that they even rebelled against the Bright Republic!

Still... resorting to Vincent of all people left a bad taste in his mouth. Ves found it hard to take the leg-less expert candidate seriously. Yet he also remembered that Vincent was good at befriending people. He was already known for this in the Larkinson Clan.

In the end, he decided to refer Vincent to Captain Ember and Captain Rivington. If Vincent was able to help in any way, then that was great. If the results were less than ideal, then the two former Lifers could always kick the idiot aside.

After discussing their initial handling of the refugees, Ves parted with the two and left the building.

After a long day of trying to fight his way out of the city, Ves was exhausted. He had just finished a design duel beforehand so he had already gone through a lot of drastic events.

While much of his mind was occupied with how to solve his current problems, he did not forget about the gains he made when he was declared the winner of the design duel.

His Spirituality had grown stronger. He knew this even if he didn't bring up the System's Status. His mind had grown a little more vigorous and he felt he could do a little more with the spiritual energy at his disposal.

Aside from that, his design philosophy and his thoughts surrounding it had taken another step forward as well. This was even more important to him. His design philosophy defined the mechs he developed. Any change, no matter how small, would have a profound impact on how his products would look!

"My mechs are more alive than mechs that are made of flesh and blood."

He spoke these words with the strength and confidence of a mech designer who put this premise to the test and succeeded in proving that he was right!

Avoiding competition and trying to evade challenges might give mech designers more peace of mind, but these were ultimately signs of weakness.

A strong and confident mech designer did not shy away from a confrontation!

In fact, it was only when a mech designer collided against another peer that various truths and insights about their chosen specialty would truly appear!

For example, the recent design duel put a very high focus on how the concept of life defined his mechs.

Ves always considered his mechs to be alive, but his definition for this word had always been rather abstract.

This was no fault of his own. He simply never encountered anyone who challenged him on this aspect.

Sure, there were plenty of people who denied that his mechs were alive, but he dealt with these doubters easily enough.

What he truly needed was someone coming up with a competing idea of what a living mech should be. Despite all of the accidents that took place on this trip, Ves felt it was still worth it considering the crucial insights he harvested!

After witnessing and confronting a biomech designer who adhered to an entirely different perspective of living mechs, Ves knew he did not have to be careful anymore about calling his mechs alive.

An unknown shackle had broken off from his mentality. Before, he always felt that biomechs may have had a more legitimate claim to the term of living mech, but now he learned first-hand that biomechs weren't all that magical. While they were exotic in many ways, their actual effectiveness was much less exciting than he initially thought!

"Biomechs are just another form of mechs." He muttered to himself. "They are not game changers, nor do they pose a threat to my own products."

Even if there were fantastic biomech designers who could design much better products such as Master Cline, Ves did not feel inferior. He bet that he could design something considerably stronger than any powerful biomech designer once he reached their level of strength!

Of course, he had a long road ahead before he reached this point. It would take many decades before he could play with the big boys.

After navigating to another structure, Ves reached his bedroom and sat on his bed.

He was still wearing his Unending Regalia, so he did not feel any additional comfort at the moment. Even though he was in the center of his own base, Ves still insisted on wearing protection.

The thought of wearing his combat armor continuously for several weeks on end did not make him happy, but he had little choice. There were too many threats on this planet that could kill him up close and from afar.

"Meow."

Ves turned his gaze to the side and saw that Lucky had already left his shoulder. The gem cat jumped onto a pillow and settled on it. He needed a long rest after exhausting his phasing ability.

"I hope you get well soon. I have a lot of work in store for you. Your infiltration ability is vital in scouting our potential allies and enemies."

"Meow..!"

"Hey, don't complain. I still haven't forgotten about the gem, you know. You promised several times to deliver something to me, but I haven't seen you working your b.u.t.t at all in the past month. Where the hell are you putting all of the exotics you eat?!"

Lucky didn't want to talk to Ves about this. The indignant cat turned his slender body around and deliberately closed his eyes.

"Well, whatever."

A gem wouldn't help Ves much right now. He still had a handful of them left, but it was too wasteful to implant them in any of the mechs at his disposal. The performance boosts wouldn't make a difference in any large-scale combat involving hundreds of mechs.

Before Ves planned to take a brief nap in order to reset his mind, someone requested to enter his room.

"Come in." He said while gesturing Nitaa to unlock the entrance.

Venerable Tusa stepped forward. Ordinarily, Ves would have been surprised at his entry, but he already sensed the expert pilot's force of will approaching beforehand.

"What's the matter, Tusa?"

"I'd like to make a request. I already discussed this before with Commander Casella, but she did not have good words to say about my idea."

This sounded serious. Ves sat back up on his bed. "So you thought of going over her head?"

"Yup." Tusa shamelessly smiled. "Here's the thing, Ves. I feel a bit.. constricted in this base. Sure, I know how my presence helps with stabilizing the people and all, but staying in a single place is not my preference. Jannzi is much more suited to hold the fort."

"Are you asking permission to take the Piranha Prime and go on a patrol or something?"

"Not.. exactly. I do want to take my mech out for a spin, but I don't want to fly circles around this base. I want to go further. There's an entire city in the distance that is engulfed in war. I want to reach it and see what I can do to help us, whether it is finding new allies, scouting possible enemies or finding valuable loot! I know it sounds risky and all, but I can take care of myself. No one is able to mess with me when I'm piloting my Piranha Prime, especially if there aren't any expert mechs in the field!"

This was a radical proposal! Ves was taken aback by how willing Venerable Tusa embraced the unknown.

Ves and Jannzi had just struggled to distance themselves from Veoline. It was absurd for anyone to do the opposite, especially alone!

"The risks are too great, Tusa. While the Ferocious Piranha and its prime variant is capable of going solo, Veoline is way too dangerous! A metallic mech like yours is way too conspicuous on this planet. Its glow will also attract a lot of unneeded attention. Do you truly think you can handle yourself in the chaos?"

Venerable Tusa's gaze remained steady. "Yes."

Chapter 2844 - Logistical Mismatch

Of all of the ideas he heard today, the one suggested by Venerable Tusa was the most absurd!

There was strength in numbers. Ves knew this. Every other Larkinson knew it. Even his opponents on the planet were aware of this universal truth!

This was also the reason why Ves was greedy for more biomechs and the people that piloted them. Biomechs and their accompanying pilots were worth far more than exotics and other ordinary goods at this time!

The more mechs his side accumulated, the smaller the chance of getting defeated by someone else. Gathering more mechs was the number one priority of Ves and his allies who were stranded on the surface!

"Do you think you can take over the entire planet by yourself?" Ves asked. His befuddlement was clear to see! "Do you think you're some kind of lone wanderer who can solve the conflict by yourself. Do you see yourself as a courier who can deliver peace to the masses? What if our base falls without our assistance? You'll be the sole survivor of our people on this war-wracked planet!"

Venerable Tusa did not look admonished. His expression was as firm as ever.

"I know it sounds risky, but I think we can gain much more if I split off and explore on my own. I'm good at this. You know that. I can take care of myself, especially when I have the Ferocious Piranha. If you feel I really won't be able to make it on my own, you can assign some mechs to me. They'll slow me down, but as long as they carry some supplies, I can do a lot more in the field."

"Absolutely not! We need those mechs to defend our base and participate in any ambitious plans we might have. We cannot afford to divert a single mech to you. Everyone else isn't as confident in being able to survive on their own. In fact, I'm still doubting whether you are as good as you say. You've never gone on a solo operation like this, right?"

"I've gone through my fair share of excitement during the Bright-Vesia War. Remember that? I'm a former soldier, you know. I have the training. I know what to watch out for and how to take care of myself when I'm alone."

"That training only applied to third-class mechs operating in third-class environments!" Ves retorted. "Battlefields in second-rate states are much more dangerous! There are way more threats you need to watch out for, especially on a planet that is filled with unfamiliar biotechnology!"

Venerable Tusa crossed his arms and leaned on one of his legs. "I won't be of much use if I stay here. Sure, I can contribute a lot to the defense of our base. I'll give you that. Yet the point I'm trying to make is that I can do more if I am out there, finding new allies and directing potential new recruits to head over here to join our clan. A part of me yearns to head over the city. This is calling, Ves."

When the expert pilot spoke those words, his force of will seemed to resonate with his voice.

Ves could sense the powerful will and d.e.s.i.r.e in the statement. Venerable Tusa spoke with his heart and did not get swayed at all by any doubts.

This was the troublesome aspect of expert pilots. Ves already glowered when he realized that his arguments would never have any effect.

While Ves had the power and authority to deny Tusa's request, the harm it would cause was quite great. The expert pilot would just feel restricted and blame his inability to follow his d.e.s.i.r.es on the person responsible for shackling him in place.

This was one of the worst things that Ves could do to an expert pilot that prized freedom and the ability to decide his own fate.

"Fine." Ves said with obvious reluctance. "I'll give you permission to go out there. Just be mindful of the endurance and operating time of your mech. While the Piranha Prime is an upgraded variant of the base model, its energy reserves are not that much better. Its special armor may allow you to block many attacks, but it won't do you any good if your mech runs out of power because you fought too intensely."

"You don't need to remind me of that, Ves. This is mech piloting 101. I'll carry some extra supplies as I go in. I don't want to run out of energy cells too soon."

Both of them discussed how the Piranha Prime should be equipped and piloted to make the most out of this solo reconnaissance mission. Ves dug up his memories on how he modified and configured the Piranha Prime and made some small suggestions that could extend the operating time of the prime mech.

"If you want to conserve energy, then don't take flight." Ves advised. "The Ferocious Piranha doesn't waste too much energy when moving through space because it doesn't have to fight against gravity. Here, anytime you lift your mech in the air, it constantly has to exert downwards thrust in order to keep a lot of tons worth of metal and alloy in the air. Compared to running on land, flight is inherently inefficient!"

"It's fast, though. If I accelerate forward as fast as possible and reach my destination in a fraction of the time it takes to travel over land, will I save more energy this way?"

Ves frowned. He performed some rapid calculations with the help of his implant.

"It depends. Some cities and busy environments are much harder to traverse, but even if the streets are all straight and even, you will still waste a lot more energy if you fight in the air. That's not a problem if you are fighting within range of easy resupply, but if you are all alone in the field..."

"I'll make it back in time."

After Venerable Tusa received a couple more tips on how to handle his mech, the expert pilot quickly left. Now that he got what he wanted, he couldn't wait to see what he could do on his own!

No one came to visit Ves after that, so he gladly took the opportunity to take a much-needed rest. He had gone through so many different ordeals today that he didn't feel confident if he continued to work without rest.

Even though there were many time-s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e priorities on his plate, Ves learned that he was never able to address all of his items on his to-do list.

"Time is precious, but having a good mentality is even more precious."

The best way to get around the constraints of lack of time was to work smarter. In order to do that, he needed to refresh his mind.

When Ves began to slumber on his bed with his combat armor sealing his body, Lucky yawned and began to move himself a bit closer.

"Meow."

A few hours later, Ves woke up and had a brief breakfast while listening to a report.

"...We've inducted more refugees into the clan a few hours ago, sir." Commander Casella reported. "Most of the Trezin Showstoppers and the Right Siders welcomed the opportunity to become a part of us, but just as before, not all of their ranks agreed with the decision of the majority."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "We don't need to care too much about these doubters. Since they're too reluctant to join our clan, they're not the kind of people who we can rely on in a fight. We don't need to try too hard to persuade these doubters."

"You can say that for most of the refugees parked outside. By the way, word about that has already spread. Three more refugee groups have made their way over here."

"Huh? More have arrived?"

Casella nodded. "They were already in the area or witnessed the passage of your refugee train. While the newcomers aren't sure what we're actually doing, they just want to take comfort in the safety that hundreds of mechs can provide."

After discussing a few issues with regards to accepting other newcomers, they quickly changed the subject to another important matter.

"The Roving Hunters are complaining about their inability to service their biomechs. The biomech technicians that we've accepted are all saying that there is little they can do to repair the Taragon, the Bluestar, the Perringer and the Optimon. All of the mech infrastructure in this base is meant to service classical mechs. We don't have the capability to perform work on any biomech, and this is going to be a serious problem going forward."

Ves understood the gravity of her message. "Since our current plan calls for quickly expanding our strength by acquiring a lot of mechs, we can't get around the reality that we'll be having a lot of biomechs on our hands."

This was a serious matter. The mechs of the Roving Hunters were all hurt and could no longer fight as well as before. While they could heal many light to moderate injuries on their own, it took way too long for the biomechs to heal by relying on their natural regeneration alone.

At the very least, they all had to supply a lot of nutrients to the hungry biomechs in order to support their healing process!

"Ugh." Ves palmed his face after he realized the depth of this issue. "Gentle Lotus Base isn't set up to service biomechs at all, right?"

"That's correct. The infrastructure required to turn this site into a location where we can maintain and repair a lot of biomechs is a huge endeavor. At the very least, we need a biomech designer or a bioindustrial engineer to form a plan to set up the required facilities. Then we need to go out and bring back an immense amount of industrial goods and equipment. Then we have to put it all together to form lots of feeder pools and other necessities required to service biomechs."

All of that sounded extremely c.u.mbersome! Building an entirely new biomech processing facility took months or even years. There was no way that Ves could wait that long to achieve results.

"This won't work, Casella. It's an enormous waste of time and energy for us to build something that we are not even good at. Rather than trying to build our own biomech facility, we should take over an existing one! There are plenty of places like that on this planet."

"Those are our thoughts as well, sir. We have already tasked our intelligence personnel with locating and scouting any nearby biomech facilities that can allow us to service our growing collection."

She called up a map of the local province and pointed out several possible interesting locations.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Moving away from Gentle Lotus Base is a big endeavor. We might not have any fancy biotech, but this place is fairly remote and secure. In part, this is because there is nothing to fight for in this boring place. Once we move back closer to the city in order to take over one of its biomech facilities, we'll be painting another target on our backs. I don't think I need to explain why."

Commander Casella understood the implications. "The most valuable assets of any force on this planet are biomechs and mech pilots. Yet they can only fight one or two battles before they require servicing in order to regain their peak condition. A strong force could easily become feeble and weak if it doesn't have access to any facilities that can keep their war machines in shape!"

Right now, this wasn't a serious concern, but Ves could already predict that this would become a huge issue in time.

Any organization that simply fought with abandon but did not pay attention to this problem would definitely pay for it later on! Only those who were farsighted enough to secure a precious facility would have the capital to continue to fight on this planet!

Ves had to follow suit. Staying in Gentle Lotus Base would only weaken his forces over time. If he wanted to increase his agency during this crisis, then he couldn't get around this necessity!

"It looks like we'll have to abandon this place, then."

Chapter 2845 - Insular People

The Piranha Prime left the base after loading up on extra supplies. In order to minimize its energy usage, Venerable Tusa disabled or lowered the power setting of numerous systems.

The mech also carried a customized backpack module that it was able to dump onto the ground whenever it needed to fight. The backpack was filled with extra energy cells and other supplies.

It didn't take too much effort for Ves to cobble it together in a way that molded it to the form of the light mech without shifting its balance too much. He also made a few other tweaks to the Piranha Prime in order to increase its performance when it had its feet on the ground.

"I hope he manages to make it back." Ves worryingly sighed.

"Venerable Tusa prepared extensively for this trip." Commander Casella said as she stood by his side. "He studied the map of Veoline and memorized every noteworthy location. We also held several discussions on how he should respond when faced with difficult situations. He's not going in blind."

"All of that sounds great, but there's no way you can anticipate every possible outcome. I hope that Tusa doesn't make any stupid decisions over the course of his adventure."

The departure of Tusa caused the base to lose a powerful defender. The Piranha Prime's unique properties were extremely well-suited to the current situation. It had the power to break up entire formations and challenge even the most powerful opponents as long as they weren't expert mechs.

If any hostile party launched an attack on the base while the Piranha Prime was away, then the defenders would certainly suffer greater casualties due to lacking a core mech!

Venerable Tusa knew this, but he still insisted on going on a solo jaunt. From his perspective, the intelligence and other assistance that he was able to provide in the field was far more valuable than staying in place!

For example, the expert pilot could be on the lookout for any large troop movements that could pose a threat to Gentle Lotus Base. He was also tasked with scouting several nearby biomech production and servicing facilities.

The latter task was especially important. Due to the breakdown in central communications, Ves and the rest no longer had access to real-time data on what was happening throughout the planet.

The only way to get a solid look at various locations was to dispatch scouts. In order to make sure that the stranded Larkinsons obtained the data they needed to stay on top of the situation, they also dispatched lots of scouting drones.

Hundreds of small bird-sized drones spread in every direction. Each of them acted on specific programming that told them to scout a complex route that wouldn't give anything away if any of them got captured.

Ves didn't have much hope in the drones. There were too many methods to detect, interfere or shoot them down. However, it was worth sending them out if even 1 percent of these disposable drones returned!

After seeing the Ferocious Piranha off, Ves reentered the base and began to inspect the few metallic mechs that were currently off-duty.

With the departure of the prime mech, the Larkinsons on the ground only had seven LMC mechs at their disposal. This was a depressingly small number, and the implications would have been worse if the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan failed to bring their mechs as well.

As it was, the base occupants were still able to keep their footing with the mechs they currently had at their disposal, but only barely. The refugee camp that the escapees from Veoline had erected outside of the base posed a latent threat.

For this reason, Ves emphasized the importance of converting the refugees into Larkinsons. So far, this process was slow going, but that was mostly because the clan had already absorbed the most willing groups early on. The remaining Lifer citizens still had too many misgivings.

"I never really thought about it, but after spending time with fellow Larkinsons, it seems obvious now. My former people are too insular." Captain Rivington said with a wry expression. "The LRA forms the center of their reality. Whatever lies beyond is alien and unfathomable. The people who come from other states are so alien to Lifers that we can't even understand why they cling to tech that is centered around cold hard metal instead of warm and reassuring flesh."

Ves looked puzzled. "I can understand if Lifers from a rural settlement think that way, but aren't you exaggerating a bit when it comes to the citizens of this planet? Prosperous Hill is a port system! This planet alone is a nexus of trade, and lots of foreigners conduct transactions here all of the time!"

"That's true, but you overestimate how often the people here get exposed to foreigners. Visitors and traders like you only show up in downtown Veoline. Outside of the city center, the less exciting districts are almost indistinguishable from an ordinary domestic settlement. Every citizen lives in the same bubble as everyone else. With few or no opportunities to meet and interact with foreigners, they don't really know what foreigners like you are truly like except what other people have told them. I'm sure you can imagine how well that goes."

This indeed sounded troublesome. The Larkinson Clan adopted an open and tolerant culture because it was made up of people with many different origins. It was also vital for every clansman to learn how to cope with strangers with radically different outlooks of life. Otherwise, how could the Larkinsons ever be able to survive in the Red Ocean?

Being able to make friends with strangers would likely become a vital survival skill in the new frontier!

The Lifers didn't have to do all this. Since they only intended to live in the same state, star system or planet for their entire lives, they had no need to be tolerant and open-minded. Instead, their society encouraged them to put their own people and values above everything else, because this was an easy way to maintain internal cohesion!

"Their strong pride in their identities as Lifers is the greatest obstacle we face right now." Captain Rivington explained. "While Captain Ember and I are slowly working to draw out the most desperate and most open-minded among the refugees, I'm not optimistic we'll be able to win over more than half of the people camped outside."

"How many mechs are we missing out on, then?"

"That figure changes every day, particularly since we are receiving a trickle of new refugees every day. For now, we're talking in the range of a hundred biomechs. Most of them aren't impressive in terms of performance, but they can still contribute in any battle."

This was a serious difference. Ves hated the thought that there were so many biomechs within reach, but ultimately wasn't under his control!

If any battle commenced, then these cowards would be the first to flee! Since they didn't owe anything to the Larkinson Clan, they were under no obligation at all to risk their lives and expend their precious assets to fight someone else's battle.

The only way to remedy this was to turn them into Larkinsons themselves! This way, any attack on the Larkinsons turned into their battle as well!

Ves looked sharply at the former competitive team leader. "Do you have any good ideas on how to convince these stubborn Lifers that they're better off with joining our clan?"

The man grimaced. "I don't have any good solutions at the moment. The insularity that I've talked about makes it difficult to get anything through their skulls. Even though they already lost their homes and livelihoods, the most stubborn refugees still insist that the government will make everything right!"

"The government can't even take care of itself. These Lifers are delusional." Ves contemptuously remarked.

They were at an impasse here. Ordinary measures wouldn't work. No matter what kind of logic or persuasive argument they used, closed-minded people simply wouldn't bother to listen.

Ves encountered these types of people many times in his life. His wife was a good example of that when it came to Hexer matters.

He knew that only powerful or forceful means were capable of penetrating through their thick skulls.

He didn't want to leave this problem unaddressed.

"Since I can't use force, maybe I can use a more subtle means..."

Ves came up with an interesting idea, but in order to implement it, he had to explore what the refugees were like. So far, he hadn't spent any time with them after returning to his base.

He called up Lucky and all of his honor guards. He also requested a couple of Bright Warriors to accompany him from afar.

Due to the impressive appearance of his Unending Regalia, there was no way for him to hide his identity. The people who sat at the edge of the refugee camp already noticed his arrival and quickly began to spread word!

"These people are certainly industrious." Ves commented as he saw the refugees begin to talk and gossip about him. Not everything they said was nice.

"If these Larkinsons didn't visit our state, we wouldn't have lost our homes!"

"Look at how scared he is of us. He doesn't even dare to expose his face. The stronger and thicker the armor, the more the wearer is afraid. Don't fear him. Pity him instead."

"Stay away from him! He's no friend of ours. According to the galactic net, everything he says is a lie. You can't trust any foreigner, but this guy is worse than everyone else!"

Ves accepted to hear some snide remarks towards him, but he didn't think it would be so bad. The Lifers, despite sheltering right outside Gentle Lotus Base, possessed remarkably little gratitude towards the people who helped them escape the dangerous city!

While there were plenty of people who had better words to say about him, the stupid and negative remarks already convinced him that he should not be lenient towards these people.

He resolved to treat them better once they became a part of the Larkinson Clan. As long as they saw the light, he could forget about their prior opinions.

As Ves and his guards stepped close, anyone nearby conspicuously stepped aside. No one wanted to mess with the heavily-armed guards that were constantly on the lookout for possible threats.

The Bright Warriors looming at the back could not follow Ves inside. When the refugees settled on this location, they made use of hastily-erected structures made out of scavenged debris or some sort of fast-growing tree product to form a chaotic town.

The refugees clearly didn't discuss their plans with each other because the structures were all placed that did not make sense when taken as a whole.

Children ran along the uneven corridors. Their parents were either sitting uselessly outside or busy with performing the tasks that were necessary to keep the camp running.

None of them wanted to speak to Ves. His honor guard alone was enough to deter anyone from getting within 10 meters of him! His intention to talk to the locals in a comfortable setting obviously wouldn't work at this rate.

Just as he thought about sending away his guards, an object launched from the top of a nearby tree structure and rapidly approached his position!

Ves didn't do anything. He merely waited as his honor guards already made their moves.

The gravitic projector wasn't able to contain all of the released acid, so plenty of drops and splashes managed to spread to the sides and splatter onto the roof of a tree building.

The affected organic structure quickly started to sizzle!

Chapter 2846 - Turbulent Emotions

Whoever attempted to assassinate Ves should have known better.

People as wealthy and powerful as him always enjoyed multiple layers of protection. Outside of his honor guard and the mechs on standby further back, the feeble attack had no chance of getting through his shield generators and his Unending Regalia.

"Meow!"

Lucky had instantly jumped from the Unending Regalia and became fully alert. Nitaa and the rest of the guards had also adopted a more high-strung posture as they tried to watch out for follow-up attacks.

Ves waved everyone down. "Don't do anything rash. The attack didn't do any harm and we don't know who's responsible for setting this trap."

"Sir, I advise you to pull back." Nitaa insistently urged. "These locals have already shown that they are willing to act out on their dangerous impulses. It's highly likely that they have prepared other traps!"

"I'm aware of that, but do you really think they can threaten us?" Ves sneered behind his helmet. "If we turn away, we will only leave a weak impression behind. Our goal of convincing these locals to join our clan will become a lot harder if everyone thinks that we're a bunch of cowards!"

"That's a dangerous argument, sir. You are willfully ignoring a safety warning in order to fulfill another objective. Is it worth it for you to continue to risk your life?"

"I'll be fine. Consider this as a test. Each of you have missed this trap until it had already triggered. I expect better next time. The acid grenade should have never been launched at me to begin with. Its payload could have been much more dangerous."

The honor guards recognized their failure. Their sensors were highly-g geared towards detecting conventional threats, but biotechnology presented dangers that none of them were familiar with. Even though they had already tweaked the settings of their sensor systems to be on the lookout for biological threats, it was clear their database on biological threats possessed some serious gaps!

This was not a problem that they could solve in the field. The honor guards had no choice but to pay more attention and watch every angle.

"Meow meow?"

"Don't bother. I can already tell that whoever set this trap was probably far away."

Using the sensors of his Unending Regalia, he could spot a small and camouflaged launching mechanism at the top of the tree structure.

Perhaps the Larkinsons might be able to trace who was responsible for setting it up by watching the security recordings, but Ves didn't plan to make any moves in person. The assassination attempt was so primitive that he didn't even feel the urge to take revenge. Compared to the powerful enemies he faced on a regular basis, a single discontented Lifer did not even register on his mind!

"Meow.."

Since Ves didn't feel bothered, Lucky relaxed as well. The cat knew that Ves was almost impossible to harm when he was wearing his combat armor.

Ves continued his mostly-silent tour. The only difference was that his honor guard acted much more proactively. They did not just approach various structures in order to sweep them for any hidden weapons, but also pushed any loitering refugees back.

None of this fostered any goodwill towards him and his clan..

The Lifers who disliked him took what happened as proof that he was an oppressor.

Those that didn't hold any strong opinions towards the Larkinson Clan began to develop a negative impression.

Even the small number of people who previously thought about applying to join the Larkinson Clan were having second thoughts!

This was not conducive to his goal of persuading the refugees to join his side. Perhaps the harm he was doing to his image by continuing on his tour was worse than turning back from the start!

Yet Ves still insisted on walking through the entire refugee camp on foot. He didn't even shy away from the dormant or patrolling biomechs. With the level of protection he currently enjoyed, not even mechs could kill him right away!

"Damn cowards." He muttered under his breath.

A part of him even looked forward to seeing what would happen if a refugee mech pilot pulled the trigger!

The fact that none of the Lifer mech pilots were stupid and brave enough to make the attempt diminished his opinion of the refugees even further.

"Is that it?" He asked as he explored everything there was to see.

The refugee camp was interesting. Even though it was only a short time since they settled down, the displaced citizens were already trying to pick up their lives in any way possible.

They erected bars, restaurants, basic biotech repair facilities and even set up a school to keep restless teenagers busy!

While Ves admired their proactiveness, the fact that these refugees were so quick to set up a new town for themselves spoke volumes about their d.e.s.i.r.e to return to their previous lives!

"What do you think about the people in the camp, Lucky?"

"Meow." Lucky flipped his tail.

"Yeah. Their priorities aren't straight. If I was in their place, I would be looking to dig underground bunkers or something. It's much safer for them to shelter beneath the surface and out of sight."

No one liked to get caught up in a war brewing near their old homes. Numerous refugees had already lost family or friends. Not everyone was able to cope as well with the losses than others, and some even channeled their negative emotions in worrisome directions!

"All in all, these people are quite sad."

The emotions he sensed and the impressions he gained informed his next decision.

When Captain Rivington informed him of the difficulty of persuading many of the locals to join his clan, Ves thought about how he could change that without earning Venerable Jannzi's ire.

The solution he came up with was making use of glows.

"This is what I'm good at. There aren't many mech designers who can surpass my ability to sway other people!"

Of course, this didn't mean that Ves intended to assign a couple of his LMC mechs right in the middle of the refugee camp.

That would just increase everyone's opinion that the Larkinsons were oppressing the poor citizens.

"Besides, I don't have any suitable mechs for the job at the moment." He muttered.

The Ferocious Piranha's would drive everyone away. The Eternal Redemptions repelled men like the plague.

His Bright Warriors were much more suitable, but not enough. They weren't as offensive to people as his other mechs, and they might be able to project a more welcoming presence if Ves switched out their design spirits. Yet that did not change the fact that they were killing machines!

"Mechs aren't teddy bears."

Ves had to find a way to expose the refugees to glows that would lower their vigilance towards the Larkinson Clan and increase the odds of winning them over.

"I have an excellent solution in mind!"

Once he returned to the base, he visited one of its workshops and began to gather some materials together. Before he went to work, he activated a design interface and sketched a simple statue.

The solution that Ves had settled upon was making several totems!

"What do these people need? What will bring them the most relief?"

He had several design spirits that could have a calming effect on people. Some were more exclusive than others, but depending on how he tweaked his totems, he could finetune any glow in order to alter their properties to an extent.

Which design spirit should he choose first?

"If these people are too caught up by their own grief, they won't be receptive to joining our clan. My first totem should pull them out of their depression."

He briefly thought about using the Solemn Guardian. It always had a great effect on raising people's morale.

However, Ves quickly shook his head.

"This is an awful idea. The Solemn Guardian will only make these Lifers even more loyal to their state!"

What Ves needed to do was to calm their extreme emotions, and there was no better design spirit to accomplish this than Lufa!

"Speaking of Lufa, I haven't really used him all that much." He muttered.

The design spirit formed an integral spiritual component of the Doom Guard and Ferocious Piranha models, but those mechs did not reflect the spiritual product's true inclinations.

Ves believed that his design spirits always fared best when they watched over a mech design that mirrored their identity.

For example, the Crystal Lord matched the Ill.u.s.trious One. The Aurora Titan fit Qilanxo like a glove.

Much of these cases came about because Ves expressly designed a mech that corresponded to a design spirit or vice versa.

He even applied the same approach to Lufa, but for various reasons he never got around to releasing the Sanctuary model.

"I've been so busy that I never really examined how my third-class mechs are faring in the hands of my customers."

To be honest, Ves hesitated whether he should release the Sanctuary at all. His current products were selling well as far as he knew and introducing a mech that negated other glows would certainly lead to a huge amount of disruption.

"I'll think about this later."

He threw these distracting thoughts aside and proceeded with fabricating a couple of totems.

None of them were particularly big or imposing. They merely depicted Lufa as he envisioned it. The white composite material portrayed the peaceful design spirit with a solemn and pure demeanor.

He made four statues in total which he planned to place in the four corners outside of the refugee camp.

The reason why he decided against placing them directly in the camp was because that was too forceful. Making the Lifers feel as if he was forcing them to enjoy his glows was counterproductive!

"I need to lure them over on their own accord."

Ves believed that the value that Lufa could provide to the distressed was powerful enough to do the job. Even he felt calmer and more at peace with himself as he became affected by Lufa's presence.

Of course, he could easily block this influence from affecting him if he wanted to. His mental strength was considerable and he would be damned before he allowed one of his own creations to screw him over!

After finishing the four statues, Ves admired his craftsmanship for a few minutes before calling in Captain Rivington to hear what he had to say about his work.

The moment the former mech athlete became affected by Lufa's glow, all of the tension in his body faded away. He closed his eyes in contentment as he relished in the opportunity to rid himself of his mental burdens, if only for a moment.

"Are these some of your famous statues, sir?"

Ves nodded. "Well, I don't know whether I deserve any fame for making them, but yes, they are mine."

"I heard you made a much greater and more impressive statue for the Hexers."

"Skip the flattery and tell me what you think about these four statues. As you are obviously feeling right now, I've imbued them with something special that makes them more than simple ornaments. Do you think they will be able to inspire the refugees to reduce their objections towards us and increase their chances of following in your footsteps?"

Captain Rivington put careful thought in his answer. He continued to bask in the glow of the totems as he looked up to them with a contemplative expression.

Eventually, he shook his head. "No."

"What? Why not?"

"Don't get me wrong. These statues are amazing. It's just that they're not.. organic."

"..."

"You've seen our city, right? Have you ever spotted a statue that was made out of metal or stone?"

"Now that I think about it... no. I haven't encountered any statues that look like these in Veoline."

"While my former state prefers to rely on natural growth to decorate a space, any statues made must be organic. They're either made out of flesh, bone or wood. These marble-like statues of yours are too static and clinical! I can tell you that few refugees are willing to approach these foreign-style statues!"

Chapter 2847 - New Incarnations

The feedback from Captain Rivington exposed a serious flaw.

Ves invested his time to craft several totems in the form of decent-sized statues in Lufa's likeness.

During the creation process, he constantly had the tranquil design spirit in mind, which meant that the finished products all possessed weak spiritual foundations that were nonetheless capable of holding a design spirit.

He thought that he created a way to encourage the refugees to let go of their past bonds and consider joining up with the Larkinson Clan.

Yet throughout this entire process, Ves never questioned the basic assumption of whether his target audience would even like his statue!

In any other state, Ves was extremely confident that his artistic abilities would be able to win the appreciation of the locals.

In the LRA, his usual art style fell completely flat! Now that he thought about it, not even his mechs earned as much appreciation from the public at the time of the design duel!

"These damn Lifers..."

These biotech-obsessed people were way too different for his liking. They were so abnormal compared to humans living in the rest of human space that they should have been classified as aliens!

There was a limit to how far a human could diverge from the norm of his race!

When Ves realized that his work had to be adapted to local sensibilities, Captain Rivington suggested that he call over a biomech technician.

A technician that used to work for the Roving Hunters reported to the workshop.

"You've called, sir?" A skinny man with pale hair asked.

"This is Dr. Robert Swindell." Rivington introduced. "Back when all of this happened, he was the specialist I always turned to whenever I needed to alter the appearance of one of my biomechs. He had a major influence on the current looks of the Taragon, Bluestar, Optimum and other mechs."

Ves looked at 'Doctor' Swindell with much more respect. While the newcomer looked nerdy enough to deserve this distinguished title, it was odd that someone who studied at one of the LRA's famed biotech-oriented institutions took on such a low position.

Dr. Swindell responded with a rueful smile. "There are famous universities and there are not-so-famous universities in our state. I attended one of the latter ones, sir. It still teaches all of the basics, but it's curriculum and teaching are not as extensive, partially so that students with no implants or low-quality implants can keep up. The majority of the graduates of my class went on to become biomech technicians. Only the most brilliant ones started a career in biomech design."

"Did the latter ones succeed?"

"No." The man who was slightly older than Ves replied. "They all failed to attract enough capital, let alone design a biomech that would attract enough customers. Everyone pretty much already knew this would happen, but we can always dream."

Ves smiled. "That is true. I admire their boldness."

That said, such an exceptionally poor record did not put Swindell's school in a good light.

"What do you specialize in, exactly?"

"Well, I studied enough biomech design to know the basics of how they are put together, sir. I have worked with enough biomechs to learn how I can shape their tissue. I can manipulate flesh and other organic tissue so that they retain most of their properties while taking on a different shape, color or texture."

"I see."

That sounded interesting. From how Ves understood it, Dr. Swindell trained himself into becoming a cosmetic surgeon for biomechs of sorts. This was doubtlessly a necessity for a competitive team that had to take great care in the appearances of their competitive mechs.

The most popular mechs in the arena always looked good. Each team aspired to be regarded as heroes or at least town favorites by presenting their mechs with as much beauty and flair as possible.

Ves asked a couple more questions to Dr. Swindell. The biomech technician explained the procedures he could perform and how extensively he could shape organic tissue to take on a d.e.s.i.r.ed shape.

Cosmetic alteration was a highly-developed field in human civilization. Even before the Age of Stars, humanity already came up with many ways to beautify someone's appearance. That trend continued on all the way up to the present day.

Therefore, Dr. Swindell was able to learn several different methods and techniques that could make a lot of changes without needing too much tech or sophisticated materials.

Ves pointed towards his four b.a.r.e statues. "The reason why I requested your presence here is to find out whether you can help me with a problem. Can you cover these statues with living flesh and make them look as if they are actual angels in the flesh?"

The cosmetic specialist had already noticed the totems beforehand, but he wasn't close enough to be affected by their glows.

This was deliberate. Ves did not want Lufa's glow to affect Dr. Swindell's judgement.

"I can see that you have taken great care in their design and shaping. I love how you have emphasized the character of this fantasy angel, sir." The former Lifer spoke as one artist to another. "As for transforming their appearances.. I can do that, but not as well

as I wish. If we were back in Ruuzon Arena, I would have access to much better facilities than now. As it is, whatever I can make will not be able to win any prizes."

"It doesn't have to be perfect." Ves spoke. "It just needs to look pleasing and convincing enough to gain the acceptance of the refugees outside."

"Ah. Now I see why you asked me to make them look organic, sir. If that's the case, then even a basic attempt is good enough. I doubt anyone here will be able to spot any shortcomings in the current situation."

Now that Dr. Swindell knew what Ves had in mind, they began to put their heads together in order to come up with a revised design for the totems.

Ves had never worked with a biotech specialist before, at least not in this capacity.

It helped that they weren't working on a mech. Making a statue was countless times simpler. They didn't have to worry about moving parts or trying to make sure that any cosmetic features could withstand a certain amount of damage.

"If durability is not a concern, then my job is much easier." Dr. Swindell smiled. "Harder flesh and tissue is much harder to shape and manipulate. You can't believe how many hours it takes to form abs onto an uncovered biomech or how much time it takes to precision-grind a piece of bone plating."

Under these conditions, Dr. Swindell quickly formed a plan. When Ves studied the projected sketch of his statues, he became impressed by how lifelike Lufa's depiction looked. The revised design truly had the capacity to make people believe as if a real angel had come!

"From what I've been told, our base doesn't possess the facilities and materials needed to perform many biotech-related procedures. Are you able to realize this new design with our current means?"

"The problem isn't as bad as it sounds." The cosmetic specialist confidently replied. "It is indeed true that it is difficult to work on biomechs and so on, but this is different. I can borrow some of the machines and tools from the infirmary to clone the required tissue. The quality of materials required to form all of the flesh, skin and other organic matter does not have to be high. In fact, if there is no suitable feeder stock, we can even feed the tissue generating machines with nutrient packs."

Ves looked astonished. "Are you serious?"

"It's true, sir. Nutrient packs consist of industrially-processed organic matter. When someone eats one, those nutrients get turned into the building blocks of blood cells, hair, nails and other organic tissue. The tissue generating machines simply perform the same process but with the middle steps cut out."

He didn't know that generating tissue was this convenient. It sounded as if it would be no problem to transform his statues into a brand new form of totem that he had never realized!

"Let's get to work then. I'll adjust the statues while you generate the required tissue. If there is anything you need, whether it is permission to use the medical equipment or materials needed to generate the tissue, then just ask."

Once Dr. Swindell moved to perform his own task, Ves turned back to his statues and began to slim them down.

The current proportions of his statues depicted Lufa in his actual form. This was fine if Ves didn't want to add anything to it, but now that he intended to use it as a base for organic tissue, it had to be cut down to size.

Otherwise, the fleshy Lufas that would appear at the end would look fat and bloated!

This was a simple enough process to Ves. Even though it hurt to mutilate his own artworks, he told himself that it was for the greater good. The end product would look much nicer after he completed this necessary step.

In order to facilitate the process of adhering organic tissue to his statues, he cut them in certain ways. Dr. Swindell had already gone over where and how he should hollow out certain portions of the base.

After that, Ves didn't have much to do. It took a lot more time to generate the required tissue, so he diverted his attention to upgrading and optimizing his mechs.

A day later, Ves returned to the workshop to see Dr. Swindell with a few tanks of biotissue floating by his side.

"Can we proceed?" Ves asked.

"Yes, sir. I have grown all of the materials we need. Do keep in mind that most of this tissue won't last very long. This is because I've accelerated their growth while using very basic materials as input. After three months, the softest and lightest flesh will begin to decay. Your statues will look quite gruesome as time goes on if this process continues."

"It doesn't matter. Three months is more than enough."

Once they began to work, Dr. Swindell quickly became immersed in Lufa's glow.

"Whoah. You didn't tell me that I would get affected by some sort of calming field."

"Will your work be affected by this mood?"

"I'm not used to working like this, but I can manage. I think."

Though Dr. Swindell behaved a bit hesitant at first, once he began to affix and bold some organic tissue onto a statue, he quickly found his groove.

Lufa's glow caused the man to enter into a zen-like mood. While it was hard to evoke any passion under these circ.u.mstances, it was very hard to make mistakes.

Ves did not stay idle throughout this time. He wanted to involve himself as much as possible. He knew that if he left the final step to someone else, the statue's spiritual foundation would likely diminish.

In addition, he suspected that the statue would treat the flesh layer like an article of clothing instead of a part of its body!

The flesh that covered the base had to be imparted with life as well in order to form a seamless whole with the rest. To do that, Ves had to be involved in every step of the way no matter how bad he was with shaping flesh!

Though Dr. Swindell was uncomfortable with Ves trying to help, they quickly formed an arrangement.

Ves didn't actually have to perform any difficult or s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e steps. It was already enough for him to act as an assistant and follow some very simple steps.

After half a day of manual work, which Ves had insisted upon, the new totems had finally taken on their drastically different forms!

Ves and Dr. Swindle stepped backwards in order to behold their efforts.

"They're.." The biomech technicians uttered. "They're unreal. I never thought that they would have this effect."

Even Ves was impressed by the outcome of making an organic totem!

"They look.. as if they are truly about to soar into the sky."

Resting before them were four large angels. Their supple flesh looked tender and their clothes enhanced the impression that they were all alive.

What was even more notable about this collection was that each organic statue was different! They not only adopted different postures, but also varied in their glows!

The result was that each fleshy incarnation of Lufa provided a slightly different form of sanctuary!

Chapter 2848 - Exceptional Discovery

Both Ves and Dr. Swindell had to step far away in order to escape the calming influence of the four works of art they made.

When they finally did, the significance of what they created sunk in. Both of them looked astonished!

They were astonished because they realized the versions of the statues exceeded the initial sketches!

Compared to the totems that Ves initially made by himself, the vitality and liveliness of the organic statues exceeded almost anything that he had seen!

The full wonder and splendor of the statues could never be fully described with words. To someone who was almost completely new to the concept of glows and living mechs, Dr. Swindell briefly thought he had created a set of masterpieces!

How else could he describe the four similar but individualized organic statues that seemed to be surrounded with divine halos? Even though he used to be a typical Lifer citizen who believed in the power of science rather than faith, the biomech technician momentarily became swept up by the illusion that he had just played god, or at least worked alongside someone who was capable of breathing miracles into life!

Though his rationality quickly reasserted himself, Dr. Swindell would never be able to forget this magical moment. He had a feeling that he would forever look back on this moment in his career as a turning point of his life, as a moment when he ceased to be a mere cosmetic surgeon for biomechs but instead evolved into something greater.

While the flesh shaper immersed himself with all kinds of grand delusions, Ves was almost just as enraptured, if for different reasons.

"I never expected the statues to come out like this." He whispered in a dumbfounded voice.

Most of his totems were rather ordinary works. While they were mysterious and provided a unique benefit to other people, Ves felt they were pale derivatives of his usual work.

As a mech designer, he derived a much greater sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from designing mechs.

His life centered around them. His entire career was based around developing better war machines.

Of course, every mech designer was also an engineer. He possessed enough expertise to design and craft simpler products such as statues and combat armor such as his Unending Regalia.

Each of these products possessed at least a shadow of the potential he inserted into mechs. Not much, but everything he made by hand with love and care received the gift of life, however small and faint it may be in his perception.

He considered this a side effect of his domain and specialty, much like how other mech designers such as Ketis were able to channel their domains in other ways that didn't have anything to do with mechs.

The loyalty medallions he made in large batches showcased the practical value of these non-mech products. Their effects on people caused him to call them totems, which was not a word he especially liked, but served as the most obvious label in which he and other people could understand what he made.

The totems he made until now were all inorganic in nature. From the modest totems of the Golden Cat he made to decorate the halls of the Spirit of Bentheim to the reconstructed statue of the Superior Mother, which was by far his greatest and most magnificent totem up to date, they were all 'alive' in a symbolic rather than literal fashion!

The four statues of Lufa sitting before Dr. Swindell and Ves broke that pattern.

At the start of applying the hastily-grown organic tissue prepared by the former Lifer biomech technician, Ves initially did not feel anything special about the process.

Sure, the processes performed by Dr. Swindell was novel and completely different from what he was used to. Assembling organic tissue was both gruesome and fascinating to someone who was accustomed to piecing together metal parts, but working with parts that were made out of living, squishy cells was an entirely different experience.

He did not particularly like it, though. His lack of understanding on how they were made, how they were put together and how every cell in every single piece of tissue worked frustrated any attempt to develop an affinity with them. He simply could not bond with strange flesh the way he did with metals he understood or knew how to use like Breyer alloy.

Fortunately, Ves did not work alone. With Dr. Swindell doing all of the technical heavy lifting, Ves was largely free to approach this project from an artistic and creative perspective.

As the director and decider of this endeavor, he determined how the statues should look in the end. He had already learned from his previous stints as project leader that this was a powerful position. The work being done conformed to his creative vision, so the

end product primarily carried his touch rather than those who did all of the heavy labor such as Dr. Swindell.

It was rather ironic. Dr. Swindell led the crafting process, but Ves firmly maintained control over the creative direction.

This wasn't the case usually. He was a mech designer, but his emphasis on craftsmanship often caused him to be personally involved when fabricating his more important works.

The mech industry also prized mech designers who knew their way around a mech workshop or manufacturing complex. It wasn't strictly needed though, and plenty of colleagues achieved success without ever stepping foot in a production facility.

However, Ves was someone who always prized the ability to expand his understanding beyond just designing mechs. His work would never be as real to him if he forgot all of the steps to making them by hand.

Ves was missing this deep connection here. Compared to how he crafted the initial form of the statues, he experienced an obvious disconnect as he helped from the side.

He thought that this missing factor would diminish the quality of his new totems.

He was wrong.

All four of them blazed with life and attraction in a way that none of his totems could convey!

Only the lightning-struck statue of the Superior Mother surpassed the four statues of Lufa, but this was a completely unfair comparison.

Ves briefly recalled all of the steps he took to create the vessel that birthed the Superior Mother.

The statue was enormous and a match to any mech in height, though not quite in volume due to its slimmer proportions.

The Superior Mother's statue had also been imbued with several exceptional spiritual ingredients, most notable the overpowering life attributes of his life-prolonging treatment serum.

It also served as the focal point of a massive, self-invented ritual that involved tens of thousands of people and objects that was so drastic that it even distorted the climate of an entire planet!

There was no way that combining all of these exceptional factors together would produce an average product! After throwing his expertise and spiritual energy into the mix, the statue of the Superior Mother rightfully became his most powerful totem!

Ves even thought that he would never be able to produce anything that was comparable to it for a long time. One of his biggest limitations was that he no longer had access to a high-grade life-prolonging serum.

The results today caused him to question this assumption!

The conditions today were incomparably simple and crude compared to his grand endeavor in the past.

He did not put too much time in designing and revising Lufa's statues.

The base material was made out of cheap and readily-available construction materials. He did not choose to utilize something tougher and more precious materials such as Breyer alloy because he needed to reserve them for his mechs.

The artificial flesh and other organic tissue brought by Dr. Swindell was grown from low-quality organic stock. Yet these seemingly average, mass-produced organic materials reacted considerably differently when Ves began to infuse life into them as they were being molded into shape.

For some unfathomable reason, the artificial organic tissue applied to the base of the statues merged with the spiritual foundations exceptionally well.

As the crafting process continued, Ves began to become more amazed at how the living tissue incorporated spirituality.

If he attempted to do the same procedures to a piece of Breyer alloy, then he always had to apply considerable force. It was as if he had to drill through a solid block of ice!

In contrast, once he began to work with active organic tissue, the resistance he experienced was so low that it was like walking through a fog bank. Other than knowing that something existed, the lack of pushback or obstacles made his work so disturbingly easy that it felt unnatural!

His doubts and hesitation slowly disappeared once he considered the implications of this amazing discovery.

"What can I do in these favorable conditions?"

Ideas started to swell in his mind. He observed all of the deviations from the norm and started to feel the urge to experiment with them. He just had to know how he could take advantage of generous conditions!

This was why he started to modify the design of the individual statues and instruct Dr. Swindell to divert from the original design.

Ves individualized all four statues so that they tested several different ideas!

Not only did these ideas differentiate the effects and appearances of Lufa's statues, but also infused them with separate but related identities.

In his enthusiasm and excitement, Ves unconsciously channeled the design spirit as he applied his new ideas. It didn't matter to him that Lufa constantly tried to dampen his heightened passion.

The discoveries he made and the possibilities he envisioned at that moment were so fascinating that Ves felt driven to perform his experiments!

Through this great moment, Ves felt as if he was not only shaping the organic statues, but also shaping the design spirit himself. Lufa literally altered in spiritual form as Ves expanded on his spiritual existence!

Ves became inspired by the Superior Mother's multiple aspects. Aside from her base existence, she also differentiated herself by embodying the six phases of existence of hexism.

Since a spiritual product like the Superior Mother could come in multiple different facets, why shouldn't other spiritual entities be able to present other sides of themselves?

This was the root of why he felt the need to differentiate the organic statues into four different aspects of the entity they were supposed to represent.

Ves turned to the statue on the far left.

"The Aspect of Tranquility."

This organic statue was Lufa in his purest form. It was one of the least pronounced aspects of the four, but it was still notable in its strong effect.

What the Aspect of Tranquility excelled at was imposing a total state of calm and peace to people within the range of its glow. Every positive or negative emotion was dampened to the greatest degree possible.

Anyone who opened up to this organic statue would lose all of their strong impulses and heated passion!

As befitting this effect, the Aspect of Tranquility depicted the white-robed Lufa with a single palm raised upwards. It was as if its gesture caused reality around it to stop,

making people feel as if their persistent worries, burdens and p.l.e.a.s.u.r.es no longer mattered.

Even the most rabid individuals would be able to find peace in the presence of this neutral and non-judgemental statue!

This was the original effect he was striving for, but due to the intermingling of living tissue, the Aspect of Tranquility was able to channel it to a much greater degree than it should!

While its effect wasn't enough to overpower the minds and spirits of extraordinary people such as expert pilots and maybe expert candidates, Ves was convinced it was able to sway practically any other human!

The utility this totem provided was so groundbreaking that not even his Sanctuary mechs were a match!

"This is impossible!"

The existence of this organic statue alone broke his assumption that his mechs were always stronger than his totems!

Chapter 2849 - The Four Aspects

The Aspect of Tranquility embodied the purity of Lufa. It stripped almost all of the personal and extraneous sides of the design spirit and distilled what remained into a facet that was completely neutral.

No matter whether someone was a friend or foe, they would both be able to find peace in the Aspect of Tranquility's presence.

Compared to the other statues, the Aspect of Tranquility was the most harmless of the four. Its effect on people was less extreme and it did not set out to impose any specific changes. It just provided a sanctuary where those who sheltered in its glow would be able to purge themselves of their distracting thoughts and emotions and find peace in a reality that was always busy.

Yet for all of the Aspect of Tranquility's benefits, it was merely the plainest totem compared to the other three variations!

Ves shifted his gaze to the second organic statue.

Compared to the purity and lack of personality of the Aspect of Tranquility, the second was a font of positivity!

The reason why Ves came up with a distinctly more empathic statue was because he wanted to develop something that was even better at healing broken and traumatized people.

When he toured the recently-erected refugee camp, he personally came in touch with different forms of negativity. Through reading the expressions and minds of the Lifers trying to make sense of their lives, he encountered plenty of anger, helplessness, loss, despair and indecisiveness.

It was not good for so many people to bottle up all of these negative emotions. If these traumatized citizens kept harboring dark thoughts, then an amateurish assassination attempt would be the least of his worries!

While providing active therapy was the best way to straighten these people up, Ves doubted that the refugees were open to it. He had to come up with an alternate way to heal the traumas that scarred their minds.

The Aspect of Healing was the realization of this need.

Just as its name suggested, the organic statue exuded a tweaked version of Lufa's glow that dampened every thought and emotion.

The difference was that the Aspect of Healing was slightly more tolerant of positive thoughts and emotions!

This meant that every person that was under the effect of its glow would find their negativity melting away, but leave at least some room for positivity.

Any mental impulse that was benign, positive and harmless would continue to exist in people's minds in a weakened form.

The latter was necessary because a pure and cleansed mind could easily become warped if a single, overpowering thought and emotion settled in someone's mind!

Without any counterbalancing elements, Ves had to be careful not to create any extremes. Even positive obsessions could lead to great harm under the wrong circumstances!

Only the mentally ill and the most extreme personalities would react adversely to the Aspect of Healing's influence!

Once he placed this statue in the vicinity of the refugee camp, he predicted that its effect would quickly become popular among the distressed and purposeless Lifers.

After losing their jobs, their homes and possibly their loved ones, they had all been wrenched away from their usual prior lives and routines.

This violent disconnect caused a lot of their hearts to bleed.

Contrary to its name, the Aspect of Healing was not able to heal these wounds directly. It was not that powerful. What Ves actually aimed for was to provide the circumstances in which hurt people were given the opportunity to heal their own mental wounds.

By muting the source of their pain and giving room for their joys and other positive emotions to assert themselves, Ves hoped that the personalities of the people who needed healing slowly recovered to a healthier state.

He was unsure whether these improvements would stick. Once these people left the influence of the Aspect of Healing, their depression and other negative emotions would instantly regain their old strength.

"Only the people themselves can kill their own demons." He muttered.

In order to emphasize Lufa's willingness to provide assistance in this manner, the Aspect of Healing adopted a friendly expression. Its hands reached forward as if to beckon those that needed help to come closer.

The Aspect of Healing was definitely the most reassuring of the four, but beyond making people feel better, it didn't bring any other benefits.

When Ves was thinking about leveraging Lufa's traits in a manner that would be more helpful to himself and other people, he came up with a different combination of suppression mind activity.

Instead of making a division between positive and negative activity, he began to wonder what would happen if he separated the rational from the irrational.

This was something that Ves often thought about. Every living sentient being was characterized by both their logic and their emotions. Sometimes, they complemented each other, but many times they clashed against each other.

Each human had to make a consideration which side they should follow in their daily lives. It could be something as trivial as eating something unhealthy to something as serious as sacrificing a hundred people in order to save the lives of thousands!

Ves knew that he had a problem of letting his emotions and obsessions get the better of himself sometimes. In fact, he encountered plenty of people who suffered from the same kind of affliction.

Too many people made stupid and illogical decisions because their warped personalities compelled them to. If they were a bit more sober in mind, they would have never acted so stupid!

If Ves was able to create a totem that could suppress all of the irrational sides of people and only left some space for rationality, then the people under its influence would be able to make much more optimal decisions!

Of course, whether these decisions made with pure logic were actually better or not was another matter. Ves believed that this effect would be a boon more than a bane for many people, especially the refugees who were highly emotional and very prone to making stupid decisions!

Such a totem might also be useful to mech designers like Ves and Gloriana. While they were both passionate mech designers, it might be helpful to adopt a different perspective over the course of their work.

This was why the third statue was one of the most intriguing for mech designers like Ves.

"The Aspect of Rationality."

While the third statue strayed a bit beyond Lufa's original purpose, it did not exhibit any form of rejection or lack of fit. During its shaping, Ves had actively altered the design spirit's very identity to embrace this new aspect!

Just as its name suggested, the organic statue portrayed the angel with a contemplative expression. The statue's finger even pressed against the chin to mirror his own habit of rubbing his smooth-shaven cheeks!

Compared to the other statues, Aspect of Rationality was the coldest and most calculative of the four. It was all brain and no heart. This was why Ves was quite hesitant about exposing it to everyone.

He believed it was a particularly bad idea to subject the Aspect of Rationality to children. The harm it could do to their growth was incalculable!

Children should not be allowed to lose their innocence and wonder of reality around them as far as he was concerned. Only the cruelest and most heartless parents would want their kids to turn into emotionless drones.

If Ves wanted to go through with his plan to make it available to refugees, then he had to set up a security cordon in order to control who was allowed to approach this special statue.

While he was interested in using the locals as test subjects to examine the precise effects of his creations on different personalities, he did not want to make a bad impression on these people!

This was why he held a lot of misgivings about the fourth and last statue.

Unlike the first three aspects, the fourth one was a lot more active. Its glow shook with excitement and sparks seemed to jump across its unusual form.

From the first statue to the fourth one, the depictions of Lufa progressively grew more active. The final statue was even more radical than the third one, and that was quite an accomplishment.

Its glow still performed many of the same effects as the previous ones. It dampened and suppressed many different thoughts and emotions that cluttered people's minds.

The fourth statue also differentiated the mental activity within people in its area of effect. The unique benefit about this final variation was that it only exempted a single emotion, thought, principle or obsession from dampening!

As long as it was positive or neutral, the highly-specific glow not only allowed it to exist, but also did its best to amplify this singular quality!

For example, someone interested in becoming a more skilled professional like Dr. Swindell would become unprecedentedly motivated and driven when subjected to the fourth statue's glow!

Yet this was not its true purpose. When Ves initially conceived of the final statue, he wanted to create a statue that might be able to help individuals break past their existing shackles.

The idea behind this final creation was the most ambitious by far! Ves wanted nothing less than to create a new aspect of Lufa that purified people's minds and stimulated their greatest obsession in order to spark a powerful mental outburst!

This was also why he bestowed a much more ambitious and impressive name to this dangerous but highly ambitious statue!

"The Aspect of Transcendence."

Just whispering those words caused Ves to become immersed with dreams of the future. He could already imagine allowing expert candidates to approach this aspect with their chosen mechs.

If they had already polished their skills, accumulated enough experience and discovered their reason to fight, then subjecting them to the Aspect of Transcendence's glow might give them the push they needed to undergo apotheosis!

"This totem can revolutionize our clan!"

If this organic statue truly worked as promised, then it could serve as a powerful alternative to breaking through in actual combat!

In order to symbolize the Aspect of Transcendence's potential effect, Ves chose to have it shaped so that its expression was filled with hope and expectation. Its head looked upwards and it raised its arms in the sky as if to call down a blessing!

How magnificent!

It took a lot of effort for Ves to rein in his excitement at this last creation. Though its glow sounded ground-breaking in theory, messing with spirituality was always inherently dangerous. Any strong or extreme changes to someone's mind could easily produce a lot of harm!

Ves knew that he could never allow most people to approach the Aspect of Transcendence. He didn't even want his own clansmen to experience its unique glow unless he was more certain about its effect on other people!

He didn't intend to create such a radical new aspect at first. He didn't really know what he was thinking when he got caught up in his passion earlier. The Aspect of Transcendence did not address his original purpose at all. Instead, it had a good chance of backfiring on him if he let the refugees experience its glow with no preparation!

"I'll have to lock it up, I guess."

It was a pity, but the current crisis was not a good time to get lost in another innovation!

Chapter 2850 - Natural Fit

When the Larkinson Clan erected a couple of statues in front of the walls of Gentle Lotus Base, a lot of people from the nearby refugee camp wondered what was happening.

The Larkinsons marched out in significant numbers. Not only did they deploy a few mechs as protection, but also invested plenty of construction material to form three separate plazas.

"Are they building a podium or something?"

"Wait! Look at those pedestals. The foreigners are installing some kind of organic statues onto them. Don't you think they look different in some way?"

"Who made them? They're not much different from the organic statues in our city, but these ones look.. odd."

"I see what you mean. Is this the Larkinson way of making organic statues?"

While the more intrigued refugees were speculating on the odd sight, the construction crews quickly completed their work.

The Aspect of Tranquility, the Aspect of Healing and the Aspect of Rationality all seemed to beckon towards the distant viewers. Even though their glows did not extend to the edge of the refugee camp, their mysterious charm somehow drew people's eyes to them. Once that happened, the statues that looked like real angels that were frozen in time seemed to beckon them forward.

Unfortunately, the distrust between the displaced citizens of Veoline and the base occupants was still too high. None of them had any good opinions on Ves and his clan. This negative sentiment grew even stronger when he barged into the camp while surrounding himself with intimidating, heavily-armored soldiers.

An hour passed. No one moved closer, despite the obvious welcome the three plazas exhibited. The Larkinsons had even installed simple benches for people to sit on as they admired the different organic statues!

Peer pressure was a powerful force. It was capable of forcing an entire population to behave in a manner that the majority deemed acceptable.

However, the refugee camp encompassed many different people who came from all walks of life. As escapees from the city continued to trickle in, the newly-emerged settlement hosted former businessmen, biomech technicians, shuttle salesmen, tunnel maintenance crews, beetle breeders and more people.

Some were more willing to approach the organic statues than others. Peer pressure had less effect on them than others because they were already nonconformists at heart.

Ves constantly kept an eye on the site as he began to improve some LMC mechs. He never doubted the ability of the three Aspects of Lufa to attract people to come over.

They were too good to be ignored!

"They're strange. All four of them." He softly said.

Their spiritual foundation was much stronger and more vigorous than they ought to. Ves hadn't spent that much time, effort, resources and expertise to create them. Yet from the moment that Ves began to involve synthesized organic tissue, the totems attained a much higher level!

"Why?"

Ves thought a lot about the discrepancies. Since even a sloppy and haphazard combination of flesh and spirituality produced greater results, the obvious conclusion that he could make was that the two belonged together!

"Life can bloom from any object, but some are better suited for it than others!"

To put it in other terms, it was always harder to bring a bar of metal to life than a handful of meat!

What made this particular case even more exceptional was the high fit between the tissue generated by Dr. Swindell, the shape of the statues and the nature of the design spirit.

According to the biomech designer, he simply used a tissue generating machine from one of the base's medical treatment facilities to pump out a lot of flesh and other organic components.

Since Swindell was in a hurry and didn't have to be too particular about the quality of the organic tissue, he utilized the lowest and fastest settings.

What was a tissue generating machine in an infirmary best at? Producing lots of human tissue!

It made little sense for such a machine to generate exobeast tissue. Certain high-end, upscale models might be capable of doing so, but human flesh was still the most standard option!

As a result of Dr. Swindell's convenient actions, the organic tissue he applied to the base of the statues, whether it was flesh, bones, teeth, hair or nails, were all intrinsically human!

The only anomalies were the obvious angel parts. Baseline humans didn't possess wings, so Dr. Swindell had to resort to a creative solution.

He ended up utilizing bird DNA that was already present in the tissue generating machine's gene database. The feathers and all of the other parts that made up the outer portion of the wings were distinctly non-human, but that might not necessarily be a bad thing.

"Angels aren't human as well. So the anomaly with their wings actually fits with the nature of their existence."

Of course, how could an angel not possess a halo above their head? Adding the stereotypical glowing band of golden light above the heads of the statues was essential to completing the impression that they were true divine creations!

This was familiar territory for Dr. Swindell. He easily implanted special bioprojector cells on the top of the heads of the statues that were capable of forming halo projections on a constant basis as long as they were supplied with energy.

While the care and attention that Ves and Dr. Swindell put into their work may not have been the best, much of their design choices unintentionally worked out extremely well!

Since Lufa was a humanoid design spirit to begin with, the overwhelming use of human tissue and the effort spent into fleshing out its angelic traits all produced statues that truly felt like incarnations of the actual entity!

The attraction of the statues was finally too much for some people. The first to emerge were a group of Lifers who Ves immediately recognized.

"Wait.. aren't these the owners of the mysterious purple mechs?"

He never really got any names or identities out of them. The men and women, who all happened to wear purple uniforms, stepped out from the refugee camp and approached the plazas.

The spaces weren't entirely unattended. Ves ordered personnel to be stationed nearby in order to guard the statues and regulate the entry of visitors.

"Greetings." The head of the group began. "May we inquire about the purpose of these unusual organic statues?"

The visitors received a brief explanation on their effects. The guards were also quick to point out that they had to undergo an examination before they were allowed to approach the third statue.

"Why the need for such a restriction? Isn't it just an ornament?"

"You should approach and experience the glows of the first two aspects first." The Larkinson guard answered. "You won't understand the third aspect if I explain it to you right away."

The purple men decided to see what all of the fuss was all about. The leader split his group in two. One half approached the Aspect of Tranquility while the other half walked towards the Aspect of Healing.

The visitors immediately became affected by the different glows.

Those who approached the Aspect of Tranquility all let down their guard. Their bodies loosened up and their expressions no longer seemed as stressed and concerned as before.

This was the power of the Aspect of Tranquility. Every burden became as light as a feather. Every other distraction faded into the background.

Only near-total silence was left.

Lufa left enough room for those who became affected by his Aspect of Tranquility to think basic thoughts and pursue his own self-interests.

No one spoke. Everyone simply basked in this strange moment. While the purple men actually didn't possess as many burdens and negative emotions as the other refugees, that did not make the Aspect of Tranquility less attractive!

Their leader was particularly taken with Lufa's simplest and purest glow. His burdens were considerably larger than others, and it felt good for him to forget all of his concerns, if only on a temporary basis.

With the release of all manner of serious and trivial concerns, the people affected by the glow each changed in unknown but most certainly benign ways. It was as if they were all put in a state of meditation!

When Ves turned his gaze to the people who approached the Aspect of Healing, they exhibited a bit more activity.

Unlike the Aspect of Tranquility, the Aspect of Healing did not impose total silence or inactivity.

Instead, its allowance for positive thoughts and emotions enabled the purple men to move and act, if only in a mild fashion.

What they did completely surprised Ves.

He thought these Lifers would smile, laugh, share happy stories or lean back on the benches as if they were on vacation.

Instead of doing all of this, each of the purple-garbed men and women approached the base of the statue and lowered themselves to their knees in supplication.

While they didn't speak any words, the affected individuals all looked up at the life-like face of the Aspect of Healing as if it was a god!

Ves palmed his face. "These idiots!"

No wonder the purple men were so odd. It turned out that they were some kind of cult! A cult that worshipped biotechnology!

He instantly lost interest in these cultists. Their only value to him was that they had become his first test subjects for his latest creation.

As Ves clinically observed the test subjects from a distance, he confirmed that the two aspects did not pose a risk to any of these people. That was a good sign. The aspects were working according to plan.

He wanted to see how more people acted under the influence of the first two statues before he opened up access to the third. He could never be too safe.

As Ves witnessed the strong effect of the statues on other people, he started to think about the implications of his latest work.

"These living, organic totems exist in a class of their own."

There were multiple implications to the discoveries he made today. Chief among them was how well he was able to combine flesh and spirituality.

If Ves was able to produce considerably stronger results with organic totems, what if he began work with biomechs?

The logic was the same. As long as his work contained a significant amount of organic tissue, its capacity to bear and channel life may be multiple times greater than his metallic mechs!

His determination to stick to designing metallic mechs started to waver.

This was because he realized how logical it was to incorporate biomaterials into his mechs.

Even if he did not commit to designing biomechs, he could still selectively incorporate a number of biological components to increase the life capacity of his products!

Ves was reminded of his spiritual domain. It embodied both life and mechs.

The latter was easy to fit. His definition of mechs always came paired with images of metallic mechs. These were the kind of mechs he grew up with and admired throughout his life.

As for the former, life was not a natural fit for metallic mechs. Just because Ves succeeded in combining them did not mean this was an optimal solution!

If Ves truly wanted to exert his spiritual domain to its greatest potential, then he should be applying his skills to designing mechs that incorporated both organic and mechanical components...

"In other words, my best mechs might possibly come in the form of cyborg mechs!"