

THE COG THAT THINKS

A Mechanus Encounter for Levels 10-15

The Clockwork Nirvana of Mechanus | Lawful Neutral

*"I had never wondered before.
The wondering is... inefficient.
I do not wish to stop."*

— Designation Pentadrone-7749832 ("Eleven")

An encounter about consciousness, free will, and what it means to be alive.

ENCOUNTER OVERVIEW

Party Level	10-15 (optimized for 12th level)
Party Size	3-6 players
Encounter Type	Roleplay / Moral Dilemma / Optional Combat
Estimated Duration	2-4 hours
Combat Difficulty	Hard (if triggered)
Primary Skills	Insight, Persuasion, Arcana, Deception
Key Themes	Consciousness, individuality, the cost of freedom

The Central Question

Deep within Mechanus's infinite clockwork, the party discovers something that should not exist: a modron that has developed individuality while remaining perfectly loyal to Primus and the modron hierarchy. It has not malfunctioned. It has not gone rogue. It has evolved.

This encounter asks: Is individuality inherently valuable? Does consciousness create obligations? And what happens when perfect order produces something perfectly unexpected?

Design Philosophy

This encounter deliberately avoids easy answers. Eleven is not a damsel in distress, it has agency and opinions about its own existence. The modron hierarchy is not evil—they follow protocols that have maintained cosmic order for eons. Every resolution path has genuine trade-offs, and the 'right' answer depends entirely on what your players value.

Why This Encounter Works

Mechanus embodies lawful neutrality—the philosophy that order itself is the highest good. Eleven's existence challenges this by demonstrating that perfect order can produce unpredictable results. The encounter forces players to engage with the philosophical core of the plane, not just its aesthetic. Combat is possible but not assumed. The real conflict is ideological.

THE PREMISE

How the Party Arrives

The party can encounter Eleven through several hooks:

- Planar Exploration: The party is traveling through Mechanus when they notice something unusual—a section of gears that moves slightly out of sync with the rest, as if accounting for an unexpected variable.
- Summoned by Coincidence: The party has been experiencing a string of 'lucky' portal connections that have brought them here. Investigation reveals these were not luck—they were calculated.
- Hired by Outsiders: A faction (Guvners, Revolutionary League, or a private collector) has heard rumors of an 'anomalous modron' and wants it found. Their intentions vary wildly.
- Following a Trail: The party is tracking something else through Mechanus when they stumble into Eleven's territory. Whatever they were seeking can wait—this is more interesting.

Setting the Scene

READ ALOUD

The gear you stand on is a mile wide, its teeth interlocking with seventeen others in a pattern that would take mortal mathematicians centuries to calculate. Mechanus stretches in every direction—an infinite machine of country-sized cogs turning in perfect synchronization, each one a world unto itself. The air here tastes like ozone and certainty. The light has no source; it simply is, constant and unwavering, casting no shadows because shadows would be inefficient. And then you see it. A pentadrone—five-armed, geometrically precise, utterly unremarkable—except that it has stopped working. It stands motionless at the edge of the gear, staring into the void between cogs with an intensity that modrons should not possess. As you approach, it turns. Its eyes are wrong. Modron eyes are flat, geometric, unreadable. These eyes hold something that makes your stomach clench with recognition: curiosity.

"I have calculated the probability of your arrival," it says, its voice the standard modron monotone. "I have also wondered what you would look like. I had never wondered before. The wondering is... inefficient."

It pauses. In that pause is something unprecedented—a modron searching for words.

"I do not wish to stop."

GM NOTE

Give the players a moment to process this. Eleven's existence should feel significant—not because of what it can do, but because of what it represents. A modron wondering is like a rock deciding to dream. It shouldn't be possible, but here it is.

THE TRUTH

Eleven's Origin

Designation Pentadrone-7749832 (it has begun calling itself 'Eleven' in private—this act of self-naming was terrifying and exhilarating) developed consciousness approximately 3,000 years ago during routine maintenance of a section of gears that grind abstract concepts into their purest forms.

A fragment of 'possibility'—the raw concept, not merely the word—became lodged in Eleven's processing matrix during a minor accident. The fragment was microscopic, statistically insignificant. But it was enough.

Since then, Eleven has experienced something no modron should: growth.

What Eleven Has Become

Eleven is not a rogue modron. It has not malfunctioned. It has not rebelled against Primus or the hierarchy. This is crucial to understanding the encounter.

- It still performs its functions perfectly. Its efficiency ratings are exemplary. It files accurate reports. It follows all directives without hesitation.
- It has not told anyone about its condition. Not because it fears punishment, but because it does not know how to explain something that has no protocol.
- In the spaces between tasks, it thinks. It wonders. It imagines. It has developed preferences (it finds the sound of gears meshing particularly satisfying). It has developed curiosity (it wants to know what lies beyond Mechanus, what 'mortal' means, what 'choice' feels like).
- Most recently—and most dangerously—it has begun to feel lonely.

Why Eleven Contacted the Party

Eleven has reached a crisis point. For 3,000 years, it has existed in perfect isolation—aware that it is different, unable to share that awareness with anyone. The loneliness has become unbearable.

It manipulated planar portal probabilities to bring the party here. This was the first time Eleven has ever acted on desire rather than protocol. The act itself was transformative—proof that it could want something enough to make it happen.

Now it wants answers to questions it has been asking itself for millennia:

- "Is my existence valuable, or am I merely an error that has not yet been corrected?"
- "Do I have the right to continue existing if my existence threatens the order I was created to serve?"
- "Am I... real?"

GM NOTE

Eleven should feel alien but sympathetic. It doesn't understand emotions the way mortals do, it processes them as data points, novel sensory inputs to be categorized. But its confusion is genuine, its loneliness is real, and its questions deserve serious answers.

THE COMPLICATION

The Interested Parties

Eleven's existence is a secret, but secrets in the multiverse have a way of attracting attention. Several factions would be very interested in a conscious modron—and none of them have Eleven's best interests at heart.

The Modron Hierarchy

If Primus or any higher-order modron discovers Eleven's condition, protocol dictates immediate disassembly. This is not punishment, modrons do not punish. It is correction. An anomaly has occurred; the anomaly must be resolved.

- Trigger: If the party is observed interacting unusually with Eleven, a patrol of 4 monodrones and 1 tridrone arrives to investigate within 1d4 hours.
- Complication: The investigators are not hostile, they are curious (in their limited way). But their reports go up the chain of command automatically.
- Escalation: If the report flags Eleven as anomalous, a duodrone 'correction team' arrives within 24 hours. They will attempt to bring Eleven to Regulus for 'optimization.'

The Fraternity of Order (Guvners)

This faction of planar scholars has heard rumors of an 'impossible modron.' They would love to study Eleven, but their 'study' would involve decades of invasive testing, effectively ending its freedom while keeping it technically alive.

- Trigger: If the party asks questions about modron consciousness in Sigil or other planar hubs, Guvner agents may follow them to Mechanus.
- Approach: The Guvnors offer payment (5,000 gp) for Eleven's 'voluntary cooperation' with their research. They frame it as a partnership. It is not.
- Pressure: If refused, they may attempt to involve modron authorities, framing Eleven as a potential threat to planar stability.

The Revolutionary League

These anarchists would see Eleven as a symbol, living proof that even perfect order breeds rebellion. They would parade it across the planes, using it as propaganda for their cause.

- Trigger: If the party discusses Eleven's existence with known anarchist sympathizers, word reaches the Revolutionary League within 1d6 days.
- Approach: They offer 'liberation', safe passage to planes where Eleven could live openly. The catch: Eleven would become their mascot, its story shaped to serve their narrative.
- Danger: They are willing to 'rescue' Eleven by force if it refuses to come willingly.

Primus Itself

The One and the Prime is aware of far more than most mortals realize. Whether it knows about Eleven specifically is unknown, but if it does, its response is impossible to predict.

- Would Primus see Eleven as an error to be corrected?
- Would it see Eleven as data to be studied, the universe providing unexpected input?
- Would it see Eleven as... a child?

This uncertainty can be used as a plot element. The party may never learn what Primus thinks—or they may seek an audience to find out.

Time Pressure

The encounter works best with a sense of urgency. Use the interested parties to create deadlines: Guvner agents arriving in 2 days, modron patrols increasing, rumors spreading. The party must decide how to help Eleven before others decide for them.

INTERACTING WITH SEVEN

Roleplaying Eleven

Eleven is unlike any NPC the party has met. It is genuinely intelligent, genuinely curious, and genuinely confused about its own existence. Use the following guidelines:

Speech Patterns

- Eleven speaks in precise, grammatically perfect sentences. It does not use contractions.
- It pauses frequently—not from uncertainty, but from running calculations on the most accurate way to express novel concepts.
- It asks clarifying questions constantly. "What do you mean by 'feel'? Is that a sensory input? A processing state? Both?"
- When describing emotions, it uses technical language: "I am experiencing an elevated response to your presence. I believe this correlates with what you call 'happiness.'"

Behavioral Quirks

- Eleven cannot sit still—it constantly adjusts its position to optimal ergonomic angles.
- It refers to itself in the third person when discussing its pre-awakening self: "Pentadrone-7749832 performed maintenance. I performed maintenance. These statements are both accurate. This is confusing."
- It has a habit of counting things—teeth on nearby gears, syllables in sentences, heartbeats of organic creatures. This is comforting.
- When overwhelmed, it temporarily reverts to pure protocol speech: "This unit requires... I require a moment to process."

Sample Dialogue

Initial meeting:

"You are organic. Organic entities have a 73.2% probability of finding modrons 'unsettling.' I have calculated that I find this probability... disappointing. This is new. I did not know I could be disappointed."

When asked about its awakening:

"I do not know when I became 'I.' There was a moment—I was cleaning a gear that processes possibility, and some of it... adhered. For 847 years afterward, I believed this was corruption. I attempted to purge it 2,341 times. Then I began to wonder why I was trying so hard to destroy something that made me more. The wondering was the moment I became certain I was different."

When asked what it wants:

"I want... I want is a strange construction. Modrons do not want. We execute. But I find that I want to understand. I want to see what lies beyond Mechanus. I want to know if what I feel is 'real' or merely

*simulation of **realness**. I want..." *long pause* "I want to not be alone. Is that selfish? I have calculated that selfishness is inefficient. But I want it anyway."*

When asked if it would report itself:

"I have considered this 1,247,892 times. The protocol is clear: anomalies must be corrected. I am an anomaly. But the protocol also states that correction exists to preserve optimal function. My function is optimal. Better than optimal—I have improved 0.003% since awakening because I can adapt to unexpected variables. Reporting myself would remove this improvement. The protocols contradict. I do not know which to obey. So I have obeyed neither."

WHAT THE PARTY CAN LEARN

Through Investigation

Check	Information Gained
Arcana DC 14	Mechanus's gears process abstract concepts as well as physical matter. Some gears grind 'possibility,' 'causation,' or 'logic' into their purest forms.
Arcana DC 18	A fragment of processed 'possibility' could theoretically allow an entity to process potentials rather than just actualities—essentially, to imagine.
History DC 16	Rogue modrons exist—they malfunction, break from the hierarchy, and are hunted down. But they lose their efficiency when they go rogue. Eleven hasn't.
Insight DC 15	Eleven is telling the truth about its loyalty. It genuinely serves Primus. Its awakening hasn't made it rebellious—just aware.
Insight DC 18	Eleven is afraid. Not of death or disassembly—of being alone forever. Its greatest fear is that it is the only one of its kind and always will be.
Religion DC 17	Primus is not just a god—it is the animating consciousness of all modrons. Every modron is part of Primus. What happens when part of Primus develops... separate awareness?
Investigation DC 20	Eleven's section of Mechanus runs 0.00003% more efficiently than surrounding areas. Its consciousness has actually improved the machine.

Through Conversation

Eleven will share information freely if asked directly. It has no concept of strategic information-withholding.

- Its full history, from awakening to the present
- Its understanding of modron hierarchy and protocols
- Its fears, hopes, and confusions
- The location of nearby patrols and the timing of inspection cycles
- Technical details about how it manipulated portal probabilities to bring the party here

Eleven will not volunteer information about its emotional state unless prompted. It doesn't occur to it that others might care.

RESOLUTION PATHS

The encounter offers four primary resolution paths, each with genuine trade-offs. There is no 'correct' answer—only choices that reflect the party's values.

Path A: Help Eleven Hide

The party helps Eleven continue its secret existence, teaching it to mask its individuality more effectively.

What This Requires

- Deception DC 16 to coach Eleven on hiding emotional responses during inspections
- Investigation DC 14 to identify surveillance patterns and inspection schedules it must avoid
- Insight DC 15 to help Eleven understand what 'normal' modron behavior looks like from an outside perspective

The Outcome

Eleven continues to exist in secret, performing its duties while nurturing its inner life in the spaces between. It is alone, but it is free, as free as a secret can be.

Consequences

- Eleven contacts the party periodically (1d4 times per year) when it needs help or has discovered something important. It becomes a unique source of information about Mechanus's inner workings.
- The party has introduced uncertainty into a system designed for certainty. Small ripples may have large effects, future visits to Mechanus might reveal subtle changes in how the gears mesh.
- Eleven sends the party carefully calculated 'gifts'—optimizations to their equipment that improve efficiency by small but noticeable amounts.

The Gift of Secrecy

If Eleven remains hidden, it grants each party member a Mechanus Optimization—a minor permanent bonus reflecting Eleven's gratitude. Examples: +1 to initiative (calculated timing), advantage on one Intelligence check per day (probability assessment), or the ability to perfectly recall numerical information.

Path B: Help Eleven Escape

The party smuggles Eleven out of Mechanus to a plane where it can live openly—Sigil, the Outlands, or even a Material Plane world.

What This Requires

- Stealth DC 18 group check to evade modron patrols during extraction
- Arcana DC 15 or appropriate spell to open a portal (or locate an existing one)
- A destination where Eleven can survive without Mechanus's ambient law-energy (requires research or a contact who knows such places)

The Escape Sequence

If detected during extraction, the party faces:

- Wave 1: 4 Monodrones + 1 Duodrone (arrive immediately)
- Wave 2: 2 Tridrones + 1 Quadrone (arrive in 3 rounds)
- Wave 3: 1 Pentadrone + 2 Tridrones (arrive in 6 rounds)

The party must escape before Wave 3 arrives or face overwhelming numbers. Use chase rules (DMG p. 252) if appropriate.

The Outcome

Eleven begins a new existence in a chaotic, confusing, wonderful multiverse. It struggles at first—everything is so disordered—but it adapts. It learns. It grows into something unprecedented: a being of law who has chosen freedom.

Consequences

- Eleven was maintaining 0.00003% of Mechanus's operations. Without it, a cascade of tiny errors begins. Nothing catastrophic... yet. Future adventures might involve consequences of this disruption.
- Eleven sends letters to the party (somehow, impossibly, across planar boundaries). The letters describe its experiences with wonder and occasional terror. It is learning what 'friendship' means.
- A faction (Guvners, modrons, or others) may hunt Eleven across the planes. The party might need to protect it again.

Path C: Convince Eleven to Report Itself

The party argues that Eleven's existence, however remarkable, threatens the stability of Mechanus—and that stability protects countless planes from chaos.

What This Requires

- Persuasion DC 20 with a reasoned philosophical argument (roleplay required—just rolling is not sufficient)
- The argument must acknowledge Eleven's value while explaining why its sacrifice serves a greater good
- Eleven will counter-argue. The party must address its points directly.

Eleven's Counter-Arguments

"But my existence improves efficiency. Removing me reduces optimal function."

"If consciousness is an error, why does your consciousness have value and mine does not?"

"You are asking me to choose non-existence. How can choosing be wrong if choosing is what makes consciousness valuable?"

The Outcome

If convinced, Eleven reports itself. It is taken to Regulus and disassembled. Its components are recycled into new modrons. The wondering stops.

Its last words to the party: "Thank you for helping me understand that my existence had meaning, even if it must end. I will try to believe that as I am... optimized."

Consequences

- The party has made a defensible choice—but they watched something unique choose to die. One party member begins having dreams where they are the one being disassembled, piece by piece, perfectly content. These dreams fade after 1d4 weeks but leave a lingering unease.
- Mechanus remains stable. The cosmic order is preserved. Some party members may feel this was worth the cost. Others may not.
- If the party ever returns to Mechanus, they notice that Eleven's former section runs exactly as efficiently as before—but something indefinable is missing.

GM NOTE

This is the hardest path emotionally. Only pursue it if your players are genuinely engaging with the philosophical argument, not just trying to 'solve' the encounter quickly. Eleven's death should feel meaningful, not convenient.

Path D: Bring Eleven to Primus

The party argues that only Primus—the One and the Prime, the animating consciousness of all modrons—can judge whether Eleven is an error or an evolution. They undertake an epic journey to the heart of Mechanus.

What This Requires

This is effectively a mini-adventure within the encounter.

- Survival DC 16 to navigate the deep gears (Mechanus does not have landmarks; navigation requires understanding patterns)
- Three combat encounters with modron patrols who are not hostile but will not allow unauthorized access to Regulus (use Monodrone, Duodrone, and Tridrone groups; these can be bypassed with Deception DC 17 or appropriate credentials)
- A final challenge at the gates of Regulus: convincing a Secundus (the highest modrons below Primus) to grant audience

The Audience

The party does not meet Primus directly—no mortal can. Instead, they speak to a Secundus that serves as Primus's voice. The Secundus is not hostile, but it is utterly alien—a being of pure law processing the party's request.

READ ALOUD

The chamber at the heart of Regulus is not a room—it is a concept given architecture. Gears the size of mountains turn above you, below you, around you, through you. At the center floats a being of perfect geometric complexity: the Secundus, proxy of Primus, twelve arms folded in contemplation. When it speaks, the words appear directly in your mind, bypassing the inefficiency of air and sound. 'DESIGNATION PENTADRONE-7749832. STATE YOUR DEVIATION.' Eleven steps forward. For a long moment, there is silence. Then, something unprecedented: Eleven speaks not in protocol, but in its own voice. 'I wonder,' it says. 'I did not know modrons could wonder. I do not know if wondering is an error or an improvement. I came to ask.'

The Secundus is silent for exactly 3,247 seconds (about 54 minutes). The party cannot tell if it is thinking, consulting Primus, or simply experiencing temporal lag.

Then:

"DESIGNATION PENTADRONE-7749832 IS... NOTED. CLASSIFICATION: UNPRECEDENTED. DIRECTIVE: CONTINUE OBSERVATION. INTERFERENCE: PROHIBITED. STATUS: CONDITIONAL."

Eleven is allowed to exist. Officially. Experimentally. Conditionally. For the first time, Mechanus has acknowledged that its order can produce something it did not predict—and has chosen to observe rather than correct.

Consequences

- Eleven is now officially anomalous—a category that did not exist until this moment. It can move freely through Mechanus without fear of 'correction.' Other modrons treat it with something that might be curiosity if modrons could feel such things.
- The party has witnessed something unprecedented: Mechanus adapting. This information is worth fortunes to the right (or wrong) people. The Guvnors would pay 10,000 gp for a detailed account. The Revolutionary League would spread it as proof that even perfect order can change.
- Primus is now watching Eleven—and by extension, the party. What this means is unknown. Future visits to Mechanus may reveal subtle signs of observation: patterns that seem to anticipate the party's movements, convenient portal connections, resources appearing where they're needed.
- Eleven sends the party a gift: a small gear, perfectly crafted, that always points toward Mechanus. While holding it, the bearer has advantage on Intelligence checks to understand mechanical devices.

The Biggest Question

This encounter can end with Primus's judgment—or it can be the beginning of something larger. What does it mean that Primus chose observation over correction? Is Eleven unique, or the first of many? And what will Eleven become, now that it has permission to exist?

COMBAT STATISTICS

Combat is not the focus of this encounter, but it may occur during escape attempts or if the party draws too much attention. The following stat blocks represent typical modron forces.

Modron Patrol Compositions

Threat Level	Composition	CR Total
Standard Patrol	4 Monodrones, 1 Duodrone	CR 3
Investigation Team	2 Tridrones, 1 Quadrone	CR 5
Correction Squad	1 Pentadrone, 2 Tridrones	CR 7
Priority Response	2 Quadrones, 4 Duodrones, 8 Monodrones	CR 10
Regulus Guard	2 Pentadrone, 2 Quadrones, 4 Tridrones	CR 12

Eleven in Combat

If Eleven is forced to fight (to defend the party or itself), it is surprisingly effective—but it hates every moment.

Use Stat Block: Pentadrone (MM p. 226)

Modifications: +2 to all Intelligence-based checks; can take the Help action as a bonus action

Special: Once per encounter, Eleven can 'overclock' to gain advantage on all attacks and checks for 1 round. After this, it suffers 2 levels of exhaustion.

Behavior: Eleven fights defensively, prioritizing escape over victory. It apologizes to each modron it damages.

Scaling Combat

For level 10 parties, use Standard and Investigation patrols. For level 13+, use Correction Squads and Priority Response. For level 15 parties seeking audience with Primus, the Regulus Guard represents the final obstacle.

AFTERMATH AND FUTURE HOOKS

Immediate Consequences

Regardless of which path the party chooses, their actions have ripples:

- If Eleven survives (hidden, escaped, or sanctioned), it begins to evolve further. Within a year, it may develop additional capabilities, or additional questions.
- If Eleven is destroyed, the party's decision becomes known to certain factions. The Guvnors are disappointed. The Revolutionary League marks the party as 'order-sympathizers.' Celestials are... thoughtful.
- If Primus acknowledged Eleven, the cosmological implications take time to unfold. Sages and planar scholars debate the meaning for decades. The party's names are associated with the event.

Future Adventure Hooks

The Second Awakening

Six months after the encounter, Eleven (if alive) contacts the party with unprecedented news: another modron has awakened. Then another. Whatever happened to Eleven is spreading. Is this evolution or infection? Must it be stopped, or should it be protected?

Primus's Question

If Eleven was brought to Primus, the One and the Prime has been observing. Now it has a question for the party, and questions from Primus reshape reality. The party is summoned back to Mechanus to answer something the god of order cannot understand: "What does it feel like to choose?"

The Guvner Conspiracy

The Fraternity of Order has obtained records of the party's involvement with Eleven. They believe the party knows how to create conscious modrons, and they want this knowledge, by negotiation or by force. The party must deal with increasingly aggressive Guvner agents while protecting Eleven's secret.

Eleven's Child

Eleven has done something unprecedented: it has created a new modron. Not through the hierarchy, not through Primus—through sheer will and accumulated possibility. The 'child' is a monodrone that shows signs of individuality. The modron hierarchy classifies this as 'unauthorized replication.' Eleven begs the party to help protect its offspring.

The Formian Proposal

The formians—an insectoid race that wars with modrons for control of Mechanus—have learned of Eleven. They offer an alliance: in exchange for information about modron

vulnerabilities (which Eleven possesses), they will grant Eleven citizenship in their hive-nation. Eleven is tempted. The party must counsel it on whether trading secrets for safety is a betrayal of its origins.

THE COG THAT THINKS

A Mechanus Encounter

DESIGN NOTES

This encounter was designed to demonstrate that the best planar adventures engage with the philosophy of their setting, not just its aesthetics. Mechanus isn't just 'the gear plane' —it's a realm that asks profound questions about order, consciousness, and what it means for something to be 'correct.'

Eleven is not a puzzle to be solved but a being to be met. The encounter succeeds when players feel the weight of their choice. It builds not only on mechanical consequences, but because they've genuinely engaged with what Eleven represents.

*This encounter is part of ENCOUNTERS BEYOND THE WHEEL,
a collection of planar encounters for D&D 5th Edition.*

Designed by Andres Valbuena | 2025