

Chapter 181 A Shoulder to Lean On

The departure of Doctor Jutland and his gigantic Kaius mech gave the hunting platoon a much-needed reprieve. Mech technicians and supplies continued to pour down the transport at a steady rate. A maintenance team replenished some of the depleted energy cells of the battered mechs. They also replenished the Emphyreans with ammunition for their railguns.

As for the Ajax Olympians, they both suffered badly in the last engagement. One heavy knight laid down on the ground with a mangled leg while the other stood haplessly with a scorched exterior. Both mechs required an extensive overhaul, something which Ves couldn't do in the middle of an alien jungle.

In order to bring the damaged mechs back home, Ves prioritized restoring some mobility to the mech with the crippled leg. The limb suffered grievous damage, but the readings the scanner module spat out showed that he had a way out of this mess.

"Looks like the chimera mech's teeth haven't cut very deep." Chief Ramirez muttered as he stood next to Ves. He gestured to the center of the wireframe leg. "While much of the outer sections are in disarray, the internal frame of the limb is still intact."

Both of them had worried about this possibility. Since it functioned as the leg bone of the aforementioned limb, a broken internal frame meant that the mech couldn't support its weight on the limb even if they fixed some of the internals. The Olympian simply couldn't walk in this condition without snapping its hastily propped up leg in that case.

Fortunately, the scans revealed that the leg suffered from extensive but shallow wounds. Ves already adjusted his preliminary repair plans.

"We can get this Olympian back up its feet if we replace the broken control modules and repair some of the tears in its musculature." Ves explained and

pointed at the most critical components to repair. "At a minimum, we have to fix these areas in order to raise the load-bearing capacity of the leg. That's the real challenge that we're facing at the moment. Even with some patches and improvised repairs, the mech might never be able to walk on its own feet without crippling the leg again."

Ramirez nodded, though his hazard suit hardly bobbed. "It's this damn heavy gravity. I reckon we won't be able to bring the mech up to a state where it can walk under its own power. A couple of Volmars are needed to support the Olympian on its way home."

"Are you certain that the Volmars won't get crushed under all of that weight? The moment the Olympian diverts more than twenty percent of its weight onto a Volmar, the latter mech will get crushed."

"Let's run the numbers then. You're a wizard at math, right? Let's say we fix the Olympian so that it will be able to stand and walk with assistance. If nothing else, we can employ the other Olympian as a support as well. Only a heavy mech can support another heavy mech's weight."

"I don't think Captain Kaine will like that proposal." Ves carefully replied.

"We're in a bad spot right now and Doctor Jutland might be cooking up another attack. Pinning down our remaining heavy knight leaves the hunting platoon with no viable tank that can meet the chimera mech's charge."

Both of them had to keep in mind that they faced a lot of constraints. Not only did they have to make repairs in the field with hardly any proper facilities at hand, they also had to keep in mind the constant threats from the environment.

"I'll go begin to prep the leg and clean up all the ruined parts. You should stay here and refine the repair plan."

They split up to perform their own tasks. With a mech designer like Ves on hand, Chief Ramirez didn't have to perform a haphazard repair job that might work out for a couple of days but quickly broke down afterwards. While Ves modified the Olympians to perform beyond their safety margins, the heavy knights still had to last for at least another month.

The mech technicians started to use their limited supplies to cut open the mangled and deformed armor plating. Once they opened up the leg, they quickly tore out the internal components that looked dubious.

By the time the repair team was about to install some replacement parts, Ves finished testing out a rudimentary model. He passed on an updated repair scheme to Ramirez, who used it to guide his men in prioritizing the restoration of a small number of critical sections.

The repair team made good speed in restoring the functionality of the leg. After half a day of rushing the repairs, the Olympian managed to rise up to its feet with the assistance of the scorched Olympian. Once it stood on its own two feet, a pair of Volmars took over and carefully let the half-crippled heavy mech sling its arms around the skinnier medium mechs' shoulders.

An awful sound of metal pressing against metal sounded out, but the Volmars hadn't caved in yet.

A lot rested on the shoulders of the pilot of the damaged Olympian. He had to juggle between balancing the right amount of weight his mech put on its damaged leg and the shoulders of the Volmars that supported his machine. He had to put some weight on each of his supports, but not too much to overwhelm any one of them. The hunting platoon had no choice but to take it slow.

Once it became clear that their repairs accomplished something, the repair team started to pack up and lifted their gear back up to the transport.

Ensign D'Amato approached Ves as he stared out at the metal forest.

"Commander Tregis has sent his compliments to you for a job well done. It will take a about two days for the hunting platoon to return to base, but at least it will be able to do so under its own power."

He nodded at the ensign's words, but took them lightly. Ves was only here to do a job. Once he completed his mission, they'd go their separate ways. Building up a favorable impression availed him nowhere at this moment, especially considering House Kaine's current stance.

"I'll return to the transport in a moment." He answered to D'Amato. "Let me admire the scenery while I can."

Once the nosy ensign walked away, Ves leaned his hazard suit against a metallic tree trunk and beckoned with his hands. "Lucky!"

The cat sprung out from nowhere and landed its paws in front of his feet. Lucky looked fairly frazzled at the moment. Ves quickly picked up his pet and removed the comm he slipped around the neck.

"Good work, buddy! Hopefully you got in some good shots."

Since they arrived at this location, he let Lucky loose with his comm attached to his gem cat's collar. Ves wore a replacement comm on his wrist that could send out simple commands to his primary comm.

The moment Doctor Kaius showed up, Ves quietly relayed a couple of commands from his replacement comm. He first sent the code to activate the Stealth Field on his primary comm along with its attached recording sensors. He then ordered Lucky to find a way to sneak inside one of the Kaius' many holes in order to record its internal state.

While Ves also ordered Lucky to try his luck in trying to approach Doctor Jutland, the shield generator prevented his pet from getting anywhere close. If

Lucky succeeded in his mission, Ves could probably look forward to a couple of minutes of valuable footage of the chimera mech's internal makeup.

Lucky kept yowling at his owner. Ves exasperatingly made another promise.

"Okay, okay, I'll make it up to you! Once we're back, I'll order another batch of luxury minerals for you to munch on."

After placating his cat some more, Ves finally joined the rest. He stepped on a lifter platform and let it bring him back up to the hovering transport up above. It gained a few more scratches on its hull after suffering from sporadic hexabat attacks. Though the vessel boasted thicker armor than regular transports, even the smallest indigenous life forms on this planet could tear through the armor over time.

Once they finished loading all of their gear and men, the transport returned to base along with its escort. The mechs from George's Cavalry and the Stanislaw adopted a dispersed formation and overtook the hunting platoon in their fairly brisk journey back to base. Besides encountering a couple of wild hexapods, they enjoyed a quiet trip back to the safety of the base camp's walls.

Ves let out a deep breath. Everyone on the repair team started to relax once they realized they had a couple of very thick walls between them and the monstrous Kaius. While the frightening Doctor Jutland still had the run of the forest, at least the mech technicians didn't have to risk their lives in the field anymore.

Ensign D'Amato received a message on his comm. Once he read his instructions, he turned to Ves. "Commander Tregis wants to debrief me in his office. While I'm gone, you should start setting up a plan to bring both Ajax Olympians back to full functionality. They're the only mechs we have on hand

that can withstand a head-on charge from both the hexapod kings and the Kaius."

"I understand. I'll be sure to work with the chief to set up a detailed plan."

"Also, your presence is needed two days from now when Commander Tregis convenes a meeting on how to handle Doctor Jutland and his Kaius. Your expertise will be of vital help here. You can access the workshop's secure terminal to look at the recordings and sensor readings we've taken of the Kaius."

"I'll be sure to do that."

The repair team settled back in the maintenance department and immediately went to work. Ves hadn't spent the trip back to base idling around. He already formed an extensive repair plan that saved as much time as possible.

Ves didn't anticipate much of a challenge in this matter. The experienced mech technicians serving under Ramirez could fabricate and install the replacement parts on their own.

However, a complete repair required at least two weeks of constant working. With the limited manpower and facilities on hand, they'd waste far too much time, leaving the mercenaries out in the field without a shoulder to lean on when they encountered a hexapod king.

In order to speed up the repairs, Ves and Ramirez huddled together in order to determine which parts needed to be replaced and which parts only needed a couple of taps to bring it up and running.

"We're cutting a lot of corners here." Ramirez remarked as he leaned back onto his seat. They both worked for hours to complete a detailed repair scheme. "This is real sloppy work. I won't be surprised if a few components blow apart under stress."

"Heavy mechs have ridiculous amounts of redundancy. It can take a few malfunctions."

The repairs of the Olympian with the crippled leg was fairly simple. In comparison, the other Olympian who bathed in the flames of the chimera mech's breath weapon posed a thornier problem.

While the heavy knight remained functional bar the need to replace its shield, its entire frontal area had been subjected to a massive amount of heat. This not only degraded the integrity of its extremely expensive armor, it also affected the components at some level. Most of them functioned properly for now, but who knew if the Olympian could sustain its current level of performance.

Ves made a difficult suggestion. "We can keep most of the existing components in place. We should trust in the quality of the Olympian. All of its internals are rated to withstand a very high heat level already. As for its armor, we can manage for now if we settle for replacing its upper layer. It will take far too much time to fabricate replacements plates for its middle and lower layers."

Chief Ramirez shook his head. "It takes over two days to fabricate a single plate with our facilities. The only heavy duty armor compressor in this expedition is back on the Ark Horizon. The fabricators there will have to work around the clock to form the most essential replacement plates and ship them to surface in the next couple of supply runs."

That meant they had to pick and choose the worst sections of armor to replace. Ves didn't look forward to making the decision. If he made the wrong judgement, the Olympian might suffer grievous damage when its armor failed to hold up against a heavy blow.

Chapter 182 Achilles Heel

Ves entered the conference room with tired eyes. He stayed up late the last two days as he tried to juggle various duties at once. Not only did he had to come up with a way to bring both damaged Ajax Olympians back to fighting form, he also had to devote some time into studying the sensor data the hunting platoon had taken of the Kaius.

The more he studied the Kaius, the more he admired the strange and primal-looking chimera mech. For a mech that had been built more than twenty-seven years ago, it possessed a lot of charm.

Whoever designed the initial incarnation of the Kaius possessed a lot of hands-on experience. However, that mech designer's skill level didn't exceed what Ves already mastered. The mech designer must be a senior in age who never made any achievements in the field. Doubtlessly he only reached the level of an Apprentice Mech Designer in his later years.

Still, age and experience brought its own strength. His work might lack in sophistication, but he made up for it with a strong mastery of the basics. The sound design and solid foundation of the Kaius allowed it to remain functional long after the first expedition ended in failure.

Commander Tregis welcomed Ves into the conference room and nodded him to a seat at the side. Since the headquarters of the base featured full climate controls, everyone took off their bulky helmets and breathed in the sterile air.

Ves took a seat next to a handful of exobiologists. They had been studying the same sensors readings as he had, but they focused instead on the incredibly powerful heat organ.

The room already had a handful of other important people present. Captain Kaine sulked next to Tregis, while an officer wearing the uniform of George's Cavalry conferred with someone from the Stray Phantoms. A handful of other officers whose roles Ves couldn't guess rounded out the gathering.

Commander Tregis clapped and gestured everyone to take a seat. "Now that we are here, let us begin with this meeting. First, I'd like Captain Kaine to recap her encounter with Doctor Jutland and his strange biological mech."

Captain Kaine didn't wish to recount the awful experience, but Tregis put her on the spot. She briefly described the events that took place, and described how a crippling strike against one of her heavy knights forced them to hunker down and wait for rescue.

No one laughed at her. They all knew that she did her best under the circumstances. The power and endurance shown by the Kaius exceeded every other mech in the expedition.

After she sank back into her seat, Tregis turned to Ves. "Before we go into Doctor Jutland, let's start with the Kaius. Mr. Larkinson, please relay your analysis on the chimera mech."

Ves dutifully described his initial results and threw out a guess on the identity of the mech designer. "One thing to note is that the Kaius shows definite signs of cross-discipline collaboration. At a minimum, a mech designer and a specialist in biology have had a hand in its initial design."

He summoned up a projection of the chimera mech's wireframe model. Sections of it had been shaded in blue while a lot of other areas had been shaded in red. "That's living tissue. The chimera mech isn't so much a mech but is more like a carcass brought to life with the help of technology."

The Kaius told a story of its own. The mech hadn't been designed and fabricated in a well-stocked workshop. It looked more like a product that a mech designer came up in the field. The lack of facilities along with the limited amount of supplies necessitated some compromises.

The survivors of the first expedition must have started hollowing out a hexapod king carcass. It's powerful on its own and Doctor Jutland must have

done something in order to preserve the heat organ which acts as the power reactor for the Kaius. They then augmented it with parts salvaged from other mechs in order to turn it into a controllable war machine.

"Isn't the beast supposed to be dead for over two decades?" Captain Kaine suddenly asked, expressing the bewilderment of much of the mech pilots present in the room. "How come it hasn't rotted to the point of becoming a useless mess?"

"That's something for the exobiologists to explain." Ves nodded to the exobiologists who patiently remained at their seats. "I don't have a clue how Jutland managed to stretch the longevity of the Kaius' muscles and organs, but there's obviously been some failures over the years. You can see in the readings that there's a lot of gaps and places where salvaged parts have taken the place of living tissue."

"So the mech is failing?" Tregis honed in on the most important point.

"The state of the mech is fairly awful at this point." Ves stated carefully. "That doesn't mean it's a pushover. The design is incredibly robust. The mech designer, whoever he may be, had built it to last for years, perhaps in anticipation that a second expedition will arrive twenty-seven years later. However, the patchwork repairs over the years has not been very effective in maintaining the full capabilities of the design."

"In other words, the mech designer is dead?"

"He's either dead or is unable to help with the maintenance and repair of the mech. Whatever the case, these repairs appear to be done by someone who is inventive, but is not an engineer. The current version of the Kaius has already drastically drifted from its original design, to the point of performing around twenty to thirty percent worse."

Captain Kaine shuddered at his words. If her hunting platoon faced the Kaius at its peak, then they would have been smacked down hard.

"This sounds promising." Commander Tregis smiled viciously. "While the Kaius represents an enormous threat to this base, we still have a chance to turn the tables on Doctor Jutland. Doctor Mellow, please report your findings on the biological aspect of the Kaius."

A prim and proper middle-aged woman with her brown hair tied in a neat bun stood up from her seat. "Our studies of the hexapod species and its various properties are still ongoing. Though we lack a direct comparison of an apex hexapod, our studies of the smaller hexapod adults allow us to extrapolate the properties of this chimera."

Doctor Mellow slowly explained her findings in a simplified way. None of the people present had a background in the biological sciences, so she skimmed over much of the details.

"The Kaius takes advantage of the remarkable capabilities of the heat organ, as you call it." The doctor frowned for a moment, as if she disdained the layman's term of such a powerful example of life's ingenuity.

"The role of this marvelous organ is first and foremost to draw in power from ambient heat and radiation. It is incredibly capable of doing so, to the point of absorbing the energy from any form of direct energy weapons with near-complete efficiency. What is even more remarkable is the role the monoexurite plays in this system. It's part of a complex organic structure that's compressed all of that energy into a space the size of your palm."

What she described truly defied convention. While the most advanced technology humanity had at its disposal could also achieve such an effect, that took thousands of years of scientific accumulation to develop. Even Ves

couldn't recharge his precious shield generator by himself with the facilities he had on hand.

"The Kaius expended a lot of energy in the last engagement. Its breath weapon is especially potent. Do you believe the mech is on its last legs?"

The doctor shook her head. "Do not underestimate the prowess of the indigenous life forms on this planet. The heat organs become increasingly more formidable the larger they become. The average hexapod adult has a heat organ the size of a human, while the heat organs of an apex hexapod has reached the size of a small aircar."

She waved her hand, causing the projection of a wireframe model of the Kaius to zoom in to the center of its torso. Its heat organ deviated from its purely organic counterparts with the addition of various mechanical attachments that served unknown purposes.

"The Kaius is unusual in its size. It is about fifty percent larger than what our models suggest. Our conjecture is that Doctor Jutland must have preyed on other hexapods and processed their heat organs to augment the chimera mech's biological functions. All of the other tissue show evidence of extensive modification, much of which we are still determining their purpose."

In other words, the exobiologists knew that Jutland had done something, but they didn't know how he did it. Still, the effects spoke for themselves. The Kaius performed significantly better than a purely organic hexapod king. It truly deserved to be called the king of the forest.

Commander Tregis rapped his fingers on the table. "Is there any way to exploit the biological portion of the Kaius? Can we synthesize some form of poison that can weaken its functions?"

The exobiologists all shook their heads. "The hexapods are the most resilient forms of life on this planet. They've thrived under incredibly difficult situations

that would poison an unaugmented human to death in seconds. I'm not sure even Doctor Jutland has managed to find a way to poison this species."

All of this meant that they couldn't take any shortcuts. With Doctor Jutland's extensive tampering, the internal structure of his chimera mech had become exceptionally resilient to all forms of damage. They stood a better chance of defeating the Kaius by focusing on its mechanical portions.

Everyone turned back to Ves. While House Kaine had its own experts to consult with, Ves remained one of the most knowledgeable people around when it came to mechs.

Ves zoomed the projection back out and pointed his finger at a couple of portions, causing them to be shaded in orange. "I've already determined that two of its six limbs are improperly affixed to its joints. I found a handful of other components that show similar signs of poor maintenance and patchwork repairs."

Ten percent of the wireframe model turned into orange. "These portions should be the chimera mech's achilles heel. They're much less tolerant of damage than the rest of this complex mech."

A light shone in Captain Kaine's eyes. She dearly hated the Kaius for beating her first command to the point where they had to abandon their mission and return to base in disgrace. Her Cathrec also lost its hand at the end, which cut her combat effectiveness in half.

"Unfortunately, the scans we've made of the Kaius has not been very extensive, especially in its deepest portions. I'm still unable to figure out the state of its cockpit or if its even present on that thing. However, I'm confident that the weak points I've pointed out should severely impact the performance of the Kaius."

In truth, Ves learned a lot about the chimera mech's internal structure with the help of Lucky's surreptitious recordings. He even encountered something frightening that gave him a whole new conception of what mechs were capable of. He left all of these details out of his story because he didn't wish to explain how he got ahold of this information.

After Ves finished his report, the meeting turned to other topics. They talked about Doctor Jutland and whatever scraps of information they found of his background, which was surprisingly brief. He definitely had a checkered past, but someone with a lot of power had scrubbed all mention of the man from the galactic net.

Tregis even brought in a psychologist who talked a whole round of nonsense about the crazy doctor's mental state. Ves largely slept through his long and winding explanation.

The man had simply gone native. He also let the poison in the air affect his judgement despite his best efforts to modify his body to become more compatible with the environment. The twenty-seven year long wait for the next expedition had also taken a toll on his psyche.

At the end, Commander Tregis relayed something unsettling. "The mercenaries in the field have started to relay unusual movements among the hexapods. Much of them are being drawn away to the east of our position, which is where the hunting platoon had been circling towards. Our analysts believe that Doctor Jutland is gathering them for an assault."

The news came like a thunderbolt from the sky. While the hexapods possess a formidable amount of power, they generally acted with beastly instincts and thus could easily be outfoxed. They also generally roamed the forest in a solitary pattern.

If Doctor Jutland gathered them into a horde, and directed them with a rudimentary strategy, the base camp could very well be overrun.

"We should ask for reinforcements from the fleet!" A nameless officer proposed. His eyes darted around as if he feared a hexapod could jump out at any moment. "There are still a lot of mechs that haven't been shipped from orbit!"

"That is out of the question." Commander Tregis shook his head. "The vast majority of the assets this expedition has brought comprise of spaceborn mechs that function best in zero-g space. Bringing them down to the surface where they will have to face crushing 1.4 times standard gravity will severely hamper their effectiveness."

In addition, the spaceborn mechs also possessed flight systems that wouldn't be able to function in atmosphere. This severely neutered the spaceborn mechs to the point where they were better off with deploying obsolete mechs.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I also have to relay an important change that affects our entire operation." The base commander continued. "Scout ships have reported sightings of a small but potent sandmen fleet. They're approaching the Groening System in an inexorable march. Due to this approaching threat, the main fleet has quietly left orbit to meet the sandmen fleet in battle."

If the threat of Doctor Jutland could be likened to a rabid dog, then the threat of the approaching sandmen fleet was comparable to a hungry tiger. Between the two adversaries, Lord Kaine put a higher amount of priority in beating back the space-faring aliens. Half of the people present in the conference room adopted despairing expressions.

Even Ves frowned at the news. The departure of the Ark Horizon cut off their supply lines, which meant that they couldn't get their hands on replacement

armor plating for the damaged Olympians. Without the heavy knights, nothing could stop the Kaius if it decided to barge past the walls of the base.

"We're so dead."

Chapter 183 Pressure

The situation changed abruptly the next day. Doctor Jutland had finally made his move. The mercenaries in the field started coming back with damaged and half-broken mechs. They moaned about getting overwhelmed by large hordes of hexapods.

"More than a dozen of the beasts popped out of nowhere! They destroyed Jimmy's mech in an instant! If he hadn't ejected in time, he would have ended up in their bellies!"

"I looked over the hill and saw six of the hexapods following this giant monstrosity. It's like a mech, but not! I don't know how to describe that crazy thing! Here, my mech recorded the whole thing. Do you see that weirdo sitting atop its head? He's not even wearing a hazard suit!"

The mercenaries hadn't lost too many mechs, but all of them returned to base with extensive battle damage. This led to endless frustration as the unseated mech pilots hounded the overworked mech technicians to bring their machines back to prime condition. Practically every mech technician had to work around the clock.

The absence of the main fleet up in orbit exacerbated the problem. The base's logistics became severely strained as far too few mech technicians had to repair too many damaged mechs.

No matter how hard they worked, they ended up with even more mechs waiting for repairs the next day.

The brass wanted to keep the presence of Doctor Jutland and the departure of the main fleet quiet, but the deteriorating situation caused everyone to know of their new circumstances.

Doctor Jutland deliberately showed up and taunted the hapless mercenaries whose mechs crumpled in a single hit when faced with the awesome might of his Kaius.

"I'm not sure whether I'm glad the mad doctor is taking his time." Chief Ramirez remarked to Ves as he looked over the spotty repairs they rushed through for both Olympians. "The man's turning the mercenaries against us just as Lord Kaine and his fleet are gone, but at least he's giving us a chance to bring the Olympians back in action."

Even if a vast horde of hexapods descended upon the base, its defenses provided the expedition with a formidable advantage. Nonetheless, the Kaius exceeded everyone's expectations and could easily open up the base by charging through a wall. Only the Olympians stood a chance of surviving a head-on charge.

Ves shook his head. "Three days is far too little time to restore these machines."

Both Olympians sustained a moderate amount of damage. The main issue with these mechs was that their highly advanced armor required a lot of time and effort to replace. They simply couldn't replicate the original armor system with the facilities on hand.

Thus, Ves and Chief Ramirez made a difficult decision. They gave up on the original composition of the armor and used a cheaper formula instead. The alloys they chose to work with possessed a decent amount of strength and could be formed quickly. However, its production wasted a lot of exotics, which depleted a large amount of their available stock of raw materials.

This worsened their already awful reputation. Not only did the hunting platoon fail to tackle the strongest threat in the region, their extravagant mechs also wasted a large amount of resources.

The mercenaries who waited for their mechs to be repaired grew surlier by the day. These rough and hardened men and women easily resorted to their fists whenever tempers flared. The grounded mech pilots had nothing to do while they waited for their mechs to be patched up. The entire hunting schedule had to be halted.

"You should watch your back." Ramirez warned Ves. "There's talk of handing you over to Doctor Jutland because he's loudly demanding your help in repairing the Kaius. He says as long as we hand you over, he'll stop harassing the mercenaries."

"I know."

The mad doctor aimed to force the expedition to give up on Ves through applying continuous pressure. His strange ability to control the local wildlife gave him a decisive edge in the field. Currently, he made the hunting parties suffer miserably whenever they set off.

"We won't serve you on a silver platter to Jutland." Ensign D'Amato spoke from the side. He carried a stun baton around these days in order to deter the mercenaries from doing something stupid. "It's counterproductive to empower the doctor by allowing you to repair the Kaius. He'll immediately employ his strengthened chimera mech against our base."

The analysts and psychologists who studied Doctor Jutland's behavior believed that he wanted to wipe out everyone who trespassed his territory. The doctor fully believed that only he possessed the right to enjoy the fruits of his underground kingdom.

Ves huffed under his breath. "Tell that to the mercs."

The tense standoff couldn't be maintained for long. After calling back the mercenaries in the field, Commander Tregis let slip that he intended to go on the offensive. A strong strike force centered around the hunting platoon and its partially repaired Olympians would go out and confront the Kaius away from the base.

Ves imagined not a lot of people would be willing to sign up for such an arduous mission. Indeed, almost none of the mercenary groups signed up. Only the mercenaries with close ties to House Kaine such as George's Cavalry and the Stray Phantoms expressed any willingness to join the strike force.

With no other choice, Commander Tregis conscripted a third of the mercenaries who shied away from the job. Through a combination of naked threats and generous rewards, he managed to augment the strike force with fifty mechs of dubious quality.

The strike force gathered at the main entrance of the base. Such a large gathering of mechs posed enough of a threat to topple many smaller planets, but against an anomaly like Doctor Jutland and his steed, they barely qualified as cannon fodder.

Captain Kaine walked over and conferred with Chief Ramirez about the particulars of the hastily patched up Olympians.

"It's best to employ the Olympian who took a breath weapon in the face as the primary tank. Its armor has largely held up apart from a few critical sections. It's just the internal components close to the surface that have gone bad."

"What about the other machine?"

Both Ramirez and Ves grimaced. "The leg is rather shoddy. We haven't been able to replace nearly as many plates as we wanted. While it's able to bear

the Olympian's full weight, I don't recommend it use that leg to absorb the impact of a charge. It's liable to snap in that case."

They discussed a few other concerns that Captain Kaine had to shoulder. Her elite Cathrec mech also received a touch-up. House Kaine prioritized its repairs, and allocated several mech technicians in other departments to replace its molten hand in record time. Out of all of the recently repaired mechs, only the Cathrec enjoyed a better treatment than the Ajax Olympians.

Once she finished her discussion, she returned to her mech and boarded its cockpit. After raising the Cathrec's spear, the strike force finally left the base.

The departure of a large amount of mechs caused the base to quiet down. While the mech pilots waited for the results to come in, the mech technicians quietly resumed their repairs. Ves also did his part by lending a hand at the other workshops.

While Ves supervised the overhaul of a partially crippled mech, Melkor spoke out. "Do you think the expedition has any chance of success?"

"I don't think highly of their chances. Doctor Jutland might be missing a few screws, but he isn't the type to take the bait."

Doctor Jutland's indirect approach of pressuring the mercenaries showed that he possessed some form of restraint. Adversaries who actually contemplated their moves scared Ves more than a strong but overconfident brute.

Put into his perspective, why would he want to fight the strike force in the first place? At best, a pitched battle could result in mutual wounds. While his Kaius handedly beat every other mech on the planet in terms of power and resilience, the hunting platoon knew its weak points now.

"Supposedly, the exobiologists determined that the Kaius requires a large amount of fluids to keep its living portion running. The regular hexapods draw their moisture from their diet, but the Kaius doesn't even have a digestive

system anymore. The scientists think Doctor Jutland must be basing around a spring. If the strike force manages to find his hiding hole, then he'll be forced to stand and defend."

Ves also heard the rumors. Doctor Jutland also had to take care of his own needs. Even though he messed around with his body's makeup, he still needed to drink if he retained a shred of his humanity.

While Ves quietly talked with Melkor, Ramirez and D'Amato received an alert and turned around. Ves became alarmed when the ensign armed himself. He wielded a laser pistol in one hand and a stun baton in his other hand.

"There's trouble! Quick, move away! We have to run to the inner base!"

"Has Doctor Jutland sneaked up to our base?"

"No, it's worse. Half of the mercenaries are mutinying. They've forcibly activated over forty mechs at once and intimidated the security officers into standing down. They're on their way here!"

Ves froze in place. The mercenaries brazenly defied their current orders at the worst possible moment. They waited until the strike force left, bringing away much of the mechs who ordinarily worked to restrain the mercenaries from acting out.

Without the deterrent posed by George's Cavalry and the Stray Phantoms, the mercs who were supposed to defend the base instead turned against it in order to act out in their own interests.

Even the base defenses couldn't do much to deter the mercs, as most of the turrets could only fire outwards. Any threat that bypassed the walls would ordinarily be handled by the mechs in charge of security.

For a moment, he considered running. But then he recalled the distance to the inner base and gave up. "There's nowhere we can hide."

The only way he could escape the incoming mercs was by making use of his stealth field. Though he strongly considered activating it now, he didn't wish to reveal one of his trump cards to his current audience. He never really fully trusted House Kaine.

The four waited for the workshop to open up. A small squad of mechs coated in black stepped forward. The lead mech was a swordsman mech. It chopped down the toxic air with its massive two-handed blade, causing Ves and his companions to stumble backwards due to the wind it whipped up.

A deep and grizzled voice patched into the local channel. "Ves Larkinson, I'm going to have to ask you to surrender yourself in our custody."

Ves recognized the voice. It was Commander Keller of Keller's Blades. Of all the possible mercs who had the guts to pull off this stunt, it had to be the Vesians who organized the entire revolt.

Ensign D'Amato bravely stepped forward. "Mister Larkinson is a mech designer contracted to House Kaine. You have no right to apprehend him!"

The black mech crushed the tip of his mech-sized sword into pavement of the workshop. The impact threw everyone back.

"Don't speak to me about rights! We're the ones who are risking our lives out there every day! What is the worth of a mech designer to the safety of my brothers and sisters? Don't forget that this expedition will only turn a profit if mech pilots like us continue to enter the forest!"

A handful of mercs on foot arrived at the workshop and forcibly pulled Ves away from Melkor, D'Amato and Ramirez. None of his three companions made any moves to resist. Against the awesome power of a mech, nothing could make a difference.

"You'll regret this mutiny! Lord Kaine never forgets a slight!" The ensign impotently yelled.

Commander Keller laughed without holding back his amusement. "Lord Kaine won't care a thing. Compared to a bag full of monoexurite, the safety of a consultant is not even a priority!"

Ves might not be so sure about that. Keller and his band of miscreants might enjoy their moment of superiority for now, but once the strike force and the main fleet returned, he'd lose much of his temporary leverage.

Unfortunately, he'd have to wait a couple of weeks for that to happen. Right now, a sword many times larger than his own body pointed straight at Ves. He had no choice but to go along with Keller's arrangements.

Chapter 184 Handover

The revolt spearheaded by Keller cleverly pitted the fate of the expedition against the freedom and safety of a hired mech designer.

Commander Tregis could do nothing but glower and watch on from his personal mech. Though the mechs that answered to his call could match the rebels in numbers, he hesitated to engage in a senseless battle that could only result in mutual annihilation.

As a trusted subordinate of Lord Kaine, he knew he had to prioritize the harvesting operation over anything else. Nevertheless, he felt he couldn't let the mercs tear down the social contract they had with House Kaine.

Even if he didn't like it, Ves understood what Commander Tregis had to go through. In order to prevent the situation from spinning out of control, he allowed the revolt to take him into custody without a fuss.

A handful of footsoldiers in the employ of the mercs came close and pushed Melkor and the rest aside. They prepared a bulky set of cuffs designed to restrain the hazard suit that Ves currently wore. Without even checking for any weapons, they slapped it on his wrists.

"That will keep you in place." One of the mercs smiled cheekily.

The mercs hauled him out of the workshop and dumped him into a beaten-up shuttle. The craft clearly had seen better days. Ves could spot the tell-tale signs of hexabat claws and fangs scarring its hull.

"Get in there!"

They threw him into the empty passenger compartment of the tiny shuttle. Ves tried to get comfortable as the shuttle started to ascend. Unfortunately, the pilot blanked out the windows, preventing him from looking out.

After a couple of minutes of wondering what to do, a small projection came to life. Keller's face leered at him from the cockpit of his mech. Unlike his usual controlled expression, this time he completely revealed his nefarious intentions.

"Commander Keller."

"Ah, the smart little Brighter." He spoke, drawing out his voice at the mention of his nationality. "You Brighters always think you're smarter than anyone else."

Ves didn't give the Vesian the satisfaction of seeing him beg and plead for his life. "You are making a very big mistake here. Doctor Jutland isn't your friend, or anyone's for that matter. He'll never honor whatever deal you made with him."

"Hah! As if it matters!" Keller laughed. "The good doctor can't do anything once we return to space at the end of our forty-day stay. Last I knew, dinosaurs can't fly. I'll be eagerly leaving this ratty planet and the crazy doctor behind. Getting rid of a Brighter mech designer along the way will earn me enough merit to earn my knighthood!"

"You Vesians chase after nobility as if it's something attainable. It's just a carrot your slave drivers dangle in front of your heads. No matter how hard you work, the carrot will always be out of your reach."

"You lie! You understand nothing!"

"I'm sure they won't welcome you back in open arms. After all, you clearly mutinied against your client when you signed a mercenary contract with them. As far as I recall, most of those contracts are filled with clauses that will make your life very short once you cross a few lines."

In today's society, mercenaries were plentiful, but the means to control them had also evolved. Mercenaries generally didn't possess the same loyalty and dying devotion of a warrior nurtured by the clients themselves. Too often news came back that revealed that the mercs abandoned their cushy assignments as soon as they encountered a spot of trouble.

In order to bring some order to the chaos, some enterprising organizations formed a trans-galactic Mercenary Association to regulate this blooming business. Though the Mercenary Association lacked the enforcement power of the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance, they were nevertheless the only game in town.

Earning a bad mark on your record in the Mercenary Association often spelled a dead end to your career as a reputable mercenaries. Those with negative records often retired in ignomy or resorted to taking shadier jobs that hadn't been regulated by the Mercenary Association. People usually called them dark mercenaries, and were often regarded as one step away from pirates.

Keller snorted at Ves. "Once I earn my knighthood, I can leave my mercenary days behind me. My boys and I will be able to retire to a quiet mansion on a rural planet in the Kingdom until we're called back to fight a war."

The man had a decent plan. Depending on how much Vesia valued his head, eliminating him could indeed earn Keller enough kudos to propel him into the lowest level of nobility. By then, what did a negative mercenary record matter?

The mercenary commander gloated some more before he shut off the channel. Ves sighed in frustration as he looked down at his shackles. The mercenaries never regarded Ves as a threat, and didn't even pat him properly for weapons.

Outwardly, he only wore a tool belt around his hazard suit. He didn't carry any holstered weapons because they'd be worse than useless against the native life forms on this planet.

"Turns out I've been watching out for the wrong threat." He sighed.

He learned a very painful lesson today. Ves had never considered the mercenaries to go out of control in such a dramatic fashion. He continually relied on the iron grip of his client to keep the rowdy men and women in line. Today's event proved that the iron grip was as soft as a pillow.

Well, no use recriminating himself. Ves regained his composure and started to take stock of his gear. First, he still wore his hazard suit. The suit's heads-up display showed that he still had over seven days of oxygen.

After that, he'd get into a lot of trouble, because the air on Groening IV contained plenty of junk but precious little oxygen. The exobiologists discovered that some of the plant life emitted oxygen, but most of the other plants seemed to thrive on a very different cycle. Ves would slowly suffocate at that time if he couldn't get any replenishment from his captor.

Second, he had his shield generator with eighty percent charge remaining. This might save him from a couple of fatal blows, but Ves had no illusion that it would last very long against a raging Kaius.

Though a shield generator looked conspicuous, he hoped that Jutland wouldn't notice. As long as the doctor didn't frisk him or force him to take off his hazard suit, Ves was sure he'd be able to keep its presence a secret.

Lastly, Ves still wore his all-important comm. Besides the System, his comm also held his Privacy Shield and its Full Stealth augment. He put most of his hopes on the latter in order to provide him with an opportunity to escape.

That was also why he didn't struggle too much when Keller came to whisk him away. He still held on to a lifeline.

A shudder interrupted his thoughts. The shuttle's engines cut off, and the hatch of the vehicle opened. "We're here! Throw him out!"

The same pair of soldiers grabbed ahold of Ves and dragged him out of the shuttle. After bringing him in the middle of a clearing, they unceremoniously dropped him against the harsh metallic soil.

"We've got your mech designer here! Come and pick him up!"

To his surprise, the Kaius itself appeared from the jungle. Its giant, half-rotting form crawled over to the middle of the clearing with deliberate steps. Everytime the Kaius stomped with one of its six limbs, the entire ground appeared to be shaken up.

The looming sight of the Kaius intimidated everyone present in the clearing. Remarkably, no one brandished their weapons. Despite the fact that a strike force composed of more than a hundred mechs had set off to pin down the Kaius and force it into a decisive engagement, the monstrous mech evaded House Kaine's determined efforts.

"Ah, the esteemed Mister Larkinson. How delightful that you have come!" The infamous doctor spoke from his makeshift seat atop the head of the Kaius. "For an Apprentice Mech Designer, you are very far away from home. The likes such as you never venture this far out in the frontier."

Ves chuckled deprecatingly at himself. "I let my greed get the better of my judgement."

"Greed, the ever-present motivator of man. You can do a lot with greed." Jutland replied as he rummaged through his dirty lab coat and retrieved a small sack. He threw it towards one Keller's soldiers standing beneath the towering giant. The man easily caught the falling bag with dextrous skill.

"As promised, here's your fifty grams of pure monoexurite. Take care not to eat it all at once. You'll turn into a human furnace in seconds before blowing up! Your flesh will be scattered over hundreds of meters! I should know, because I once saw someone try! Hahahahaha!"

Ves leaned back when the doctor continued to babble on. The mercs meanwhile stayed silent and waited for something to happen. Once the soldier verified its contents with a handheld scanner, Commander Keller spoke out from the speakers of his mech.

"It's all there. Thanks, doc. Pleasure doing business with you. If you need anything else from me, I'll be sure to lend a hand."

The doctor abruptly swung his mood and scowled at the loose collection of mechs in front of him. "I do not need more help from hired thugs like you! Do not presume that you are of equal standing to me!"

"M-My apologies, doctor!"

Commander Keller and his gang of mercs ended the conversation as fast as possible and practically fled away at the first available moment. They didn't wish to hang around any longer in case Jutland decided to kill them on a whim.

Unfortunately, Ves couldn't go anywhere. Even if his shackles didn't prevent him from running, a man on foot could never overtake the massive Kaius.

"Up you go now, mech designer! A vast new world awaits your mighty presence!"

The Kaius lowered its tail and forced Ves to climb on top of it. A crude metal poke hammered between the unbreakable scales of the chimera mech provided him with the only means for him to hang on to the mech as it slowly slithered back into the forest.

Ves had an awful ride as he tried to maintain his seating on the moving mech. If his grip ever lost power, he'd fall several stories down and certainly break some bones. He could even bump against a sharp metallic tree on the way and cut a hole through his hazard suit.

Once he started to get a hang of staying seated, Ves looked up to the raised head of the Kaius. The chimera mech practically strutted through the jungle as if it truly believed it ruled the forest. Doctor Jutland appeared to be engrossed in something as he frequently talked to himself and laughed.

He considered sneaking off. The doctor didn't pay any attention to him at the moment, granting him a prime opportunity to flee from Jutland's presence. Perhaps his shield generator could absorb the impact of his fall. If Ves remained unharmed, he could immediately activate his stealth augment and run like hell.

Yet he paused after considering the stakes. Even if he ran away now, he couldn't go very far. Without any map or way to orient himself in the jungle, he would never be able to find his way back to base camp.

Furthermore, Ves wanted some answers. House Kaine always acted like they held back a significant secret. Perhaps he could pry something important out of Doctor Jutland, though he also had to survive the doctor's unstable temper.

Ves started with something simple. "How is it you're able to breathe without a suit?"

"What's that? Did you say something?!" Jutland turned his head and snapped at him. "Hah, your puny little mind won't understand the wonders I've been

able to craft with my mind. The flesh is trivial! With my unfathomable genius, modifying by respiratory organs is child's play! I've done so much more to my body that it will break your simple little mind if I list them out!"

"You might not know this, but I'm still a regular human. I'll die once my suit runs out of oxygen after a week."

"What?! Your suit runs out of air after a week?! That's too short! You still have so much to do! Damn these hired thugs!"

Jutland's anger extended to the Kaius. The chimera mech began to shudder dangerously, making it even harder for Ves to hang on.

Then, the doctor suddenly stopped his tantrum and looked at Ves like he was an interesting lab rat. "Don't you worry, mech designer! Once I bring you back to my lab, I'll implant my latest set of enhancements in your body. You'll be able to breathe the air without risk! Oh your body will be transformed into a true new species, just like me!"

Ves almost wanted to let go of his grip right then and there. He didn't relish being cut open by the craziest exobiologist in the rim. The thought of losing his sanity and becoming best friends with the delusional Jutland frightened him to death. He had to escape before the doctor cut him open!

Chapter 185 Secrets

Carlos stepped backwards and looked at his latest finished work. The Marc Antony Mark II sparkled like a shiny new jewel. It looked to be his best work to date. Too bad he still lacked the skill and finesse to match the gold label mechs.

Raella whistled impressively as she hobbled over while chewing a nutrient bar. "It's really impressive to see you conjure up a mech out of nowhere. How much do these go for anyway?"

"Our company's mech broker is currently selling them for twenty-eight million credits. It used to be thirty million, but the models haven't proven to be very popular at that price."

Though twenty-eight million credits sounded respectable, Carlos knew that it wasn't enough. The Living Mech Corporation needed to accumulate billions of credits in order to establish a fully mature production line as well as acquire the necessary licences to design and fabricate a newer generation mech model.

Still, he believed that Ves had a handle on the problem. His previously average friend and classmate had turned into a terrifying mech designer as of late. While Carlos still scratched his head at the sudden transformation, his friendship with his increasingly inscrutable boss gave him a unique opportunity to ride on his coattails.

"Man, you must be rolling in credits right now! Won't you slip a few million credits on my way?"

"No can do." Carlos shook his head. "I don't have full authority to the company's accounts. Ves' grandpa is constantly keeping an eye on the company's expenditures."

As a director of the LMC, Benjamin Larkinson took an active interest in the development of the company. He especially guarded over the influx of money used to buy a twenty-five percent stake in the business.

"Cheapskate." Raella shrugged and finished off her nutrient bar. "It's so boring around here. I really would have liked to join Ves. Do you think he's having fun right now?"

"No idea. All I've heard is he's somewhere out in the frontier doing something dangerous."

"That sounds like an adventure! Ves and Melkor must be having the time of their lives right now! Damn, why am I stuck here recovering from a bout of Molgon? I could have been out there beating up pirates and aliens in order to rob them of their treasures!"

No matter how much Raella moaned about her fate, she couldn't do anything at the moment. Her body still had to undergo several treatments stretched over months before she became fit enough to pilot a mech. Any excessive physical exertion risked setting back her progress.

In reality, Ves experienced none of the wonders she imagined that went on in the frontier. Instead, he hobbled down from the tail of the Kaius and sat down on the ground of the hollowed out cave. A pitifully small stream of water flowed from the cave, making it one of the few readily available sources of water in this underground kingdom.

Ves looked around the cave and tried to peer through the relative darkness. From the ambient light streaming from the entrance of the cave, he spotted decades worth of improvisation and neglect.

A couple of makeshift structures ringed around the pool. They were cobbled together from a combination of fallen metallic trees and salvaged building materials from the prior expedition.

A large pile of rusting mech wrecks laid heaped upon a pile in a corner. Doctor Jutland must have been cannibalizing their parts over the years to supplement the Kaius.

What struck Ves the most was that he detected various forms of life scurrying about. Dog-sized hexapods vaguely shimmered around the wrecks while small flights of hexabats flew lazily over his head.

None of them showed any hostility to him. Ves figured that Jutland must have tamed them with his strange control method. The madman's ability to tame

and direct the hexapods alone gave him the qualifications to call himself the king of the jungle.

The Kaius lumbered over a deep pool dug out from the side. It submerged itself into the water up until it reached its neck. Doctor Jutland removed the straps holding him to his makeshift seat and jumped to the edge of the pool with practiced ease.

The man grinned at him, as if he knew what Ves tried to hide. "There will be no rescue for you here. Mr. Keller has helpfully kept me apprised of what your expedition is up to. Don't think this is my only base! In fact, I've built up over fifteen outposts! They'll never be able to find all of them! Hahahaha!"

That traitor! Ves cursed under his breath. Keller's nearsighted decision to collaborate with Jutland just ruined one of his hopes. The expedition couldn't divert too many mechs to chase around a madman, especially after he got what he wanted. The chance of rescue just dwindled down to almost nothing.

Ves could only rely on himself for now.

"Why did you kidnap me?"

"What else?! I need a mech designer, and you're the only idiot who's stupid enough to land on this planet. You're it, hahahaha!"

Doctor Jutland's hysterical laughing grated on Ves. The man acted like he constantly injected himself with stimulants. Sometimes he paused and whispered softly to himself as if he had a second personality in his mind.

When Jutland regained some clarity, he turned to Ves with a laser focus. "A mech designer only needs to design mechs! Why else have I brought you here! Finally my Kaius will receive the attention it deserves!"

The doctor whistled loudly in a very peculiar pattern. A juvenile hexapod lounging nearby sprung to readiness and approached Ves in no time. The creature hissed at him and bumped its head forward.

Through the creature's direction, Ves stepped forward and approached the lake with the half-submerged Kaius. The mech looked like a wreck stranded in water, though the darkness prevented him from spotting more details.

"It's too dark here. Do you have a light or something?"

"You pitiful baseline human." Jutland shook his head, but he started moving and approached one of the structures formed out of salvaged armor plating. Both of his hands touched a pair of twin rods poking out from the sides. "Let there be light!"

Something incredible happened. A live current emerged from Jutland's hands and transferred over to the rods. The entire cave came to life as different lights salvaged from wrecks lighted up and illuminated the breath of the cave.

Ves had underestimated the amount of hexapods Jutland gathered in his base. He could spot an entire colony of hexabats quietly resting on the roof of the cave. As for the landform hexabats, a small group of formidable adults rested near the entrance, ready to swat Ves into mush the moment he tried to escape.

Jutland's control over the hexapods had reached a terrifying height that couldn't be explained through common sense. Even if he spent decades training up the same group of hexapods, he shouldn't have been able to make them smart enough to follow orders only a sentient being could follow.

"Are the hexapods sentient?"

"Hihihihi!" Jutland erupted into giggles. "You blind fool! They are mere beasts! Can you ask a dog to cook you dinner? You can't unless you've tinkered with their genes, but then they won't be dogs anymore!"

The man rambled onwards for another minute before he inadvertently revealed something important. "The Compact never believed in my research! The nearsighted idiots at the Life branch only concentrate their funds on replicating the MTA's secrets to longevity. They've gone completely astray! We cultivate the soul, not the body! The flesh is trash!"

Ves tried to rub his ears with his shackled hands, only to bump against his helmet. Did he hear correctly? "Were you part of the Five Scrolls Compact?"

The man snapped shut and his gaze bore down on Ves like how a cat gazed at a bird. "You are not supposed to know about the Compact. You're not a regular mech designer, are you?"

"I, ah, my master has some intelligence reports on the Compact. My clearance is too low to read them though. I only glanced at their titles."

The odd mix of truth and lies saved Ves from having his secrets exposed. He definitely did not wish to let Jutland know that the Five Scrolls Compact forced his father into the life of a fugitive.

Oddly enough, Jutland smiled at Ves as if he performed a funny trick. "To those who are only peripherally aware of the Compact, we are often made out as cultists and terrorists. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because it's true! We venerate the Five Scrolls! We revere the Immortal Gods who gifted us with forbidden knowledge! For these reasons alone, the vile traitors of the MTA and CFA saw fit to bite the hand that fed them! We provided them with the means to prolong the life of a baseline human up to five hundred years! Without our exclusive life-prolonging treatments, they would have never been able to subdue the elites who rule over their petty states!"

Ves couldn't determine whether Jutland spoke any truth. The devastating secrets flowing out of his mouth changed his entire cognition of the current human order. He often wondered why the MTA and CFA maintained such an iron grip on human society. Perhaps the offer of living far beyond the natural lifespan of a human presented a fatal attraction to these pampered rulers.

"You know how to extend the life of a human?"

"Of course! I'm part of the Life Branch! I've even had the opportunity to glimpse some of the majesty of the Earth Scroll and the Water Scroll. Do you know how rare it is to view a fraction of a copy of the Scrolls? It was the most defining moment of my life! The Scrolls, oh the precious Scrolls, if only I was able to view the originals! The missing portions are constantly haunting me even now!"

Perhaps the doctor already went off the deep end before he fled to the frontier. Ves guessed that these supposed Scrolls turned anyone who saw them into lunatics. Doctor Jutland kept lamenting on how he only understood a tiny portion of the secrets contained within these elusive Scrolls.

No matter what, Ves wanted to dig out more secrets out of Jutland while he was still in the mood to talk. "What did you learn from the Scrolls? Did they teach you how to communicate and control the hexapods?"

"Shut up!" Doctor Jutland jerked his arm, causing the dog-sized hexapod next to Ves to slam him down with a forelimb. "The sanctity of the Scrolls cannot be tarnished! The Immortal Gods will strike me down myself if I disseminate what I've glimpsed!"

Despite his stern words, Jutland quickly laughed again and rambled about his conflicts with former affiliation. "The Life Branch thoroughly misunderstood the point about life! They pursue longevity to a ridiculous extreme, not even realizing that they're merely placing more shackles upon the soul! Only by

cultivating the soul can we pursue immortality! Every other path is a distraction!"

While Ves believed in metaphysics, he only admitted that he didn't fully know how the multiverse worked. Everything could be explained through logic and science once you understood the rules of how things worked.

Unlike this reasoned approach to the unknown, the Five Scrolls Compact assumed that gods actually existed. A delusional fantasy like believing that a bunch of rolled up parchments of dubious origin could help your soul become immortal clearly went too far.

No wonder the MTA and CFA considered the Compact a collection of crazy cultists.

Throughout Doctor Jutland's barely understandable rambling, Ves got a small sense of what the Compact did.

The scientists of the Life Branch experimented without any regard for safety and sanity. Their wild experimentation often led to bizarre results like human-alien hybrids that deserved to be incinerated, all in an attempt to develop new ways to make a human body more formidable.

Though they failed more often than not, their rare successes sometimes led to a radical advancement in a difficult field of research. Jutland obviously enjoyed some of the fruits of this extensive research in order to be able to modify his body in a way that allowed him to adapt to this alien biome.

"Ah, what have I done? I spoke about the Compact! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

Jutland loudly berated himself to the point of punching himself in the face. Ves got a terrible fright when each of the punches released a small burst of potent heat that washed over their surroundings. Any unprotected human would have been burned to ashes with the amount of energy Jutland's fists released, but the doctor still looked fine.

"Ah, that reminds me, I should gift your body with some new implants. We can't have you dying of hunger and thirst while you slowly suffer from the pain of your body breaking apart from acute radiation poisoning like Mike! He only lasted a couple of months and croaked as soon as we ran out of nutrient paste!"

Jutland leered ominously at Ves, as if the doctor intended to cut him open right now. While Ves secretly envied Jutland's strange abilities, he didn't wish to lose his sanity in the process. Besides, Ves suspected that Jutland wouldn't stop with only a couple of essential implants.

"Look, we can get some food, water and air from the base. No need to go through the trouble of operating me, right?"

"Too slow, too limited, too finite! With my exclusive Jutland organ wrapped around your heart, you'll be able to draw out most of the energy from around us like the hexapods! I'll make sure you'll last long enough to consolidate my rule over the forest!"

Before Ves could take a couple of steps back, Jutland stepped forward with inhuman speed and gripped the collar of his hazard suit. The doctor fumbled at the outer controls and forcibly removed the helmet!

"Air! I can't breathe!" Ves choked as he tried to hold his breath. The toxic air of Groening IV stunned his eyes to the point of almost turning him blind. The insides of his mouth, nose and ears burned like they'd been doused in acid. The pain overwhelmed his body so much that he couldn't activate his life-saving gadgets.

Jutland put his bare palm atop Ves' thrashing head. "Sleep now."

Chapter 186 Post-Human

One of the biggest fears any human faced was the prospect of never waking up after sleep. This especially crept up when you were being operated

immediately after being knocked out. The prospect of never knowing when you died haunted Ves when Doctor Jutland forcibly sapped his consciousness.

It came as a small relief when Ves eventually woke up. That relief quickly made way for pain, as his entire body ached.

The most prominent pains came from the incisions in his chest and in his head. Jutland obviously hadn't wasted much time cutting him open. The recently cut flesh still radiated a lot of pain as his flesh actively worked to recover from the damage.

Several new portions inside his body emanated a lot of pressure that constantly washed over his flesh and bones. A portion near his heart constantly released a stream of omnipresent pressure that constantly pressed against his body as if he was a dam about to burst. Having nowhere else to go, the scalding hot energy washed inside his body, forcing it to accommodate the excess.

His body couldn't take the sheer amount of energy flowing out from the organ next to his heart. However, a strange sensation swept from a spot near his spine that forced the volatile energy to submerge in every cell of his body. Ves could vaguely sense that the energy brutally transformed his flesh and bones through a constant cycle of destruction and rejuvenation.

Each time his cells got destroyed, new ones grew in their place that were able to contain a little bit more energy before they reached their limits. Ves didn't know how many cycles his body already went through, but it grew to the point where he could breathe the foul-tasting air of Groening IV without suffocating to death.

His eyes and all of his orifices only lightly stung when they came into contact with the toxic air. A constant prickle suffused his body from his surroundings.

They weaved through his flesh and entered the organ besides his heart without stopping. Ves took that to mean his body drew on the ambient heat and radiation to fuel his ongoing transformation.

"Ah, you're awake!" Doctor Jutland entered the makeshift hut with a smile. A small, salvaged light taken from a mech hung from a wire extending from the ceiling. Jutland's face took on a mock-fatherly appearance as he studied the readouts from a medical device strapped to his bed. "Your life signs have stabilized. Good! You've passed the most difficult test!"

Jutland turned around and brought up a bucket filled with freshly butchered meat. He grabbed a random thigh of a juvenile hexapod and ripped the hardy scales from the flesh with his bare hands, coating it with greenish blood. After he finished removing the inedible scales, he extended the raw piece of meat to Ves. "Here. Eat! Your energy is limitless, but your body still needs nutrients!"

His overarching hunger suppressed usual disgust when presented with a raw piece of meat. Ves grabbed onto the shank and sank his teeth into the hardy flesh, not even taking note of his strengthened denture. He finished up the shank in only a couple of minutes. His stomach finally subsided from its constant nagging for food.

The urge to sleep overtook him. Ves tried to restrain his fatigue but his strengthened body overwhelmed his feeble desire. He returned to slumber just as Doctor Jutland injected his body with a strange solution.

Over the course of an unknown amount of time, Ves kept waking up with hunger gnawing in his stomach. Each time, Jutland entered the hut and eagerly handed him another freshly butchered hexapod limb.

Sometimes, the doctor fed him their organs. Ves even got to sink his teeth into a juvenile's heat organ, which instantly scorched his mouth despite its

increased tolerance for heat. Just a tiny bite of the underdeveloped heat organ had surpassed what his stomach was capable of digesting at any single moment.

Minutes later, the organ besides his heart flared up as if it had been injected with chicken blood. The torrent of energy that flowed out from his chest almost physically pressed against the insides of his toughened skin. When the waves finally subsided, Ves blissfully returned to sleep.

After his twentieth-or-something awakening, Ves woke up devoid of excessive hunger. His body had finally finished whatever Jutland had initially spurred on. His exposed flesh withstood the alien atmosphere without any signs of degradation. Though his body still generated a lot of energy, most of it threaded through his body in a circle and returned to the strange organ in his chest.

When Jutland finally returned to check his body, he cackled maniacally. "Hahahaha! You not only survived the process, but exceeded my expectations!"

"What did you do?" Ves asked weakly.

Though the excess of energy invigorated his body, he had a hard time gaining control over it. It was as if the energy didn't belong to him but merely rented space in his body. Sporadically, it even showed signs of erupting, which Ves suspected would be really bad.

Jutland grinned at the opportunity to brag. "I put in twenty-seven years of focused research to use. My Jutland organ is carefully designed and grown to incorporate the best traits of a hexapod's heat organ. Meanwhile, the regulator I've implanted in your spine has spurred your body to renew itself along a modified genetic makeup. All of your cells down to your bone marrow have fully adapted, just as I intended!"

"Did you change my genes?"

"Of course! It's the only way I can force your body to transform with the failing tools I have on hand. Be glad that I found out that you took an initiating elixir. Without that gene boost as a primer, I would have never been able to spur your cells to swap their DNA so effortlessly!"

Ves recalled the M-21 Initiating Elixir gifted by his master. He only received a small boost in attributes from the injection, but he'd been told that it only laid the groundwork for further gene boosts.

If Doctor Jutland recognized that he used that gene boost, then his earlier rants about the relationship between the MTA and the Five Scrolls Compact might be true. Ves tried hard not to think too deep about that connection.

"What else did you do to my body?"

Jutland cackled again and rubbed his hands in a nefarious manner. He rambled on a bit about the various enhancements he developed over the years. His Jutland organ formed his magnum opus, but he didn't limit his research on the humanized heat organ alone.

Overall, Ves received two other major enhancements.

First, his digestive system received a large enhancement in order to be able to process food that regular humans could never stomach. The doctor expanded the range of foods he could digest.

To his relief, Ves did not lose the ability to digest conventional human food. He hadn't lost any capabilities in that area. Instead, his digestive system became even more effective in extracting every possible nutrient out of everything he ate. Combined with the energy provided by his heat organ, Ves required a lot less food to make it through the day.

Next, Jutland implanted a small growth next to his spine that initially directed the transformation of his genes. Now that his body adapted to his revamped genes, the regulator organ mainly functioned as his heat organ's central processor.

For example, the energy cycle within his body had only come into being with the help of the regulator organ. Its cells contained extensive biological programming that coordinated his central nervous system with all of the changes in his body.

After all, a baseline human didn't have anything like a human-sized heat organ. Without some form of instructions, his body wouldn't know what to do with it. The regulator essentially augmented his baseline central nervous system like how his Full Stealth augment added a new function to his Privacy Shield.

That reminded Ves to check his gear. He found out that Jutland stripped him of all clothes and gear, replacing them with a spare set of hospital clothes that must have been stewing in a box for a couple of decades.

"Ah, wondering where your devices are? I confiscated them both! Thank you for your spare shield generator. As soon as I decipher its identity lock, it will make for a useful guarantee of my safety! That blasted lock! The latest system is too tricky!"

Ves already expected to be stripped of his shield generator when Jutland stumbled upon it. After all, without it, he'd be at the mercy of his deranged captor. He could only give up on that avenue. Instead, he focused on his comm. He had to get his hands on his System.

"What about my comm?"

"What about it?"

"I need it to redesign the Kaius. Do you expect me to design a mech by drawing hexapod blood on the ground?"

Jutland waved his hand dismissively. "I've salvaged a number of terminals from a couple of derelict workshops from the first expedition. Half of them still work, last I checked!"

"Their processors have never been rated to endure this much radiation and corrosive air over time. Even if they still look functional, you can't trust them to produce reliable results."

"Then I'll commission that thug Keller to steal a terminal from your current expedition!"

"That won't do. The workshop runs on a vastly different software suite. I'm used to working with the software installed in my comm. Please give it back to me."

Doctor Jutland uncharacteristically fell into silence. After a long consideration, he nodded and pulled out a familiar comm from his dirty lab coat and threw it onto Ves.

"Fine! But no more delays now! You've slept for eight days straight now and your expedition is already halfway through its window! You'll start your work immediately! "

The news that Ves had intermittently slept over a stretch of eight days affected him greatly. He already missed so much! A new sense of urgency washed over his mind, spurring him on to sit up from his cot. He slowly reached upwards, but his sudden movements disturbed his internal energy cycle. A large portion of energy escaped the cycle and travelled onwards until it smashed the front of his chest.

The invisible impact forced a painful cough out of Ves. He heaved a bit and vomited out some blood.

"Reckless! Just because your body finished its transformation doesn't mean you've mastered your new source of energy!"

"How can I control this rampant energy?"

"You can't!" Jutland cackled again. "An unenlightened boor like you will never be able to master this higher form of energy! Instead, the cycle will continue to revolve your internal energy until its quantity surpasses the limits of your flesh."

"Am I dying?"

"Everyone is dying, Ves! You are merely expiring faster than others because your body is eventually unable to process the vast amounts of energy from my Jutland organ! You'll blow up in a grand explosion that will spread your scattered flesh over many kilometers! Maybe you'll even break Mike's record! Hihihihih!"

Jutland's insane behavior frightened Ves but also made him question why his thoughts and behavior still remained the same. Had Jutland improved his new organs and fixed the flaws?

"Don't think all of that energy will keep strengthening your body." Jutland ominously said after he recovered from his latest bout of giggling. "The flesh is weak. Your only salvation lies in cultivating your soul. I predict you'll be bedridden for a few weeks. Don't bother moving away. Instead, start working on improving my steed!"

Doctor Jutland made some arrangements to his bed so that Ves could prop himself up into a somewhat comfortable seating position. He also threw a datachip at Ves that he could slot into his comm.

"I'm not a mech designer, but years of boredom have given me plenty of time to master a trivial scanner device. I've already included extensive scans of the

Kaius in that chip. Ignore the living tissue and focus on remedying its mechanical components!"

After Jutland finally left the hut, Ves tiredly smiled. Despite the ticking time bomb implanted in his body, he remained hopeful he could remedy the flaws in his body.

He already achieved significant progress after Jutland had rambled about the soul. Even though he automatically dismissed the doctor's assertion, his beliefs gave Ves a clue on how to tackle his runaway energy cycle.

Obviously, Ves couldn't rely on his body to sort the problem out itself. Even the regulator organ did nothing but impose a rudimentary cycle that extended his lifespan from a couple of hours to a couple of months.

Ves didn't believe in the existence of the soul. Yet the idea prompted him to employ his mind. He instinctively sharpened his focus onto his Jutland organ, trying to impose his will on it. He treated it like he wanted to nurture the X-Factor onto a design.

Strangely enough, it worked. His Jutland organ jerked a bit, and it took several minutes to figure out how he could dial down the overactive organ. The energy cycle slowly subsided from a raging torrent to a placid stream.

It became much more bearable for his body, which enjoyed a reprieve for the first time in more than a week. He regained control over his body in rapid time, which broke Jutland's estimate that he required weeks of rest before he could even leave his bed.

"Now we're talking."

Now that he managed to restore his mobility, Ves could finally cook up an escape plan.

Earlier, Jutland ignorantly handed him back his comm. Not only did he regain access to the stealth augment, he also recovered the ability to access the System and its various marvels.

Ves carefully pretended to be weak and tired and slowly activated his comm. Instead of opening his hidden Mech Designer System, he executed a mundane designer software.

Who knew if Jutland kept some eyes on him. Ves had to be very careful in order to preserve his ability to escape.

"First, I'll have to master this abundant power reactor in my chest."

Pseudoscience or not, Ves resolved to cure his body through his own efforts. He refused to entertain Jutland's delusions and his heretical faith that he could find salvation from these supposed Immortal Gods.

Ves recalled two very pertinent quotes he learned from school that guided his resolve.

First, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Second, the weak believed in God while the strong seek to surpass his existence.

Chapter 187 In Shambles

Ves currently likened his body to a balloon that steadily took in air without stop. His body could only hold a limited amount of energy. Even after Jutland directed his body to grow stronger, it had reached its limits, meaning that Ves eventually faced the possibility of bursting apart like a balloon with too much air.

For now, he couldn't figure out a way to release the pressure. The strange energy cycling inside his body consisted of a strange sort of energy that resembled a thick, permeable gas of some sorts. It was remarkably difficult to control and currently Ves had no way of siphoning a portion outwards.

Therefore, the only way to relieve the problem was to slow down his overactive heat organ. Such a solution wouldn't work forever, as he merely delayed his eventual death, but he bought himself a lot of time.

When Ves narrowed his concentration on corralling the heat organ, he estimated that the rate of accumulation had slowed down to a fifth of its former activity level. His active efforts also pulled the wind out of his internal energy cycle, which reduced the pressure it put onto his body. This allowed him to regain his mobility.

"I can't keep this up forever, though."

It took a lot of effort to maintain his current level of concentration. Ves felt as if he had to maintain two trains of thoughts, one for the present and one dedicated to keeping his heat organ in check. Designing the Mark II which employed three images had been a bit more onerous.

He estimated he could keep this up for three hours at a time before he needed to take a break. He also determined that he couldn't maintain his concentration when he slept, which potentially cut the effectiveness of this exercise by a third.

"This is merely a temporary fix. I'll find a more permanent one once I've returned to civilization."

At worst, he'd travel to the Titanium Garden and beg Master Olson to remove his newly implanted organs. Despite the awesome power they provided, it was useless if he couldn't control it. Ves constantly played with fire the longer he hosted this strange new energy.

The door of the hut slammed open. An angry looking Jutland saw that Ves hadn't done much of anything, as he still pretended to be suffering from an of energy. "Get a grip! Your body isn't crippled to the point you're never able to move again! Get to work!"

Ves minutely shook his head. Despite all of his fanciful thoughts, he remained vulnerable to the whims of a madman.

"Let's see what's on the datachip."

When Ves studied the contents of the datachip, he found the information to be partially complete. Much of the inner portions of the Kaius remained obscured, as Jutland probably didn't intend to put all of his eggs in a single basket.

Pity he didn't know that Ves already had a good look inside, courtesy of Lucky.

Doctor Jutland made detailed scans of his chimera mech's mechanical components. In case of salvaged components, he also documented the wrecks from where he sloppily removed them. The chip even contained the precious notes of the initial mech designer.

Parsing them proved to be a challenge for Ves. The mech designer mostly wrote down miniscule details and incomprehensible calculations that meant nothing without knowing the context. The mech designer never intended to present his notes to others, so he didn't bother to format them in a way that allowed other mech designers to pick up his torch.

Puzzling through the schematic and documents yielded a little more understanding of the Kaius. The mech designer not only mastered the humanoid form, but also knew his way around several beast shapes, including reptilian ones which the hexapod mostly resembled. Ves vaguely gleaned several insights about the peculiarities a reptilian form demanded.

"It's all about stability."

A hexapod massed as much as a mech and more due to its highly developed bones, muscles and scales. This granted them an incredible amount of speed and power that surpassed the specs of most mechs with an equivalent mass.

All of this strength came at a cost. Hexapods required six sturdy limbs in order to leverage their heavy muscles. Though they could make do with four limbs for a time, eventually they reached its limits. Supporting their immense bulk required a lot of constant effort.

"That heat organ is certainly a cheat."

The plentiful amount of energy provided by a highly developed heat organ allowed the hexapods to do more with less. It removed most of the bottlenecks that constrained their size and allowed them to balloon to epic proportions.

According to the schematic, Jutland modified a hexapod king's heat organ into an organic power reactor. The highly augmented organ was a marvel of nature and technology. It provided a stable output of energy that powered both its organic and mechanical components. The only downside to these tweaks was that the Kaius thirsted for water whenever it exerted its heat organ.

"Everything is balanced. Limitless energy doesn't exist."

Exotic materials often produced miracles, but they always hid a lot of limitations. Besides their scarcity, their effects always exacted another price. The heat organ's dependence on water gave Ves a clue on one of the vulnerabilities of the Kaius.

"Too bad it's not something I can mess around."

Ves was a mech designer. He hardly knew anything about exobiology, which was Jutland's core strength. If Ves wanted to figure out a way to sabotage the Kaius, he'd be better off focusing on his own core strength.

A fifth of the hexapod king carcass that made up the Kaius had been replaced with metallic parts. All of them were in pretty bad shape. They withstood decades of corrosion, neglect and incompetent handling.

In addition, the quality of the salvaged mech parts left a lot to be desired. The mechs brought by the first expedition simply didn't hold a candle to the advanced models employed by the forces from the Grey Willow Star Sector. Even in an optimal environment, it would be remarkable if they lasted over twenty years.

This fit with the modus operandi of small-to-medium scale expeditionary fleets. They employed fairly cheap mechs made out of materials that could be easily recycled and be used to fabricate new replacement parts or even entire new mechs.

While this meant that the materials were easy to work with, the parts never lasted very long. The Kaius clearly suffered a substantial degradation in performance due to the perennial weaknesses introduced by its various mechanical components.

It was like a galactic-class athlete being hobbled by a crude prosthetic made of wood. That single imperfection ruined the perfect balance of his body that allowed him to break galactic records.

Depending on the facilities at hand, Ves could think of a number of remedies. To be frank, the parts needed to be broken down and reformed. Ves had no expertise of the former and he'd require a fully functional 3D printer to do the latter.

From the state of this sorry-looking outpost, Ves guessed that Jutland hadn't been able to preserve a 3D printer. Even if he did have one in the early years, it must have broken down as many of its components were rather delicate.

"I'll have to assume I only have basic tools at my disposal."

Expeditions that established an outpost groundside usually brought a standard set of portable equipment to service their mechs.

A compact autoforge was a step down from a 3D printer in that it couldn't fabricate precise components from a ready supply of raw materials. However, its low-tech nature gave it a robustness that could withstand many different hostile environments without a sweat.

"I don't know how to work an autoforge."

He used to handle one when he studied mech design, but only to familiarize himself with its various functions. The much superior industrial 3D printers provided students with a much easier experience. Only the true hardcore metallurgists kept hanging around an autoforge in order to fine-tune the casting of alloys.

Ves spent the rest of the day drawing up a preliminary overhaul of the Kaius. He only touched up the most glaring weaknesses in order to placate Jutland.

The next day, Ves woke up with his entire body aching lightly. He obviously lost control over his energy cycle somewhere in the night. Without his conscious direction, his heat organ went back to pumping his energy at full throttle.

Jutland came by sometime later. "Good! You're awake again! You better show some work, or I'll feed you to my subjects!"

"I've already drawn up a plan!" Ves quickly replied, and proceeded to show his captor his meager efforts.

"Hmph. Considering the state of your body, you've made an adequate amount of progress. How soon until you finish a new design?"

"That's difficult to say because I don't have a complete grip on the facilities you have on hand. Do you still possess a working 3D printer?"

"I don't know! Let's take a look! It's your first day on the job, so you better familiarize yourself with your workplace. Haha!"

The doctor summoned a random juvenile hexapod and dumped Ves onto its back. Its coarse scales chafed against his skin, but Ves refrained from uttering a complaint. Ever since he started working on the doctor's long-awaited overhaul, Jutland hadn't exploded into anger very often.

When the hexapod brought him to a shambling shack, Ves got to see the outpost's workshop.

"Well? What do you think? I've salvaged more than enough tools for you to work with! I've even hauled over a 3D printer for you!"

It looked abysmal. A broken 3D printer took up most of the space. From all of the rust and broken parts poking out of its massive shell, Ves directly wrote it off. As for the pile of handheld tools such as plasma cutters and welders, he briefly sorted them and found that maybe one in four still worked.

At least the workshop held an autoforge. It exhibited sporadic signs of use. Jutland must have fumbled with it over the years as his Kaius began falling apart and needed more mechanical replacements. the hexapod brought Ves over to the autoforge, he turned on its control terminal.

It booted up at least. When Ves initiated its diagnostics, the terminal reported the state of the autoforge. While he didn't understand some of the readings, he noted that the machine largely held up despite the abuse it suffered over a period of twenty-seven years.

"Your autoforge needs some work. It's not in the best shape."

"Then fix it!"

Ves bought some more time for himself with that trick. The diagnostics painted a worse picture than what actually went on, as the diagnostics reported all of its error reports up front. That gave the machine the illusion that it suffered under a mountain of issues.

Jutland left the room to do his own things, but before he left he ordered the hexapod to stay put. While Ves didn't relish hanging on to the creature all day, it behaved noticeably docile under Jutland's influence. He probably didn't have to worry about it getting hungry and wanting to take a bite out of Ves.

"You won't eat me, will you?"

The stupid creature didn't even jerk at his question.

"Whatever."

Now that Ves had a better picture on what he had to work with, he began to formulate an actual escape plan.

After thinking through his options, he reluctantly gave up on running away on his own. From what he saw, a horde of juvenile hexapods guarded the cave and its surroundings. With only five minutes worth of stealth, Ves could never run away fast enough to escape Jutland's reach even if he sabotaged the Kaius.

He'd have to send a signal back to base camp asking for rescue.

In order to send a strong enough signal that could penetrate the miasma of metallic particles and garbled radio spectrum, he'd have to get his hands on two different things.

First, he had to get his hands on a transceiver. Fortunately, Jutland's datachip showed him that most of the derelict mechs still possessed their transceivers, though they weren't in the best shape. Ves could use the tools at hand to covertly bring them back online.

Second, in order to penetrate the miasma, he required a massive amount of power, enough to short out the transceiver seconds after it sent out its message. Ves expected a lot more difficulty in getting his hands on a power source.

The base obviously ran on Jutland's own internal energy which he somehow converted to a stable current. The salvaged energy cells Jutland used as batteries must have also slowly degraded to the point where they frequently ran out of juice.

Powering a high-strength transceiver would probably drain most of the energy cells all at once, alerting Jutland that Ves had done something sneaky. Once he came across the transceiver, there would be hell to pay.

"I've got to find an alternate source of energy."

Ves instinctively turned his attention inwards. His internal energy cycle continued to revolve inside his body. Could he figure out the trick Jutland used to draw out this strange energy in the form of electricity?

Chapter 188 Opportunity

Ves spent the next couple of days pretending to be physically infirm while dragging his feet on the redesign of the Kaius. Jutland frequently hounded him in his free time and made sure that Ves presented some progress.

His job became vastly more complicated due to its dual nature as a mechanical and living machine.

The huge chimera mech incorporated a vast amount of living tissue that Jutland spent a lot of time trying to keep alive. The incomplete schematic included in the datachip only briefly mentioned the various functions of the strange organs inside the beast.

In truth, Ves only partially directed his attention on the Kaius. Most of its complexity lay in its living components. As for the mechanical parts, they mostly provided support, taking the place of bones and tissue that Jutland hadn't managed to save.

They were simple to design but difficult to fabricate. The lacking facilities available in the cave forced Ves to be a little more creative in his designs. He had to take into account his meager proficiency with the low-tech autoforge.

Whenever Jutland holed up in his lab to cook up his latest biological horror, Ves slacked off in his current duties and focused on his goal of upgrading a transceiver and providing it with a vast amount of power. Both of these challenges required a lot of effort to make any headway.

Ves gained an opening when the doctor suddenly appeared alarmed and readied the Kaius for action. "The nerve of these outlanders! I will be off for a while!"

Before he left, Jutland gave a stern warning for Ves to stay put. He called out even more hexapods and stationed them around the entrance and his most important labs. If Ves got anywhere near the creatures, they'd gobble him up without hesitation. The biolab practically turned into an impregnable fortress by the time the doctor finished his arrangements.

Seeing the Kaius come to life and emerge from the pool of water once again gave Ves a sense of majesty. Even devoid of actual life, the chimera mech still provided him with a sense of dread.

Each step elicited a minor earthquake. Its vast bulk forced the Kaius to expend a mountain of energy which its modified heat organ provided in spades. It slowly crawled out of the cave like a dragon about to raid a village.

Something serious must have happened that caused Jutland to bring out the big guns. Ever since he kidnapped Ves, Jutland had been content with keeping an eye on Ves while he holed up in his precious labs. Perhaps the expeditionary forces stumbled upon something important to Jutland.

"I'm finally alone."

Without the good doctor looking over his shoulders, Ves could accomplish a lot more things. He scoped out the outpost for the last few days and got a good measure on Doctor Jutland's security arrangements.

The man generally disdained relying on technology. Everything high tech had already degraded to the point of turning into scrap. The plentiful amount of hexapods standing guard spoke of Jutland's trust and reliance on these remarkably dimwitted beasts.

Though Ves still hadn't gotten a clue how Jutland directed the alien creatures. Still, no matter the control method, he doubted they worked like cameras, which meant that Ves had free reign of much of the outpost.

Besides the biolabs and exit, Ves could walk everywhere as he pleased. In his boundless confidence, he judged that Ves should still be coping with his runaway internal energy cycle.

Ves indeed suffered a lot of pain and a loss of control, but that only happened when he stopped suppressing his Jutland organ. Once the doctor and his giant mech disappeared, Ves sharpened his focus once again and dedicated at least a third of his mental capacity to dialing down his rebellious organ.

Days of practice enabled him to become more adept at channeling his concentration. The urgency of the situation and the constant threat of harm had spurred his will to life like a torch.

Before he ended up in Jutland's hands, he always required a lot of lead time to transition his mind. Now he only required a couple of seconds to switch his focus.

Once his artificial organ had been leashed, Ves slid out the uncomfortable back of the hexapod that acted as his transport. The hexapod that ordinarily watched over him did nothing to stop him from leaving.

"Heh, thought so. These hexapods don't understand Jutland's intent. At the very least, the juveniles are as dumb as rocks."

Two hexapod adults patrolled the biolabs at all time, which clearly indicated their importance to the doctor. Ves thought it wise not to challenge these beasts. Though he was curious what preoccupied Jutland these days, he doubted he'd get away without losing a couple limbs.

Still, his curiosity continued to nag at him. If he activated his stealth augment, he could sneak past the oblivious hexapods and take a peek. Yet he shook his head after weighing the possible benefits.

"Using the stealth augment will drain the batteries of my comm."

Ves couldn't find a single outlet that allowed him to recharge his comm. Such a thing must have been a low priority to Jutland who lost his own comm many years ago.

He decided to hold back his stealth augment for his inevitable escape attempt. Without five minutes worth of stealth, he'd never be able to sneak past the vigilant hexapod adults standing guard near the exit.

Instead, he turned his gaze towards the pile of derelict mechs shoved into a corner of the cave. A devious smile appeared on his face for the first time in weeks.

There weren't any hexapods standing guard over the wrecks. His captor hadn't considered the possibility that he'd regain enough strength to make use of them. This allowed Ves to waltz over the pile of junk without challenge.

"This is truly a mess."

All of the wrecks consisted of remnants of the first expedition. Twenty-seven years ago, Ves could have salvaged a good number of high-quality parts. Now though, neglect and the passing of time allowed corrosion to set in deep.

In the overall scheme of things, a transceiver played a vital role for the mechs that carried them. They enabled the machines to keep in touch with each other and send back vital telemetry.

As humans often employed mechs against each other, the use of jamming technology was widespread. This limited the ability for mechs to communicate across vast distances such as a ship in orbit. Most mech designers therefore employed a transceiver that specialized in establishing secure short-range communication channels.

Thus, a mech transceiver had to fulfill two criteria.

First, they had to be robust enough to withstand shocks. It would be monumentally bad if a crippled mech couldn't call for help when its transceiver got taken out as a bonus.

Second, they had to be capable of scaling up its output when it received an increase in power. Most of the mechs in the junk pile happened to use the same

Like other sophisticated components such as power reactor and engines, mech designers always licensed a readily available transceiver model from a third-party developer.

Such a model had been designed from the ground up to accommodate many different kinds of mechs. A heavy mech possessed a shipload of power while a light mech had to be sparing in its energy expenditure. A transceiver had to work reliably in many different situations if its developer wished to license them out.

Ves brought a heavy duty plasma cutter over to the wrecks and began to make some careful cuts. He chose to work at the wrecks from the rear so that Jutland wouldn't notice anything amiss when he glanced at the pile.

When he worked with the plasma cutter, Ves noticed his body lost a lot of flexibility. His recent body transformation played hell with his coordination, which often led to near-accidents when he overshot his aim with his plasma cutter. Ves had to slow down even further if he wished to avoid a very nasty burn.

He wondered what the System thought of his new attributes. His strength and endurance must have shot through the roof at the expense of his dexterity.

"I haven't checked my Status in months."

It should be almost two months since he joined the expedition. Due to House Kaine's omnipresent surveillance as well as Ensign D'Amato's watchful presence, Ves never dared to access the System.

Now that he'd been left alone with a bunch of stupid hexapods, Ves could finally access its many miraculous functions. He quickly turned off his plasma cutter and placed it aside.

Just in case Jutland hid some cameras around the cave, Ves dove inside the half-open cockpit of a fallen mech. Closing the hatch took some effort, but a judicious application of strength allowed him to seal it somewhat shut.

The cockpit looked even worse than the rest of the mech. All of the projections and status screens either rusted away or hosted some strange metallic plant growth. Even the soft ergonomic seat cushions had decayed in a foul puddle of viscous ooze.

Ves ignored his surroundings and hunched over his body, trying to shield his comm from as many angles as possible. Once he insured that almost nothing would be able to capture the contents of his comm, he navigated through a hidden menu and executed the Mech Designer Program.

[Mech Designer System Menu]

Status

Designer

Missions

Skill Tree

Shop

Lottery

Inventory

The familiar menu reassured him that he hadn't lost his most important tool in his career. The System accompanied him in his current rise as an Apprentice Mech Designer. The difficulties he faced nowadays strained his current capabilities. Without the help of the System, Ves faced an uphill struggle if he wished to escape with his hide intact.

First, he called up his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 17,643

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 0.5

Endurance: 2.2

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Apprentice - [3D Printer Proficiency III] [Assembler Proficiency III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Apprentice

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging II] [Speed Tuning III]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Apprentice - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II] [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III] [Melee Weapon Optimization II]

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer capable of surviving harsh environments without protection.

The moment he saw his attributes, his eyes practically bulged. "My strength practically doubled and my endurance almost tripled!"

The last time he checked his Status, his physical attributes all scored below average at 0.8. Mech designers weren't hotshots like mech pilots who had to be able to navigate a battlefield on foot in event their mechs broke down. Thus, Ves always paid no attention to his lackluster fitness.

Right now, Ves didn't know what to think. His strength and endurance rose to a ridiculous level to the point of throwing his balance out of whack. He even broke through the natural genetic limit of a human body by surpassing the barrier at a score of 2.0!

As expected, all of the benefits came at the cost of dexterity. He definitely had to address this deficiency once he returned along with every other side effect. The System's Status only summarized his attributes. They didn't list out his overall fitness nor all of the junk that Doctor Jutland stuffed inside his body.

"My DP hasn't grown by much." He muttered with disappointment.

After thinking about it, Ves figured out the reasons.

He'd been absent from the market for two months. This pushed him out of the current news cycle which severely impacted his brand awareness.

Several other factors also limited the sales of his catalog. His earlier creations performed fairly bad compared to the most popular mechs in their market segments. His later works could be piloted for free via the game centers that participated in the promotion spearheaded by his publicist Gavin.

Only his most radical fans purchased the Young Blood or the Old Soul. The accessible and well-received Young Blood already capped out its DP contribution, so Ves earned nothing else from its sale. As for the Old Soul, its ambush sniper playstyle didn't appeal to the vast majority of young potentates who craved instant action.

"Well, it's not like I can scoff at seventeen-thousand DP. I can do plenty of things with this amount."

Chapter 189 Ingenuity

With around seventeen-thousand DP in his name, Ves had to consider his purchases carefully. The greedy System charged an arm and a leg for a high-powered transceiver or high-density energy cell, the latter of which also came without a charge.

"It'll be a waste to purchase an item from the Shop except for attribute candies." He concluded.

A side effect of his decreased Dexterity strangely reset the prices for the equivalent candies. It seemed like such a great deal that Ves instantly bought three of them in order to regain his former level of coordination.

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 500 Design Points

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 600 Design Points

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 700 Design Points

After swallowing the candies one after another, his body merely tingled for a couple of minutes before it finished its transformation. When he flexed his fingers, he nodded in satisfaction. His body hadn't changed much, but he regained his coordination, which helped him a lot when he worked with his tools.

He retained fifteen-thousand DP after his minor purchase. This sum wouldn't be enough to purchase a powerful item, but he had plenty to spare for handy Skills and Sub-Skills.

When he initially obtained the System, Ves spent a lot of DP on Skills. Only later did he wake up to the fact that he needed to upgrade his Attributes and his equipment as well, so he spent vast sums on the latter two categories to make up for his deficiencies.

"That doesn't mean I can neglect my Skills."

A mech designer relied on his his knowledge and expertise to make a living. A powerful mind assisted him in advancing up the ranks, but what mattered now was what he could do with the resources and tools at hand.

Their awful state made them very difficult to work with at his current level. Ves had only ever really worked with gear in their optimal or at least well-maintained state. Now that he had to work in dismal circumstances, he urgently required an upgrade in his capabilities.

"Otherwise, it will take too long to get a transceiver up and running."

Ves didn't expect Jutland to return for a couple of days, but he'd be hard-pressed to complete his project by then without the convenience of a working 3D printer. The autoforge worked great with large, uniform components but couldn't really fabricate any micro-components such as processors or chipboards.

[Salvaging - Incompetent]: 1000

[Salvaging - Novice]: 2000

[Salvaging - Apprentice]: 4000

[Signals and Communications - Incompetent]: 200 DP

[Signals and Communications - Novice]: 400 DP

[Signals and Communications - Apprentice]: 800 DP

[Jury Rigging III]: 600 DP

Ves added two major Skills to his repertoire. The Salvaging Skill encompassed everything related to recovering parts from derelict mechs. Purchasing the Skill in succession dumped a large amount of knowledge into his head.

While the cost of getting it up to Apprentice-level halved his available DP, his increase in capabilities made it up in spades. It urgently filled the gap in his knowledge on how to fully exploit the heaps of wrecks piled up in Jutland's cave.

"At least I won't be ruining anything I dig out now that I know how to recover them safely."

Different from fundamental skills like Physics or Mechanics, Ves learned a large amount of practical knowledge instead of highly abstruse theories. Seasoned salvagers mostly learned on-the-job, and the System-granted Skill offered him years worth of experience in an instant.

His entire perspective changed. Where once Ves saw a wreck, now he saw a hidden treasure ready to be unearthed. Even with all of the damage and corrosion, Ves could still recover millions of credits worth of materials and components. Even if he failed in his mech designer career, he could still earn a decent living among the rough-and-tumble world of salvaging.

"Heh. They earn a lot but they're also exposed to a lot of danger." After all, not everyone appreciates a grave robber.

The other Skills spoke for themselves. Ves always gained a lot of use out of his Jury Rigging skill, which allowed him to apply unconventional solutions in case he lacked the ideal part for the job. Enhancing it brought him a wealth of insight that, among other things, increased his understanding of damaged parts and how to employ them despite their deficiencies.

He also picked out some primers on signals and communications technology in order to avoid fumbling like a caveman when he tried to repair a transceiver. As a bonus, the Skill also provided him with a good foundation on how to reduce a mech's emissions and enhance their stealth. Naturally, this benefit would only help him out later once he returned home.

"Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 6,843

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 2.2

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Apprentice - [3D Printer Proficiency III] [Assembler Proficiency III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Apprentice

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging III] [Speed Tuning III]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Apprentice - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II] [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III] [Melee Weapon Optimization II]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice

[Signals and Communications]: Apprentice

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer capable of surviving harsh environments without protection.

Right now, Ves figured he gained the minimum amount of proficiency for his current project. His Status page looked much better equipped to face his current crisis.

"A low-end transceiver isn't complicated in its functions. I should be able to salvage most of what I need from these wrecks. What else should I spend my 6,800 points on?"

Too bad the Mech Designer System only conveyed Skills related to his primary profession. Ves could sorely use an upgrade in his ability to survive in an alien wilderness.

He shifted his priority to the Kaius. As long as the giant chimera mech remained operational, the expeditionary forces had to treat Doctor Jutland with kid's gloves. Taking out this asset would prove immeasurably useful to his safety.

"I need a quick fix."

Ves estimated the expedition was already halfway through their forty-day window. This left precious little time for everyone to complete their goals. He didn't believe Jutland intended to let the expedition rob his entire territory blind. It didn't fit in with his erratic and vindictive behavior.

How could he sabotage a monster like the Kaius without tipping Jutland off?

He considered the issue carefully. The mech withstood a head-on clash from the entire hunting platoon without a sweat. Its vulnerable head which contained the chimera mech's most vulnerable components enjoyed an almost perfect level of protection by employing integrated shield generator.

Then he remembered the pool of water in the middle of the cave.

"The Kaius will certainly rest in the pool once it returns."

If Ves discretely messed with the water, he'd be able to deliver a crippling blow to the Kaius. Best of all, Doctor Jutland wouldn't be aware of the danger until it was too late.

Yet, to do so without getting caught required a lot of thought. "Doctor Jutland won't be easy to hoodwink."

As much as Ves improved in most of his physical capabilities, he had no doubt that Jutland reserved the best for himself. Who knew how much work he had done on his smell, hearing and sight. Once he spotted something fishy in the water, the game was up and the Kaius remained fully functional.

"I'll just have to pick carefully and risk a try."

To do nothing at all left the expedition open to retaliation from Jutland. While he didn't care too much about House Kaine, their failure affected his own rewards from the Clifford Society.

Ves had very limited options with his remaining budget. If he skimmed on upgrading his Skills, he'd be able to do more, but he didn't regret his earlier purchases. After all, without a working transceiver, he'd still be on his own.

"That reminds me, I still haven't figured out a way to convert my internal energy into a stable current."

A powerful transceiver required a corresponding amount of power. The last few days, Ves frequently tried to manipulate his internal energy, but he came back with absolutely nothing.

He found no way to exert any influence on the mysterious cycle of energy. No matter the method, be it physical or mental, the energy cycle behaved as it was aloof to the mortal plane.

That didn't mean he became stuck. His Salvaging Skill conveniently provided him a lifeline by giving him the option to recover and perform basic repairs on a reasonably intact energy cell or power reactor.

And if one reactor didn't suffice, then he could always string up a bunch of them with the help of his Jury Rigging Sub-Skill.

He left the issue of poisoning the water for later, as he still needed to consider his options carefully. Instead, he started working on salvaging what he needed from the pile of wrecks.

Unlike before, Ves didn't opt for the crude option of cutting straight through a damaged mech's frame. Instead, he approached the wreck like a salvager wishing to preserve as much of its value as possible by using various tricks to peel off the layers of armor and components in the way.

He had to exert a lot of effort this way. Working without bots or a decent assembly system slowed him down a bit. However, the upside to his slow and methodical work was that he succeeded in removing a couple of decent-looking transceivers after a couple of hours. He also conveniently removed a

couple of energy cells along the way, though he had less luck with the power reactor.

"These things are too heavy!" He wiped his brow and stood back. Even his increase of strength meant nothing when it came to several tons of weight. He didn't even dare to attempt to bring it online.

The absence of a power reactor as a moderating force meant that Ves had to pass another hurdle before he completed his setup.

First things first, he worked on the transceiver. Having scavenged the same model over four different mechs, he dismantled them all and reassembled a single copy from the best parts.

Unlike a sophisticated industrial 3D printer, a low-end transceiver like this one didn't bother with employing restrictions. This saved him a lot of time and effort.

"Still, I'm not sure it will be able to handle the amount of power required to reach the base camp."

Ves estimated that this cave should not be too far away from base camp, so he set an upper limit of five-hundred kilometers. That still exceeded the base parameters of his stock transceiver.

Fortunately, he had a solution to this shortcoming. His newly Signals and Communications and upgraded Jury Rigging Skills enabled him to upgrade his transceiver's range while also boosting its ability to cope with a large influx of power. While his work had no chance of passing certification, it would work in a pinch.

He worked through the night to tackle the power problem. If there was one thing his newly enhanced body improved, it was his ability to work through his night cycle without losing too much focus.

In order to prevent the energy cells from short-circuiting his transceiver, he salvaged various components off the available power reactors. He combined these parts into a makeshift power converter. Ves even jury rigged a rudimentary control panel that allowed him to adjust the amount of power he pumped into the transceiver.

The moment of truth had come. Ves selected a widely used distress frequency and began to transmit his voice.

"This is Ves Larkinson, the mech designer assigned to the expedition! Is anyone listening to me? Please come in base camp! I say again, this is Ves Larkinson the mech designer. Come in base camp!"

The transceiver only returned a large amount of static even after he kept his message up for five whole minutes. Ves frowned and appraised his current setup.

"Looks like I'll have to put my work to the test."

Ves gradually cranked up the power.

Chapter 190 Breaking Poin

Ves pushed his setup to its limits when he failed to get a response. Due to the inverse-square law, the poor little transceiver had to accommodate an increasingly alarming amount of power.

Neither the salvaged energy cells, the improvised power converter or the hastily upgraded transceiver handled the increasing load well. Ves frequently shut down the power to cool down the stressed devices and replace a few of the more delicate components that only hung on by a thread.

His persistence finally paid off when his shabby transceiver finally returned a response. It came in with dense encryption that made no sense if Ves didn't have the right key.

"Why reply with encryption?"

Then he thought about the untrustworthy elements in the expedition. If someone like Commander Keller listened in to their correspondence, then that could lead to a lot of unpleasant consequences.

Acting upon a hunch, Ves applied a unique code that his father hammered into his head to his transceiver.

The gibberish transformed into simple text.

[This is base camp. We read you loud and clear. Both your cousin and the commander are present.]

Ves checked his transceiver and noticed a trail of smoke. He rapidly typed in his reply on the projected keyboard.

[I am still in captivity and am transmitting through an improvised transceiver. It will only hold up in a limited amount of time.]

[Roger. We are triangulating your position but it will take time. Please explain your circumstances.]

Without any delay, he briefly transmitted what he experienced including the fact that he'd been operated on. He also emphasized that Doctor Jutland and his Kaius departed the cave a day ago.

[Copy that. We have anticipated his arrival. Base camp is currently in upheaval. Expeditionary fleet has suffered a defeat against sandmen fleet but fled in good order. Cmdr. Keller and his supporters have rebelled and are at large. Prospectors have found the motherlode and its exploitation has disturbed the local ecosystem. Disabling the Kaius is a critical priority. Do you have a solution?]

The brief message came at a bombshell. The defeat of the expeditionary fleet caught everyone off-guard. No wonder Keller and his ilk went AWOL. That

latter part of 'fled in good order' sounded reassuring, but who knew what the truth really looked like.

Without a stable fleet presence up in orbit, they'd never be able to leave this miserable planet. If they couldn't leave within twenty days, they'd be joining Doctor Jutland in his merry isolation.

Forget about retaining your sanity, you'd run out of food, water and air long before the next twenty-seven year lull arrived.

As for the motherlode, Ves figured that House Kaine finally found the source of all the monoexurite spread throughout the jungle. An unimaginable amount of wealth should be locked away in this vein.

Digging it out should net the expedition an unimaginable amount of monoexurite, perhaps in the kilograms even! However, taking such a valuable source of monoexurite away would also devastate the local ecosystem and cut off Jutland's ambitions.

"He's just like an alien who can't do without a source of exotics. Cutting him off from monoexurite is like taking away the stimulants of a hardcore addict. Jutland will never be resigned to give up his source of bliss."

Fortunately, House Kaine took its security seriously, and with Ves warning them of the coming of the Kaius, they'd be fully prepared to repel the monstrous mech.

That reminded Ves of his data chip and the valuable schematics within.

[Please stand by while I transmit incomplete schematics of the Kaius.]

Ves retrieved the data chip and inserted it into an open slot on his transceiver. After selecting the pertinent files, the device slowly transmitted its contents to base camp. Due to the great distance and the constant interference in the air, the transmission dragged on for minutes.

[We've received your transmission in full and are in the process of verifying its contents. Please stand by.]

His transceiver started to release a lot more smoke by now. It shouldn't be able to hold on for long.

[My transceiver is breaking up. I have only seconds left. Please send rescue to my transmission point. There are half-a-dozen adult hexapods and a score of juveniles under Jutland's thralls. No elder hexapod kings are present to my knowledge. If the Kaius returns, I will attempt to sabotage it.

[Our manpower is short. We can only divert a limited amount of help. Your rescue will hinge on the success of your sabotage. Rescue party will abort its attempt in the event of failure.]

For a moment, Ves felt the need to slam his fist down the radio. House Kaine practically pushed him into a corner and blatantly blackmailed him into disabling the Kaius! Still, if they had to fend off Jutland, Keller and the native wildlife at the same time, it'd be a wonder if they could send out a squad of mechs.

[Roger. I will await your rescue party. Out.]

His transceiver finally bit the dust before he received the final reply from base camp. He hastily put out the flames, then dismantled his entire setup before stashing his half-fried gear among the desolate pile of mechs.

After cleaning himself up, he left the junk pile and walked over the edge of the massive pool of water. A familiar juvenile hexapod padded over and croaked towards him as if he was a dog welcoming back his owner.

"Hey there friend." He said and tentatively reached out a hand to rub its head. The hexapod barely noticed his touch. "I guess you're nothing like a dog."

The dimwitted creature acted more like a badly programmed bot than anything else. Ves wondered how Doctor Jutland managed to direct these creatures in the first place.

Did he raise them from their infancy and conditioned them to obey him from the start? Had he fed them with a cocktail of drugs and slowly weaned away their instincts? Or did the crazy doctor use some mystical mind magic?

The truth mattered little to him for now, as his rescue party could clean up the beasts themselves. Ves only had to figure out a way to cripple the Kaius. He looked down the pool of water and tried hard not to smell the disgusting scent emanating from its murky depths.

"What can I purchase with my remaining points?"

His newly added insights into salvaging provided him with a couple of decent options. Sometimes, they had to bypass obstacles without resorting to heat-based cutters.

The most sophisticated salvagers in the center of the galaxy employed highly advanced nanites. These microscopic bots not only ate through the toughest materials, but were also capable of limited self-replication.

Sadly, the System's Store charged a ludicrous price for a thumbnail's worth of basic nanites. Even if he possessed the points to exchange them, his lack of expertise prevented him from employing them as he wished.

A lower-tech solution to salvagers was the use of chemicals. They relied on various acids and the like to dissolve extremely hardy obstacles. Proper use of chemicals required a lot of foreknowledge on the kind of materials the salvagers expected to encounter. If you brought the wrong formula, you'd be liable to waste your time.

"It's a good thing I know exactly what kind of alloys the Kaius has incorporated." He smirked.

He couldn't do anything against the chimera mech's resilient living tissue. Jutland spent a lot of time and resources to strengthen them against every possible form of damage, and they were already strong to begin with when the hexapod king was still alive. Ves only aimed to weaken its mechanical replacement parts.

He returned to the junkyard and found quiet corner to activate his System. He visited the Store and sought out the chemicals that should be effective against the alloys incorporated in the fallen mechs.

[Formula FDER-351]: 25,000 Design Points

[Formula HH55-00030-F]: 50,000 Design Points

[Formula U-22 V77 Folmention]: 30,000 Design Points

[Formula 22256F]: 5,000 Design Points

Of the handful of formulas that met his criteria, only one of them came close to his price range.

As the most affordable chemical on the list, Formula 22256F appeared to be a product designed to appeal to the cheapskates. It was highly unsafe and had a limited shelf life. It also came in a smaller container than the rest.

"Will it be enough to weaken the alloys?"

If Ves dump the skinny vial into the giant pool of water, the chemical would spread out over a very wide volume. Still, despite its price, the chemical was very potent on its own. Ves even knew a couple of tricks that salvagers often used to give the formula some extra kick.

He decisively purchased a vial from the store. It materialized in his hand, which he carefully stuffed in his pockets. It would be a disaster if he spilled it. Now that he possessed the main ingredient, he could get to work with adding some supplements.

Ves returned to the junkyard and carefully opened up the engines and power reactors. Most of these core components were highly complicated systems by themselves that incorporated a number of chemicals. He salvaged a couple of critical chemicals that hadn't evaporated or turned bad over the years.

"Damn!" He hissed as he barely drew his fingers back in time. A foul splash of chemical goop exploded from the power reactor he worked on. "Even my thickened skin won't save me if I get any of this acid on me."

Doctor Jutland could return at any time, so Ves worked with haste. He finally gathered a sufficient amount of chemicals after several hours of focused work. He looked down at the makeshift buckets he fashioned out of spare scrap.

After blending them together, he added in the formula. The entire mixture instantly seethed as if it came alive. Ves didn't wait for it to fully mix and tipped over the container into the pool. The mystery blend submerged into the water and had become diluted to the point where Ves couldn't spot any difference from before.

He wouldn't want to dip into the waters, though.

"I've done all I can now."

Ves cleaned up the scene of the crime as best he could and returned to his designated juvenile hexapod. He laid down on his ride and deliberately loosened his focus.

With his reins loosened up, his Jutland organ hit back with a vengeance. The massive influx of energy destabilized his internal energy cycle and caused a lot of pain.

He gritted his teeth and tried to deal with the problem without resorting to his mind. Ves only achieved a minimal amount of progress in this regard.

Time passed slowly as he pretended to be weak and infirm. Ves caught up with his sleep but could do nothing for his hunger and thirst. He didn't dare piss off the hexapods by attempting to slaughter them for sustenance. Besides, he hated the barbarity of eating raw flesh. He'd rather go hungry for a while.

"Seems my body hasn't finished adjusting if I'm still craving for food."

While Ves continued to speculate about the changes in his body, Doctor Jutland finally returned after half a day of quiet contemplation.

The Kaius obviously suffered a setback. Its entire left torso appeared to have suffered a massive explosion that cracked some of its scales and enormously weakened the exposed metallic components close by.

The man also came with company this time. A very familiar looking swordsman mech that had seen better days trudged after the Kaius.

"Keller!"

The situation on the ground must have been dire for both of them if they retreated to this cave in a hurry. Neither of the two men paid much attention to Ves, which was just the way he liked it.

Jutland even directed his Kaius to submerge into the pool without glancing at it, which relieved Ves from one of his worries.

"Doc! This isn't what you promised!" Keller yelled as the cockpit of his mech opened up. Unlike Ves, the mercenary commander wore a vacuum-sealed piloting suit, which possessed less armor than a hazard suit but provided him with much more flexibility.

It didn't avail him when Jutland pounced on him from a ludicrous distance with his massively enhanced body. The crazy doctor grasped Keller's neck and slammed him against the side of his cockpit.

"Don't talk to me in that tone, little worm! I'm the one in charge, not you! If you and your men remained patient, we'd be able to attack the expeditionary forces from two separate fronts!"

"You don't know my men! I couldn't get a lid on my men once they got wind of the main fleet's defeat. They had to lash out!"

"Incompetent simpleton!" Jutland cursed and slammed Keller against the surface of his mech again. "Are humans always so dumb? What is the use of keeping you alive when you don't have any men anymore?"

"W-W-Wait a moment, doc! I can still get in touch with some of my friends in base! Not everyone lost hope! I can continue to feed you information and-"

A loud crack sounded out as Jutland mercilessly punched his fist into Keller's visor. The force not only broke through the transparent composite that made up the foreplate but also crunched the Vesian's head like a watermelon.

Ves felt a chill in his spine. The brute force displayed by Doctor Jutland far surpassed a baseline human's limit. Even he didn't wish to measure his strength against the murderous exobiologist.

With hardly a word, Jutland threw aside the corpse. Keller's broken form practically shattered upon landing. Only his vacsuit prevented his body from splattering out in a disgusting display. The doctor jumped from the vacant mech without a word and landed on the ground.

"Hahahaha! I'm surrounded by incompetence! There is no hope for humanity!" Jutland's gaze turned vicious as he stared at Ves. "Are you incompetent as well?"