

Mech 2851

Chapter 2851 - Waste Disposal

The Larkinson Clan received a large influx of new recruits after Ves unveiled his latest creations.

The Four Living Aspects of Lufa, of which only two were actually accessible at the moment, did wonders in changing the opinions of the refugees.

Lost, hurt and angry, the citizens of Veoline were cast adrift ever since the Supreme Revolution overtook the Life Research Association.

If they were left to stew by themselves, who knew what kind of ugly or deviant thoughts they immersed themselves with. Of all of the refugees, few of them specialized in treating mental health issues.

The Living Aspects changed that. To those who were receptive to approaching the oddly-real and vivid statues of giant angels, they began to look at themselves, their lives and their place on this planet in a different light.

Ves saw all kinds of irritable and outright aggressive people calming down when they entered one of the plazas.

To those who lost more than others, the mind-numbing presence of the Aspect of Tranquility provided an escape from their pain.

The Aspect of Healing had an even stronger effect on people. The joy and comfort it was able to provide was particularly loved among children.

As for the Aspect of Rationality, the guards did not allow too many people to experience its special glow. Only certain leader figures and educated professionals who were already sound of mind gained an opportunity to approach the mysterious third statue.

Ves carefully studied every person who came under the effects of this aspect. He noted that each of his test subjects adopted an emotionless expression upon entry.

Different from those who basked in the silence of the Aspect of Tranquility, the people who spent time with Lufa's third aspect became incredibly active!

Their mental activity shot up as the figures made full use of their unrestrained rationality to think about many matters. Since they no longer fell under the sway of their own irrational emotions and biases, their own thinking processes became unprecedentedly clear and honest!

The Aspect of Rationality stripped all of these defenses away, forcing everyone in its presence to view themselves from what they considered to be an objective viewpoint!

Not everyone took this unvarnished image of themselves that well, but the signs of inner turmoil were difficult to spot. Ves gradually discovered that absolute rationality was a frightening concept. While those who became severely affected by it did not act out in any way, once they exited the glow, they quickly broke down and cried in the air!

These incidents had caused a lot of surrounding Lifers to get spooked!

The attentive guards had to activate a gravitic module to drag these poor bastards to the Aspect of Healing to put them back together.

Ever since then, the time that people were allowed to spend around the living aspects was strictly limited. Ves and the others had learned that nothing good came out of spending an excessive amount of time.

No one was allowed to spend more than two hours in the presence of the Aspect of Tranquility and the Aspect of Healing. While the harm they did was minor, their effects were so desirable that the refugees started to get addicted to their glows!

The rules for the Aspect of Rationality were even harsher. The guards always pulled everyone out after they spent just five minutes in its presence.

Any longer, and the chance of suffering a breakdown rose geometrically!

"I get what you are trying to do here, but you can't allow these poor Lifers to grow dependent on their treatment." Venerable Jannzi complained to Ves. "Did you know that more and more people who came in touch with your mechs have developed the same dependency?"

"Huh?"

"Don't act stupid, Ves. Many of your mechs such as the Desolate Soldier are able to make people feel good in some way. There aren't any restrictions to this effect either. As long as someone is able to access the mechs, they can enjoy a mental drug that is always constant and reliable. This problem grew more significant as your mechs became more widespread that there's even a term for these addicts: glow junkies."

As Ves looked over the wall and down at the mobs of Lifers who adopted mindless expressions in front of Lufa's aspects, he felt that this label was quite apt!

"While I understand your concerns, I think the risk of developing an addiction outweighs letting these citizens go untreated. Would you rather see them wallow in their own misery to the point of taking their own lives? Compared to the alternatives, I'm doing

them all a favor. Besides, as long as we restrict access, this dependency won't become a major problem."

Venerable Jannzi couldn't argue with that. She was quite s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e towards the conditions of other people, and she could clearly see that many displaced Lifers truly needed any therapy they could get. There were worse ways to treat them than exposing them to the glows of a couple of weird statues.

"Don't go too far with exploiting these angel statues. You look like a drug dealer who is pleased with expanding his fixed clientele. While you are doing these people a service by providing them with relief, the cure should never be worse than the disease."

"Hey, who do you take me for? I'm just a mech designer, Jannzi! My business model is not based on turning my customers into addicts so that I can continually exploit them in the long-term by pushing more and more products on them so that my mech company can earn a high and continuous cash flow!"

"..."

After multiple complaints from Venerable Jannzi, Ves acquiesced and limited people's access to any of the living aspects to just one hour a day.

This predictably led to considerable indignation from the refugees, but Ves made another promise.

"If you join our clan and adopt our name, I can give you an additional quota of 30 minutes a day. We can only give you the greatest possible care that we can provide if you are one of us. If you are unwilling to cast away your old identities, then I'm sorry, but we can only give away so much charity."

Soon after that announcement, the number of new recruits skyrocketed!

Over half of the members of the refugee camp packed up their bags and entered the base.

What Ves found amusing was that almost all of the new recruits didn't even take advantage of the extra quota. Being surrounded by friendly Larkinsons and getting swept up by all of the introductory activities organized by the clan served as alternate forms of therapy that could do the job just as well!

Once anyone came under the influence of the Golden Cat and the Larkinson Network, the former Lifers were never alone. Even if they didn't share their burdens with one of their new clansmen, the injuries to their soul slowly patched up just because they had become a part of a special clan.

The entry of so many Lifers quickly altered the dynamic of Gentle Lotus Base. Not only did the existing Larkinsons had their hands full with trying to integrate so many foreigners, the base also became host to more biomechs and biomachines.

Everyone in the clan was still trying to figure out how to deal with this new tech. The existing mech technicians of the Larkinson Clan were quite adept with servicing classical mechs, but they were as good as useless when it came to performing maintenance on biomechs!

No matter how glad the existing Larkinsons were at receiving some much-needed reinforcements, the increased exposure to biotechnology led to a considerable degree of friction!

Fortunately, the problem did not escalate to the point where Ves had to intervene. Commander Casella Ingvar already took charge in trying to harmonize the different Larkinsons.

"It's not easy, sir." She tiredly sighed as she reported to Ves. "The more recruits we receive, the more organic assets we receive. At this point, we effectively control over a hundred biomechs. Do you know how astounding that sounds? Our clan only possesses eight metallic mechs right now, of which one is on deployment. We have effectively become a biomech force at this point!"

Besides, the mechs fielded by the Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan and the Infinity Guards also counted for a lot. As long as a strong core of classical mechs remained in place, Ves didn't worry about the Larkinsons on the ground going astray. The existing mech technicians and mech pilots still had a lot of work in store.

That said, trying to make proper use of the former Lifers proved quite a challenge to the leadership.

"We are all unfamiliar with the practicalities and unique conditions of biomechs, sir." Casella admitted. "I've been reading a lot of manuals and guides lately, but I am only scratching the surface of what I need to know about how to employ them in battle, how to make sure they are kept in good condition and how to deal with the peculiarities of their mech pilots. Just the fact that biomechs sometimes discharge waste products is a particularly unpleasant surprise!"

Ves looked up at that! "Biomechs have to go to the toilet?"

"Apparently, yes. While they don't have a traditional digestion system like normal organic bodies, there are still instances where their bodies accumulate substances that they aren't capable of recycling on their own. Biomechs can store these useless waste materials for quite a few weeks, but eventually their reservoir becomes full."

"How do the Lifers process these waste materials?" Ves curiously asked.

"In an emergency, they can just go out in the woods and dump their waste onto any bush, but normally this is frowned upon. The LRA has laws against this. The proper way to handle the foul-smelling substances is to collect them. Biomech waste material happens to serve as excellent fertilizers for certain crops."

This was the cycle of life. The only difference was that biomechs took the place of humans or cattle this time. Ves found it difficult to associate biomechs with such a natural cycle.

Normal mechs did not have a habit of going to the toilet!

"What do you think about all of the biomechs we're getting?" He turned to his pet, who was lounging comfortably on his desk. "Do you like it if we start fielding more biomechs in place of the mechs we know?"

The gem cat twitched his ears. "Meow."

"Yeah. I can't imagine the sight either. It just feels.. wrong to embrace biomechs. Not only am I incapable of understanding their inner workings, our logistics will become a lot more cumbersome if we decide to field organic machines in large numbers."

The hasty acquisition of the Dragon's Den would help a lot. As long as Ves acquired a few more supporting sh.i.p.s that were capable of meeting the needs of biomechs, it was not difficult to maintain a small and modest biomech force.

Scaling it up any further was out of the question, though. As long as the logistical requirements of the biomech force exceeded the capacity of the Dragon's Den, then the Larkinson Clan had to make a considerably greater commitment.

This was not very practical to Ves. As long as biomechs did not bring anything extra to the table, there was little reason in investing in them any further!

At least, that was what he used to think.

Now, some of the recent discoveries he made about himself had caused him to doubt his old choices.

Ves the patriarch had ample reasons to restrict the adoption of biomechs in his clan.

Ves the mech designer was different. Whenever he thought about how well his spiritual domain took to organic materials, he began to question himself.

"Is it truly right for me to limit myself to designing classical mechs?"

Chapter 2852 - Affinity with Life

The creation process of the Four Aspects of Lufa revealed a couple of highly impactful truths about Ves.

He spent hours mulling over all of the implications.

It seemed so obvious in hindsight.

According to his existing approach to mech design, he aspired to develop mechs that combined the best of man and machine. Ves believed with all his heart that increasing the synergy between the two was key to achieving a greater level of performance than what mechs could currently achieve!

In order to work towards this ambition, Ves invested his focus beyond the narrow confines of the machine.

Whereas most mech designers mainly paid attention to their mechs in isolation, Ves looked at them as one half of a greater system. Without the explicit inclusion of the mech pilot as a core component, a mech design would never be complete in his eyes!

Ves wondered whether this caused him to develop spiritual attributes that revolved around life over the course of his early career. The more he believed that mechs were alive, the more his spiritual development adjusted to his conviction!

It could also be the case that he already possessed these attributes from the start. The decisions he made in his first years as a mech designer unconsciously steered him into dedicating himself to a design philosophy that made good use of his spiritual inclinations.

"It doesn't really matter whether the chicken or the egg came first."

What truly mattered was that his spiritual attributes and his choice of specialization both contributed to a rather special circumstance.

Despite paying no regard to biomechs throughout his entire career, it turned out that Ves may have a talent in working with them! Better yet, any biomech he might possibly design may very well exceed his work on classical mechs!

Ves could hardly believe that such a coincidence came into being, but the logic behind this theory was sound.

"Man and machine. Organic and inorganic."

What Ves understood as life was mainly centered around its spiritual aspects. To him, life did not necessarily have to come in an organic form.

Incorporeal entities like Qilanxo were very much alive to him despite the passing of her lizard body.

Yet that did not mean that the LRA's biomech designers were all wrong. Each of them assumed that life was intricately tied to organic matter.

Strictly speaking, neither Ves nor people like Dr. Navarro held a monopoly on life and how it tied to mechs. They simply approached the same broad concepts from different directions.

"It's due to this that my affinity with working with organic products is so great!"

He had been working under a handicap all this time. From the moment he began to infuse his mech designs with life, he started a game that was set to an astonishing difficulty level!

If not for the aptitude he inherited from his mother, he should have never been able to make any of his mechs alive!

Yet because he was able to overcome this initial hurdle with unnatural ease, Ves never asked himself whether classical mechs were the best choice for his specialty.

They were all he knew and all he became exposed to. Biomechs were too distant for him. He never encountered a suitable opportunity to dabble with biomechs for much of his career until now.

Though he still hadn't touched a biomech, his forays into making organic totems already provided him with a preview of what might come.

If Ves assumed that the amplification on organic totems remained constant on biomechs, then Ves might possibly be able to design mechs that were at least thrice as strong in the spiritual department!

In fact, the Four Living Aspects of Lufa were supposed to be very crude products. If Ves designed a proper biomech, then the amplification factor could easily reach ten or more!

How much more unbearable would it be to remain in the presence of an organic version of the Ferocious Piranha? How many more battles would the Fridayman lose if Ves designed an organic variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer?

If Ves began to publish biomech designs based on new and existing mech concepts, the entire galactic rim might break! He would definitely attract a dangerous amount of attention from the MTA if it learned about the abnormally high effectiveness of his organic products!

"Biomechs aren't even the most suitable form of mechs to me! There is another form that resonates even greater with my inclinations!"

That was cyborg mechs. With a domain that revolved around both life and mechs, the most appropriate form of machine was one that incorporated both organic and inorganic parts!

Mechanical components appealed to his traditional impression on mechs. Organic components granted full play to his life orientation!

Cyborg mechs became more and more compelling to him. He felt an increasing attraction to them. Unlike other forms, cyborg mech straddled the line that separated both worlds.

While it was much more difficult to work with a mech that was neither purely metallic nor purely organic, the potential promise it conveyed to him caused his imagination to go wild!

Dozens of innovative and powerful cyborg mech ideas flowed through his mind. From a small but surprisingly untouchable stealth mech to a large and solid heavy knight, Ves became inundated with fantastic designs that he may be capable of realizing!

For some reason, his thoughts strayed back to his Devil Tiger design.

"Compared to my other mechs, it embodies the concept of a living mech to a much greater degree."

While his Devil Tiger did not incorporate any flesh and bone, it utilized a material that was pretty much the metallic substitute to them. ASMAS mimicked some of the traits of organic materials and granted considerably more possibilities for him to express his design philosophy.

Yet no matter how much nanomaterials were capable of mimicking organic materials, it was still mechanical and metallic in nature. If Ves began to work with actual flesh, then his Life-based applications would be able to find much more fertile ground!

As Ves became entranced by the power he could unleash in the form of cyborg mechs, he came very close to making a life-changing decision for himself.

However, just as Ves was about to whip out his System comm and invest all of his recently-earned DP on a collection of biomech-related Skills, his thoughts in this direction suddenly crashed into a wall.

"No! What am I thinking?! I can't go down this rabbit hole!"

The cause of this interruption was a violent impulse surged from the depths of his mind. His nightmarish entanglement with Dr. Jutland along with all of the other threats he faced that was related to the Five Scrolls Compact came forward again.

The horrible memories culminated in a recollection of that desperate moment when the Temple Protector of the Five Scrolls Compact almost came close to killing Ves, his fellow clan members and his parents!

After learning about all of the atrocities committed by the Compact, Ves constantly resolved to apply his talents in life in a different direction!

The more Ves thought about shifting his research direction towards cyborg mechs, the more resistance he encountered.

The trauma that Ves accumulated over the course of his encounters with the Compact had never gone away. They merely faded to an acceptable level.

It was only now that Ves contemplated a shift towards biotechnology that he encountered a mental block.

Though biotechnology held a lot of promise to Ves, he had witnessed plenty of cases where both Compact and LRA researchers went crazy with the possibilities their knowledge opened up. The secrets of life were so tempting to people that they couldn't help but pursue insane experiments in the name of altering their species or attaining immortality!

Although Ves was attracted by these benefits, he did not wish to descend into total insanity to attain them. He just knew that he wouldn't be able to hold himself back considering his prior track record in exercising restraint.

He knew that he already wasn't exactly very rational most of the time. If he began to transition into a cyborg mech designer, then he had a hunch that he might lose what little rationality that he still managed to retain!

"I can't lose my sanity in the pursuit of greater power!"

Control was much more crucial than raw power. Ketis had always told him that. Even the longest and heaviest greatswords stopped becoming useful if their wielders were unable to swing them anymore.

While Ves recognized that applying his design philosophy to metallic mechs was not a great fit, his current approach was not all bad.

Although the price that Ves had to pay was steep, he never had to worry about any of his mechs turning into monsters.

There was also another reason why he valued classical mechs over the alternatives.

"Trying to infuse life into products that are not supposed to bear it is a challenge. The difficulty of succeeding is greater.. but once I do, I will never be limited by the form of mechs or devices!"

Ves felt that if he began to get used to designing biomechs or cyborg mechs, he might grow lazy. He would innovate less and become more dependent on coasting on the power of flesh to make his products strong.

Of course, this was not exactly a valid argument. As long as Ves remained disciplined and adopted the right mindset, his future accomplishments with organic mechs may very well be greater!

Ves became more and more troubled by the dilemma he faced. Should he try to maximize the utilization of his aptitude and his design philosophy, or should he stay true to his current course and pursue his original ambition?

There were good reasons to go with either choice.

At some point, Ves began to recall a fundamental principle.

"Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots."

Reciting these words dispelled much of the entanglement in his mind. His thoughts became clear as ever as he began to look at his choices from a mech designer who wanted to accommodate mech pilots as best as possible.

As a mech designer, obsessing over biotechnology might derail him from trying to provide the best solutions for his customers.

Most mech pilots in the galaxy either abhorred or didn't know what to do with biomechs.

Yet Ves could not ignore the fact that mech pilots also wanted to pilot the strongest and highest-performing mechs. Some might argue that he would be doing his customers a disservice by clinging to his current handicap.

Though this dilemma still existed, Ves felt he had found a way to resolve it to his satisfaction.

"I can still design a cyborg mech even if I don't know anything about biotechnology."

His collaboration with Dr. Swindell already proved that. During the creation process of the living aspects, the biomech technician was responsible for all of the biological work and manipulation. Ves didn't do much, yet he was still able to make use of his specialty to make the organic totems alive!

Perhaps the Four Living Aspects of Lufa could have become even more powerful if he manipulated all of the flesh himself, but working as a supervisor was already enough!

"I don't need to risk my sanity to design a biomech or cyborg mech. I can just collaborate with someone who specializes in them!" Ves grinned!

This way, he got to keep the best of both worlds. His design philosophy would remain pure, but he still had the option of designing organic mechs with exceptional power and capabilities!

"I'll have to pick some up before I leave the LRA. I wonder if I'll be able to gain the services of Master Brixton's protégé..."

Chapter 2853 - Quick and Efficient

Shortly after the outbreak of the Supreme Revolution, many heroes and villains emerged from the chaos.

The list of evildoers was depressingly long. Just because Prosperous Hill was tightly run didn't mean that every malcontent and criminal magically disappeared.

They just kept their heads down!

For centuries, they kept their true selves out of sight and did their best to blend in with ordinary citizens.

The Planetary Guard and other law enforcement institutions did not pursue these hidden dangers any further. It was incredibly difficult to root these tumors out. As long as incidents didn't happen, there was no reason to break the status quo.

What the authorities didn't realize was that the cancer hidden in society were able to spread unabated.

Sure, there were some diseases that went too far and revealed their existence, but the controllers of the star system were easily able to excise the diseased cells.

It was the subtler and more clever cancer cells that truly posed a threat to the existing order. These warped and dangerous individuals were also capable of inflicting harm, but their ability to control themselves meant that their destructive potential was much greater!

The civil war presented a lot of opportunities for these darker personalities to express themselves.

Even if the chance was great that the current disorder wouldn't last, the madness of the times still convinced many of them that now was the time for them to stop holding back!

While there were plenty of soldiers that fought for what they thought was best for the Life Research Association, there were also numerous thugs that solely abused their power for selfish reasons!

While these troublemakers initially emerged everywhere, the forces fighting for the political factions quickly concentrated their might on cleaning up the anarchists and criminals that were making a mess out of their own homes.

Neither the conservatives nor the opposition wanted to rule over a pile of ruins!

Yet despite their diligence, these forces could not afford to let their peacekeeping duties distract them from the actual struggle for power!

As a result, every area deemed unimportant by the powers that be continued to be burned and pillaged!

Tree structures shattered apart. Shops and storage sites were being looted. People got killed for no reason. Nothing about these acts furthered a legitimate cause. The Supreme Revolution was too distant for those who lived in the less affluent places of the planet.

"Hahaha! I always hated your guts, old man! You called the cops on us and forced us to abandon this turf. Well, look at us now! Your precious Planetary Guard won't be here to save you now. I'll kill everyone in this block before I squash you with the foot of my biomech!"

A trio of low-quality biomechs were rampaging through an average residential district. The tree houses here did not grow past three stories and the park that was favored by kids was overgrown with weeds.

Despite these shabby conditions, many locals called this quiet place home. Despite falling within the borders of the metropolis, the big city was almost entirely absent from this location. For centuries, this working-class neighborhood maintained a long tradition of serenity.

BOOM!

Until now! The aggressive underboss of a gang called the Pit Snakes started to tear the homes apart!

BOOM!

A biomech armed with a rifle that fired large-caliber explosive shells continued to fire his weapon in random directions. Its mech pilot did not even bother to aim with precision!

BOOM!

The quaint little park that no one had mowed for months got blasted into a crater!

"I always wanted to blow this planet up! Now I finally get my chance!"

"Hear me roar!"

The tiger mech let loose a body-shattering cry in front of another treehouse that caused the family of five to literally shake apart due to the amplific vibrations passing right onto their bodies!

A set of huge jaws wrenched the side of the tree house into pieces for good measure. While tigers weren't known for eating trees, the humongous biomech didn't care that its design was based on a carnivore!

A bit further away, the biomech piloted by the ringleader wielded a giant two-handed bone axe.

Axes were quite useful in the LRA. Not only did they allow biomechs to chop through lots of thick and resilient flesh, they also had a devastating effect against organic structures, as demonstrated by this axe-wielding organic machine!

Crack!

A single powerful chop managed to sink through half the trunk of the entire tree house!

"Hahaha! Whoever is hiding inside, I can tell you're still alive! You can fool my sensors!"

The first axe chop was supposed to slice right through the bodies of the two young girls sheltering in their shared bedrooms, but somehow went askew.

"Who?!"

A flying metallic mech that hovered high in the sky dove downwards faster than the biomech could ready its axe.

In just a blink of an eye, the foreign light skirmisher sunk its daggers into the shoulders of the axe-wielding biomech!

Since the organic machine that got struck was merely a budget model, the force of the blows along with the high precision exhibited by the attacking mech allowed the daggers to cut off both arms!

"Ahhhhhh!"

The criminal mech pilot couldn't even respond with a coherent curse. The pressure exuded by the attacking mech was too great!

"Trash." Venerable Tusa contemptuously spat.

The Piranha Prime easily thrust a dagger through the biomech's exposed c.h.e.s.t, causing the weapon to end the sc.u.mbag's life in an instant.

"I'm sorry, little ladies." Tusa apologized to the damaged tree house. "I had to get close in order to stop him from swinging his axe a second time. Please calm down. All will be right."

Due to its lack of ranged options, Venerable Tusa often found himself exposing the people he rescued to the mental weight of his prime mech.

He had long diale off the Piranha Prime's glow. To be honest, he didn't need its power against all of the opponents he encountered so far. The massive spiritual enhancement that caused everyone except for expert pilots to experience a lot of mental weight was not something the Piranha Prime could get rid of so easily.

It was one of its sources of strength as well as a burden that put Venerable Tusa in difficult situations!

"I have to ask Ves to get rid of this stupid stuff."

Even as he complained, the solitary expert pilot still had a job to do. The Piranha Prime jumped into the air and soared in the direction of the rifleman mech. Its mech pilot realized only now that the newcomer killed his boss!

"Get away from me! I'll blast you out of the sky!"

The Piranha Prime gently shuffled to the left just as an explosive shell whipped past. A higher-quality shell came with proximity fuses as well as limited homing capabilities.

The shells fired by the rifleman mech just happened to be the cheapest of its kind on this planet. Venerable Tusa knew he didn't have to expend additional energy to dodge even further.

Still, that missed shell would likely follow a parabolic arc before impacting some other tree house a lot of kilometers away.

While the biomech in question was about to fire its gun another time, the Piranha Prime threw its dagger, causing it to puncture one of the arms holding the weapon!

Though this did not completely hinder the rifleman mech from firing its weapon, the distraction bought enough time for the Piranha Prime to deliver the coup de grace by stabbing the c.o.c.kpit with its other dagger!

"Two down, one to go."

The mech pilot of the tiger mech was a little smarter than his other two comrades. He recognized the Piranha Prime's design from the design duel that concluded a few days ago. Aside from some different modules, a much greater presence along with a change in coating, the light skirmisher that had descended from the air looked like a copy of the Ferocious Piranha that performed brilliantly in the arena!

"I've got to get out of here! Only my fellow Pit Snakes stand a chance against this monster!"

Though the quadruped biomech was able to traverse a lot of ground, it sadly came without a flight system.

The Piranha Prime easily caught up by virtue of its lower mass and its elevated acceleration.

A few quick slices later, the tiger mech lost control of all four limbs. Even as its maw snarled menacingly, the Piranha Prime efficiently cut through the flesh and punched through the c.o.c.k.pit.

After learning an awful lesson, Venerable Tusa no longer showed any mercy to the murderers and pillagers.

The biomechs didn't pose a threat to the people. It was their deranged mech pilots that was the true source of evil.

A slight grimace donned his face as he contemplated his umpteenth kill.

He never thought his first solo adventure in a long time would cause him to turn into a cleanup service.

Normally, the Planetary Guard should have responded to all of these incidents. Unfortunately, the higher ups all decided to pull any of the outlying Planetary Guard units to downtown Veoline.

The mechs that ordinarily presided over security in these unimportant districts were clearly left to fend for themselves!

Yet when he saw the curious and relieved faces of the locals peering out the windows of their tree houses, Venerable Tusa felt it was all worth it. He was not a savior, but he did not mind acting like one. With everyone with power rushing to fulfill their own d.e.s.i.r.es and ambitions, there were too few people like him to pay any regard to the common folk.

The expert pilot checked the readings of his long-ranged sensors and already spotted another hotspot in the distance.

Before he left to check on this potential problem area, his mech broadcasted his words to the surrounding tree houses.

"Does anyone here work in a public security department or biomech production facility?"

Venerable Tusa asked this question several times already, but he rarely received a satisfactory response.

Just as he thought that this would be another dud, a motherly woman stepped outside the doorstep of a scorched tree house.

"I don't work for those places, but I work as a secretary for a wholesaler that supplies feeder stock. Is that good enough?"

"That's fantastic news!" Venerable Tusa smiled. "Please tell me everything you think is important to securing shipments of feeder stock. Oh, can you transfer any security credentials and other relevant documents to my mech?"

"Uhm, I shall do my best."

The woman began to provide Venerable Tusa with a font of information. The expert pilot did not dare to tarry. He pressed a button that caused a large and complicated antenna array to unfold from the Piranha Prime's backpack module.

Only when the antenna turned into something that resembled a metallic tree did the prime mech begin to transmit encrypted data across a large distance.

It was very hard to keep the transmissions truly secure this way, but most organizations simply didn't have the resources or interest to decrypt a random transmission.

Venerable Tusa knew that Gentle Lotus Base was getting all of the information that he and his mech received. There was no need for him to hang on to vital intel and wait until he returned to let his clan know about all of the secrets he gathered.

With all of the exploration he had already performed, the Larkinsons should have a detailed understanding of the surrounding areas!

Tusa checked his energy reserves. Even though he managed to scavenge some spare energy cells at a depot, he was still running low.

"Maybe it's time for me to return."

Chapter 2854 - Self-Doubts

"Being a hero is not as glamorous as I thought." Venerable Tusa thought.

Originally, he did not think much of what he would do once he ventured back to settled space.

He heard plenty of stories about people abusing their biomechs for their own ends during his preparation. While these incidents were none of his business, he resolved not to stand by if he had an opportunity to make everything better.

So he did.

He no longer counted how many rampaging biomechs he demolished. Every district seemed to have their own collection of self-centered thugs. Why had the LRA never cracked down on these barbarians? Why did the authorities not go further in controlling the proliferation of mechs if they were already so strict?

"For all their fears about foreigners, the true danger lurked within their own hearts all along."

Every foreigner on the planet just wanted to escape the flames of the revolution and get away as soon as possible. This was not their struggle and they had little to no stake in its outcome.

Venerable Tusa should have minded his own business as well. The plunderers and murderers he met along the way rarely went out of their way to pick a fight against him. Rather than wage a costly battle against another mech and risk losing the source of their power, the criminals would rather direct their attention towards bullying the weak!

Each time the expert pilot encountered this reaction, his contempt and disgust led him to take action.

"You are a disgrace to our profession! At least have the courage to fight against a worthy opponent!"

As a former military mech pilot and expert pilot, Venerable Tusa spent the majority of his career surrounded by honorable men and women. Even before that, the old Larkinson Family along with the academies he attended in his youth constantly instilled him with the responsibilities and privilege of a mech pilot.

Potentates had access to an incredible amount of destructive potential. As long as they interfaced with any mech, they could use the power at their disposal to destroy enemies and innocent civilians alike!

Although Tusa admittedly did not pay too much attention to these classes, through passive osmosis, the values of an honorable mech pilot was ingrained into his bones.

Therefore, seeing these second-class mech pilots exercise little to no restraint broke something inside Tusa. He used to look up to these individuals who were lucky enough to be born in a better state.

He used to think that mech pilots that grew up in second-rate and first-rate states were better than him in every way!

Even when he advanced to expert pilot, it was still difficult for Tusa to shed his ingrained respect towards those who underwent much more rigorous training.

The Battle of Reckoning only reinforced this impression. Although the Fridaymen and enemy Garleners had hostile intentions in mind, he still respected their skill, valor, honor and sacrifice.

No mech pilot was free to do as he or she wished.

"Pfff. How naive I was back then."

To be honest, he chafed at the restrictions. As a light mech specialist, he always d.e.s.i.r.ed to make his own choices. Obeying the orders of someone who did not fully understand what he was capable of did not sit well with him. It was also difficult for mech officers to know how to best make use of light mechs.

A disproportionate number of mech pilots turned officers initially piloted medium mechs. Their fighting instincts and war knowledge always centered around the use of the most popular weight class.

Light mech specialists frequently suffered the consequences of suboptimal orders!

This was why light mech pilots such as Tusa developed a reputation for being mavericks. They were more prone to stretch their orders and act on their own accord.

This stereotype persisted only because situations kept happening where commanders improperly utilized light mechs!

His current situation was a typical example of that. With a mech as strong as the Piranha Prime, it was by far the strongest scout mech in this region on the planet. It possessed the strength to defeat everything weaker and the speed to outrun anything that was stronger.

Shackling such a powerful light mech to a stationary base was a gross misuse of its capabilities!

"These sc.u.m are disgusting."

He witnessed some of the worst that humanity could do to each other. While he wouldn't have been surprised if he witnessed this behavior from Nyxian pirates, this was not the case this time!

Every thug he killed along the way each showed enough proficiency to recognize they were academy trained. Sure, they probably scored at the bottom of their class, but they should have still been exposed to all of the duties and responsibilities that their profession conveyed!

Instead of making their instructors proud, the wayward graduates decided to pursue more selfish ends.

In a way, the criminals who let go of all restraint and revelled in the chaos were much more free than anyone else!

In a time where disorder had taken over, too many the thugs and murderers had given up on conforming. They shed the expectations and the compulsions that society imposed on them and acted without any disregard for others!

While Venerable Tusa acknowledged that these mech pilots liberated themselves, they embraced the wrong kind of freedom!

"Freedom doesn't give you the license to embrace anarchy!"

Biomech after biomech collapsed from his Unending alloy daggers. Even though the enemy mechs he faced were weird, they still worked like normal mechs for the most part. Their c.o.c.kpits were all situated in the same location, and puncturing it always caused biomechs to shut down!

Prior to his exposure to these sc.u.m, he could maintain the belief that pursuing absolute freedom was the right course of action for him. He wanted to maintain control over his own fate and did not wish to let anyone have the final say in what he could do. Not even the Larkinson Clan held his unquestioning obedience!

Yet now that he saw what absolute freedom did to other mech pilot, Venerable Tusa began to doubt his purpose.

This was very dangerous. As an expert pilot, he knew that his conviction was the basis of his strength. When he attended an introductory lecture at the MTA, he learned the perils of questioning his own principles.

Once this happened, it was hard to stop it. The MTA instructor explicitly warned him that expert pilots must always confront their problems upfront.

Cowards didn't exist among expert pilots!

No matter how much an existential question threatened his personal cause, Tusa never thought about dodging it. Tests like these happened several times throughout an expert pilot's career.

Those who passed them would continue to grow stronger while those who shirked them lost the right to advance any further.

His mech wavered a bit as he started to go over his reasons to fight. The more he became swept by doubt, the more the Piranha Prime began to lose its l.u.s.ter.

When the mech's energy reserves started getting low, Tusa turned around and piloted it back to Gentle Lotus Base.

Biomechs depended heavily on feeder stock to stay in shape. Even if they did not do anything, their cells constantly remained active. Just like how normal organisms needed to eat and drink on a regular basis, biomechs also needed a way to replenish the nutrients they spent.

Although biomech designers had gotten quite good at increasing the efficiency of their products, they could not eliminate this annoying requirement entirely.

A starving biomech always turned weak and brittle after months of neglect! This was one of the more troublesome aspects about organic machines that prevented the rest of the galaxy from embracing them. While metallic mechs also deteriorated under the same conditions, the difference wasn't nearly as drastic.

"Normal mechs are much more trustworthy than these freaky biomechs. They're no different from monsters."

Venerable Tusa even developed a theory that biomechs somehow infected the mentalities of their own mech pilots. There was no other way for him to explain why so many deviants popped up all at once.

Every biomech looked menacing in his eyes. Their raw strength, imposing stature and grotesque appearances all made it clear that their designers did not envision anything cuddly and cute!

Venerable Tusa spent enough time in the LRA to know that much of the special cells and tissue that made up biomechs were derived from all manner of exobeasts.

Even the most humanoid-looking biomechs were actually stuffed with beast DNA!

Although Tusa was not versed in biology, he still suspected that some of the bestial traits of biomechs were contagious. That, or the Life Research Association did a really poor job of educating their mech pilots!

Everything he had seen so far pointed out the perils of freedom. In a way, for all of its strictness, the LRA granted too much freedom to its mech pilots.

Now that the Supreme Revolution broke the traditional hierarchy and granted every single serving mech pilot to choose which order to obey, far too many of them decided to fight for less-than-noble causes!

Though he hadn't clashed against them yet, Tusa held an even worse regard for the mech pilots who served in the Planetary Guard or other government institutions.

Millions of citizens in the outskirts needed their help. Yet instead of doing the right thing, the protectors of people instead chose to abandon their responsibilities in order to fight for a nebulous political cause!

When granted the choice to do what they wished, too many mech pilots from all walks of life chose to abandon their duties.

Instead, they became consumed with plundering wealth, eliminating rivals, pursuing their grudges and more! They also became more prone to getting bewitched by ambitious leaders who did not care for the harm they caused in order to fulfill their personal ambitions.

"People can't be trusted with power." He concluded.

It was a damaging admission and one that Venerable Tusa did not want to settle upon. However, the truth was there for him to see. Even though he knew that his fellow Larkinsons were vastly different, that did not alter the fact that there were plenty more people who abused any measure of freedom they could grasp!

The Piranha Prime grew more turbulent. While its presence hadn't collapsed entirely, Venerable Tusa did not feel so good about himself anymore.

Reality had dealt a harsh blow to his illusions.

"What is freedom?"

"What makes me worthy to make my own choices?"

"How much do other people deserve to be free?"

"Does absolute freedom even exist?"

All of these questions and more began to swirl in his mind. His will became clouded and his confidence began to falter.

A small alarm sounded from his mech. Venerable Tusa temporarily pulled himself out of his conundrum. He realized that he was approaching the storage depot.

The site was just as large as the female worker described. Thousands of containers and other goods were stacked indoors and outdoors.

What Tusa found notable about the site was that another group had already overrun the defenses. Numerous security mechs lay broken and fallen on the ground as the unknown assailants were in the process of loading up their transports with looted feeder stock!

The expert pilot frowned. Normally, he would barge in and eliminate the looters, but he could not deny the fact that he and his clan were thinking about doing the same!

"There's also too many mechs."

The Ferocious Piranha's passive sensors weren't able to provide him with a complete picture, but his mech estimated that there were upwards of 200 mechs at the site!

"What the hell are so many mechs doing here? Who is fielding them and why are they after so much feeding stock?"

Chapter 2855 - Good and Evil

Due to the Piranha Prime's proximity to the breached warehouse depot, Venerable Tusa could not risk a transmission.

The signals released by his mech would definitely tip off the unknowns of his presence.

So far, Venerable Tusa had been careful to travel low on the ground and let all of the widespread jamming and interference obscure his prime mech.

He had been careful to control the emissions of his mech. By outputting less heat, he not only conserved his energy, but also lowered the chance of getting spotted from a distance.

Still, against powerful opponents, this trick was bound to fail. Military-grade sensor systems were much better equipped to peer through jamming and spot anomalous signal patterns.

The fact that the looters failed to detect his Piranha Prime at its current distance suggested that the unknowns belonged to a private faction, but that made little sense.

"This is a pretty remote area. Why would a large outfit that controls at least two-hundred mechs be here in force? For that matter, what kind of wholesaler would erect a

warehouse of this size when there are very few production facilities in the surrounding districts?"

It made much more sense for massive depots like these to be situated next to biomech growth facilities or something! The amount of containers for taking could probably supply a typical biomech production facility for months if not years!

The situation grew more fishy by the second. Venerable Tusa had encountered so many random groups of thugs and criminals that he found it jarring to stumble upon a cohesive force of organized biomechs.

Each of them possessed the same coating and color scheme, but the Piranha Prime's sensors weren't able to detect any prominent words or prominent symbols.

Most forces proudly marked their war machines in some way. Owning a powerful mech was a source of pride and strength to many people and organizations. His own clan gladly embraced pageantry for example!

He was so used to mechs making their origins clear that the sight before him simply did not look right.

"Anyone who tries to hide their affiliation is definitely up to no good!"

He carefully drew his mech back in order to minimize detection, but continued to observe the unidentified biomechs as much as possible.

The mechs were all coated in a plain gray shade and their transports shared the same color scheme.

His mech hardly spotted any people on foot. Instead, all of the loading was being done by mechs or beetles.

Clearly, the looters did not care too much about damaging the contents of the containers. It was highly improper to let mechs designed for combat pick up anything valuable with their own hands. They could easily crush whatever they held if the mech was not that precise and if the mech pilot was inattentive!

The unknown force was clearly in a hurry. From the way the mechs were handling the containers and how fast they were loading up their transports, they were very eager to hoard supplies for some reason.

"Are they making new mechs or are they accumulating reserves to sustain a long campaign?"

Tusa wasn't able to figure out the answer. After several more minutes of observation, he finally stepped away. While he wanted to stick around longer in order to track the direction of their departure, he didn't want to risk detection.

He had a hunch that these unknown grey biomechs were not hoarding all of these feeder stock in order to lock themselves inside a bunker stronghold!

Several hours later, his Ferocious Piranha carefully threaded its way back to Gentle Lotus Base. Though Venerable Tusa was tired and in a conflicted mood, he still answered his patriarch's summons and entered the latter's office.

"Meow."

A pale bronze figure floated over to his side and began to circle around his head.

"Hey, Lucky."

"Tusa." Ves spoke from behind his desk. "How's the city?"

"It's a mess, as I'm sure you already know. The sights I've seen and the depravities I've witnessed has caused me to readjust my opinion of humanity. I never knew that people could go so low, especially from those who had the luck and privilege to grow up in a peaceful second-rate state. Even the sandmen are nobler than some of the thugs I've ended!"

Ves' eyes grew sharper as they observed Tusa's suited form. The expert pilot felt uncomfortable with being scrutinized like this. It was as if his cousin was able to peer right into his heart!

"You look troubled, Tusa." The mech designer began to frown. "Let me guess. You encountered some unpleasant scenes and fell into a spiral of confusion and self-doubt, right?"

Venerable Tusa's unstable force of will rippled. "How did you know?"

"I created you." Ves dubiously boasted. "Proper after-market support is one of my most important priorities. I don't want one of the two expert pilots by my side to turn defective when I most need your strength. No one else can pilot the Piranha Prime except you, Tusa!"

Though the expert pilot felt pleased at the concern shown by his cousin, he was not very comfortable with the wording.

"I'm not a product, Ves, much less yours. I am my own person. You may have helped me advance to my current rank, but I could have easily managed on my own. You're

pretty annoying whenever you act like we're your assets. We are not items on your balance sheet. We are living, breathing humans who you should be treating as family."

Ves continued smiling as if he completely didn't hear what Tusa said. "Yes, yes, I understand. This conversation isn't about me, though. It's about you. Tell me what is plaguing you. Maybe I can lend a hand."

This insufferable bastard. Venerable Tusa began to see why Jannzi thought that Ves was unfit to lead the clan he founded.

Venerable Tusa sighed and moved over to sit on the nearest chair. "I don't know how to describe it. I feel like I have been too naive. Mech pilots like my fellow clansmen and I are all honorable soldiers. We swear an oath, obey our orders and abide by the rules, at least for the most part. I don't think I've met a single mech pilot in our clan who is prone to descending into madness like the ones I've seen outside."

"That's because we are selective in our recruitment." Ves pressed the tips of his fingers against each other. "At least until recently, we always screened our clansmen in order to make sure they conformed close enough to our core values. While we've been forced to put down our strict recruitment standards, I'm still not worried about our new mech pilots."

"Why? What gives you the confidence that the mech pilots you've recruited from the refugee camps will behave?"

"We are small enough to monitor everyone. No one is able to escape the sights of our monitoring system. It's different for a big state like the LRA. With trillions of citizens, it's not possible to devote human attention to everyone. There are also too many ways for people to evade observation and get away with it in a large society."

Venerable Tusa furrowed his brows. "That makes sense, but monitoring is only able to catch those who are already unstable. What if the former gang members and other unsavory figures go bonkers one day?"

"That won't happen. At least, the odds are so low that we can pretty much ignore this possibility."

"Do you believe in us that much?"

"I believe in our culture and our kinship. The heritage and tradition that we've inherited from the old family is one of our most valuable assets. Any organization can compose a set of rules to keep its members in line. However, it takes good leadership to encourage subordinates to play by rules because they want to, not because they risk punishment if they cross the line."

The answer caused Tusa to fall silent. His force of will continually rippled as he tried to make sense of what he heard.

"Can order only be established through structure? Is there no alternative to rules and institutions that allows for greater freedom without everything turning into a mess?"

Ves faintly shook his head. "Let me ask you a question, cousin. Do you believe that humans are inherently good or inherently bad?"

This was a classic question, and one that had never been settled despite millenia of growth and progress.

Everyone had a different idea on the natural state of humans.

Some believed that humans started off as inherently good and honest, much like cute little children. They only turned bad because they experienced something awful in their lives or became affected by outside factors.

Others posited that humans were violent, brutish and selfish by nature. Only the threat of punishment and ostracization was able to keep the dark side of humanity at bay. The moment when all order collapsed, the beasts inside the hearts of people could no longer be contained!

Previously, Venerable Tusa believed in the former. He had always been in the company of good and decent people. Even the opponents he fought were honorable in a sense.

Yet now, he could no longer believe in this assumption. He lowered his head in defeat as he could no longer convince himself that freedom was universally good.

"I'm more inclined to believe that people are inherently bad." Venerable Tusa sighed. "It doesn't make sense for these pampered and privileged second-class mech pilots to devolve into beasts as soon as the Planetary Guard is too busy to lay down the law."

"You're not a sociologist or criminologist, Tusa. Just because you can't come up with another answer doesn't mean that your analysis is right. You should leave these complicated societal questions to the experts."

"I CAN'T IGNORE THIS ISSUE!" Venerable Tusa flared!

"Meow!"

His outburst frightened Lucky, causing the gem cat to dart back to Ves.

"I'm sorry." The emotional mech pilot took a deep breath. "I don't want to attend a boring lecture or get flooded by jargon that makes no sense to me. I just want to find an answer that I can accept."

Ves did not immediately respond. Instead, he maintained his silence for a while before he finally spoke up again.

"If you want to find an answer on your own, then you better hurry up. This is not the time to take a sabbatical. We are stuck on a planet that is in the middle of a revolution. Who knows if we'll get attacked tomorrow."

That reminded Tusa of the odd sight he saw a few hours ago. "Did you read my last report before I returned?"

"I did." Ves nodded. "Those grey biomechs pose a serious threat to us. While they are not that close to our current position, the chance of bumping into them is greater if we choose to relocate to a nearby biomech production facility."

"Have you been able to figure out their origins?"

"Our intelligence personnel are looking into it, but so far the answer eludes us. None of the local refugees and new recruits recognize these odd biomechs. Not just their colors, but also their models remain a mystery."

The latter seemed especially suspicious to Ves. Any force that was able to employ or commission their own custom mech or biomech designs was definitely a cut above a typical mercenary corps!

All of the data so far suggested that these grey biomechs were part of a well-funded, decently-connected private organization, and a hidden one at that. For them to lay low for an unknown amount of years before moving out in large numbers suggested that they may very well be involved in the Supreme Revolution!

Ves did not want to clash against these people. While their biomechs weren't as impressive as military-grade mechs, they were still better than the biomechs in his own clan's possession.

"We don't know who these people are and what they want." He said after a moment's thought. "That unsettles me. I need you to go on another run and try to track these grey mechs down. You need to find their base, figure out their plans and identify any possible allies and enemies. Can you do that?"

"I don't know. I'm not in a good shape right now."

Ves scoffed and crossed his arms. "Moping around won't do you any good. Expert pilots like you aren't meant to sit around. Wasn't this what you alluded to me a few days ago? Just go out and do something useful. You're a fighter, not a thinker! If all else fails, you can always drown your doubts in combat!"

"..I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

Chapter 2856 - No Respect

Gentle Lotus Base became a lot busier than before. With the help of the living aspects, a lot of refugees flooded to the Larkinson Clan for one reason or another.

Some wanted a new start.

Others wanted to leave the planet that had robbed them of what they cherished.

A few even looked forward to exploring the Red Ocean.

Regardless of their reasons, the clan eagerly embraced everyone, even those who possessed dubious histories and exhibited obvious personality problems!

As a result, a lot of tension emerged as the established clansmen struggled to befriend the newcomers.

Even if the Larkinson Network was working at full force, Goldie struggled to integrate a large group of people whose values and beliefs diverged considerably with the rest of the clan.

Not even the Hexers were weird enough to embrace biomachines!

The Larkinsons did not have a notable tradition in biomechs and biotechnology. The insertion of so many Lifers of different backgrounds sparked a considerable shift in direction.

There was no doubt that these Lifers would leave a mark in the clan!

On one hand, the old hands were all happy to welcome the newcomers. No one else was better at biotechnology than the citizens of a state that excelled in this sector!

Their doctors, exobiologists, geneticists and other life science-related professionals were renowned throughout the entire star cl.u.s.ter. Not even Dr. Ranya was arrogant enough to consider herself superior to her Lifer counterpart.

The entry of so many Lifers also sparked tension for another reason. Even the most average citizens were more healthy, more learned and more competent than the Larkinsons with third-class backgrounds!

While the Larkinsons who originated from states like the Bright Republic, Reinald Republic and Sentinel Kingdom were still able to stay on top because of their head start, it would become increasingly untenable to keep the new recruits down when they could do a better job than the old guard!

The difference was most obvious when it came to mech piloting. Their skill and training was a lot more comprehensive. Their foundation was more solid and they were much more accustomed to the high-paced, high-power battles between second-class mechs.

Only the Penitent Sisters were able to match and exceed these latest recruits!

Unlike the former Hexer cultists, the Lifers were a bit more assertive about having their own ways. While most were willing to adjust their lives in order to fit into the strange but powerful clan, there were several issues where they were not willing to compromise at all! Their insistence on utilizing biotechnology was just one of their pillars.

"You don't understand how highly the Lifers regard biotech researchers." Captain Rivington explained to Ves. "Everything we use and everything we rely on is based on the work of brilliant scientists who try their best to push the forefront of the field of biotechnology. It starts right at the top with our universal reverence towards the Supreme Sage. The entire reason why this planet and the rest of the LRA has erupted into so much chaos is because we can't stomach life without our greatest and most accomplished researcher!"

The signature mech of the Penitent Sisters was originally optimized for spaceborn combat. While it was theoretically capable of fighting on land and in the air, in practice the cannoner mech's performance when subjected to gravity was incredibly poor!

If Ves wanted to employ the two Eternal Redemptions on the surface as something more than stationary turrets, then he had to make substantial modifications to their original design!

The limited resources and equipment on hand prevented him from implementing more ambitious changes. Ves had to stretch the limits of his skills in order to achieve the greatest results with the least amount of investments.

"What is your point, captain?"

"We lack an adequate leader figure to corral us all. While the problem is not acute right now, a lot of Lifers will become very dissatisfied once they have finished their introductory periods."

Ves paused in his work. "Didn't I put you in charge? As a former team leader and administrator of the Roving Hunters, you should have enough leadership ability to command their respect."

"That would have been the case if you are talking about any other people, but we're talking about Lifers here. I don't think you realize it yet, but the status of biotech experts exceeds that of generals, ministers and possibly even patriarchs such as you! This isn't the fault of you and the rest of your senior clansmen. It's just that we grew up in a state where we were taught that our leaders are always in charge!"

The Life Research Association used to be a biotech company. Even if it expanded beyond its initial scope and transformed into a fully-fledged state, this past identity still affected the running of the LRA to this day!

Ves even thought that this was one of the principal reasons why the government failed to prevent the Supreme Revolution!

While Ves often looked down on politicians, he had to admit that this greedy and selfish group of bloodsuckers at least knew how to keep a state together. Pure biotech researchers who could lecture people all day about alien biology had no time to waste on studying macroeconomics!

To be fair, the LRA was not a badly-run state for the most part. The middle and lower levels of the government all consisted of competent directors and leaders who knew their jobs well.

It was just that the upper levels were exclusively occupied by scientists. This was by design as the state always had to serve their interests over any others.

Regardless of how good or bad this governance system turned out, the Lifers were so used to living under this model that they couldn't imagine living under a regime where biotech researchers were no longer in charge!

If Captain Rivington was truly serious about this issue, then integrating the Lifers might not proceed as smoothly as hoped!

"Our highest-ranking biotech researcher at the moment is Dr. Ranya Wodin-Larkinson." Ves told the captain. "She is the director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute and holds my trust."

That latter part was very important. As much as Ves was willing to put his faith in every member of his clan, some of his secrets were too dangerous to risk getting leaked!

Dr. Ranya was one of the few people that Ves was willing to enlighten on spirituality. It was essential for Ves to share some of his trade secrets to at least one biotech expert in order to properly manage mutated beasts that could serve as design spirits like Arnold.

Captain Rivington shook his head, though. "I've heard about her from some of your Larkinsons. I am sure she is a bright lass and a promising researcher in the making, but... she's too young and junior. In the LRA, a junior exobiologist like her is barely one step above an intern. She should be working diligently under a more senior and accomplished scientist."

Without respect, these youngsters were unable to serve as a pillar for the Lifers!

"What about our other biotech researchers? I think we have plenty of older and more distinguished scientists in our member rolls."

"Captain Ember and I have already looked over the lists, but there is no one that can fill the void. We hold high standards and not just any random researcher can command our respect. A qualified scientist must have published at least a dozen academic articles, of which at least one must be published in prestigious journals that are circulated throughout the galactic rim. It would be even better if they have managed to gain the recognition of a journal that is circulated galaxy-wide!"

The Supreme Sage definitely accomplished the latter, not once, but many times!

The number of published articles and how many peers cited their contents was one of the established methods to judge an academic.

Ves hadn't looked deeply into Dr. Ranya's academic track record, but he was pretty certain that she didn't publish any article in a rim-wide journal.

He frowned. He did not ask whether an accomplished and successful mech designer like himself was able to command the respect of the Lifers. He might have more options if he learned how to design biomechs, but that was not an option at the moment.

No matter how good he was at designing classical mechs, as long as his professional qualifications didn't have anything to do with biotechnology, he could not serve as an adequate substitute to the leaders they were accustomed to obeying!

"So we don't have any relevant researcher who can serve as an adequate leader figure, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I guess we'll have to find one, then. Do you have any ideas?"

Captain Rivington shook his head. "Not for the moment. The biomech designers and other related experts that used to work with the Roving Hunters are all unreachable. They're probably involved in the civil war and don't have any reason to abandon their current positions in order to become a part of our clan."

Ves tried to think of a good candidate. He suddenly recalled a promise that had not been in the forefront of his mind for some time.

Even though the chance was slim that it would ever get fulfilled, there was no harm in maintaining hope!

"Do you think the Lifers in our clan will respect a Journeyman who used to be apprenticed to a local Master Mech Designer?"

"Hmm... maybe. Somewhat." Captain Rivington answered in an uncertain tone. "If there aren't any better options available, then it might work, I guess. How it will turn out in practice will depend on the age and academic record of the former apprentice in question. The fact that one of the LRA's Masters is willing to teach this individual is already a powerful endorsement, but it's not enough by itself. Lifers despise researchers who are all bark and no bite. Any researcher who wishes to be in charge has to prove their academic chops."

What a twisted governance system. Ves wanted to palm his face several times throughout this entire conversation. It was only barely more tolerable than the Garlen Empire's habit of putting high-ranking mech pilots in charge!

"According to you, we still have time to address this problem, so let's keep exploring our options. We need to stay on the lookout for someone who is smart enough to keep the former citizens of this state in line."

Ves originally wished to hire a lot of senior biotech experts. Now, he just wanted to leave this planet as soon as possible.

If he and his clan failed to hire a suitable leadership figure during their stay in this state, then they had little choice but to go elsewhere. With the wealth, resources and power at their disposal, it shouldn't be impossible to hire a foreign researcher.

The problem was that the Lifers simply wouldn't respect a biotech expert who originated from another state that much. The LRA was rightfully regarded as the holy ground of biotechnology! Their researchers were simply on another level!

Ves himself did not wish to leave this state empty-handed. He arrived here with a goal and he was not willing to depart without completing his mission!

"Captain Rivington?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you happen to know if there are any universities, research institutions or biomech design labs nearby?"

"Uhhh... no. Even if I knew, what would you do with the information?"

Ves began to smirk. "Isn't it obvious? I just want to approach some figures and persuade them into working for me. There are bound to be researchers out there who want a change of pace!"

Chapter 2857 - Samandra Avikon

A tide of flesh and metal soared above the ground!

Hundreds of large forms flew across the open ground and advanced towards a certain direction at a constant speed.

The few people who were in the vicinity of this migration quaked and hid behind anything that could hide their forms.

It was useless. There were hundreds of mechs and biomechs in the air along with over a hundred different transports and shuttles. Each of them possessed sensors that were s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e enough to pick up the characteristic life signs of humans.

The shocked and frightened people bent their bodies and kept themselves still as possible as the large procession swept over their heads and headed into the distance without interruption.

The lives of the people along the way were too trivial to bother. Ever since Prosperous Hill VI turned into a warzone, the importance of individual citizens had sunk to the lowest points in their lives.

Only bottom-feeders bothered to bully average citizens. Those with true power and ambition set their sights higher.

Eventually, the large force reached a specific point that was at the edge of a light industrial district located in a suburbs region.

Most of the mechs and vehicles landed. Flight was fast, but expended a lot of energy. If there was no need to move, it was better to set these heavy multi-ton vehicles on the ground.

Only the light mechs remained in the air. They spread out in a circle and began to patrol the surroundings.

A couple even continued to venture forward as if to scout what was up ahead.

While the melee mechs were merely standing by, other elements were still making preparations.

A couple of biovehicles began to deploy special arrays that made it much more difficult to observe the force from a distance.

Half of the ranged mechs entered a firing position. They knelt on the ground and began to raise the muzzles of their main armaments in the air at an angle. The precise angle and heading of their guns adjusted minutely and on a constant basis.

In order to increase their precision, all of the biomechs as well as the vehicles all pooled their processing power together in order to perform an immense amount of calculations.

Inside one of the most well-defended biotransports, a few armored and suited figures stood around a large projection that showed a wireframe model of an expansive facility.

Just under fifty different red dots were spread around the site. Only half of them shone brighter and occasionally moved around. The other dots were dimmer and were parked in various large spaces and hangar bays.

Ves did not pay attention to these dots. The quantity of mech-grade threats was too low for him to feel any concern.

Numerous officers and aids sat quietly behind their consoles and workstations. While the vehicle originally wasn't set up as a command center, it was not that difficult for the Larkinsons to take a random armored transport and repurpose it. The only challenge the techs faced was trying to integrate conventional technology with biotechnology. They only succeeded through a judicious amount of jury-rigging and kludging.

Ves faintly shook his head as his gaze strayed over to the open cables and weird flesh-metal amalgamations. He was reminded of his time back on Aeon Corona VII where he and the engineers of the Flagrant Vandals found creative uses of local biological resources.

Back then, they were stuck on a planet that was devoid of conventional resources and subject to extreme environmental conditions. The Vandals and Swordmaidens had no choice but to become more resourceful.

This time was similar. While Prosperous Hill VI did not possess gravity that was enough to crush people's bodies, the connection between surface and orbit was effectively cut. No one was able to call for help from friendlies in space.

This forced every person and organization on the planet to fend for themselves!

With the breakdown of order, markets no longer operated and commerce had completely ceased. Money did not have any meaning anymore as lives and essential supplies were worth much more than intangible numbers.

Under these conditions, if Ves and his allies wanted to obtain something, they had to go out of the way to grasp it themselves.

This was why Ves decisively abandoned Gentle Lotus Base. After recruiting enough refugees and making enough preparations, the Larkinsons along with their allies conducted a large-scale migration.

The current mode of operation of their aerial force was similar to that of their expeditionary fleet. They carried everything of importance in their supply train and abandoned everything that was too big and heavy to move.

They got it far too cheap, but there was nothing Ves could do. He really wanted to snatch up some additional groups and their biomechs, but too many Lifers still clung to the notion that the LRA would resolve the chaos and make everything right!

"Delusional suckers."

The Lifers were all riding on their past glory. None of them wanted to admit that their state was self-destructing from within. With the amount of damage that they dealt to themselves, it would take decades for the state to get back up to its feet!

"You cannot look down on the ones who have stayed true to the LRA, Patriarch Ves." A soft and even voice spoke. "This turmoil, while painful, is necessary to cleanse the rot in this society. Talk and compromise can never go far enough to turn the state around. If biotechnology is to prosper in this state, the contradictions must be solved."

Ves grimaced. "The conservatives and the opposition didn't have to plunge large swathes of their own population in the flames of war. I never asked to be caught up in the fighting, and so do many other people. Whoever comes out on top of this civil war will have to reckon with the fact that their gains came at the cost of billions of lives and an untold amount of material destruction. I don't know about you, but I don't think it makes sense to rule over a pile of ashes."

"The Lifers are not as uncontrollable as you believe. While I have renounced my oath to my state, I still believe in its sacred mission. The LRA shall rise again!"

The woman who spoke those dubious words was Samandra Avikon, one of the recent additions to the Larkinson Clan.

Different from the more normal Lifers who accepted the Larkinson Clan's outreach, Samandra Avikon was part of the same organization that fielded the mysterious purple biomechs that Ves had first encountered at Ruuzon Arena.

The purple biomechs and their mech pilots were initially by themselves, but after joining the Larkinson Clan, they borrowed the transmitters of Gentle Lotus Base in order to broadcast a coded message.

"If the LRA is a blessed state according to your views, what does that make us?" He probed.

Samandra Avikon smiled in a mysterious fashion. Unlike the others in the command vehicle, the middle-aged woman eschewed wearing a suit. Instead, she wore a voluminous purple dress and braided her black hair in an elaborate crown.

Ves grew unnerved as she stared straight into his eyes.

Unlike normal humans, Samandra modified or replaced her baseline human pair of eyes with modified ones that caused her reptilian orange pupils to glow. It made her look like a half-alien who was proud to embrace her non-human heritage.

"Your clan is blessed. That much is clear ever since we all pledged our new oaths. While your embrace of biotechnology is still in the beginning stages, the potential that you have personally shown through the creation of your angels is enough to warrant our support."

Samandra Avikon was one of the more.. eccentric Lifers that Ves had met. She and her ilk originated from a cult called Spiritus Sancti.

This suspicious-sounding organization turned out to be a gathering of some of the few religious-minded Lifers who worshipped biomechs and biotechnology as divine creations.

These nutjobs went beyond the average Lifer when it came to looking up at biomechs. The Spiritus Sancti cultists outright worshipped them as supernatural entities!

Due to their beliefs, their exposure to the Living Aspects of Lufa somehow convinced them that following Ves was a better way of seeing their dreams come to fruition than staying in the LRA!

Ves didn't know what to think about that. He detested the thought of adding yet another cult to his clan, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Not only did Spiritus Sancti gather a sizable amount of biomechs, many of its adherents were also very knowledgeable biotech experts. While their ranks and seniority weren't too high, they were still a cut above the rabble.

Not only that, the former members of Spiritus Sancti also supplied the Larkinson Clan with a wealth of intelligence. This was why Ves allowed her inside the command center.

Ves turned his attention back to the projection. "The preparations are almost complete. I want this operation to go flawlessly. Are you certain that you'll be able to convince our primary targets to accept my offer?"

"They shall, as long as they are still alive."

"Don't worry about that." He smirked.

A minute later, Commander Casella Ingvar contacted Ves directly from her mech.

"Sir, our preparations are complete. Our scouts are in position and we have dialed in our firing solutions. We are ready to fire on your order."

"Then what are you waiting for? Fire!"

"Roger that, sir! Commencing fire!"

Over fifty ranged mechs carrying many different physical rifles all fired at the same time!

The noise and shockwaves generated by all of those weapon discharges could deafen any unaugmented humans standing right outside!

The command vehicle shook a bit as the ground rumbled from all of the kinetic energy that the kneeling mechs had just unleashed!

The biggest and most powerful weapon discharges came from the heaviest and most formidable ranged mechs in the land force.

The large and splendid-looking Eternal Redemptions had both fired their formidable Samheim Gauss Cannons at relatively high angles.

In fact, the Eternal Redemptions had purposefully underpowered their cannons this time. If they fired their gauss rounds at full power, the projectile would soar so far away that it would probably land hundreds of kilometers in the distance.

There was no reason to fire at something so distant!

This was why the gauss rounds only arced upwards for a short time before descending back to the surface.

The oblivious base that had entered the crosshairs of the ranged mechs didn't even sound an alarm until there were only a few seconds left before impact.

This granted the oblivious defenders too little time to react! Even before a commander issued an order, dozens and dozens of solid physical rounds impacted mechs, turrets and base structures alike!

The two powerful rounds released by the Eternal Redemptions inflicted the damage. The proprietary Sarun rounds punched straight through the roof of a mech hangar and slammed into a pair of dormant mechs.

The collisions cratered their c.h.e.s.ts and almost certainly rendered them unusable!

The initial volley had completely caught the defenders by surprise! The near-simultaneous impacts throughout the base shocked them so much that they had difficulty putting themselves back together!

"We're under attack!"

"Take cover!"

"Get into the c.o.c.kpits before it's too late!"

Just as some of them started moving, a second volley arrived!

Chapter 2858 - Ves the Raider

The base defenders stood no chance.

If the Larkinsons and their allies on the ground were only capable of fielding the twenty-eight mechs they managed to bring to the surface and retain, then Ves would have a lot more scruples of attacking this facility.

Even if Ves held a lot more confidence in the quality of his mechs and the skill of their pilots, fighting any battle while outnumbered two-to-one would definitely result in losses.

In a situation where every single mech and mech pilot counted, it was not responsible for him to aim so high.

Fortunately, the converted refugees solved his lack of power. Even if the hasty integration of biomechs to the lineup was anything but perfect, their strength was still real!

In the end, around 150 biomechs and in some cases regular mechs entered his ranks. With so much combat power at his disposal, Ves no longer needed to cower in his base!

This was why he proactively set out to leverage his current advantages to expand his power even more.

He could never possess enough mechs! Whether they came in the form of metal or flesh, Ves wasn't picky. As long as his ground force continued to grow in numbers and strength, he could pursue greater and more ambitious goals!

Right now, aside from continuing to expand his mech force, Ves also had the luxury to pursue some of his longer-term goals.

This was why he chose to assault this particular site. While it possessed a fair number of decently-stocked feeder pools which could be utilized to repair damaged biomechs, there weren't enough to go around.

What truly attracted his interest was the fact that the facility was originally a biomech design lab!

It was actually a secondary lab from a larger company whose name and owner Ves didn't care about. The only assets that he truly cared about were the biomech designers

and assorted biotech specialists working under them! Each of them possessed valuable knowledge and experience that the Larkinson Clan sorely needed to populate its newly-acquired Dragon's Den.

A tight escort of knight mechs flew around an armored biotransport. When the flying vessel passed over the low walls of the lab grounds, a number of melee mechs and biomechs had already cleaned up the remaining threats that survived the shelling that preceded the main assault.

To be honest, the volleys of ranged attacks had already broken the medium-sized gang that had taken over the biolab. The simultaneous impacts of rounds and shells that landed precisely on target was so devastating that every surviving enemy became shell-shocked!

The attacks made full use of their superior technology. Irregular forces such as gangs usually didn't have the sensors and other hardware required to detect tiny drones that were able to transmit accurate targeting data to nearby scout mechs, which in turn were capable of relaying it all back to the main force.

Meanwhile, the gang that took over the biolab were more preoccupied with enjoying their looted riches and trying to see if they could crack the valuable databases of the biolab.

With such an immense information disparity, the battle held no suspense!

When the hatch of the armored transport opened, the honor guard stepped out first. Ves emerged a few seconds later, his cape billowing in the wind. His armored boots crunched against the disturbed ground.

"The attack you've launched is too heavy-handed." Irvine Spefan of the Infinity Guards said. "These biomechs could have been salvageable, but the intensity of damage on them is too great. They cannot be repaired in a timely manner."

Ves shrugged as he continued forward. "I don't want to give these bastards any opportunity to respond. No matter what, a force of fifty biomechs along with various turrets and other base defenses is still a significant hurdle. More importantly, I didn't want to give them any time to ruin my prize."

"Wisdom is far more precious than the products it produces." Priestess Samandra Avikon affirmed as she followed closely.

While it was lamentable that he would not be able to add most of the downed mechs to his forces, there were plenty of places where he could find other ones.

He strode past fallen biomechs and broken structures alike until he reached the main entrance of the biolab.

With his honor guard preceding him, he did not worry about encountering any ambushes.

The bodies of random thugs were splayed on the floor. Each of them had already been cleaned up by the infantry forces that entered after the enemy mechs were taken down.

Without the support of their greatest weapons, the enemies on foot had no support and could not contend against the well-equipped soldiers of the Golden Skull Alliance!

Ves passed through a corridor that led downwards. While it was faster if he took the elevator, it was already shot to pieces.

"It's not much, but it's better than nothing." He muttered.

They continued to walk until they reached a secure and shielded chamber. Half-a-dozen bodies of formidable-looking thugs were lying flat on the floor. Their suits of bioarmor still looked intact with one glaring exception.

All of them died by claw! The distinct strokes that sliced straight through the protection of the bioarmor and cut through the neck or heads of the wearers was too distinctive.

The source of the claw attacks proudly perched himself on a table inside the protected chamber.

"Good job, Lucky."

"Meow!" The gem cat clad in his Misfortune Harness arrogantly tilted his head upwards.

One of the reasons why the assault went so well was due to Lucky's infiltration. Aside from hacking and subverting the security and early warning systems of the facility, he also played a crucial role in securing the assets that Ves sought to secure.

"You!.. Who are you people? Are you the owner of this murderous bot?"

"MEOW!" Lucky angrily hissed at the speaker.

Ves strode forward and placed his armored hand over Lucky's body. "You should mind your words. Once you become my employee, you will learn that disrespecting my pet never ends well."

The old researcher that spoke up looked confused. "We have no intention of working for others, particularly for a foreign company, of which I presume you represent considering the hardware that you and your men are utilizing."

Ves' lips curled downwards behind his helmet. "I don't believe you understand the situation that you are in right now. We have graciously expended a significant amount of

effort to assault a hostile force of biomechs. We not only bore a lot of risks, but consumed a considerable amount of fuel, energy, ammunition and time. I do not plan to leave empty-handed. I will not be satisfied until I attain a positive return of investment!"

The head researcher along with his teams of other researchers were intimidated by the tone and words adopted by their 'rescuer'. It did not help that a killer cat along with numerous heavily-armed soldiers were eying their every move!

"We... would like to have some time to discuss our options. I am certain that we can come to a satisfactory arrangement."

Ves did not immediately respond. His lack of response caused the scientists to feel more and more uncertain.

Obviously, their situation wasn't good! They had been captured by one force, only to become the possessions of a warlord!

The worst part about this was that the newcomers were clearly foreigners. No Lifer made use of conventional gear. This was bad. Their previous captors, while not very sophisticated, were at least fellow Lifers. While the researchers were confined to this compartment, they still received a considerable amount of respect!

The brilliant-looking armored figure with a cape evidently lacked this inherent respect. The pressure emanated by this leader figure was so ominous that the head researcher even suspected that he might get killed if he did not supply the right answer!

"Patriarch, please calm down. You do not need to be hasty."

Priestess Samandra Avikon strode forward, causing the head researcher to look surprised.

"Samandra! What are you doing here? Are you in collusion with these foreigners?"

"It's a long story, professor. I would be glad to give you an explanation. You are safe now. An entire new future awaits."

Despite her hopeful tone, none of the researchers looked convinced. Ves frowned at the sight. The woman promised to him that she would definitely be able to convince any Lifer researcher to defect to the Larkinson Clan!

"I will leave you to it." Ves spoke and turned around. "Let me reiterate that I do not want to leave this place empty-handed. My forces will stay here for a couple more hours before we depart. We have scheduled several more raids for today and I would like to complete them before nightfall."

When Ves departed the underground chamber, he briefly toured the rest of the biolab. His forces were already making good use of the supplies and facilities.

Biomech technicians were dumping an excess amount of feeder stock into the feeder pools. This was a quick but very inefficient way to quickly repair any biomechs immersed in the thick and soupy liquids.

Others were accessing the data center in order to extract any useful data on biomechs and biotechnology.

Ves did not really prioritize this step. He had no intention of designing biomechs himself, but the looted data could still be of use to the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

Ves stood at the entrance of the armored transport as a purple-robed woman strode back inside. A short distance away, a dozen young and conflicted-looking biomech designers and biotech researchers entered another vehicle.

He distinctly noted that less than half of the researchers in the underground chambers ultimately accepted his 'generous' offer!

"What is the meaning of this, Samandra?"

The woman directed her glowing orange eyes at him. "Their seniority and accumulation of knowledge may not meet your expectations, but they are earnest workers and able learners. It will not take long for them to embrace their new lives."

"They're too junior! If I wanted to pick up novices, then I could have recruited them by the hundreds! What I need is middle and upper-level researchers, those that can immediately provide a lot of advanced capabilities to our clan. I don't have the patience to wait for all of these junior researchers to realize their potential!"

"Then look elsewhere, patriarch. The senior researchers that you have met are all too attached to the LRA. They have families that they do not wish to part with. Taking them away from this planet will only cause them to bear an enormous degree of resentment towards you. No amount of persuasion can stop a husband from wanting to go back to his wife."

Ves wasn't quite sure whether that was true, but that wasn't the point.

He softened a bit. He realized that she was right. Forcefully separating people from their families went against the values of his clan. No amount of influencing from the Larkinson Network would be able to convince any disgruntled researcher to forget about his own family!

The only way to succeed was to pick up the families in question, but that was not feasible. Those families lived all over the place and it was too risky and time-consuming

to track them all down, especially when the outbreak of the revolution had forced many people to evacuate elsewhere!

He sighed. "As long as the researchers you manage to persuade will not be affected by this problem, then I will accept this outcome. I am not satisfied with the yield, though. You will need to do a better job next time. I don't know how long we can get away with these raids, but I want to recruit as many high-value personnel as possible before this window of opportunity closes!"

Samandra bowed. "I shall do my best, patriarch."

Chapter 2859 - Locusts

For the next couple of days, the forces under the command of Ves transformed into a swarm of locusts!

Although this analogy was not entirely accurate, word slowly spread of a steadily-growing swarm of mechs, biomechs and other vehicles.

Each time someone spotted this powerful airfleet in transit, all of the estimates of its numbers and combat power had to be revised upwards!

In their wake, they left over a dozen small and medium-sized facilities in damaged condition. The Larkinsons and its allies were not shy about utilizing the full extent of their firepower to crush an opponent as quickly and decisively as possible..

One particular detail about their raids was that the Larkinsons exclusively attacked facilities held by forces that weren't entirely proper.

As much as Ves became infected by the air of chaos that had spread across the planet, he was very much aware that he was still in the middle of a powerful second-rate state.

Just because many institutions had collapsed did not mean the LRA fell apart. It still existed and some of its organs were still working. The movements of his growing airfleet could hardly be hidden from satellites and other observers from orbit, so he always assumed that various parties were keeping track of his deeds.

This restriction didn't bother him that much. The forces in the outer districts mostly consisted of gangs and other groups of sc.u.m to begin with. Cleaning them up was not a sin.

In fact, it was the opposite! These lawless forces inflicted a lot of harm towards innocent people. Even if they were born and raised on the planet, these Lifers had completely shed their compassion towards their fellow citizens and turned into a destructive influence!

Even though Ves hadn't asked permission to eliminate these cancers, he figured that no one would be able to find fault with his decisions. If he didn't eliminate all of those criminals, they would have continued to terrorize the surrounding neighborhoods!

Once his airfleet swelled to 400 mechs, Ves began to get truly ambitious. Medium-sized biolabs and complexes no longer satisfied his appetite.

Nothing really important took place at these modest sights! The local companies and research institutions all concentrated their main activities at their primary sites.

The smaller labs and facilities were merely secondary sites where less-important work took place. For example, some biolabs exclusively researched bone plating armor systems. Another site might be a simple repair facility instead of a fully-fledged biomech production site.

The biotech experts that were stationed in these kinds of places were never the cream of the crop of their profession!

"If we can't find someone important enough in these smaller sites, then we just have to target a more serious facility!"

At the beginning, Ves would never have the guts to assault a full-sized biomech production facility that was occupied by around 250 hostile biomechs.

The gangs that had joined forces in order to defeat the security mechs were also stronger and more organized than usuals. Some of their biomechs were even custom-designed premium products that were piloted by champions!

Unfortunately for these self-assured gang members, the enemies they faced in the past were nowhere comparable to the Larkinson Clan!

Just like before, the attack began with an unannounced bombardment!

Hundreds of solid rounds, explosive shells, acid missiles and even a number of attack beetles descended onto the facility!

"Damn! The locusts have finally come for us! Why couldn't they have chosen to attack another complex?"

"Activate our interception systems! Take cover as much as possible and ride out the shelling. The locusts will certainly dispatch their melee mechs once the last shells have landed, so make sure that you're ready to stop their assault!"

Despite the brave-sounding words of the commanders, a lot of mech pilots and other personnel were already thinking about turning around and fleeing into the distance.

No one had ever beaten the locusts!

In fact, no one had ever come close enough to inflicting severe harm on them! They never attacked a target until they were absolutely certain they could obtain an overwhelming victory.

While most thugs weren't particularly clever, they possessed enough logic to figure out that being chosen as the next target meant that they hardly stood a chance!

However, no one ran, at least at first. The brotherhood and discipline within the allied gangs was quite tight. They all had a history stretching back centuries, and the mech pilots already made some psychological preparations.

The notoriety of the airfleet had already spread far and wide. It was no longer possible for Ves to catch anyone off-guard, but that did not mean that the abrupt bombardment was ineffective!

Even as various bioturrets and biomechs began to fire in the direction of the incoming shelling, not every projectile could be stopped.

Plenty of them still managed to get through and strike against biomechs, defensive structures and other valuable targets!

"These bastards! How did they know where to aim their guns? There has to be a target painter somewhere!"

While the frequency of volleys wasn't particularly high, the constant attacks were quickly eroding morale. The gang leaders and officers were doing their best to pump everyone up, but the rain of attacks continued uninterrupted!

The only relief was that the large-scale production complex offered plenty of hard cover. Alongside the huge, sturdy production buildings, the complex also offered plenty of underground tunnels and storage halls.

Once every mech began to shelter behind solid structures and underground spaces, the biomechs were no longer under lethal threat.

Two powerful gauss rounds shattered the roof of a production hall and slammed through a wall before landing several meters away from a sheltering biomech!

The powerful release of kinetic energy caused the nearby biomech to lose its footing and collapse onto the ground!

Even though the mech pilot inside had managed to escape getting hit, the immense firepower left an unforgettable impression on his mind!

The other mech pilots that had managed to reach the underground shelters grew less and less courageous. While they were very loyal to their bosses and gangs, it was very hard for them to maintain their fighting spirit in the face of overwhelming strength.

"When will this stop?"

"They'll run out of rounds eventually."

"Wait, they already stopped!"

The bombardment ceased as soon as the defending biomechs all reached cover. Only around thirty organic machines had succ.u.mbed from the attacks.

Some of the defenders suddenly made a frightening realization.

"Get out of the tunnels! Their melee mechs are coming! If we're all stuck underground, we'll be stuck in our caves!"

Biomechs poured out of the underground spaces and hastily deployed outside. Even as the mech pilots reluctantly started to prepare themselves for a tough fight, an enemy mech had already entered the base!

"Ahhh!"

"Our exit is blocked!"

"What are you doing? It's just a light mech. Push it out!"

"We can't!"

"Then shoot it before it passes through the tunnel!"

"It's too late!"

The Piranha Prime had gone ahead of the other attacks and boldly pushed its way through the tunnel, sinking its Unending daggers into the weak points of the opposing biomechs along the way.

Biomech after biomech fell in rapid succession despite the hard flesh or harder bone plating protecting their frames.

In contrast, hardly any attack managed to land on the fast and slim biomech. Even though Venerable Tusa was not in his best fighting condition at the moment, he was far from helpless against these ordinary mech pilots.

"Sc.u.m like you don't deserve to be free! I will send you all to hell where you belong!"

The prime mech's spiritual pressure combined with its suppressive glow was too much to bear for any mech pilot that entered its range.

Perhaps a highly-disciplined soldier may have been able to resist the superimposing effects, but the weaker-minded gang members were not so capable!

The only reason why a handful of them managed to retain control was because of their strong loyalty and long service. These veteran mech pilots tried their best to band together to limit the movement space of the Piranha Prime, but even in the confined underground halls, Venerable Tusa always managed to slip through the gaps!

In order to accelerate his killing pace, Tusa didn't bother to perform as many evasive maneuvers anymore.

Occasionally, swords and positron beams struck the surface of the mech. The Piranha Prime's weak resonance shield managed to negate some of those attacks. The solid Unending alloy that clad its surface blocked the rest!

"This light mech is unreal! Why didn't my attack deal any damage?"

"Stay away from it! It's got a freaky field effect that turns your mind into mush. Pull out your guns and shoot!"

No matter whether the biomechs attacked up close or at a distance, none of their attempts achieved any visible effect. Whatever confidence the defenders still held was rapidly draining away.

At some point, one of them made an astonishing observation. "The power of this foreign mech does not belong to a second-class machine. It's armor is too good despite being so thin. It's a first-class mech!"

The hearts of every surviving mech pilot briefly shook as they heard this conclusion.

From the way the Piranha Prime slaughtered so many second-class biomechs like cattle, the deceptively thin classical mech indeed seems like a first-class mech!

Even though its speed was not actually comparable to a true first-class light mech, its impervious armor along with its indestructive daggers was way beyond anything that a typical second-class light mech should possess!

Their already frayed morale completely evaporated at the moment. All thoughts of loyalty and obedience went out of the window.

"RUN!"

"We can't beat this first-class mech!"

The biomechs completely stopped coordinating their movements. Their chances of winning while cooperating was not big, but once their formation collapsed, they completely gave up their chance of stopping the Piranha Prime!

Venerable Tusa grinned like a shark. "Run, biomechs, run! No one can outpace my light mech!"

The Piranha Prime easily surged up to the exposed rears of the fleeing biomechs and easily cut them down with a couple of rapid stabs.

When the Piranha Prime began to reach a narrow tunnel, its progress nonetheless slowed down a bit because it had trouble moving past its latest victims.

It took too long for the disabled mechs to fall and allow for other mechs to pass through!

Still, Venerable Tusa was more than satisfied with the effect he achieved. In just a couple of minutes, he managed to slaughter 25 biomechs!

After hunting down so many organic machines in quick succession, he had become incredibly efficient at taking them down.

Tusa quickly swept his surroundings.

At this time, the main wave had already arrived and engaged with the shell-shocked defenders.

The disparity in skill, equipment, organization and most importantly morale meant the battle was already over before it began!

What undoubtedly helped was that the panicked transmissions about encountering a first-class mech had already spread. As soon as the Piranha Prime began to approach a nearby squad of enemy biomechs, their pilots shook so much that they didn't even think about putting up a fight!

"Screw the boss! Let's run!"

"We can't beat this first-class mech!"

The abrupt flight of a single mech squad sparked a chain reaction. The remaining defenders didn't want to bear the increased pressure. While they weren't necessarily selfish, they did not wish to lose their lives in order to facilitate the escape of craven deserters.

Even the leaders recognized that the fight was lost.

"Retreat! Split up and make your way back to our fallback point!"

The defending force completely disintegrated! The locusts devoured yet another prey!

Chapter 2860 - Straining Integration

The conquest of the biomech production complex was one of the greatest victories accomplished by the ground forces up to date!

The stellar performance of Venerable Tusa and the Piranha Prime played a critical role in collapsing the coalition of gangs.

If the prideful and cohesive base occupiers insisted on standing their ground, then they could have inflicted quite a lot of damage against their opposition.

Yet due to their crumbling morale, the criminals lacked the mental fortitude to put up a bitter struggle.

Holding on to the base wasn't worth losing all of their lives and biomes! Gangs were all opportunists by heart and only fought for material gains rather than a higher and more abstract purpose such as defending their state.

Ves and many people in the Larkinson Clan knew this, so they constructed and refined their tactics to specifically exploit this trait!

Even if General Verle wasn't present to implement this strategy himself, there were plenty of other military officers in the clan who attended his lectures and received his instruction.

The three mech doctrines of the Larkinson Clan were elite development, psychological warfare and maneuver warfare.

The tactics the Larkinsons and its allies utilized in their battles up to this point were based on these paradigms.

The immense success that they enjoyed so far showed that the mech doctrines truly fit the clan. While the older members of the clan were already familiar with these notions, the new recruits had all become impressed by the ease in which the Larkinsons mowed down their opposition!

Throughout the raiding runs, the Larkinsons never shut their doors. Plenty of refugees and desperate Lifers looking for safety decided it was a good idea to flock to the welcoming arms of the imposing airfleet.

Unlike many other armed forces on the planet, the eclectic airfleet never bullied the innocent or attacked the righteous.

Instead, their swords were squarely pointed at the organizations that had stained their hands with Lifer blood. These gangs and groups of depraved mech pilots added to the chaos overtaking the planet and thought that they had become invincible.

The saviors from the skies decisively proved these delusional criminals wrong!

Due to the relatively good reputation that this growing airfleet accrued, the Lifers who were sick, injured, hungry, overtaken by grief or simply desperate all flocked to the Larkinson Clan!

The influx of hopefuls had gotten so big that the Larkinsons were forced to become picky again. While Ves welcomed any chance at expanding his force, there was no room for burdens who couldn't contribute anything to the airfleet.

When he looked out at the thousands of hopeful citizens lining up in front of the main gates of the biomech production facility, Ves doubted that more than 1 percent of them would make it through.

Unless they brought something of immediate value such as biomechs or valuable expertise, taking them in only drained more resources.

Those that managed to get in all had to get up to speed on what it was meant to be a member of a clan that traced its roots to a humble third-rate state in an entirely different star sector.

Larkinson Network or not, the cultural differences were too great for the former Lifers to change their attitudes right away!

If Ves was able to bring the new recruits back to his expeditionary fleet, then he wouldn't have to worry so much about this problem.

The clan could break them up into small groups and distribute them throughout the sh.i.p.s of his fleet. By making sure that every Lifer was surrounded by lots of regular Larkinsons, the newcomers would rapidly conform to the clan because of constant exposure to a different way of life.

Together with the constant influence from the Golden Cat, it would only take a few months for these newcomers to be able to work seamlessly with other Larkinsons.

"It's too bad that this is not an option..." Ves sighed.

The scale of his airfleet grew so much that he had to accommodate thousands of Lifers. Some of them possessed vital skills such as the ability to service biomechs or crew a biovessel.

When the Lifers began to outnumber the foreigners from another star sector by two-to-one, the integration process stalled.

The more established Larkinsons weren't as capable in convincing the former Lifers to alter their views or convince them to embrace typical Larkinson values.

There were too many other former citizens of the LRA in their midst who each preferred to maintain as many views and habits of their home state as possible!

While Ves worried a lot about this issue, he had little choice but to let it slide. As long as the new recruits remained loyal, he reluctantly tolerated the quirks of the locals he absorbed.

Yet due to the fact that the initial batch of recruits consisted of some of the most desperate kind of refugees, not everyone was able to find their place in the Larkinson Clan. Under these difficult circumstances, the clan was unable to treat the clansmen as well as they should or invest enough attention to make sure they received the attention they needed.

On the day after the airfleet took over the large complex, an older man wearing a freshly-fabricated red-and-white uniform of the Larkinson Clan entered the main production complex. The armored guards stationed at the sides allowed him to pass without a fuss.

"Good day, Dr. Redmont."

"Good day to you too, fellow." Nigel Redmont-Larkinson smiled and nodded at a younger worker who directed a bot that carried a sack of beetle eggs."Where are you taking these eggs?"

"They're headed back to our airfleet. We don't have enough of them and there are way too many chores that need to be done that only beetles can do. It's better to have too many of them than the other way around."

"I see."

They chatted briefly but continued on with their duties. Nigel continued to pass through a number of corridors and halls.

Even though the Larkinsons didn't actually own this massive biomech production complex, their guards still manned the checkpoints.

The security procedures also become more cumbersome. Nigel went from passing through the checkpoints without interruption to being patted and scanned for any spy devices or sabotage equipment.

The guards and security systems found nothing, because Nigel did not carry anything suspicious to begin with. Aside from his uniform, he only carried a biocomm on his wrist and some inconsequential identity cards and authentication tools in his pockets.

He didn't even carry a single weapon!

Only after completing the entire routine was he allowed to enter the most valuable space in the building.

The enormous hall had ceilings that stretched over a hundred meters into the air and covered an area that was large enough to host a full mech company.

What was remarkable was that this was just one of several halls of the expansive production complex!

None of the preceding conquests of the Larkinson Clan matched the scale and sophistication of this production facility.

What was special about it was that every biomech that used to be in 'production' had been taken out of the feeder pools and left to dry out on the ground.

Each of these shriveling biomech embryos were sized differently. The more recent ones were as small as an aircar, while the ones that had almost finished their growth cycle only looked a bit skinnier than a finished biomech.

Yet as long as they weren't finished, they were of no use to the Larkinson Clan. They had to make way for damaged biomechs that urgently needed repairs and servicing. The feeder pools that used to grow new biomechs could also be employed to remedy existing mechs without employing too much effort.

This was one of the advantages of working with biomechs. The infrastructure required to grow them and repair them was cumbersome, but once the feeder pools were in place, they could perform all kinds of useful work without requiring too much manpower.

"Nigel!" Someone called. "Did you make some progress on finding the right formula to feed some of our biomechs?"

"I have developed some ideas last night. I will try them out and see whether the stubborn biomechs will finally absorb the nutrients."

Not every biomech was created equal. Different biomech designers adopted different kinds of organic matter in their work, and each of them had to be fed with a unique formula of feeding stock.

Many formulas were public, but there were some biomech models that required a special blend of nutrients.

Puzzling them out without access to the right documentation was like a difficult puzzle. While the chance of stumbling on the right formula was low, someone familiar with feeder stock could still perform lots of tests to see which nutrients reacted well to a specific biomech model and go from there.

As Nigel entered a secure control room, he approached the main workstation and slotted in a physical authentication device.

He gained total control of twenty feeder pools! With the borrowed authority at his disposal, he could drain the feeder pools, alter its temperature and change the formulas of the feeder stock.

Right now, a handful of feeder pools showed warning signs. The biomechs placed in these pools required urgent repairs, but they were immersed in the wrong formula of feeder stock!

The lack of correct substances and nutrients meant that their repair process proceeded a lot slower than it should.

The clan tasked a group of biomech designers to deduce the right formulas so that these stubborn biomechs would finally be able to enjoy the care they deserved.

Nigel began to tap his fingers across the projected interface with great familiarity. He concentrated on a specific feeder pool and completely changed its initial formula.

Once he finished, he checked the chosen materials and made sure their proportions were correct.

At this point, he should have asked his colleagues in the room to check over his proposal. Perhaps he overlooked something that might result in a problem if applied.

The old man didn't do that. Instead, his fingers moved to duplicate the formula to all of the other feeder pools, even the ones that were already working correctly!

Without giving him any time to question his actions, Nigel pressed the button to force the feeder pools in the current hall to use his new formula.

A strange beep sounded out from his console that requested for Nigel to authenticate himself again.

As he did so, he was just about to press the button that confirmed his choice, only to halt at the last second.

His finger only had to press a little lower, but for some reason a pressure built up in his mind that heavily discouraged him from going through.

"Ahh! What... is this?"

Was his guilty conscience acting up? That was impossible! His cause was just and his reasons were sound.

Yet despite all of that, Nigel suddenly felt uncomfortable in a way that caused him to become increasingly more concerned.

His outburst along with his frozen posture attracted the attention of other colleagues.

"Dr. Redmont, what is the matter? Wait, why do I feel..."

The other biomech designers and assorted experts all felt there was something wrong. Normally, they respected Nigel's knowledge and experience, but right now they felt that their supervisor was a threat for some reason!

"Am I sick?"

"I might have drunk the wrong coffee this morning."

Even as the feeling of wrongness continued to intensify, the Lifers in the control room had never received any relevant instructions. They were all confused instead vigilant!

During this time, Nigel gritted his teeth and tried to press the projected button with greater and greater force.

Though the strange mental pressure in his mind was strong, his determination to fulfill his mission was greater!

"HAAAAAAAA!"

After crying out his breath, Nigel forcefully managed to press the projected button!

A few seconds of silence passed before a change took place. Every feeder pool in the hall began to roil as the existing feeder stock drained away. Soon, a new formula poured inside the empty pools.

As soon as the new stock started to get into contact with biomechs, smoke started to sizzle from the pools.

The feeder stock weren't nurturing the organic machines. Instead, they were killing them! The corrosion was so great that toxic fumes were already beginning to escape the open pools!

"What is going on? The biomechs are corroding!"

"Reverse the latest procedure! Activate the failsafes!"

"It's Dr. Redmont! He's responsible for all of this! Stop him before he can do anything worse!!"