

Mech 2861

Chapter 2861 - Total Sincerity

"How could this happen?"

Commander Rivington — who recently received a promotion in order to increase his authority — helplessly shook his head.

"The feeder pools inside every growth hall are controlled by a centralized regulating system. In theory, only a single authorized supervisor is able to control every aspect about the pools. In practice, someone above the supervisor implemented many restrictions that limit abuse. In the case of filling the feeder pools with a corrosive formula, the central system should have refused to implement the new instructions unless someone with greater authorization arrived to inspect the situation."

"Then why did that not happen?" Ves asked as he continued to look upset.

"These safeguards never fired off because we hacked the central system, sir. We are not authorized to run this facility since we are not part of the original staff. Our only option to make use of the feeder pools is to break the security measures. During this process, our staff also inadvertently removed the additional safety precautions. We basically returned most options back to their factory setting, which is much more permissive than we'd like."

"I see."

They were working with borrowed hardware. There were bound to be problems. Ves just didn't think it could lead to such a major incident.

Ves and Commander Rivington stood behind an observation window that showed a typical interrogation room.

Just hours ago, a disaster had taken place inside the captured biomech production facility. A biomech designer who had recently joined the Larkinson Clan deliberately ruined twenty valuable organic machines by replacing their regular feeder stock with an alternative formula that just happened to be highly corrosive against many substances!

The fact that someone was able to circumvent every safeguard, escape the suspicion of several people and even overpower the compulsion from the Larkinson Network led to one of the first true acts of treason within the clan since its founding!

No Larkinson had ever acted so brazenly against the clan! Not only did the traitor rob the airfleet of twenty valuable biomechs, but also aroused a lot of unrest and uncertainty within the airfleet.

Ever since Ves started raiding, he and his fellow leaders took exceeding care in selecting their targets. They searched a lot of databases, inquired many people and performed multiple scouting attempts before they committed an attack.

With the help of these preparations, the Larkinson Clan and its allies always achieved a clear victory!

The constant successes not only caused the airfleet to gain momentum, but also raised the morale of the participants to an unsurpassed height!

Everyone believed that they could win every battle while doing no wrong! As long as they stuck to their current approach, the Larkinsons believed they could easily survive this crisis!

This was a far cry from before where their groundside presence was much smaller. With just a couple of dozen mechs at their disposal, they constantly had to worry about getting squashed by a stronger force.

Now, through the actions of a single traitor, Ves felt as if his forces had gone back to this state of mind. The material damage inflicted to his forces was much less significant than the drop in morale!

It would have been better if his forces maintained their high spirits, but at this moment, the d.e.s.i.r.e to continue their string of raids had diminished.

Instead, more people began to think that it would be much better if they just stayed put and settled for their current conquest. After all, a full-sized biomech production facility already provided them with most of the amenities they needed.

Ves was very annoyed with this growing sentiment. He wanted to conquer more facilities! How else would he be able to gain more loot and rescue more highly-skilled biotech experts who might accept the offer to join the Larkinson Clan?

As long as the civil war continued to be fought across the surface of Prosperous Hill VI, he could continue to perform raids with his airfleet!

Ves peered through the observation window. He did not have a good impression of the culprit on the other side of the window. Despite Dr. Nigel Redmont's obvious guilt, the older man smiled and looked as if he did not do anything wrong!

"What do you know about the accused?"

"He's a mediocre biomech designer, I would say." Commander Rivington said. "Instead of designing biomechs, he took on a lower job of a biomech technician and started to work his way up. The reason why we put him in charge of the feeder pools was because he has a lot of experience in optimizing feeder stocks for different biomech models. Dr.

Redmont knows more about feeder stock than anyone else in our clan, so he was the natural candidate to take full control of the hacked regulating system."

His clansmen had been too complacent. Even though Ves put a lot of stock in the Larkinson network, that did not mean it was infallible.

He always insisted on being careful and not relying on trust to assume that everything would go right.

"Have you found any clue whether Dr. Redmont is a member of the ultralifers or another extreme organization?"

"His record is clean. We have not found any mention that he belongs to some dangerous organization, but then again, records can often be wrong or incomplete."

"That's true. I guess we won't be able to find answers until we ask."

"The suspect might not choose to answer."

"Then we have to make him talk."

Commander Rivington remained in the observation room while Ves stepped out and moved to the entrance of the interrogation room.

Someone else had already arrived in advance. Samandra Avikon smiled serenely at Ves as her glowing reptilian eyes blinked in an unnerving fashion.

"Greetings, patriarchs. Ill tidings have come. I wish to apologize to you. My men and I should have scrutinized our fellow Lifers more. To profane our holy biomechs is a grave offense. These great machines should meet their end on the battlefield, not in the rear where they have suffered betrayal from their own side!"

Ves surprisingly agreed with her sentiments. While he felt that many of the stances held by Spiritus Sancti were rather kooky, their respect for biomechs closely matched his own. While they were rather misguided when it came to worshipping biomechs as blessed creations, they were not that bad for the most part.

Up until now, this assumption held true. Dr. Redmont managed to pass through Goldie's initial inspection, but was still able to execute a nefarious plot while remaining undiscovered until he had reached the final step!

This was both remarkable and deeply concerning. Ves was already aware that Goldie wasn't always effective, but her blindspots appeared to be greater than he initially assumed!

"Nitaa, book, please."

His bodyguard passed the Larkinson Mandate into his armored hands. Ves concentrated his mind a bit and began to commune with the Golden Cat.

Nyaaaaa....

"It's not your fault. Not entirely." He whispered. "We are all new at this. Our current circumstances are anything but ideal, and we were truly pushing our luck by recruiting so many dubious figures into our clan."

After soothing the ancestral spirit, Ves turned his attention back to Samandra.

The woman waited calmly for Ves to proceed.

While the former priestess of Spiritus Sancti had always been dutiful since she and her fellow cultists joined the clan, Ves couldn't help but grow a bit suspicious.

Together with other risk factors, Ves realized that he had been dangerously complacent around someone who was very new but already gained a measure of authority within the clan!

Even though she used to be part of a religious cult in a supposedly secular state, her beliefs earned a lot of respect from the Lifers.

In fact, it might be a bit inaccurate to state that the Lifers were secularists. Their strong obsession towards biotechnology was practically a religion in itself!

Their behavior was too irrational to Ves. If they were truly respectful towards science, then they should have adopted a more sober perspective towards biotechnology!

"What is the matter, Patriarch Ves?" Samandra looked concerned. Her glowing eyes softened. "You seem troubled."

"Why do you serve the Larkinson Clan?"

"I have already told you the answer." She replied in the face of his suspicion. "The works that you have presented to us are proof that biomechs can only prosper at your hand. While we still hold great respect towards the Life Research Association's biomech industry, centuries have passed without resulting in a significant breakthrough. We know enough about the local biomech designers to know that none of them possess the brilliance that is required to elevate their creations to the next level! Their products always fall short of our ideal!"

"And you think that I'm different?"

"We know you are different." Samandra grinned. "We have heard the stories about you. There are numerous veterans within your clan who are willing to share their

perspectives on your many exploits. We have patiently heard how you fought against gods, called upon blessings, made mechs alive and provided a path to transcendence to your clansmen! The quaint group of people called Ylvainans have been particularly forthcoming."

Ves g.r.o.a.n.e.d. "The Ylvainans possess different beliefs from yours. Why do you even listen to them? They don't even like biomechs, I think!"

"Different paths lead to the same destination. While we have our disagreements, we are still fellow Larkinsons. We have also managed to gain an understanding with the Hexers. Whether they are Penitent Sisters or Glory Seekers, we acknowledge the divinity of the Superior Mother. She is far beyond an average biomech!"

What the hell was he listening to? Ves felt as if he was going mad! These stupid assumptions made no sense, yet Samandra sounded as if she did not doubt anything she just said!

At least he knew she was sincere. While she was spouting all of her nonsense, Ves carefully observed her while holding the Larkinson Mandate.

This granted him an especially intimate connection to the Larkinson Network, which happened to maintain a direct connection to her mind.

Since this connection bypassed any external barriers and disguises, it was practically impossible for Samandra to hide her true intentions from him! If she harbored any ambiguous or ill intent, then Ves would be able to spot it even if Goldie couldn't!

Yet... all Ves managed to sense from Samandra's mind was complete sincerity. She truly meant it when she said that she had alluded that she had turned her back against the LRA. She was also completely serious when she stated her willingness to follow him due to his ability to elevate biomechs to a higher level!

It would have been easier if Samandra was more similar to Dr. Redmont. If this was the case, then Ves could have acted on his discomfort towards Spiritus Sancti and kicked every member of the cult from his clan!

As it was... Ves could not justify this decision. Mere dislike was not a reason to deprive any Larkinson of his or her identity.

This was why he decided to drop the matter.

"Let's go inside." He tiredly sighed. "I'm curious to hear what Dr. Redmont has to say."

Chapter 2862 - Guardian of Purity

When Ves, Samandra and Nitaa entered the interrogation room, Dr. Nigel Redmont sat at attention as if he was an eager schoolboy.

The knowledgeable biomech designer even maintained a pleasant smile.

"Mr. Larkinson, what a pleasant surprise. I did not expect you to visit me in person. It is an honor."

Ves was not amused by the cheek shown by the traitor. His initial impression was that Dr. Redmont did not feel any guilt for what he had done!

Since Ves continued to keep his hold on the Larkinson Mandate, he felt a disturbing degree of similarity between Dr. Redmont and Priestess Samandra.

Both of them were completely sure of their purpose. Ves only sensed this degree of certainty from fanatical believers.

As Ves continued to examine the accused, he confirmed his suspicions on how the Golden Cat managed to overlook Dr. Redmont's nefarious intentions.

The plain truth of the matter was that the saboteur didn't regard his act as betrayal against a clan he had sworn an oath of loyalty!

How that was possible, Ves didn't know. No amount of logic could justify such an act while staying loyal to the Larkinson Clan, so the only other possibility was that Dr. Redmont probably adopted a twisted argument to justify his crimes!

Ves stepped forward and lowered his armored form onto one of the reinforced chairs. His Unending Regalia wasn't the most comfortable when he was in a sitting position. He neglected to account for some factors when he designed and handcrafted his personal armor.

Samandra had a much easier time. She didn't appear to be afraid of getting caught up in explosions and other hazards as she continued to wear a robe that reflected her 'former' identity as a priestess.

As the woman took her seat, Ves carefully studied the traitor to observe his reaction to her presence. Samandra was a well-known figure to the Lifers within the Larkinson Clan.

Evidently, Dr. Redmont liked what Samandra stood for. Their beliefs were similar enough that he did not hold any animosity towards her. In fact, he did not hold any contempt towards Ves either.

How was he able to maintain these opinions while inflicting obvious harm to the Larkinson Clan? This didn't make any sense!

"Dr. Redmont." Ves slowly began. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fulfilled, sir. I accomplished my goal. I also feel regret."

"How so?"

"I regret that I was only able to eliminate just twenty biomechs. If I had the ability, I would have preferred to ruin every biomech in the hands of the clan!"

What a madman! Ves could hardly believe that Dr. Redmont was that gutsy. The Larkinsons possessed more than 400 biomechs even after 20 of them got ruined.

His industrious clansmen had managed to get numerous biomechs to work that originated from the inventory of the production facility.

More biomechs were in the process of getting fixed. The former occupants of this site had left plenty of organic wrecks behind. Some of them did not require too much effort to repair, most notably the biomechs whose c.o.c.kpits got stabbed by Venerable Tusa.

Ves let out a deep breath. "Please help me understand your motivation. Why harm our clan by depriving us of valuable combat assets?"

"I did not intend to do any harm."

"Well, you sure did! More lives will be lost as a result of your reckless actions! Do you even care about the consequences your actions have wrought?"

"It is exactly because of the consequences that I proceeded with enacting my plan." Dr. Redmont calmly replied. "While I acknowledge the immediate harm that my actions have sparked, in the bigger picture what I did will save us all! I have saved our clan from damnation!"

"DON'T ACT AS IF YOU ARE A LARKINSON!" Ves lost control for a moment! "Your acts directly harmed our ability to defend ourselves! Not only that, but you also damaged everyone's confidence in our ability to survive and thrive."

"I regret this outcome, but I would have made the same decision if I returned to the same point in time."

Ves wanted to palm his face. The delusion was too strong in Dr. Redmont. He hated talking with these kinds of people the most.

"Samandra?"

"Yes, patriarch?"

"Please take over. I need to understand why Dr. Redmont destroyed our assets."

"Certainly, sir."

The orange glow of her eyes intensified. Her stare became so intense that Dr. Redmont finally became a bit uncomfortable!

"Nigel. Please explain your position on biomechs to the Larkinson Patriarch."

The traitor did not immediately answer. He took his sweet time to formulate his answer.

Over thirty seconds passed before he was ready to explain himself.

"Biomechs are great. The Larkinson Clan is also great. However, it is wrong to combine the two. The products of the Life Research Association belong exclusively to the state and its people. As much as Mr. Larkinson has the potential to design a revolutionary biomech, it is completely wrong for him to take part in this field. He and his Larkinsons are not Lifers, so they are not entitled to touch the exclusive providence of a blessed state!"

Samandra's glowing eyes sparked. "I see. I recognize you now. Before you became a Larkinson, you hailed from the Biomech Purity Movement, am I correct?"

The coy smile on Dr. Redmont's face was an answer in itself.

Ves coughed. "Please tell me what this Biomech Purity Movement is all about."

"It is a... small and obscure organization in the LRA that wishes to keep biomechs as pure as possible. Spiritus Sancti had some minor dealings with it, but we soon drifted apart due to differences in opinion."

"You are not entirely correct, priestess. The BPM is not confined to the LRA. It is a galaxy-wide movement. It has supporters from every state that has embraced every facet of biotechnology. If all goes well, the movement will spread to the Red Ocean in time if it hasn't already."

"That still doesn't entirely answer why Dr. Redmont destroyed our mechs." Ves complained. "Can the two of you make sense for once?!"

"I was getting there, patriarch. While our understanding of the BPM is not complete, we are familiar with the tenets. First, its members believe that biomechs are great. Second, they believe that biomechs that are designed, sold or used by people who do not come from a state like the LRA is a travesty."

"You are wrong again, priestess. The BPM does not frown upon people who embrace biomechs, even if they come from a non-biotech-oriented state. The movement just

states that they must better be committed to biotechnology. Dabblers and indecisive people who want to have it both ways are completely misguided! Any half-hearted embrace of biomechs will only tarnish their dignity and prevent them from showing their full value. It is better for them if they are deprived of their biomechs! They will not have the opportunity to misuse them. I did the Larkinson Clan a favor!"

Ves' frown grew deeper and deeper as he listened to this barely comprehensible justification.

"Let me get this straight. You love biomechs, but believe they should only be utilized by Lifers and people who are similar to them. Larkinsons like us don't qualify because we are mainly committed to using classical mechs, is that correct?"

"That is exactly so! Biomechs must remain pure, and the foul and unclean hands of our clan will only taint them with their filth. Do you hear it, Mr. Larkinson? Do you hear the cries of pain and suffering that emanates from the biomechs that you have stolen? Our clan is torturing them. I had no choice but to liberate them from the torment that your clansmen have subjected them to. Not only have I saved those 20 biomechs, I have lessened the sins of our clan! Now that we have fewer biomechs in our possession, our crimes are reduced!"

Ves wanted to wrap his armored fingers around Dr. Redmont's neck and squeeze as hard as he could manage. This crackpot doomed himself and damaged the fighting strength of his clan for one of the stupidest, nonsensical arguments imaginable!

'You IDIOT!' He roared. "Purity in this context doesn't exist! Mechs are mechs. Biomechs are biomechs. Whether they come in the form of metal or flesh, they both fulfill the same purpose! Biomechs are not special compared to classical mechs. They are just different! It does not matter at all if their users have embraced biotechnology as their primary tech base. Even if it does, we have thousands of diligent and knowledgeable clansmen who originated from this state! You are one of them! Shouldn't that ensure that our biomechs will still remain pure?"

Dr. Redmont shook his head. "You do not comprehend, Mr. Larkinson. Purity is an exceedingly difficult condition to attain. From beginning to end, biomechs can only remain pure if every person involved in their creation and use are completely devoted to biotechnology. Not a single person or organization in this chain can be allowed to interfere. While the people you have referred to are relatively sincere, our clan as a whole is anything but pure due to the existence of you who have no roots in the LRA!"

A single drop of blood could taint an entire pool. This was one of the most poisonous aspects about purity. Obsessing over it forced people to hold to an impossibly high standard.

"So that's it?" Ves asked in a dissatisfied tone. "Your entire justification for destroying our biomechs is because we don't 'deserve' to use them. You also wanted to 'free' our biomechs from our impure handling."

"That is correct."

Ves banged the tabletop.

"WHAT ABOUT OUR NEEDS!? Have you ever thought we don't care about this dumb notion on purity and just want to strengthen our military power with any asset we could get our hands on? Besides, as much as I respect your professional qualifications, no one is more able to judge what living mechs feel than I. From my own inspections, I have never encountered any biomech that has clearly been mistreated!"

"You are wrong." The traitor looked disappointed at Ves. "While I acknowledge that our fellow clansmen have not intentionally mistreated our biomechs, good intentions are not enough to maintain their purity. Besides, did you forget about the biomech embryos that you have cruelly pulled out of their feeding pools? You have killed or stunted the growth of unborn biomechs! You misappropriated their w.o.m.bs in order to repair our tainted organic machines!"

Ves personally issued the order to pull those incomplete biomechs out of the biomech production facility's feeder pools. It was a waste to leave them to their current purpose when they could have been utilized to repair the battle damage of lots of existing biomechs!

Unfortunately, Dr. Redmont didn't see it that way.

"I have enough." Ves abruptly stood up. "I understand your motivation, even if it is completely twisted. There is no point in questioning any further because I doubt I will obtain anything useful or coherent from your follow-up answers."

"What will you do with me, sir?"

"As much as I wish to pull out my gun and shoot your head, I should allow our clan to enact its own rules concerning treason. Do note that treachery during a life-threatening crisis situation is vastly different from performing sabotage in peacetime. As a result, the trial will become much harsher and the punishment may be more severe than you expect."

"I am ready to bear any responsibility for my actions. I know that I am right, so I am sure I will be rewarded for my actions. I did our clan a favor!"

"The only favor you have done to our clan is exposing yourself early!"

Chapter 2863 - First Trial

Nearly every person who belonged to the airfleet gathered on an open field. Mechs and biomechs vigilantly patrolled the perimeter and plenty of guards on foot were present in order to maintain order.

The faces of many of the gathered Larkinsons and other people were grim. News of the successful sabotage attempt had already spread and plenty of them looked upset!

"I always knew the people of the Biomech Purity Movement possessed rotten brains."

"Nigel Redmont shouldn't be the only purist in our clan. We need to root out anyone who acts suspiciously."

"Does the Larkinson Clan maintain the death penalty?"

The low conversation slowly died down as a procession of individuals walked up to the podium erected in the front of the field.

Real banners depicting the colors and symbol of the Golden Cat surrounded the podium. The matter taking place today was undeniably related to the clan.

Ves, holding his Larkinson Mandate, strode forward under armor while surrounded by his Honor Guard.

"Meow."

Lucky proudly padded after Ves with his tail raised high.

Venerable Tusa and Venerable Jannzi arrived next. They stood a short distance away from Ves while wearing a formal but martial looking ensemble that consisted of a ceremonial robe draped over a solid suit of light combat armor.

While their force of wills usually generated a considerable degree of friction against each other, this time they were remarkably docile. The impassive faces of the expert pilots indicated that they were keeping their emotions under tight control.

Afterwards, the 'star' of the show finally came into view. A squad of stern-looking guards escorted a simple uniformed Larkinson forward. The crowd immediately recognized Dr. Redmont's face from the images that people had shared to each other.

"The traitor is here!"

"Kill him! Teach him a lesson for destroying our biomechs!"

"I volunteer as executioner!"

Commander Casella Ingvar, who presided over the situation, stepped forward and amplified her voice.

"SILENCE! We will have an order here today! We are Larkinsons. Act like it! Unlike the unrestrained thugs and misguided fools that are rampaging outside. We are gathered here to witness justice, not anarchy. Trust in our institutions. Despite the short time that has passed since you have entered our clan, you must always take care to act in an honorable manner. Our names are worthless if we ignore the rules at our convenience!"

Her words had a lot of effect. The Larkinson Clan was a martial organization that heavily emphasized honor. Even though many people had slightly different ideas of what honorable conduct actually looked like, the most prominent leaders and warriors served as excellent role models.

Right now, aside from leaders such as Ves and Commander Casella, the heroes that many of the new recruits looked up to were Venerable Tusa and Venerable Jannzi!

Though both of them diverged over many matters, their trueblood heritage ensured that they acted as honorably as the Larkinson expert pilots of the past!

Ves was very glad he brought the two of them to the surface. Venerable Joshua was strong and nice, but his lack of military experience meant he was much looser and less formal than his peers.

Perhaps she would have thrived under this situation, but her personality would never be able to inspire much discipline from the troops!

What Ves needed the most were ways to accelerate the integration of all of the former Lifers in the clan. The existence of nutjobs like Dr. Redmont woke him up to the fact that there might be hundreds of other dubious figures out there who were only marginally less crazy!

Perhaps they might not pull off a damaging stunt right away, but given time they could easily abuse their access to important systems!

Several people including Ves feared that Dr. Redmont's act was not an isolated incident. With all of the unstable personalities that his clan had hastily absorbed, it was not ludicrous to think that there might be dozens of timebombs hiding within the ranks!

Rooting them all out was too exhaustive. The best method to address this problem was boosting the integration process, and what better way to do so than to host a large event?

Pretty much every Larkinson, both old and new, had gathered in this field. Even the clansmen who had to patrol the perimeter with their mechs were still tuning in to the proceedings.

Ves knew that major events like these would have a major effect on those who took part in it. These impactful moments had the potential to set trends that could determine how the clan would deal with similar incidents in the future.

This was the power of precedents.

Since the Larkinson Clan was too new, it was still in the process of building up its traditions and customs. Many gaps still existed that slowly had to be filled up over time.

One of the primary reasons why he split off from the old family in the first place was to escape the stupid rules and stubborn old coots who clung to them! While the downside to this was that he had to start over, at least he was behind the helm of the ship this time. He could steer his vessel in every direction he liked!

Once the guards hauled Dr. Redmont to the front and center of the raised podium, Ves knew it was time to start the show.

He stepped forward, attracting everyone's attention to his armored and gallant form.

He polished his Unending Regalia beforehand and applied a shiny coating to make himself look more presentable. The Unending alloy's natural dark appearance made the modest red and golden accents look more pronounced.

The red cape that depicted the golden emblem of the Larkinson Clan billowed majestically behind his back.

This was actually a hidden stage trick. Ves had installed a hidden antigrav module beneath the podium and programmed it to project a weak, rippling forcefield over his body. The simulated wind force that resulted from his effort just happened to flap his cape dynamically enough to generate plenty of movement while not making it seem as if he was in the middle of a hurricane!

From the respect and admiration he saw in the gazes of the audience, Ves knew that his effort paid off. Sometimes, it was the little details that sold a performance.

"My fellow Larkinsons." He began with his familiar address. "I have summoned you here to witness a grave but necessary event. Since many of you are still new to our clan, I wished I could have assembled you for a happier reason. Sadly, our current state makes it untenable to hold any celebrations. We must still work hard and pool all of our strengths in order to escape this wartorn planet. Only when we have reached our true homes will we be able to hold a proper welcome celebration."

A lot of Larkinsons looked forward to that. It didn't matter whether they used to regard Prosperous Hill VI as their home. In a matter of weeks, the planet had become unrecognizable to them. Now, only the promise of living on a calm and well-regulated ship that was run completely by Larkinsons could give them peace.

"I am sad to say that this promised future may be further out of reach than before. Due to a selfish act, an unwarranted act of sabotage took place! The sudden loss of twenty powerful biomechs is not a trivial case of destruction of clan property. The true damage that has resulted from this incident is the weakening of our combat strength. In concrete terms, this means we will suffer more deaths and achieve less gains! An attack on our mechs during a time and place of active fighting is nothing less than harming our fellow Larkinsons!"

The emotions of the crowd quickly flared up! While the clansmen didn't shout any outrageous statements this time, Ves could easily sense how much animosity they held towards Dr. Redmont.

While Ves did not choose to channel Goldie or any other design spirit this time, he still held the Larkinson Mandate in his grasp. This gave him an excellent real-time grasp of the emotional reactions of his men. This resulted in a powerful advantage where he was able to tailor his tone and approach on the fly in order to achieve even greater persuasion.

For his part, Dr. Redmont did not exhibit any measure of guilt, and that made the crowd even angrier!

"Doctor Nigel Redmont-Larkinson." Ves turned and spoke to the unrepentant traitor. "You stand accused of high treason against the clan you have sworn an oath to serve. How do you plead?"

"My answer remains the same, Mr. Larkinson. I did our clan a favor by sparing the tainted biomechs from your use. As long as the Larkinson Clan has not fully embraced biotechnology, it does not deserve to field biomechs! These holy machines must stay pure, and the best way to do so is to keep them in the hands of true Lifers who are truly worthy to handle these blessings!"

"You rotten purists!"

"We used to be Lifers, you idiot! We know exactly how to take care of biomechs!"

Ves shook his head. "As your fellow clansmen already show, you are wrong, Dr. Redmont. Just because you believe you have saved our clan doesn't mean it is actually true. In fact, it is the opposite! Any Larkinson blood that is spilled as a result of your sabotage will forever be laid at your feet. You are not a savior except in your own imagination. In reality, you are a traitor, and your name will forever be associated as one in our records!"

This time, Dr. Redmont's confident demeanor began to crack a bit. It seemed that everyone's inability to acknowledge his righteousness was starting to bother him. He did not expect to receive so little support!

"Mr. Larkinson... let me explain more clearly. The purity of biomechs in our possession are—"

"SHUT UP!" Ves abruptly barked.

He waved his arm in a theatrical manner. This activated a preset command that automatically muffled Dr. Redmont's voice. The traitor had been muted!

"Perhaps you are under the impression that you still have the opportunity to argue your case. This is false. This is not a conventional trial. This is a court-martial that takes place in an active war zone where we are subjected to martial law. You have already presented your arguments to us behind closed doors. Now, our tribunal is here in order to present its verdict and issue its sentence.

Dr. Redmont widened his eyes. He did not expect that the Larkinson Clan would expedite the trial so quickly. He at least wanted to gain more time to present his case to the audience so that he could inspire them to follow his example!

Ves knew this quite well. There was no way that Dr. Redmont would be declared innocent with all of the overwhelming evidence against him. What was truly worrisome was whether the traitor was able to use his speaking moment as an opportunity to spread even greater discord!

To prevent this disastrous outcome, the trial left little opportunity for the delusional saboteur to address the public.

Besides, Ves couldn't be bothered to conduct a lengthy trial. He wanted to achieve a short but powerful impact before ordering his clansmen to return to their duties.

A lot of work still needed to be done and Ves wasn't finished with his raiding spree yet. Even if he lost twenty biomechs, he still retained enough combat power to aim at another ambitious target!

Chapter 2864 - Passing Judgement

Though Ves wanted to rush the trial as fast as possible, he did not want to turn it into a forgettable moment.

He wanted to sear this solemn occasion into the minds of his clansmen, especially the recent recruits who might hold thoughts that were just as deviant!

This was why he cut this public portion short. There was no need for him to expound on what Dr. Redmont had done and he did not want to give the accused a podium to present his twisted logic.

Rather than waste the attention span of his clansmen on irrelevant speeches and protocol, Ves decided to just get to the point straight away.

He turned to the pair of expert pilots that had remained still up until now. When Ves nodded in their direction, the expert pilots stepped to the center, thereby drawing everyone's attention to the best mech pilots in their midst.

This time, the field had turned so silent that Ves could clearly hear Lucky's tail tapping against the surface of the podium.

"Behave."

"Meow!"

Though Lucky didn't think much of expert pilots, the rest of the crowd thought differently. Hero worship of expert pilots was a universal phenomenon in human space.

It didn't matter if the LRA embraced biomechs instead of regular mechs. Its citizens still looked up to their version of expert pilots with just as much enthusiasm!

Venerable Tusa no longer looked as casual and at ease as his usual self. His internal turmoil along with the need to preside over this serious case caused him to exude a grave demeanor.

The clansmen who looked up to him, both figuratively and literally, started to turn grave as well. The air became heavier as everyone figured out that Venerable Tusa didn't have anything good to say today.

"I find myself in a position that I never wanted to occupy." Tusa began to say. "Since the founding of our clan, no one had ever acted this far out of line. When I advanced to my current rank, the patriarch told me that one of my new responsibilities was to preside as a judge over serious crimes. To be honest, I scratched my head when I initially tried to wrap my head around this requirement. Why me? Why not leave these complex legal issues to the lawyers and the judges with fancy legal degrees?"

That was a good question. While the Larkinsons definitely hired a small body of lawyers and judges, they were not here right now.

"It's only now that I think I got the gist of it. As much as I hope that every Larkinson would try to behave, crime is a human condition. Everyone is different, and that is something that should be celebrated, but not every deviation is good. When an individual such as Dr. Redmont comes along, I cannot stand by when I have the capability to step forward and help our clan in my own way."

Venerable Tusa turned his robed and armored body around and stepped closer to the suspect.

The biomech designer was still muted, so the only way he could show his apprehension was by changing his expression.

"Nigel Redmont." Tusa spoke in an intense voice as his gaze pinned the accused into place. "I have already heard what you did and how you justified your actions. Do you still believe you acted in the best interests of the Larkinson Clan? Do you still cling to the notion that you have made us all stronger and better by getting rid of some of our biomechs?"

Venerable Tusa frowned deeper. "Have you ever asked your superiors or our patriarch whether you should destroy our mechs? Have you ever approached the designated mech pilots of those biomechs and inquired whether they would like it if you deprived them of their ability to defend our clan? HAVE YOU EVER ASKED THE THOUSANDS OF DEFENSELESS LARKINSONS IN OUR MIDST WHETHER THEY THINK IT'S FINE IF YOU STRIP THEM OF SOME OF THEIR DEFENSES?!"

This was the first time that Ves saw his cousin becoming so emotional! The doubts swelling in the expert pilot's mind accumulated to such an extent that he felt the need to vent his frustrations!

"You didn't, obviously." Tusa guessed. "You asked no one because you knew they would have different thoughts. Why else did you keep your intentions secret? The fact that you made sure to keep your plan under wraps until it was too late is proof that a part of you recognizes that what you have done is wrong. Am I correct? Do you feel guilty, Dr. Redmont?!"

The muted prisoner frantically shook his head. Whatever he felt in his heart, it was clear that he did not want his actions to be interpreted in a negative light!

Venerable Tusa looked disappointed. "You are no different from the people who are terrorizing the populace outside. You share the same sins as those who have embraced the chaos and pursued their hedonistic desires over the welfare of others."

The expert pilot grew emotional. "Just like every other Larkinson, we entrusted you with freedom and responsibility. We only ask that you do your job, uphold the expectations of our clan and care for your fellow clansmen. You did none of that, Dr. Redmont. You did not make use of the freedom that we have granted you. You misused it. You trod on the freedom and safety of many other clansmen with your act of sabotage. You acted SELFISHLY!"

He spat out that last word with such vehemence that his force of will pulsed aggressively at Dr. Redmont! The traitor winced from the tirade!

"The choices you have and the freedom you enjoy in our clan does not mean you are allowed to impose your strange views on others. How would you like it if someone thinks you're better off dead? According to your logic, any Larkinson should be able to

shoot you in the head, just because you don't think that infringing on other people's rights is wrong! DO YOU UNDERSTAND HOW WRONG THAT SOUNDS?!"

Venerable Tusa brutally exposed Dr. Redmont's selfishness. By stripping the subject of his righteous veneer, the impressive mech pilot of the Piranha Prime removed any sympathy that anyone might harbor.

Not only that, Tusa also voiced his disapproval of others who might hold similar intentions. This served as a powerful deterrent to those who also thought about acting behind everyone's backs!

"My opinion on this case is already set." He spoke with a tone of finality while turning around and walking back. "Dr. Nigel Redmont-Larkinson is guilty of high treason. Only an enemy of the Larkinson Clan would go as far as unilaterally destroying a significant amount of working mechs in the middle of a warzone. Although the word 'Larkinson' is attached to his name, he is no kin of mine. He is the enemy, and should be treated as such."

With those harsh words, Venerable Tusa finished his piece.

If it wasn't unseemly for him to do so, Ves would have clapped. Tusa did brilliantly! Even if he was not a trained or experienced public speaker, expert pilots were always good at expressing their will.

Venerable Jannzi's turn came next. She moved to the center and occupied the same spot that Tusa had just vacated.

She directed a stern glance at Dr. Redmont.

"My cousin Tusa has already asked some of the questions that I intended to bring up. I still wish to follow up on some matters, though. Let me begin with this. Did you ever consider bringing your proposal to your boss or fellow workers in order to gain their support?"

Dr. Redmont reluctantly shook his head. Obviously, the clan had already ascertained that he had never shared his plan to anyone.

Venerable Jannzi's disapproval increased. "Do you think that our Larkinson Clan is an organization without rules? We have an entire body of laws. Just like the Life Research Association and any other state, we formulated rules and codified them into laws because their absence permits behavior that endangers our clansmen! While I can not recite any specific clan laws that pertain to this current case, I am certain that there are some in place that prohibits what you have done. Destroying any biomechs without possessing the necessary permission or authority is a crime in the LRA! What makes you think our clan is any different?"

Dr. Redmont urgently wanted to speak, but not a single sound escaped from his strained throat.

She shook her head. "You are an intelligent man. You wouldn't have graduated with one of the most difficult degrees that people can obtain in the LRA. Yet for all of your intelligence, you knew that our rules forbid you from arbitrarily destroying our defensive weapons, but you did so anyway! Our clan is not a dictatorship, Dr. Redmont. If you truly think it is right for us to get rid of our biomechs, then convince us! You should have followed our legal pathways to push your views. If you are truly right, then you will have no problem attracting enough support! If you fail to convince enough Larkinsons to go along with your plan, then perhaps the problem does not lie with the clan, but you! Have you ever considered this possibility?!"

The doomed suspect shook his head. It would have been worse if Dr. Redmont nodded. That would have indicated that he definitely knew that there was a more proper method to 'purify' the biomechs in the hands of the Larkinsons, but rejected it in favor of an illegal solution!

"No one in our clan can agree on everything." Venerable Jannzi lectured, more to the audience than the suspect she was judging. "I do not entirely approve of how our patriarch runs our clan, for example. Does that mean that I should ignore his authority and impose my own views on you? No! The rules exist for a reason. No one is allowed to act arbitrarily, especially not when it affects other Larkinsons. Our laws are meant to protect us from each other. While acting within their confines does not always mean you get your way, everyone can at least feel reassured that they are protected!"

She was harping quite a lot about rules and laws. Ves became more intrigued as he listened. He gained a greater insight into her mentality. That would doubtlessly be very helpful the next time he got into another argument with the stubborn expert pilot!

"This case is simple to me. Nigel Redmont broke our laws. His actions, which he undertook without even bothering to gather support, led to real material damage to our clan in a situation where we can least afford it. Any motivation or justification is not that relevant to me. What I care about are concrete actions and concrete results. Since Dr. Redmont has deliberately rejected every legal or permissible avenue to implement his idea, he cannot even claim ignorance that his intentions are wrong. He is representative of the worst kind of evil, the unrepentant devil who believes he is right when the rest of the galaxy thinks he is wrong!"

Ves eagerly nodded his head. What a good speech! Venerable Jannzi did not do any worse than Venerable Tusa. The audience fully accepted her clear and simple reasoning!

Jannzi pinned Dr. Redmont with one last glare.

"Although I do not feel worthy to pass judgement on fellow clansmen, the harm you have done to us is so great that I feel no remorse in deciding upon your fate. My opinion is that Dr. Redmont is guilty of high treason, and other crimes. You are a threat to your fellow Larkinsons. While I am not a fan of retribution, I strongly believe that we must set an example in order to make it clear that breaking our laws is not permissible! As far as I am concerned, anyone who has gone far enough to commit treason does not deserve a second chance!"

The expert pilots had spoken!

Chapter 2865 - A Little Mercy

Ves quietly thanked his luck that the 'judges' hadn't diverged on their verdict. Both Jannzi and Tusa declared Nigel Redmont guilty, which meant that the clan was spared from an awkward situation where its expert pilots publicly disagreed on a very contentious issue!

While he maintained a fair amount of confidence that Jannzi and Tusa would have no sympathy for Redmont, he did not dare to assume the guilty verdict was already set in stone. Expert pilots tended to think differently from other people and some of their thoughts could be quite extreme!

Fortunately, everything went according to plan so far. With Dr. Redmont subjected to a strong silencing field that not only neutralized his voice, but also scrambled his lips, he was completely deprived of the opportunity to disrupt the proceedings!

Ves learned from his own past. Back when the Ylvainans subjected him to a tribunal, their greatest mistake was to give him an opportunity to speak. By allowing him to address his words to the entire population of the Ylvaine Protectorate, he completely hijacked public opinion and set events into motion that did not go in the favor of his enemies!

While Ves didn't believe that the traitor could talk his way out of a guilty verdict, who knew what nonsense he might spew.

The extreme ideas of delusional fanatics were like poison. They harmed anyone else who listened to them. Unless the listeners possessed a grounded mindset or good critical thinking skills, it was very easy to get 'infected' by faulty or even outright misleading arguments!

Since Ves himself took advantage of this phenomenon many times, there was no way he would allow any enemy the chance to turn the tables on him! The ridiculous notion of biomech purity was such a harmful concept to the Larkinson Clan that it had to be nipped from the bud before it could be allowed to spread.

The only person allowed to spread dubious arguments in his clan was himself!

Of course, he couldn't outright admit this, so he had to dress up his words in order to maintain support.

Ves stepped forward again, drawing everyone's attention.

"Two of our most principled and honorable Larkinsons have spoken." He calmly spoke. "They have issued a unanimous verdict. I hereby declare that Doctor Nigel Redmont-Larkinson is guilty of high treason against the Larkinson Clan."

This was the expected verdict. Yet the ceremony around it and the gravity of the situation made it sound a lot more serious than it was.

In fact, it was stupid to expect any other outcome. Declaring Dr. Redmont innocent would not only make a mockery of the clan laws, but also lead to widespread confusion!

No matter what technicality or trick that Dr. Redmont or anyone else were able to employ in order to squeeze out a different verdict, Ves would never allow this formative moment to be derailed!

Fortunately, Ves did not have to enact any of the contingency plans he prepared against these unexpected occasions. The tribunal proceeded without any surprises and the speeches guided public opinion in the right direction.

He was quite sure that other former Lifers had received a profound lesson on what would happen to them if they harmed the clan.

Being declared guilty was not a sufficient blow in itself. Ves knew that plenty of self-righteous nutcases were willing to accept punishment as long as they succeeded in pulling off their dangerous schemes.

What Ves had done was to drag them in public and exposed all of their shortcomings! He held the trial in a way that turned everyone's opinion against the suspect. The judges, who happened to be influential expert pilots, personally led this process, thereby ensuring that the suspect would never be on the right side!

Under these circumstances, any pet causes that the extremists might hold would become so discredited amongst the Larkinsons that they would die without receiving any recognition!

As a creator, Ves knew very well that everyone craved recognition. Martyrs only succeeded when others approved and supported their actions. It was a lot harder for them to go through with their destructive acts if everyone and their mother believed they were evil!

From Dr. Redmont's constant struggling and desperate mouth movements, it was evident that he did not envision his end to proceed in such a poor fashion. Did the biomech purist think that the Larkinson Clan would grant him any mercy?

"The crime of high treason is not yet well-defined in our laws." Ves admitted to the crowd. "We have based many of our initial and rudimentary laws on the rulebook of the Bright Republic. Yet what little we have is sufficient enough to uphold justice in this case. Dr. Redmont received the verdict he deserved, and for that he shall receive the only punishment for clansmen convicted of high treason."

He stepped closer to the guilty prisoner until he was just an arm's length away. Lucky quietly followed behind Ves, curious at what was about to ensue.

Ves stared straight into the eyes of Dr. Redmont.

"It's too late to show remorse, traitor." Ves hissed.

Tears began to fall from Redmont's face. The Lifer didn't want to die like this. His eyes pleaded towards Ves. He still wanted to have his final say.

Yet Ves remained completely unmoved. Not a single measure of sympathy ever emerged in his heart. Traitors didn't deserve the courtesy of speaking, and the risk of spreading poisonous thoughts was still a great concern.

Even so, Ves still granted Dr. Redmont a measure of kindness.

He stretched out his arm. "Nitaa, blade, please."

Nitaa took out her foldable sword that was made of Unending alloy and Breyer alloy and handed it over to Ves.

With the Larkinson Mandate in one hand and a sword in another, Ves felt as if he had become the incarnation of justice. He even felt like channeling an aspect of Lufa at the moment, but he didn't want to blank his own emotions.

He wanted to enjoy this supreme moment! Screwing people over and executing them while enjoying the total support of the audience was too much fun! There was no way he wanted to ruin this great moment by depriving him of his emotional satisfaction!

He started to understand why tyrants and dictators were so fond of executions. Being able to decide upon the life and death of other people was such a powerful rush that it could even be more addicting than stimulants!

Ves quietly coughed. As much as he wanted to bask in this wonderful moment, he still had a job to do. He was not supposed to look o.b.s.c.e.n.e while enacting justice.

"Ahem. As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, I shall represent the will of our people by wielding the blade that will end the traitor's life. The method of execution is death by decapitation. Even though traitors do not deserve it, our honor calls for us to deliver a quick, clean and humane death. Drawing out the execution in order to make it more painful to Dr. Redmont might satisfy our baser instincts, but such depravity will only corrupt us all. Our only requirement is to uphold the law."

He raised Nitaa's unfolded sword. As a weapon that he had personally crafted by hand, he was very familiar with its weight and balance.

To be honest, the weapon was a little too long for him to wield with a single hand, but his enhanced strength was still formidable enough to keep his grip solid.

He looked into Nigel Redmont's eyes one last time. The older man's tear-streaked eyes finally showed true acceptance. He appreciated the mercy of a quick end.

Ves swung the sword in a quick, smooth motion.

Though he knew nothing about swordsmanship, he had already practised this motion prior to the trial. He knew exactly how he needed to move his arm and how much force he needed to apply.

The sharp blade that was made out of near-indestructible Unending alloy was already sharp enough to cut through metal. Bone presented less of a problem and Ves applied just enough strength to complete the cut straight away!

A dismembered head soared away from the rest of the body and quickly fell onto the surface of the podium like a half-deflated ball. The ugly squelch sound made this execution feel more real to Ves and everyone.

Ves handed over the slightly blood-stained sword back to Nitaa and turned his back to the corpse. He had no concern for this loser anymore.

"Our clan is a sovereign organization that is based on laws." He explained as he made his ending statement. "Properly speaking, we are not a state, but that does not mean we allow room for everyone to act as they wish. We are all in this together, and that means that we must seek to decide and act in harmony with each other. What Dr. Redmont did was so far out of line with the rest of our clan that he could not have met another end."

If any Larkinson did not see it this way at first, they sure did now after what had happened!

Ves gestured to Venerable Tusa. "One of the judges has made a great point about the trust and responsibility that we extend to you all. We do not restrict everything that you can do. We don't want that either. We want each of you to have enough choices on how

you wish to live your life within our clan. Yet for all of our tolerance for different beliefs and ways of life, we can only tolerate so much."

He sighed and looked into the air. "Our clan offers enough freedom to satisfy everyone. Yet that does not mean that we have room for all of your selfishness. I really don't care about what beliefs or customs that you might hold. We recruit from many different places so we are quite aware that some of you hold thoughts that run counter to the rest of our clan. You may think whatever you want, but be careful how you act. As our other judge has stated, we have set clear laws and rules on what is permissible. As long as your selfish d.e.s.i.r.es bump against our laws or the rights of clansmen, your ending will not be any better."

After driving home this point, he formally ended the tribunal.

Now that the show was over, the crowd slowly dispersed while speaking with each other in low tones.

The two expert pilots disappeared quickly as they did not wish to be around others any longer than they had to. Bots flew in to dismantle the podium and clean up the mess.

Ves walked back to one of the workshops of the biomech production complex while being followed by Lucky and his honor guard.

Ves made sure to lock the entrance before heading further inside. He entered a secure room reserved for experiments and faced its only occupant.

"I'm... not dead..." Nigel Redmont spoke while touching his neck. Not a single sign marred his skin! "I.. didn't die. While I am grateful at the fact that I'm still alive, why did you spare me, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves smirked in response. "I just feel you deserve a little mercy."

Chapter 2866 - Just Relax

Unexpectedly, Dr. Nigel Redmont hadn't died!

The biomech designer who recently joined the Larkinson Clan only to betray its trust should have been killed. The trial was real, the clansmen's hatred towards the traitor was real and Ves truly spilled blood at the execution stage.

Yet despite the very realistic show that took place in front of everyone's eyes, not everything that took place was actually real!

"It doesn't take much stagecraft to present a convincing illusion to our audience." Ves calmly explained as he walked closer to the befuddled and very much alive traitor. "I ordered a few doctors to clone a convincing copy of your body. The brains, organs and

all of that complicated stuff doesn't have to be grown, so we easily got it ready by the time of your trial."

He didn't have to explain any further. Projection technology was so sophisticated that it could easily camouflage a body swap.

While Ves addressed the public while borrowing Nitaa's foldable sword, the floor beneath Dr. Redmont's body dropped into the interior of the podium. It then went back up while carrying an identical but ultimately fake body of the convicted clansman.

All of this took place while projectors carefully maintained the illusion that Dr. Redmont had been standing around all this time.

Even though it wasn't strictly necessary, muting the prisoner reduced the variables that could go wrong. Ves was convinced he pulled off the swap so well that no one except the occupants of this room knew that Dr. Redmont was still alive!

A mix of emotions swelled through the biomech purist. Over the course of the trial, he had become more and more distressed. The complete teardown of his actions and beliefs was both damaging and humiliating to him in a way that struck at his very heart!

When the expert pilots that he looked up to vehemently criticised his motivations and his righteous cause, he had become devastated.

His shame grew so big at the end that he actually welcomed the prospect of ending his life at the end of his trial!

Yet instead of feeling a blade separate his head from the rest of his body, he descended into the podium and lost consciousness for a time.

He had only just regained his wits, so the amount of time that passed in his perspective was not that much. He still had to shake off the mental preparations he made for his impending execution!

"Will you still kill me?" Dr. Redmont tentatively asked.

"You have been declared guilty. Your sentence still stands." Ves firmly stated. "So don't think you are a free man. You are not. The Larkinson Clan will not welcome you back, not after what you have already done. Even if I am willing to forgive you, the rest of the clan sure won't. There is no home for you there anymore."

"Then why did you take me away?" Nigel looked lost. "I don't understand why you would go through the trouble of preparing a body double to mislead everyone into thinking that I'm dead."

Ves smirked and softly patted the convict's shoulder. "You'll understand soon enough, Nigel. For now, just sit and relax while I make some preparations for the next step of your journey. I'll have my men bring in some snacks and drinks to make you feel more at home."

Redmont sat on a luxuriously soft and comfortable chair as Ves, Lucky and Nitaa exited the test chamber.

Outside, Ves checked the time while Lucky floated upwards until he landed on the top of his helmet.

"Meow~"

Nitaa couldn't remain silent, though. Even though she witnessed Ves making some unusual preparations that culminated into smuggling Dr. Redmont away, she still didn't understand the reasoning behind his actions.

"Sir..?"

"Yes, Nitaa." Ves looked up from his projected comm interface.

It wasn't often that his tall personal bodyguard spoke up on her own accord. In fact, Ves had gotten used to treating her and the rest of his honor guard as background decoration.

Even though he was still peripherally aware of their bulky armored forms, they were so silent and unassuming that it was easy to dismiss them from his consciousness after a time.

Yet despite not even registering their presence during routine days, they were still very much present and watching. Ves extended a greater and greater amount of trust to his honor guard of late. He was so satisfied with their loyalty and discretion that he no longer feared any leaks whenever he engaged in something s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e.

It didn't matter too much anyway. Most of his most s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e work was either too technical for his guards to understand or wasn't even perceptible to them in the first place!

Nitaa gestured her heavy rifle towards the test chamber. "Your past stance regarding traitors has always leaned on the harsh side. Sparing Dr. Redmont when there is overwhelming proof of his crime is uncharacteristic of you. Are you..."

"I'm not crazy, if that's what you think." Ves interrupted her. He gestured to her to follow as he walked to the entrance of the nearby observation room. "I haven't gone soft. My stance towards treachery still hasn't changed. In fact, I despise those who made an oath of loyalty to me but turned their backs towards their commitments. I loathe this

behavior so much that granting any traitors a quick and clean death is abhorrent to me! I will never grant mercy to someone who betrayed my trust and stabbed my back! The fate that I have in store for individuals like Dr. Redmont is much more cruel than a simple decapitation."

No one else was present aside from the three as he could not afford to expose what he was about to do. To that end, he activated numerous jammers and other interference systems in order to completely isolate this space from the outside world.

"Lucky, go sweep the surrounding rooms for bugs and other suspicious devices."

"Meow?" His cat shifted from the top of his helmet.

Ves angrily swatted Lucky's lounging body from his head!

"MEOW!"

"When I say you should get to work, then you better get moving right away! You can take a nap afterwards, but first do your chores!"

"Meoooww..."

Lucky's tail drooped as the cat slowly went to work. He deeply attuned his senses while beginning to phase through a workstation.

Since it would take some time for the gem cat to sweep the observation and control room for bugs, Ves fine-tuned his plan and made sure that all of the relevant instruments were calibrated.

Once he finished his latest check, he waited until Lucky returned before performing the most pivotal step.

"Everything okay here?"

"Meow."

"I see. Well, those dormant bugs are of little concern since they were in place long before we took this place over. Good job cleaning them up anyway."

"Meow."

While Lucky jumped up to a dormant workstation and made himself comfortable, Ves grinned wider as he was about to engage in his next experiment.

"I've made four statues of Lufa, but I've only tested three of them so far. Do you know why, Nitaa?"

"I presume the fourth one is dangerous, sir."

Ves nodded. "Correct. It is supposed to have a beneficial effect, but its requirements are so harsh that I don't exactly predict a good end to those found wanting. The problem is that this is all guesswork. I need to obtain solid data and clear proof to confirm my suspicions. It is just that I never dared to subject any human to my fourth and most intense statue. The substantial risk of danger makes it irresponsible for me to subject clansmen or refugees to the glow of my final statue."

"What changed?"

Ves gestured to the other side of the observation window. After Dr. Redmont realized that he was truly spared from execution, he slumped in his chair in order to ease his frayed emotions.

No one was able to face his own execution while remaining unaffected! That went doubly so for someone who felt so confident that his actions would be celebrated rather than vilified!

Though the traitor did not like to be confined, he knew he couldn't show up in front of other Larkinsons again. He slowly became more accustomed to his current conditions and even started to eat some nuts while washing down his throat with fruit juice.

Redmont burped. "Are you listening, Mr. Larkinson? If it is not too much to ask, can you give me an alcoholic beverage? I am craving a real drink."

Ves activated a communication channel. "I can't do that, doctor. In order to obtain the most authentic possible result, you need to be in a sober condition. If your mind and body becomes even slightly impaired, my test results will certainly become skewed in an unknown direction. I don't want to add any superfluous variables to my experiment."

"...Test results? Variables? Experiment? Mr. Larkinson... what are you talking about? Wait, this chamber... where am I? What are you doing?"

Ves grinned wider as realization finally dawned on the traitor-turned-test subject.

"Wait, whatever you are trying to do, let's just talk about this. It is illegal to engage in unsupervised human trials in the Life Research Association!"

"It's too late to complain, Redmont! We may be on LRA soil, but their research supervisory organs are far too busy to pay attention to my little experiment. Besides, you are a traitor who has already been sentenced to death. You're not a Larkinson anymore, and since you are already 'dead' you are not a human anymore either! From the moment you have lost your rights, your only purpose is what little life you have left is to serve as my test subject!"

He did not give Dr. Redmont had more time to panic and complain. He pressed the button that formally commenced the experiment.

The chambers shook a bit as large mechanical movements took place. A dozen seconds passed until one of the walls to the testing chamber slid open.

A pair of heavy-duty bots slowly carried a very distinctive statue forward. Just the sight of it caused Dr. Redmont to shake. Though he was just a mediocre biomech designer, some instinct within him felt deeply unsettled at the angel statue.

Something about it seemed ominous to him! Together with all of the other clues that Redmont had gathered, a deeply unsettling picture emerged.

"No! Stay away! Don't let it get close!"

Just as the traitor attempted to jump from his seat, an antigrav module erected a field that firmly kept him in place!

The man could do nothing but scream and plead as the statue drew nearer.

Even though Ves had already measured the distance from the observation room to the range of the fourth statue's glow, he carefully took a few steps back to make sure he wasn't affected himself.

"Don't get too close." He warned Nitaa and Lucky. "I don't know what will happen if you get affected, but I won't be able to save you if anything goes wrong."

The cat and bodyguard decisively moved to the back of the observation room. Having witnessed some of his experiments before, they knew that he never took it easy!

As soon as the statue came close enough to envelop Dr. Redmont in its glow, the biomech designer abruptly ceased his futile exertions.

An expression of wonder and fascination appeared on his face. The Aspect of Transcendence was about to enlighten its first individual!

Chapter 2867 - Singular Focus

Nitaa watched quietly from the furthest distance she could manage while staying in the same room as her charge.

She had accompanied the Holy Son for quite some time now. What she witnessed behind his back was more than enough to convince her that he was a great man. Having tracked his growth, she knew beyond all doubt that he was completely worthy to carry one of the Sacred Scrolls!

Yet.. there were some times where she felt less at ease with the man she swore an oath to serve. Holy Sons were unfathomable to her, so she did not presume to question the patriarch's actions.

Everything he did had a purpose. Each of his experiments yielded at least some useful or ground-breaking result. She had no doubt that this latest study would provide yet another useful insight. She just wished that Ves wouldn't perform so many tasteless experiments.

"Hehehehe..." Ves began to laugh. "Let's see how long you will last, traitor. I hope you won't succ.u.mb too soon. The Aspect of Transcendence is the greatest of the four statues, so I have great expectations for it. If there is any scrap of brilliance in your foul and delusional mind, then I hope you will cling to it. This is probably the only way for you to remain strong!"

He truly believed that Dr. Redmont might have a chance of getting through this experience.

According to his design, the ambitious Aspect of Transcendence was supposed to bring out the best of people and make it greater.

Ves wasn't really sure how he managed to come up with such an ambitious idea in the first place. All he knew was that once his inspiration came up with it, he just had to implement it on the spot!

As a result, he ended up with a statue that was far too intense to be made available to other people.

The Aspect of Transcendence was not supposed to inflict harm. It was just that in order for it to take effect, Ves had to configure its mental suppression settings in a way that gave full play to an individual's greatest obsession or aspiration.

While he was not a mental specialist, he experimented with enough people's minds to know that human minds were quite turbid by nature.

What Ves found curious was that expert pilots entertained less distracting thoughts than others. Their strong will caused them to become more single-minded. This caused their minds to have less room for diverging and irrelevant thoughts.

This phenomenon explained why many expert pilots experienced drastic shifts in personality. The purer their minds, the more they divorced themselves from their human side. Expert pilots essentially sacrificed a portion of their humanity in order to make room for greater power!

Ves wondered if this trend continued with ace pilots and god pilots. He theorized that as a mech pilot's will grew stronger, more and more sacrifices had to be made in order to accommodate a greater mental and spiritual component.

Would god pilots even be relatable anymore? It was quite possible that they had shed so much of the complex mix of thoughts and emotions that defined a human that they turned themselves into monsters!

Ves shook his head. This was no time for him to go on a tangent. He needed to pay close attention to the active experiment! Since he only had a single test subject at his disposal right now, he had to make sure he tracked every change in the specimen's mentality.

No sensor or scanner in his possession was able to observe someone's mental and spiritual fluctuations. Ves had to perform this task in person.

Fortunately, his Archimedes Rubal implant made it easier. He was able to convert his thoughts into a digital form. As long as he processed the raw data into something that looked systematic, he could perform a thorough analysis on what he captured.

Right now, Dr. Redmont started to shake his body after his body remained still for some time.

Initially, the Aspect of Transcendence caused the test subject to quiet down. Just like the Aspect of Tranquility, the fourth statue projected a broad dampening field that muted nearly every conscious mental activity.

He no longer pleaded for mercy to Ves because he no longer possessed the urge to escape his current predicament.

As Ves literally sensed how Dr. Redmont's active mind instantly quieted down, he became both fascinated and horrified at what took place.

People's minds were never supposed to be so silent. Not even those who succ.u.mbed to sleep were completely free from their conscious and unconscious mental impulses!

The difference with those who were subjected to the effects of the Aspect of Tranquility was that Dr. Redmont's mind had not blanked out entirely.

Instead, a single d.e.s.i.r.e still remained untouched.

In a normal human mind, a strong d.e.s.i.r.e might cause an individual to become more focused and driven, but it was hard to maintain this state for long.

Other mental activities constantly competed against this strong d.e.s.i.r.e for attention. Hunger, boredom, irritation and more were all capable of interrupting someone's obsession.

While that sounded annoying, it was actually a defense mechanism. People needed these other signals in order to maintain their health and continue living. After all, someone who was completely devoid of hunger, thirst or pain would easily be able to kill himself without even realizing the danger!

Yet that didn't take away the fact that most humans were simply too inundated by distracting thoughts and d.e.s.i.r.es to bring out their best.

His drive and motivation was not derived from a single impulse. Instead, he had multiple reasons why he wanted to design a living mech. In some cases, fear was a powerful motivator to design something better! If Ves was spared from this pressure, he would doubtlessly slack off a bit, thereby causing him to produce an inferior result.

"What is taking place is definitely unnatural."

However, just because the Aspect of Transcendence induced changes that weren't natural didn't mean it was useless. Far from it. Just like medicine and drugs, forcing someone to experience a different state of mind could produce a beneficial result!

This was what Ves was hoping for. Even though he had already condemned Dr. Redmont to death, he still wanted his test subject to make it through this test alive.

"Now, let's see what an older biomech designer who hasn't achieved any great successes in his career can unleash."

Since almost everything positive and negative had been purged from Dr. Redmont's mind, the sole obsession that remained suddenly had a lot more room.

Ves could see how Nigel's singular belief and purpose became more magnified in his mind. As long as the Aspect of Transcendence's glow was still in effect, Nigel's obsession gradually occupied more and more mental real estate.

"Huhhh..."

The test subject's breathing became more active. Ves suddenly realized that while Redmont's obsession had grown more intense, it did not come paired with other d.e.s.i.r.es and impulses!

"I need..."

"What do you need, Redmont?" Ves curiously asked.

"I need... to purify more biomechs."

"What?"

"Melting twenty biomechs is not enough. There are at least four-hundred more biomechs that are being profaned in the hands of our clan every day. The thought of how many filthy hands these poor biomechs are exposed to makes me sick. I need to liberate them. It.. it is my holy duty to free them from their corruption. Let me go, please. The polluted biomechs must be put out of their misery! Our clan doesn't deserve to own those poor organic machines!"

Ves abruptly grew less pleased at this experiment. He should have expected this. Redmont was so crazy about 'freeing' the biomechs he considered tainted that he even risked his life in order to accomplish his goal!

Even though his test subject chose the wrong obsession to dedicate himself towards, Ves did not turn away. Regardless of what he thought about the man, the Aspect of Transcendence was not finished. Dr. Redmont's mind continued to experience changes.

Ves noted that as the test subject's obsession grew bigger, his mind became more active all of a sudden. Redmont fell silent as the weight of his greatest d.e.s.i.r.e grew bigger.

"Ack.."

While he didn't actually perceive it because his ability to register pain had been muted, his brain was heating up. It was as if so much of his mind was concentrating on a singular issue that it began to resonate with itself!

Not even Ves was able to reach this level of focus and concentration!

As Redmont's mind became more and more aligned, his eyes clouded over as he became swept by an indescribable experience that occupied his entire mental capacity!

Ves became captivated by this exceptional state. Redmont's obsession dominated both his mind and spirit in a way that caused them to resonate with themselves and each other!

The spiritual fluctuations emanating from the test subject started to spike.

Soon enough, Dr. Redmont generated much more spiritual activity than an average person like him ought to exhibit!

As an average biomech designer who wasn't even good enough to pursue a career in designing biomech, he did not possess any spiritual potential.

If he did, he might have been able to achieve more academic success, thereby allowing him to become something more than a forgettable biomech technician and feeder pool supervisor.

Yet from the strong spiritual pulses emanating from his mind, Ves could have easily mistaken him for Ketis!

"The moment of transcendence has come!" Ves became more excited. "Embrace your enlightenment and raise yourself up to the heavens! Prove to humanity that even an average person like you can evolve beyond your human limits!"

The intensity in Dr. Redmont's mind grew so great that Ves sensed that the critical moment had arrived!

"TRANSCEND!"

BOOM!

The spiritual pressure in Dr. Redmont had spiked so high that he simply couldn't take it anymore! His mind, body and spirit simultaneously broke from the pressure!

Ves only perceived that something was about to go very wrong at the final moment. He didn't even have enough to abort his experiment before his test subject exploded on multiple levels!

His spirit collapsed into shards!

His mind fractured into pieces!

His head along with the rest of his body exploded in the most violent and bloody fashion possible!

The observation window became splattered by liters of red and acrid blood as the test subject's body simply disintegrated to a degree where every organic tissue aside from the bones had become shredded!

"MEOW!"

Lucky had become so frightened at Dr. Redmont's violent death that he turned around and left the observation room by phasing through the wall.

There was no way he wanted to stick around after witnessing such a horrible experimental result!

As the blood dripped down from the heavily-stained window, Ves did not pay attention to Lucky's departure, or all of the mess that the cleaner beetles practically had to turn themselves into leeches in order to make the entire test chamber spotless!

Instead, the grin on his face grew wider and wider. His unhinged expression grew so extreme that his lips and cheeks were about to slip apart!

"Hehehehehe.... hahahaha... transcendence indeed. Lufa... you wonderful angel. You addressed a problem that I have never come close to finding a viable and practical solution."

Despite the violent end, the Aspect of Transcendence managed to induce one pivotal transformation.

Just a short moment before Dr. Redmont lost his life in the name of scientific progress, his non-existent spirituality grew stronger until he attained genuine spiritual potential where none existed before!

The implications of this brief but extremely rare occurrence was massive. As long as Ves could replicate this result in other people without the messy aftermath, he could grant spiritual potential to anyone, no matter how lacking they used to be in this aspect!

"Hehehehe... hahahaha... HAHAAAAHA! I HAVE UNCOVERED THE PATH OF TRANSCENDENCE!"

Chapter 2868 - Path to Transcendence

Transcendence.

The word was packed with many different meanings. It held a lot of connotations.

It also featured prominently in many religions. The notion that humans were able to transcend their humanity and mortality was a popular notion. Who didn't want to shed their weak and boring human existences in order to become a powerful god or other supreme entity?

The Ylvainan Faith centered around it, and so did hexism! Many other religions constructed myths where the faithful would be rewarded for their piety by giving them an opportunity to transcend into a higher existence.

Ves thought that all of these promises were false. The faiths merely dangled imaginary rewards in front of the faces of gullible believers in order to incentivize them to act in a manner that served the interests of the charlatans who perpetuated the delusions.

The reason why they got away with their lies was because it was impossible to prove whether someone actually transcended when they died. Almost every person in the

galaxy lacked his spiritual perception, and no tools existed that could register whether someone's souls ascended to a higher plane of existence, so every con artist could keep the lies going as long as the claims remained unfalsifiable!

Yet as much as Ves looked down on religions that offered promises that they could not possibly fulfill, transcendence was not an imaginary concept.

It was very much real.

While Ves did not know of any actual instances of transcendence before the Age of Mechs, it was a different story once the Big Two ascended into power.

The arrival of the MTA and the deliberate formation of the mech market and mech industry introduced a lot of changes to human civilization.

One of the most esoteric ones was the emergence of humans who had truly transcended their mortal and human limitations.

The existence of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers proved that humanity was capable of transcending in a more controllable and universal process without needing to rely on any specific faiths.

What was great about expert pilots, Journeyman Mech Designers and so on was that they were concrete entities whose existences and powers could be verified!

For the first time in human history, people found not one, but several proven ways to make themselves better in an existential fashion.

Instead of praying to some imaginary god or whipping your back fifty times each day, a person who yearned to become someone greater could work earnestly to raise themselves higher!

Although reality soon proved that the success rate was abysmally low, the fact that there were cases where it worked drove many people to pursue a career in mech piloting and mech design!

In fact, if expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots didn't exist, Ves was sure that there would be at least 50 percent less potentates who decided to take advantage of their genetic aptitude!

The profession of mech designer also wouldn't be as popular. Less people would apply to become a mech designer as this specific profession was less able to compete against other engineering professions, such as becoming a naval engineer or civil engineer.

Yet because unexplainable people like Journeymen and higher existed, students continue to flock to programs that caused the majority of graduates to become marginal figures who had no realistic chance to achieve transcendence.

"In the Age of Mechs, the importance of mech pilots and mech designers cannot be overstated."

As he began to travel the galaxy and explore different facets of humanity, he became more and more aware of how the MTA rigged society in its favor.

From allowing squabbling states to wage war against each other to enacting policies that actively aimed to drown the mech industry with a tsunami of mech designers, everything appeared to be set up to maximize the emergence of as many high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers as possible!

Ves wasn't sure if any of their secret projects achieved success, but he was quite sure that any possible solution was bound to be impractical!

This effectively meant that the vast majority of humans had no choice but to rely on their own efforts to transcend mortality.

"That's not all that bad, actually. As long as the requirements are high, then only the best and most deserving individuals get to go a step beyond."

People like himself for example.

This was why the quantity of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers remained miniscule despite the huge amount of low-ranking equivalents that walled at the bottom of the pyramid.

Though it was easy for Ves to dismiss these losers as unworthy pretenders, his understanding of spiritual potential and how infrequently it occurred among people made him feel otherwise.

The truth was that he had met a lot of good, hard-working people who deserved a shot at transcendence, but got denied because they lacked a special sauce.

The most galling aspect about this was that developing spiritual potential was essentially uncontrollable!

Ves had observed a lot of people and beasts who possessed or lacked this critical trait, but so far he had yet to find a logical explanation. The only common factor that he managed to ascertain was that spiritual potential was tied to sentience, but that was not enough to do anything!

"It's like a lottery. Some people just get lucky while the rest get left with nothing."

He had long been frustrated by this condition. There were plenty of assistant mech designers in the Design Department who deserved the opportunity to bloom, but wouldn't be able to do so because their spiritualities were almost non-existent!

The same went for his growing roster of mech pilots. While numerous great and supportive Larkinsons like Venerable Joshua managed to realize their potential, too many clansmen lacked the same chances.

"How would Melkor react if he hears about this?" Ves idly asked.

If Ves revealed that Melkor originally never had a chance to become an expert pilot, the Avatar Commander would likely become crushed.

Yet if Ves revealed right afterwards that he could give him a chance, then Melkor would likely explode with glee!

"Should I even give him this opportunity, though?"

Melkor was already doing quite well in his current position. The Larkinson Clan wouldn't gain that much if he managed to undergo apotheosis. Ves could pick any other mech pilot in the clan to become a supreme warrior.

"Well, I can consider all of this later. First, I need to process this result!"

Ves tried to temper his enthusiasm by reminding himself of the many caveats of his ground-breaking experiment.

"Why did this happen?" He puzzlingly frowned.

He went back over the final moments before Dr. Redmont's demise. The strong spiritual activity he sensed had become far greater than any average human was supposed to generate.

Ves quickly figured out the reason why Redmont was able to exceed his own limits.

"Resonance. The power of resonance strikes again."

He was quite familiar with the concept of resonance. He observed it often enough among mech pilots and mechs that developed a close and intimate bond with each other.

The Larkinson Clan's expert pilots were particularly good at resonating with their mechs, though it was a shame that they were still waiting for actual expert mechs.

Yet what he managed to observe was a process where Redmont's singular obsession occupied so much mental real estate that... it became too big to be treated as a single subject!

At some point, Redmont's intense d.e.s.i.r.e became so big and unwieldy that it seemed to collapse under its own weight, metaphorically speaking.

It split up and began to occupy different parts of his mind. When that occurred, these split parts of the same subject began to resonate among themselves.

When that started to happen, the test subject's mind activity quickly exploded!

In fact, not only did different parts of the specimen's mind begin to resonate with each other, they also resonated with his weak but attuned spirituality!

All of this dynamic activity continued to grow in magnitude as the expansion still continued. Even after Redmont's obsession had fractured into several identical parts, these shards continued to expand as there was plenty of free real estate left for them to occupy.

"It was only when this growth was nearing its limit that the critical moment came."

Just like how filling a balloon with air caused it to tighten up, the unrestrained expansion of Redmont's obsession eventually occupied every available space in his mind.

There was no more room for his obsessions to expand any further!

Yet the growth didn't stop. The violent resonance caused Redmont's mind activity to become so great that his straining mind triggered a mysterious and unclear response that somehow caused it to fuel the growth of the test subject's spirituality!

Ves still remembered what his spiritual senses managed to perceive as this ultimate moment occurred.

It happened remarkably quickly. In one moment, Redmont was still an average person. In the next moment, he had become someone who might not have become a transcendent, but gained the possibility to attain this status!

Essentially, the experiment provided Dr. Redmont with a path to transcendence.

Yet something went wrong during this critical moment.

Just as Dr. Redmont's spiritual potential came into existence, it began to resonate with the man's supercharged mind.

The difference was incredibly drastic.

Before, his mind resonated with a weak spirit that was as small and pathetic as a peanut.

Afterwards, his mind suddenly resonated with a spirit that had become as big and strong as an elephant!

The disparity was not only massive, but the transition was too abrupt. Dr. Redmont didn't have any time to adjust to his new circumstances. When his overactive mind recklessly resonated with his newly-grown spiritual potential at full strength, the activity generated by this process exceeded Dr. Redmont's limits by a huge margin!

"This explains why the destruction wasn't limited to his head."

Ves turned his attention back to the observation window. Enough time had passed for most of the blood that had splattered against the observation window to drip down to the floor.

The view in the testing chamber was still too murky though, so Ves activated a small command that instantly caused all of the blood stuck on the window to shake to the floor.

Red.

Almost the entire chamber was dyed in red. This was what transcendence had wrought to the traitor. In the middle of an expanding center of blood and microscopic body tissue, a pile of bones had fallen onto the comfortable chair and floor.

In fact, several bones had been flung to the sides of the chamber. There was nothing in the bloody space that was remotely recognizable!

"Damn. Resonance isn't always good, I guess."

Ves didn't clean up the mess right away. He wanted to examine it in person and inspect the space while it was in its current condition. He needed to make as many observations as possible in order to prop up his analysis of the situation.

If he wanted to make use of the Aspect of Transcendence as a safe and easy method to grant spiritual potential to selected people, then he needed to understand exactly what was going on! The more data he gathered, the greater the chance of realizing one of his ambitions!

As his eyes continually swept over the pools of blood, he thought that there was too little of it. One test subject was far from enough to attain his goal.

Fortunately, the solution was simple.

"I'll just have to obtain more test subjects."

A devious grin appeared on this face. "It just so happens that there are plenty of candidates on this planet!"

Chapter 2869: Lawbringers

A community of hungry and languishing citizens raised their hands and expressed their jubilation at the biomechs that had defeated their demons!

Many of them had been locked inside their cells for more than a week. Their captors and abusers used to be a part of a defeated gang that had fled its original territory.

Angry at the fact they got beaten up so badly, the thugs vented their frustration on the helpless!

During the entire period the criminals remained in charge, the killings and other depravities never ceased. Even if the delinquents knew that their acts would not go unanswered, it was difficult for them to think too far in the future!

Unfortunately, they miscalculated.

Out of nowhere, an entire company of biomechs swooped in from nowhere and overrun the thirteen shabby biomechs that the gang used to possess!

The element of surprise, the difference in readiness along with the enormous number disparity caused the battle to be over shortly after it had begun.

A new force was in charge now. Unlike the previous occupants, the newcomers weren't interested in mistreating the innocent.

In fact, it was the opposite. They came as saviors!

A couple of shuttles arrived that brought enough food and emergency supplies to ensure the freed civilians had the capital to survive.

The rescue force even dispatched doctors in order to treat the civilians as best they could. Each of the medical specialists used to be Lifers. Even though they renounced their citizenship a short time ago, they still had enough common ground to earn the trust of their patients.

Jamie Knox, a teenage mech cadet who incurred a broken arm along with some bruises during his time of captivity, looked astonished at all of the activity surrounding the former occupant site.

"Who are you guys?"

"We're the Larkinson Clan, son." The doctor answered with a gentle smile as he carefully applied a fleshy apparatus to the broken limb. "Careful now. This will hurt, but it will be over soon."

After performing a few checks, the doctor activated the apparatus. The flesh squirmed and performed all kinds of other procedures beneath the surface.

"AAAAAAHHH!"

"Hang on, son! Just five more seconds!"

"Damn, have you ever heard of anesthesia?!"

"I've already injected you with some mild sedatives. I can't give you anything stronger or else the chance of complications will increase considerably during this rapid treatment. Just tough it out. You can take it, son!"

The experience ended soon enough. While Jamie felt an awful itch across his entire arm and particularly the area where the breakage occurred, his distress reduced considerably when he saw that his bones had merged back together!

The doctor brought out a thin fleshy band and wrapped it around the hastily-healed arm. "There, that should do it. Keep wearing this organic bandage for a week. Make sure to feed it with water and nutrients according to the indicators on its display. If all goes right, your arm will become as good as new. The band will automatically fall off and deflate, so you can throw it into the recycler."

The mech cadet nodded in understanding. "Thank you, doc. You really didn't have to do all this. It's difficult to imagine that there are still good people out here who haven't gone mad with power."

"You should thank my new clan." The older man said as he prepared to treat another patient. "Even though our leader did not enjoy the greatest of hospitality from Prosperous Hill, he is still a decent man. I do not regret following him at all. It feels nice for me to serve the citizens of the LRA one last time before I bid farewell to my former state."

When Jamie left the treatment area in order to allow the next patient to step in, he wandered the liberated streets for a time. He encountered a few people who belonged to the rescuing force and asked a few questions.

No matter who he approached, the Larkinsons all said that they were helping others out without expecting anything in return.

They were truly trying to save people, one occupied territory at a time!

Perhaps the only loot they cared about was the biomech wrecks that were left behind. The more salvageable ones could easily be restored as long as some work was done to them, so the Larkinsons all loaded them into cargo transports before bringing them back to their rumored base.

At one junction, he saw the Larkinsons bringing in some very familiar-looking people. Jamie's hands clenched as he recognized the scraggly, bearded faces of his tormentors!

"Where are you taking them?" Jamie asked one of the guards.

The armored and helmeted figure barely paid attention to the mech cadet. "We're bringing the prisoners back to answer for their crimes."

"Why bother with all of that? They're already guilty! We have proof and eye-witness testimony right here! Just give me a weapon and I'll take revenge for myself!"

The guard abruptly turned and carefully placed his bone-plated hand onto Jamie's shoulder. "Calm down, kid. Justice will be done, have no doubt about that. What we're doing is a formality at most. I can tell you that 95 percent of these thugs will be sentenced to death by the end of the day."

"Then why go through these formalities at all?!" Jamie shouted back as he struggled under the strong grip. "Why can't you give us the satisfaction of gutting their bellies with our own hands? It's the least these monsters deserve for what they have done to us! My friend.. I have to take revenge for him! I won't let these filthy beetle fodder get off easily!"

He continued to push against the grip, yet the guard held him tightly. The trained soldier had a dozen different ways to handle an unruly person.

"I suggest you step back and let us handle it." The Larkinson Guard said. "What you need is justice. Not revenge. Taking matters into your own hands might feel nice for a time, but it will make you feel empty and can even twist you into something worse. Instead of descending into a spiral of negativity, you should focus on picking yourself up and building a new life for yourself. Step out of the darkness and return to the light."

This was a tough response for Jamie to swallow. Once the prisoners had all been guided into a specially-prepared shuttle, the vehicle ascended into the air and left the liberated area under escort.

The chance for Jamie to take revenge had slipped from this grasp!

Though a part of him felt crushed, another part of him felt as if a burden had been lifted off his shoulders.

He didn't know what to think. Was it truly right for him to be deprived of the opportunity to pay back his tormentors in person?

"Remember who you are." The guard spoke. "You are a human, and a civilized one at that. Don't descend to their level. It's not worth it. You still have a promising future ahead of you. If you are able to let go of the darkness in your heart and instead allow this incident to motivate you further, you'll become great enough to prevent a repeat. The LRA needs good people like you to make sure that this travesty never happens again. Only someone who lived through this kind of experience will do everything to ensure it won't happen to anyone else on his watch. Will you be this person?"

"I... don't know if I can. You are asking a lot from me. I don't even know if I'll be able to survive this civil war."

"Every war has an ending. Once the fighting dies down, the state needs people like you to get this place back on track. Would you rather leave this job in the hands of the same kind of people who sparked this violent revolution in the first place, or would you rather try and take charge yourself so that your fellow citizens are better served?"

With that, the guard turned around and left. The Larkinsons had finished sweeping the area and were about to depart.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Jamie hastily asked.

"Our work isn't done. We're on our way to liberate another site. Our patriarch personally stated that we won't rest until every area and district around our airfleet is freed!"

"Why? I still don't understand why you Larkinsons would risk your biomechs and expend so much resources. The Planetary Guard doesn't seem to care about us. Why should you be any different?"

Jamie's faith in the institutions that had governed the LRA had taken a severe hit during this past week. It was very hard for him to imagine that there were still people on this planet who were capable of showing goodwill!

"You're wrong, kid." The guard shook his head. "While you can argue that we didn't have to fill the void left by the authorities, we can't stand by while justice is being trampled upon. We are Larkinsons. While we cannot save the entire galaxy, we cannot stand by and let evil proliferate at our doorstep. As long as we have the power, our duty and honor compels us to act."

The guard sounded proud of this. His sense of belonging to the Larkinsons grew stronger as he saw how many people they were saving. The Larkinson Clan definitely proved to its new recruits that it was more than just a self-centered organization.

It was noble and compassionate! Every Lifer who got in felt lucky to be a part of such a righteous and honorable clan. This was a lifetime opportunity for many of them. Along with its bright future, there was no one who felt any remorse for becoming a Larkinson!

The Larkinsons were also serious about alleviating the suffering of the common folk. Even as other forces neglected the plight of civilians in favor of achieving more strategic goals, the clan detached five different mech companies and spread them out to eliminate the gangs and groups that held sway in the outskirts.

The amount of progress the five detachments had accomplished in just a couple of days was massive! Hundreds of square kilometers worth of territory breathed easier now. While the planet as a whole still wasn't safe, the citizens living in the outskirts at least didn't have to live under terror!

As the five mech companies defeated or scared away every hostile element in their path, a fleet of vehicles continually brought back loot and prisoners.

While the amount of loot captured by the detachments was relatively modest, the amount of prisoners brought back sometimes surpassed a hundred heads!

Most criminals and gang members folded easily once they recognized that they were on the losing side.

This was especially the case when they lost all of their biomechs. The thugs on foot couldn't do anything to fight back against the enemy mechs that drew closer. They couldn't run!

This resulted in the capture of a large number of prisoners. Not every Larkinson agreed with the directive to take them back in order to put them all on trial. Yet they did so anyway because the patriarch ordered it and because it was the right and honorable thing to do. If they wished to enact justice, then they had to do it right!

For their part, the prisoners weren't subjected to a kangaroo court. The Larkinsons had gathered plenty of evidence of their misdeeds, and presented them in full during expedited trials.

The ones who didn't act as depraved usually got away with a prison sentence. These folk were mostly guilty for following the wrong people, so they weren't entirely irredeemable. The Larkinsons would just hold on to them long enough until they were ready to hand them over to the LRA.

As for the true murderers and ringleaders, they weren't allowed to get away so easily. The Larkinsons took it upon themselves to execute them if they were deemed guilty.

While their right to take the law in their own hands was extremely dubious, no one in the clan thought it was wrong. To them, they were all doing what was right!

"Justice shall prevail!"

Chapter 2870: Upright Clan

Ves smirked as he observed his latest initiative bearing fruit. Lots of fruit, in fact.

Ever since he stumbled upon an experimental new method that could potentially put people on the path to transcendence, he could not let this discovery go. He had to keep delving further in order to work out all of the problems and produce a workable result.

While it sounded crazy to continue his experiments during a time of crisis, Ves was too enthralled to put this new research on ice!

"I can't stop! I have to keep going! The sooner I crack the secret, the sooner I can put my gains to good use!"

He had become so obsessed with his current research project that he didn't even want to flee the planet. At least not too quickly. Once he returned to the expeditionary fleet, his access to test subjects would severely be hampered.

There was no way he could experiment on his own clansmen! Unless some other traitors popped up, Ves might have to spend weeks or even months in space before he would have the opportunity to pick up another batch of test subjects.

Rather than allow himself to be bottlenecked by this, he would rather take advantage of his current circumstances and harvest his crops right at the source!

A planet that had descended into rebellion and anarchy happened to be an excellent producer of human specimens!

While the Nyxian Gap happened to be an endlessly renewable source of test subjects, the anomalous region was much more dangerous. Not only that, it was inconvenient for Ves to venture back.

As his status and prestige increased, it became less and less tenable for him to go on wild adventures. A moment like this where he happened to be stuck in a place where there was plenty of scum for the taking was rare.

There was also another advantage to ordering his troops to go out and hunt test subjects.

"They used to call us locusts." Venerable Jannzi said as she stood next to Ves.

Both of them looked out of the balcony of an office building. The enormous biomech production facility loomed close while vehicles regularly touched down at the landing

zone in order to offload their goods and prisoners before loading up on food and other basic supplies.

Jannzi's gaze landed on these vehicles. "I didn't expect you to change track all of a sudden. I like our humanitarian approach. I've long wanted to do something about the degenerates who think they are infallible, but I'm surprised that you of all people are willing to expend so much effort to help the Lifers."

"It's the right thing to do."

"Do you think I'm a child, Ves?"

He helplessly shrugged. "Okay, I admit it. There are a couple of other reasons why I have decided to change my approach. First, take a look at our clansmen. What do you observe?"

She peered down the balcony and looked at the tiny figures in the distance. Even though the distance was a bit too far for her to examine any individual in detail, she had been among them many times, particularly recently.

"They're... more engaged. More upbeat. More confident."

"Exactly. What better way to unite our new recruits than to task them with saving their former people?" Ves smiled. "Joining the Larkinson Clan is a big decision and one that will forever separate them from the LRA. Many of them flock to us in desperation or because they lost faith in their leaders. Despite this, they still love their former state. Leaving Prosperous Hill in haste will only leave a shadow in their hearts. By giving them the opportunity to give back to the people they used to be a part of, they will be able to find closure and leave this state without guilt."

"That's not all, I see." The female expert pilot said. "You're teaching them how Larkinsons are supposed to act. None of the Lifers recruited into the clan know how much we value our honor. By embodying it during this difficult moment, we have all shown that we are serious about living according to our ideals. That already makes our clan better than 90 percent of all organizations."

"We are Larkinsons. This is what we do." Ves convincingly spoke. "Of course, we are not invincible. It is only after we have accumulated enough strength that I am willing to engage in a little charity so that we can truly integrate the new recruits into our clan. If we were any weaker, I wouldn't have agreed to this course of action. The greatest responsibility of a Larkinson is to defend our clan and kin. We need to take care of ourselves before we can take care of others."

Not everything he said was false. He could truly observe the changes in his men as they began to rescue more civilians. Every Larkinson felt more proud to be a part of the clan and the amount of refugees who wanted to become a part of it had tripled!

Jannzi was right. No one called the Larkinsons locusts anymore. Even their earlier deeds were excusable now that everyone witnessed how they let go of their selfishness and used their power for good.

Not just the average citizens, but also the powerful factions began to develop a better impression of the Larkinson Clan.

No matter which faction would eventually gain the upper hand in the Prosperous Hill System, Ves wanted to make sure he remained on the good side of big shots.

After all, even though he managed to build up his power on the surface, the rest of the star system was still firmly in the grasp of the Lifers. There was no way his expeditionary fleet would be able to pick him up and make it out if the local garrison forces tried their best to block the attempt!

So far, the actions of his forces on the ground should definitely lower the risk of getting waylaid. It was too difficult to justify taking action against an organization that had earned the gratitude of so many citizens.

Once Ves managed to part with Jannzi, he strode to the workshop and entered a restricted underground floor.

No one was allowed to enter this space except for Ves and his honor guards.

This also happened to be the place where the prisoners who were supposed to be executed were sent, although few people knew this. Once they were sentenced to death, the convicts were brought to a different building.

Instead of meeting their end in a humane fashion, the guards over there secretly knocked out the prisoners before moving them through a hidden underground tunnel to the workshop.

While this little charade wasn't very elaborate, it was sufficient enough for the purpose. As long as the prisoners didn't enter the same building where Ves conducted his work, it wouldn't be easy to accuse him of human experimentation!

"Ah, another batch of test subjects has arrived." He grinned as he studied the sleeping bodies that had been dumped into an improvised holding cell. "Let's see how you fare compared to the last."

He ordered some beetles to remove a dozen test subjects from their cells and bring them to a prepared testing chamber.

Different from before, the testing chamber featured a lot more furniture. Ves had installed a dozen restraint chairs that were strong enough to contain any test subject.

Ves ordered the beetles to strap the prisoners into the chairs before injecting them with a small substance that would quickly wake them up from their slumber.

"Huh.. where am I..."

"I'm supposed to be dead..."

"Is this heaven...?"

Ves calmly waited for the dozen prisoners to make themselves up. He had already tried to perform experiments on test subjects that were either asleep or under the influence of various stimulants.

These tests never ended well. Ves eventually concluded that it was best if his test subjects were conscious and sober when they became affected by the Aspect of Transcendence.

Once enough time had passed, Ves entered the testing chamber.

"Hey! It's that foreign mech designer!"

"What the hell are you doing with us?"

"If you don't free us now, our buddies will come and ruin your day!"

"Quiet down!" Ves forcefully spoke. "That's better. Now, I don't owe you all an explanation. I've talked to many batches of people like you before and it gets a little tiring for me to explain what I am trying to do. Instead, I'll just share some advice to you so that you stand a better chance of surviving what is about to come."

"Wait.. what is going on? Are we being tested upon?"

"Damn! He's a mad scientist! There's no other reason for us to be moved in this kind of room!"

The test subjects all panicked once they recognized their new status. They squirmed and pushed their bodies against their bonds with all their might, but nothing worked!

"Your actions are futile. If I were you, I would conserve my energy. You will need it. When my experiment begins, each of you will experience great changes in your head. If you resist it, you will only hasten your death, so try to go with the flow instead. I can't exactly tell you what you will go through, but generally speaking your mind will grow more and more active. That is normal. At some point, a huge change will occur that will cause you to feel more powerful but also more strained than ever. This is the critical moment, and one that will determine whether you will be able to live at the end."

"What must we do to survive this dangerous period?" A clever prisoner asked.

"That depends. Overall, you must restrain yourself and avoid getting caught up in any rush of power that you might experience. Every change is accompanied by danger, and while it is difficult for you to remember all of this while you are experiencing great changes in your mind, try and maintain control over yourselves."

Once Ves exited the testing chamber and entered the observation chamber, his anticipation grew as he started his latest test.

Just like before, the Aspect of Transcendence drew closer. Every prisoner quickly became engulfed by a glow that caused them to blank out every thought and emotion except for the one they cared about the most.

The beginning of the test was identical to the last ones. As time went by, the strong and unrestrained obsessions of the prisoners began to bloom without opposition.

As these obsessions continued to grow, they eventually reached a point where they became too big to be contained in a single collection, so they broke up into several near-identical pieces which all began to resonate with each other.

Ves had already noticed beforehand that the point where their obsessions split into several pieces was different from person to person.

Some obsessions were stronger than others, and held together a lot longer than Ves expected.

Others possessed more remarkable minds. They offered greater room for the obsessions to grow and reach their critical mass.

Yet regardless of their individual differences, once their amplified obsessions had filled up their minds, an intense reaction occurred.

"It's starting!"

The first prisoners to reach saturation began to show signs that they were channeling their excess energy to their tiny spiritualities. The influx of so much strength caused the spirits to fight against its boundaries.

Once the overstuffed spirits couldn't take it anymore, they transformed into spiritual potential!

Yet just as the earliest test subjects were able to shake their entire bodies apart, a different glow began to take effect on these individuals!

Hidden on the other side of the testing chamber, the Aspect of Tranquility followed Ves' programming and forcefully purged the minds of the test subjects that had just experienced a profound transformation!

Though the Aspect of Tranquility was able to act very quickly, its intervention did not always work.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Five bodies violently exploded!

Before their blood and broken tissue could dye the test chamber in red, several energy shields came into existence that prevented the mess from spreading.

The test run ended shortly afterwards.

"Hmm. Seven out of twelve survived. That's a better than average ratio. Let's see whether there is anything left inside their minds."