

## The Mech 5191

### Chapter 5191 Young At Heart

"Congratulations, Ves." Jovy said as both of them entered a lounge in order to catch their breath.

The meeting with the three enjoys of the faction leader still reverberated in their minds. Ves felt completely out of it for the moment. He did not even notice that a cup of refreshingly hot brew materialized on the table before him. The cup perfectly maintained the precise temperature to optimally enjoy this drink.

Ves did not take notice of this because he still could not get over the enormous changes that his companion spirits had wrought.

It shouldn't have been much of a surprise for the Survivalists to value his companion spirits and more importantly the trees that enabled mass production. The implications for humanity in the Red Ocean were massive. Countless people's lives were about to change forever once the fruits rolled out in greater numbers.

Was he proud? Yes.

Was he happy? Not precisely.

He had plenty of reasons to be happy as a creator. He developed a powerful new product that could benefit almost everyone. Once exotic radiation had done its work and imparted spiritual potential into any red human, each of them could get in touch with cultivation a lot easier so long as they obtained a fruit.

Ves deserved a lot of credit for that, but it was not the most ideal way he wanted to be known for. He considered himself a mech designer first and a cultivator second. He did not want his secondary identity to overtake his primary identity!

While he did not reject all of the benefits that came from releasing works that did not directly relate to mechs, he had to remind himself not to get lost down this road. He needed to spend a lot of time on designing mechs after this in order to ensure that he did not go astray.

He had seen plenty of examples of mech designers who had gotten far too deep into other activities that had ultimately taken away far too much time from their design studios.

Fortunately, other parts of Ves were still quietly working on various mech designs at the same time. Both his cyborg leg that he had left behind at the Spirit of Bentheim as well as Veronica back in the Nyxian Gap had spent nearly all of their time in design labs.

Even now, they were steadily making progress in progressing the large amount of mech design projects he had taken on as of late.

Once he spent enough time on regaining his composure, he finally took notice of his new drink and took a sip that gave him enough of a kick to feel a little more energetic again.

"So... you will be accompanying me for the foreseeable time." Ves spoke to the mecher that he trusted the most. "Am I inconveniencing you or anything?"

"No. Not at all. It is a great honor for me to escort and accompany a living treasure of your stature. My curriculum vitae will receive a fantastic boost if nothing else. More than that, I genuinely want

this. I don't need my Eye of Providence to recognize that you are steadily turning into one of the focal points of the history of our civilization. As you begin to develop more and more solutions from your unique angle and specializations, you will be able to influence the course of the great war as well as trajectories of every human and alien in the Red Ocean. There is no other way I can get into closer contact with anyone else who can compare to you, so this is truly my best posting."

The RA Senior Mech Designer indeed looked enthused about this long-term assignment. He did not appear to miss the safety and the plentiful amenities of the Red Association in the slightest.

Ves smiled at Jovy. "I will welcome your company if you insist on sticking around my fleet."

"I will be doing more than that." Jovy graciously said. "I am not confined to being your babysitter. As your galactic citizenship tier grows higher, you will gain more and more privileges and permissions from the Red Association. The way it works is that the closer you get to the top, the more we want to work with you. What this means in practice is that I will have a lot more room to cooperate with you than normal. This includes collaborating on mech design projects."

"What?" Ves straightened his back when he heard this. "I thought that mechers are supposed to be neutral and avoid getting entangled in more mundane affairs."

"You are not wrong, but didn't you hear what I just said? The higher your citizenship tier, the more you become a part of our hierarchy and organization. Even if you are not a formal member of our Association, you can be treated as one in many situations that we find convenient. The reason why this custom has come into being is that tier 4 galactic citizens and higher are generally old and highly accomplished professionals who have already made enough attainments in their normal careers. At that stage, they begin to involve themselves more into galactic affairs. Since they have the qualifications to cooperate with us at this level, we are more than willing to lower the barriers so that we can work together with the best of the best."

"I see. I guess that makes sense." Ves said. "Does this mean that I can contribute to your mech designs and vice versa?"

"Yup. That sounds great, right? I do not think we should collaborate all of the time, but we should explore ideas on how our specialties can synergize together to produce superior results. You can begin to learn what it takes to design first-class multipurpose mechs from me, and I figure I can learn many lessons from you as well."

That indeed sounded great to Ves. It would help his transition a lot if he was able to get into contact with first-class mech design a lot sooner. This was probably one of the motivations why the Survivalists assigned Jovy to his escort fleet.

Just as those Masters had already said, Ves was wasting his talents if he remained stuck in second-class. He became more and more eager to move up in society and interact with the Terrans, Rubarthans, mechers and maybe even the fleeters on a more equal basis.

Ves called up a list of other rewards that he had put off his mind a while ago. With the shocking announcements from the three envoys, he had almost forgotten that he was supposed to do additional work in order to earn a handsome set of rewards!

"I should get this out of the way first so that I can go back to attending more informative sessions." He said.

"Good idea, Ves."

Both Ves and Jovy stood up from their seats and began to seek out the individual parties who placed the top 5 bids.

Not all of them were available as several of them had already chosen to attend other sessions.

The patriarch of the Becker-Anson Family happened to be available. It turned out that the older gentleman had waited patiently for Ves to finish his business.

"Professor Larkinson. It is a pleasure to meet with you again." The man that screamed old money invited Ves into his assigned berth and shook the mech designer's hand. "I am impressed by what I have heard from my contacts on this ship. Is it true that you are due to promote your galactic citizenship to tier 4?"

"I cannot say." Ves replied as he began to examine the older patriarch with his spiritual senses. "I think it is a bad habit to count my chickens before they hatch. I prefer to wait until the Survivalists are ready to issue their final verdict."

Ves and Jovy continued to step inside until they sat and made themselves comfortable.

They did not spend much time on small talk as each of them were busy individuals. The more time they wasted in this compartment, the less time they had left for other productive pursuits.

"Please tell me whether my age and health hinders my ability to obtain a companion spirit." The 150-year old silver-haired patriarch requested.

Ves gave his client a reassuring smile. "Age generally isn't a concern unless you are already close to reaching the end of your lifespan. Aside from that, your augmentations and overall fitness are both excellent for a man of your age. I foresee no complications due to health and physical problems. Your mind also remains sharp, so that won't be a problem as well. Are you sure you want to reserve this opportunity for yourself? Companion spirits can be excellent investments for your younger generations. Their growth potential is much higher, and they experience so much in the first few decades of their lives that companion spirits can grow much more dramatically as a response."

Patrick Becker-Anson resolutely shook his head. "I have made the same considerations. I rejected this option in the end. I was unable to bring any of my descendants to this conference, so we will have to seek each other out afterwards, which can set us back for weeks if not months. It is better to fulfill this request straight away. Besides, I am anything but close to retirement. A companion spirit will continue to be a useful addition to my family in the decades to come. It is not as if my children and grandchildren will remain deprived. Once your companion spirit fruits begin to circulate within human society, the rest of our family will gradually acquire the same advantages."

He was right. After hearing that Patrick was truly certain about his choice, Ves began to discuss options on what sort of companion spirit he should make.

"What are my options?"

"A companion spirit can provide a lot of assistance in both mundane and extraordinary matters. I think it is best if we narrow down the options by filtering out the choices that you do not want or need. Are you expected to be engaged in combat in any way, whether in person or in command of a mech force?"

The older patriarch chuckled. "Heavens, no! I leave defense to other capable members of the Becker-Anson family.

"Would you like your companion spirit to enhance your self-defense or help you spy on others more effectively?"

"No no no. I wish to avoid conflict." Patrick shook his head. "To be honest, I have developed a desire to reconnect our family to our ancient roots. Our bloodline used to be descended from a Divine Blacksmith. I do not have a clear impression of what that means, but it does not take much effort to recognize it as a prestigious title. I would like my companion spirit to help me with deciphering, learning and understanding the meaning of our ancient scriptures. It would also be useful if my companion spirit can utilize what I have learned to practice the old but presumably powerful methods employed by our greatest ancestor."

That... was an expansive request.

Ves looked hesitant. "Technically, I should be able to fulfill the majority of your demands. However, you... don't have any existing knowledge or experience in blacksmithing or other forms of craftsmanship, correct? Why would you want to obtain a companion spirit that falls far outside your main vocation?"

Patrick did not take the hint at all. He stood up and voiced his feelings in a heartfelt manner!

"Because it is in my blood! Because our family has diverged too far from its original purpose! Because my ancestor is crying out to revive his forgotten legacy! I need this, Professor Larkinson. Did you not explain to us all that companion spirits present second chances? You stated that anyone can pursue a different career at the same time with much fewer repercussions with the help of your invention."

"That is true, but you are a bit past the age where that makes sense. This approach is much more suitable for students and young professionals who are still at the start of their careers. They have much more time to explore their new options than an older patriarch such as yourself."

"I am not old. I have only experienced just over 150 standard years in this life. I still have several centuries worth of time to restore my family's buried traditions."

"...Okay."

## Chapter 5192 Fulfilling Small Commissions

Ves considered himself to be a good service provider, so he did not insist on changing the mind of his client any further.

He had a professional obligation to meet the demands of his customers as best as possible without compromising any rules and such.

Even though he was of the opinion that Patriarch Patrick Becker-Anson made a suboptimal choice concerning this opportunity to obtain a custom companion spirit, it was not a truly awful choice.

Old or not, Patrick had good access to life-prolonging treatments. Future advancements in cultivation might be able to extend his longevity even further. It was not a waste to provide him with a custom companion spirit.

With that in mind, Ves proceeded to do his job so that he could get his hands on the Divine Blacksmith scriptures as quickly as possible.

He created a companion spirit on the spot. He designed the new entity to be a close interpretation of the ancestor of the Becker-Anson Family.

In the end, Patrick looked fascinated as he felt several decades younger all of a sudden. His newly created companion spirit floated around his head like a curious little fairy.

"I name you Balthasar."

The supposed name of the Divine Blacksmith was Balthasar, so it was pretty clear what Patrick had in mind for his second personality.

In order to accommodate his client's desire to take up traditional craftsmanship, Ves decided to be generous. He used up a small spiritual fragment from Vulcan in order to impart the talent that Patrick lacked.

This already had a significant effect on the cognition of the older patriarch. His perspective had expanded as he instinctively knew more about the craftsmanship of all of the objects around him. It was like a veil had been lifted from his eyes!

Ves gave the older patriarch several more minutes to get over his fascination with his latest augmentation.

"I have upheld my end of the bargain. I have even transmitted a manual to you that thoroughly explains how to care for your companion spirit and all of the dangers and pitfalls that you should avoid. Can you finally show me the scriptures?"

"Ah. Of course. As I have mentioned before, I have brought the original scriptures to the conference so that the mechers can analyze and translate their contents. They are still working on it as far as I know. I can make arrangements to grant you permission to visit the department that currently has possession of them so that you can attempt to read the texts in person. I can also give you a copy of the scriptures in their ancient words and letters and transmit the completed translations when they arrive."

Ves did not really feel like studying a bunch of fragile ancient scrolls that had managed to survive for who knew how long.

"I only care about the contents rather than their carriers." He responded. "I can make do with the digital copies of your scriptures."

"Very well. I shall transmit the original texts. Mind you that the language is so old that it has been dead for hundreds of thousands of years at the very least. There is an exceedingly small number of people in the Red Ocean who have gained enough proficiency in this primitive language to barely translate the words. Even then, their work is greatly hindered by the fact that the scriptures likely contain a large proportion of professional jargon and terms."

That indeed sounded trouble, but Ves showed little concern about this problem. "Understood. I will wait until the Association has completed its interpretation work."

As Ves said goodbye to the patriarch of the Becker-Anson Family, he loaded the files into his cranial implant and already began his attempt to read the ancient words.

He made no progress at all. The language consisted of pictograms whose meaning completely and utterly eluded him. His talent for understanding alien speech played no role at all because there was no living counterpart for him to interpret.

This was fine. Ves might not be able to understand anything, but his mother was a different story!

Back in the Milky Way, Veronica already interrupted her design session in order to seek out Cynthia again. Hopefully the True God possessed enough knowledge to make sense out of the digital copy of the ancient writings.

Ves meanwhile proceeded to handle his other custom orders in the ensuing hours. The jobs were relatively straightforward as no one issued any odd demands.

He managed to earn a first-class military base and outpost that was currently situated in a fairly precarious region of the Red Ocean.

Jovy expressed a bit of puzzlement why Ves selected this bid over other ones such as a straight infusion of cash.

"The value of this outpost and all of its first-class facilities is higher than a couple of hundred million MTA credits." Ves replied. "So long as I can pack it up and sell it on the second-hand market, I can already earn a greater sum of money. I am not getting rid of it, though. I intend to use it as the foundation of the first branch of the Larkinson Clan in an upper zone. We might not be able to make proper use of it in the next few years, but it is extremely handy to have on hand when I am finally promoted to a first-class mech designer."

He needed to have a first-class counterpart to the Cat Nest in an upper zone to facilitate his future operations.

Jovy looked a bit skeptical. "You will have to move the outpost from its current location to a safer position that is further away from the frontlines. Your clan cannot accomplish this by itself. You will have to pass on this responsibility to another trusted party."

Ves grinned. "I have already thought about that. Once this conference is over, I plan to get in touch with the Eden Institute of Business & Technology to disassemble the base and bring it back to a safer location. I will also ask for assistance in hiring a small maintenance crew to keep everything in good condition."

"That... might work. Does that mean you have decided to keep the base within the Terran Alliance?"

"Yes. Don't worry, Jovy. I do not intend to completely align myself to the Terrans. I am also planning to open up a couple of small branches in the Red Ocean Union and the Rubarthan Pact if possible. I think my work shouldn't be confined to select areas of human space. Everyone deserves to have a chance to pilot my mechs."

Even though Ves gained a lot more recognition and appreciation from the Red Association, he still rejected the notion that he should bind himself to any single major power.

The mechers might remain in a dominant position for the moment, but that was not necessarily the case in the future. Ves wanted to keep his options open and hedge his bets as much as possible.

"Let's proceed with my next commission."

Half an hour later, Ves had just granted a custom companion spirit for one of the direct disciples of a Master Mech Designer.

In exchange for a custom first-class cranial implant for Gloriana, Ves gave a younger Journeyman a fish-shaped companion spirit with a strong affinity for phasewater.

Ves approved of the choices made this time, so he put a little extra effort into designing a graceful little fish.

Once he had completed this job, he received a fancy virtual voucher from the old associate who commissioned the custom companion spirit.

"I advise you or your chosen recipient to be patient. The implant industry is undergoing great upheaval and rapid changes at the moment. Every day, our researchers and developers discover new materials, new interactions between materials and so on. We even have a secret research group that is tasked with enabling our implants to draw power from E energy radiation. This can present the next generation of implant users with unprecedented options. For example, you can theoretically load a sophisticated software program in the implant that automatically allows its carrier to practice a cultivation method without conscious thought."

"What?! Is that even possible?!"

Much of this already sounded familiar to Ves as he had already solved this particular problem.

However, his approach was not replicable for others. A method of automatic cultivation through the use of cranial implants was much more significant in comparison!

"The early generation products will likely rely on hyper materials to make this happen. The most powerful and effective hypers do not come cheap, so only the highest segments of the market will be able to afford this service. The service that I am offering to you will include this capability if you desire to have it. It is not as useful for mech designers and mech pilots, but it can still benefit them in other ways, especially when we update the software of the new generation of implants in subsequent years."

This was cutting-edge technology that clearly blew all of the older generations of cranial implants out the water!

He even thought about whether it might be better to give it to Aurelia instead, but she was so abnormal that she probably did not have to rely on any external measures to attain great results.

"I will keep all of this in mind." Ves said as he accepted the voucher. "I need to fulfill my next two commissions. Goodbye."

He did not get to meet with Master Henry Urbeck or Master Xena Wintress in person again. Both of them were busy with attending other sessions.

Instead, Ves met with their younger disciples so that he could do his work without any fuss.

The rewards for these jobs were not simple.

The young Journeyman who worked under Master Xena Wintress was in a good enough mood to share a bit of news about the EdNet.

"The EdNet forms one of the pillars of the Polymath's Unity Plan." The young man said. "The initial version of the EdNet is the magnum opus of the Neuromancer, and it has become the Mech Trade Association's signature technologies. Recently, the Polymath has taken the initiative to collaborate with the Neuromancer to update and transform the design of the EdNet in order to improve upon the tech. Her aim is to learn enough about the EdNet to develop a lesser but more practical variation that can be used to quickly educate a massive amount of batch humans."

That sounded interesting.

"Isn't the Neuromancer supposed to be stuck in the Milky Way?"

"That is right, but the two Star Designers can still correspond with each other through the few communication methods that are able to establish data channels between the two distant galaxies."

This was one of the many examples that showcased how much assistance the Milky Way could still provide to their cut-off brethren in the Red Ocean.

So long as they were able to communicate with each other, they could engage in all kinds of joint research projects. The collective wisdom of humanity in the Milky Way was still overwhelming, and the people of the Red Ocean could dearly use all of this help!

"Thank you for telling me that." Ves replied. "Does this mean that the quotas will less or more valuable in the future?"

"It depends on whether the Polymath will keep working on the EdNet. If she continues to use her endless cross-disciplinary knowledge to update and optimize the design of the EdNet from different angles, it may very well become accessible to the general public. I wouldn't worry too much if I was you. The more affordable versions of the EdNet will likely operate with a lower time acceleration factor. You cannot spend as many years in an accelerated virtual learning environment if that is the case."

"I see. So these permanent quotas will at least hold some of their value in the future."

Ves did not feel like he was getting scammed anymore, though it would have been nice to learn about this before he concluded the auction.

## Chapter 5193 Recognition Of Status

Ves saved the best commission for last.

Once he created another custom companion spirit for the favored disciple of Master Henry Urbeck, the last recipient handed over a small metal container.

The box was made out of darker metals, but also bore small golden embellishment to add a strong sense of class and refinement.

The symbol of the Red Fleet adorned the top of the ceremonial container.



It looked completely foreign compared to the standardized architecture and the design principles of the Red Association!

"Every token is locked and registered to a single individual or organization." The student of Master Urbeck carefully explained. "It will become invalid once its registered recipient ceases to exist in any real capacity. In this case, our connection with the Red Fleet has only allowed us to tie this token to your personal identity. I do not foresee this to be a problem as you still have many years ahead of you. It may very well be possible that the Warship Quota Program will become obsolete a few generations later."

Ves nodded in agreement as he continued to stare at the container. "I think this will be the case as well."

"This change is unlikely to happen in the short term, so these tokens will still be able to give their holders a head-start on red humanity's reintroduction to warships. You can train personnel, establish a supportive infrastructure and formulate the doctrines on the use of armed starships far in advance of other groups."

Ves couldn't hold in his curiosity any longer. He opened up the box and lifted up a metal medallion. The token displayed a stylized frigate on the front and a bunch of data on the rear.

It was a remarkably small object given the enormous power it bestowed to its registered holder.

"Is there anything else I should know about these tokens?"

"The tokens will grant you access to a private section of the Red Fleet's galactic net portal. You can read the full instructions over there. One of the more important conditions that you should know is that the Red Fleet retains the right to come unannounced and inspect the warships associated with the tokens at any time. You cannot just install any weapon system on a warship. Having a frigate is not an excuse to turn it into a missile platform that can launch dozens if not hundreds of antimatter warheads at your enemies."

That was a shame.

"I see. I will make sure that my people and I don't accidentally stuff any weapons of mass destruction inside our upcoming warship." Ves promised.

"You will need to procure a warship through your own means. Neither the Red Fleet nor the Red Association will be able to help you in this regard. This should not be an insurmountable challenge to a mech designer as impressive as you. Just be certain that the warship that you use conforms to the definition of a frigate as recognized by the Red Fleet."

Frigates were quite small and could only fit a handful of mechs at best if they made heavy compromises in other areas. Their length and volume had to remain on the small side in order to avoid entering the territory of destroyers.

The difference in firepower between the classes was considerable. Destroyers might not look that much larger, but their exponentially greater volume allowed shipbuilders to mount considerably larger and more powerful ship systems in their hulls. This in turn resulted in much greater firepower and defenses.

Still, Ves could do a lot with a frigate. He actually had several possible ideas on how to make good use out of this token. He needed to get back to his fleet and discuss his options with his inner circle as well as Vivian Tsai in order to make a good decision.

In any case, Ves eventually bid goodbye to his last client and took stock of his situation.

He collected a handsome amount of rewards, each of which he could benefit from in many different ways.

The RF Frigate Token alone opened up a lot of exciting new options for his expeditionary fleet!

Even if it was unlikely for the Larkinson Clan to obtain a small warship that exceeded the performance of the Red Association's escort fleet, the advantage was that the little vessel was completely under his control.

He could decide the type of frigate to build.

He could instruct what sort of weapon systems and other useful modules the ship should mount.

He could dictate the appearance and the colors of the hull.

Most importantly of all, he could order her crew to go on offensive missions and attack any target he designated without bumping into the restrictions set by the mechers!

"What you have gained is of great significance, Ves." Jovy remarked. "I doubt that Master Henry Urbeck would have gone out of his way to arrange this reward for you if your contributions were any lower. You have earned your token through unusual means that falls outside of the boundary of the RF's Warship Quota Program. That is bound to attract a great amount of accusations of corruption and complaints of favoritism under normal circumstances. Now that you are bound to become a tier 4 galactic citizen at minimum should stifle much of the criticism. Your rise in identity already elevates you above some of the rules that ordinary people are subjected to. You should not be bothered by ordinary restrictions as you continue to work on other ways to contribute to red humanity."

That sounded rather... dark. As people became richer and more powerful, they became increasingly less constrained by laws and other rules.

Ves already experienced this effect to a certain degree, but he did not expect his status to rise so quickly in the short term. The transition was so abrupt and jarring that he needed a lot more time to take stock of his new reality.

Even the way that the people invited to the conference looked at him had changed.

He used to be a relatively forgettable individual as his age, rank, reputation and so on were not remarkable among all of the impressive mechers and associates.

All of that changed after the conclusion of his first closed session. The introduction of companion spirits had the potential to elevate all of red humanity to a whole new level.

Ves could see and hear that a lot of people initially looked surprised when they learned that the inventor of companion spirits was just a second-class Senior Mech Designer.

However, this did not stop them from admiring him as one of the success stories of this conference.

"This conference is truly a gathering of hidden tigers and crouching dragons. We would have never been introduced to these impressive companion spirits if not for the Survivalist Faction."

"Professor Ves Larkinson is one of the greatest successes of the associate program. Uncovering talents like him is the reason why our faction never closes itself off from our wider society. There are always geniuses buried among the space peasants."

"I do not understand the hype around Professor Larkinson. Master Ikan's advancements in transphasic energy shield technology is much more significant in my opinion. His breakthroughs will allow the next generation of mechs and starships to resist more damage. These companion spirits on the other hand look identical to projected mascots. What are they supposed to do on the battlefield? They do not have any substance to them and they are too small to function as a distraction!"

So many people began to talk about Ves and his recent work that it actually became embarrassing for him to walk in crowded areas.

Fortunately, few people were stupid enough to approach him without invitation in order to solicit his input or services.

Ves assumed a demeanor that made it clear that he did not seek distraction. Jovy also helped with conveying the same message.

The two eventually passed through an entrance that led them to a hall where over a thousand mechers and associates had already found their seats.

Ves was just about to move towards the middle of the room, but Jovy stopped him by holding his arm.

"Wait. You don't belong there anymore, Ves. Your place is here among other tier 4 galactic citizens."

It took a few seconds for Ves to register the break in routine.

"I do not think that is appropriate. As far as I know, my record still states that I am a tier 6 galactic citizen."

"We both know that won't last much longer." Jovy said as he shook his head. "As the Masters have explained before, the only reason why they have yet to update your record right away is because they want to add up the rewards for all of your contributions on the sixth day. Anyway, you are already a de facto tier 4 galactic citizen. If you want proof, look at the people around you. None of them will disapprove of you if you sit further in the rear."

Jovy was right. Ves appeared like a rockstar to them. He had become larger than life, and all because he had decided to dedicate one of his many inventions to humanity.

It still felt surreal to Ves. He already messed around with companion spirits for so many years that their shine had already faded from his perspective. To him, they were just another part of his life.

This was not the case for the people outside of his clan. Ves needed to adjust his mentality on the value of his own inventions in order to understand why so many people gazed at him as if he was a savior or a hero.

As Ves and Jovy moved to the rear and took their seats among distinguished company, they both felt odd and out of place.

The average age of all of the Masters, ace pilots, prize-winning scientists, business magnates, statesmen and so on definitely surpassed a century!

Ves even noticed a few impressive figures who were probably legends in their own industries that looked as if they lived through the end of the Age of Conquest!

Most of these leading figures had better things to do with their time than to mock the two incredibly young Senior Mech Designers.

They just took it as fact that Ves deserved to sit in this band.

The speaker of the open session finally began his presentation shortly afterwards.

The Master Mech Designer started out strong by lifting up a transparent container that securely stored several grams of phasewater.

"Each of you should recognize what I am holding. E energy radiation and its many new applications has become the latest trend to sweep our industry, but that does not mean that phasewater has become irrelevant. Its relatively abundant availability in the Red Ocean along with its distinctive effects will ensure that it remains an important tool in our arsenal."

That was correct. Ves did not intend to abandon phasewater technology either just because E energy radiation had come along. It was much smarter to make use of both of them in order to maximize the use of available resources.

"Considering the importance of phasewater, it becomes imperative to understand its traits in order to determine how we can use it more effectively. One question has always plagued our researchers. Where does it come from? Phasewater is particularly abundant in the Red Ocean, but it is strange that it is almost entirely absent in the Milky Way. Why is this the case? Is it because of the presence of phase whales?"

That caused many of the attendees to recall what the natives thought about the origin of phasewater.

"If you believe in the myths and stories of the native aliens, then phasewater is the liquid that flows through the veins of this 'god race'. We all know that this is not true. Any young phase whale that has yet to augment himself has normal alien blood running through his veins. Perhaps the only trait that is truly impressive about this aquatic race is that they can integrate phasewater into their massive physiques at a much higher success rate than others. Is this a coincidence, or are phasewater and phase whales intricately related to each other? In this session, I shall walk you through our studies of both phenomena and present you with our conclusion that may provide you with a possible answer."

Interesting.

Chapter 5194 PPS

"Any serious discussion centered around the relationship between phase whales and phasewater inevitably devolves into a chicken and egg problem." The respected Master mech Designer and researcher spoke. "What came first, the chicken or the egg?"

Everyone had a different interpretation to this question. The debate raged on for so many millenia without anyone offering a satisfying resolution to this problem.

Now, humanity has become confronted by a more modern and alien version of the same notion.

"Let me ask you this, then. Which of the two emerged first: phase whales or phasewater?"

Everyone immediately fell into thought as they tried to formulate a personal answer based on the information that they had in their possession.

An associate spoke up first. "We do not have enough reliable information to form a definite answer. One of the greatest uncertainties is whether phase whales are a naturally evolved species that is indigenous to the Red Ocean or whether they are artificially created by a hypothetical predecessor race that is colloquially known in the local alien community as the mythical Elder Gods. If it is the former, then phase whales most likely evolved under the influence of the abundant quantities of phasewater in their home planet. If it is the latter, then there is a greater possibility that they were specifically designed to synthesize phasewater in their bodies."

The Master at the front grinned. "There are a great number of assumptions packed in your response. Let us go over them and consider whether they are viable, shall we? Let us start with the first assumption: phase whales are capable of synthesizing phasewater in their enormous physical bodies. This is one of the most prevalent myths among the indigenous aliens, but it also happens to be correct. Our Association has captured and examined the physical processes of enough phase whales to confirm that this theory is true. At a certain point in their life cycle, phase whales are able to produce phasewater in their own bodies."

This was a clear-cut answer that clarified the doubts of many of the attendees!

It partially explained why the other major races revered the phase whales so much. Calling them gods did not sound as unreasonable as before if the phase whales could actually generate phasewater that much of the Red Ocean depended upon to sustain their local technologies.

However, this led to a bunch of other questions. Ves had a more personal stake on this topic. As much as he did not want to portray himself as an attention seeker, he could not resist the urge to raise his hand at this time.

"Ah, the man of the hour desires to satisfy his curiosity. What is your question, Professor Larkinson?"

Ves stood up and tried his best to maintain his calm as hundreds of eyes scrutinized his form.

"You told us that phase whales can generate phasewater in their bodies. Does the same apply to phase lords as well?"

The Master Mech Designer responded with a rueful smile. "We are still undertaking research on this topic. We have yet to capture and dissect a sufficient quantity of phase lords to offer a conclusive answer to this question. It may take a year to solve this particular mystery. The clues that we have gathered so far suggest that phase lords are poor imitations of phase whales. What the latter are able to do with straightforward self-augmentations, the former must undertake vastly greater effort as well as dubious experimental procedures to catch up. The topic of phase lords deserves its own session, so let us return to the topic at hand."

Ves sat down as the presenter activated a projection that showed a simplified diagram of the internal organs of a 'typical' phase whale.

"Phase whales exhibit an extensive degree of diversity in size, shape, evolution and abilities. This is because their natural growth stops at a certain point. Instead of settling for their mature forms like many other races, they have opted to utilize their high mastery in biotechnology to augmented their own bodies according to their tastes, their scientific knowledge base and the resources they have at hand."

The projection highlighted a number of interconnected organs that looked exceedingly mysterious and complicated. Even Ves understood nothing about it as his basic grasp of biotechnology failed to provide him with any useful insights.

"Every phase whale beyond a certain point of maturity boast a system of complementary and related organs that are capable of producing phasewater. We call this the phasewater production system or PPS for short. We have dedicated many studies towards these organs. This has enabled us to determine many important findings. For example, do you know that the PPS is not a product of natural evolution? When every phase whale ages and reaches maturity, the alien develops numerous precursor organs in their bodies that can help them regulate and control any phasewater they have absorbed from their environment. However, the precursor organs cannot produce the key substance itself unless the phase whales have upgraded them through biotechnological means."

That sounded both impressive and strange to the audience of the open session.

"What prevents the phase whales from altering their genes and make their future generations develop complete PPS for themselves as they age?"

"There are many possible reasons why that is the case." The Master replied. "We do not have any definite answers to this question. A probable answer is that a PPS is resource intensive. A phase whale must obtain a sizable quantity of phasewater in order to develop a means to produce it. If an adolescent phase whale grows up in a gas giant or other environment that is already depleted of the substance, then he will die of 'starvation' if his PPS cannot receive the resources needed to grow to maturity."

That sounded plausible, but not too much. The phase whales should have enough grasp of their own genes to be able to develop a safety mechanism that pauses the development of their precursor organs if they were stuck in a region that was devoid of phasewater.

"Another possible answer is that the phase whales do not want their offspring to grow lazy. We have received scattered pieces of information that indicate that self-augmentation is a rite of passage to the phase whale race. Every specimen must use their own means and knowledge to transform their precursor organs into a working phasewater production system. This is a powerful motivating factor. It is harsh but ensures that the average quality of every mature phase whale remains high."

"What about the phase whales who fail this rite of passage?"

"They are shunned and treated as outcasts." The Master replied in a factual tone. "We rarely encounter them because the unqualified phase whales presumably remain stuck on their home planets without a means to travel to other places. What is interesting is that we have information that not every unqualified phase whale is content to stay in their home environments. There are stories where these delinquents have chosen to prey on other phase whales for the purpose of

preying on the latter's PPS. This allows them to obtain the benefit of these essential organs without putting in the hard work of developing them on their own. There are obvious sequelae to this approach, and it is a great taboo in the phase whale community. It is exceedingly rare for these unclean whales to enjoy good lives."

That explained so much to Ves!

Having encountered these delinquents himself, Ves had always wondered about the motivations of their criminal acts. For them to be desperate enough to steal the PPS of more successful phase whales made a lot of sense!

The Master gazed into the crowd and more specifically towards Ves as he spoke his next words.

"While I have agreed to limit the scope of this session to phase whales, it may be interesting for you to learn that phase lords do not possess the precursor organs of a phasewater production system. This is one of the reasons why there is a hard line between lesser phase lords and greater phase lords. The vast majority of other native aliens who have attempted to imitate the so-called descendants of the Elder Gods have never moved beyond the stage of a lesser phase lord due to their inability to produce phasewater."

That caused Ves and many other people to look puzzled or curious.

"If that is the case, Master, then how have greater phase lords managed to come into being?"

"The answer is simple. They have obtained and assimilated the PPS of mature phase whales."

What?!

Ves never expected to hear such a shocking revelation in an open session!

"This is not an absolute certainty, but our confidence level in this conclusion is fairly high." The presenter spoke. "This is because in the rare cases where we have managed to obtain the bodies of greater phase lords, we have always found PPS embedded inside that are clearly foreign body tissue with vastly different genes and other biological markers. It is impossible for these native alien 'gods' to evolve their PPS on their own or develop it through their own biotechnological efforts. They have gained the capacity to produce phasewater by 'taking' it from the descendants of the Elder Gods."

"That should be impossible." A woman interrupted. "The native aliens revere the descendants of the Elder Gods too much to do the latter harm. The very notion of it is regarded as blasphemy. Sinners will be treated with the same degree of contempt as unclean whales in alien society."

The presenter shook his head. "That is a highly simplified perspective on alien society. The rules and relations between the different alien races are not as clear-cut as they like to present to the public. The other major alien races are in constant cooperation as well as competition with the phase whale race. The latter is regarded as *primo inter pares* in the alien community, but they may very well be treated as mobile PPS incubation livestock by the leaders of the other alien races. The actual truth is more complex, multi-faceted and nuanced."

"Is it possible for greater phase lords to come into power by relying on different solutions that do not depend on obtaining the PPS of other phase whales?"

"We do not know enough about them to issue a definite verdict. Our most predominant theory is that it is technically possible, but the threshold is too high. It is far too impractical for lesser phase lords to develop a means to produce phasewater themselves when they lack the tech and possess no native precursor organs to work with. The most accessible solution is to receive a PPS by any means necessary. We are not quite certain, but our studies on alien society has shown that there are a number of prominent greater phase lords who have most likely promoted their bodies by stealing the PPS of other phase whales. We do not know why they have not received any sanction from the phase whale race. It may be that checks and balances prevent the latter from overreaching."

That sounded rather complicated and hinted at a complicated web of interspecies relationships.

"However, we have also identified a number of greater phase lords that have been awarded with PPS by the phase whales after earning great merit. This shows that there is an avenue for a member of another alien race to obtain their own phasewater production systems through legitimate means. The greater phase lords who have come into power through this fashion are often regarded as the strongest supporters and sycophants of phase whales. This is logical as the latter only wishes to promote aliens that can promote their interests."

It sounded as if a large chunk of greater phase lords were effectively traitors to their original races.

They were the Red Ocean versions of cosmopolitans!

The presenter quickly went back to explaining his views on the relationship between phasewater and phase whales.

Ves listened with rapt attention as every piece of information he learned about this broad subject matter was highly relevant to his own interests!

#### Chapter 5195 Can't Fit Inside

"Wow." Ves spoke as he left the hall after the open session had concluded. "There is so much depth to phase whales that I never realized how little we actually know about this incredible species."

The presentation provided many answers, but also generated a lot of new questions. Red humanity was doing its best to understand the nature and the properties of phase whales, but there was simply too little time and not enough manpower to lift all of the mystique surrounding this power race.

Nonetheless, Ves came away from this highly informative session with a lot more information about how the natives engaged in their own brand of body cultivation.

One of the most important factors that determined the power and the future growth of a native alien was whether they possessed the capacity to produce phasewater within their ownbodies.

Ves was not quite certain why it was necessary to acquire an internal mechanism to produce phasewater. It sounded as if this was a necessity rather than a convenient way to reduce one's reliance on phasewater harvested from the environment.

Whatever the case, a lot of phase lords deeply desired to get their hands on a PPS. They weren't entirely complete without this set of phase whale organs.

It explained so much about what he had heard and encountered over the years.

It also gave Ves a new perspective on phase lords. Each of them were both individually powerful and incredibly influential in their own societies.



Phase lords had long been equated as the beings who had stepped beyond the limitations of their original races and stepped onto the path of godhood. Their former comrades all worshiped them as living gods and did not dare to treat them as if they were equals anymore!

To hear the presenter equate lesser phase lords as an underclass was a radical change in perspective.

These alien beings who succeeded in transforming their lives indeed managed to ascend to a higher state of being. Yet their journey forward became so difficult that they essentially needed to slave away for the phase whales for a long time or violate a taboo by stealing the PPS outright!

It was unclear how many phase lords resorted to the former or the latter. There simply wasn't enough information as most aliens remained ignorant of what went on at the higher levels of their society. Even if they did know anything, they knew better than to gossip about their supposed gods.

What was clear to most people was that a lot of lesser phase lords were about to descend upon human space.

The reason why the Eminence of Torment turned into a service minion of the Red Cabal was because he probably hoped to earn enough merits to exchange for a PPS from his phase whale masters.

More lesser phase lords were bound to arrive in the ensuing months and years as they trickled to inform the other parts of the new frontier.

Not all of them were highly motivated to save their dwarf galaxy from the scourge of human invaders, but they would definitely do their utmost to make themselves look as good as possible during the war in order to earn a precious PPS!

Ves thought about his own awkward status as a phase lord. He wondered whether he should endeavor to hunt down a phase whale for the purpose of harvesting the creature's PPS.

He immediately rejected this notion. His progress in body cultivation was almost nonexistent. While a lot of lesser phase lords coveted the PPS contained within the enormous bodies of every phase whale, not all of them were capable of transplanting the crucial organs into their own physiques!

Phase whales were large.

They might appear to be around several hundred meters long most of the time, but their true bodies were much larger once they lifted the dimensional folding effect that enabled them to assume more compact forms.

It was conceivable that the organs that made up the PPS were also humongous!

Even if a lesser phase lord had reached the limits of his current stage, he might not be able to fit a complete PPS if the latter came from an elder phase whale that had grown to the size where his titanic body generated its own gravity well!

Perhaps the native aliens developed methods that enabled them to cut the PPS down to size so that they could fit into their smaller bodies, but there was probably a limit to this miniaturization process.

There was no way that Ves could fit a full or reduced version of a PPS inside his own body!

His phasewater concentration still remained at the pathetic level of 0.01 percent. He could barely call himself a phase lord despite the fact that he had already managed to overcome one of the most difficult hurdles.

While his status as a phase lord allowed him to pull off a couple of cool tricks such as teleporting him a short distance away, he remained otherwise unimpressed by what he had gained.

Part of it was his own fault. He never put any serious time and effort into exploring how to increase his phasewater concentration and develop more spatial manipulation abilities.

It all seemed unnecessary to him. As he continued to climb up in society, it became less essential for him to rely on his own abilities.

He was a mech designer. The only advantage that Ves cared about was that phase lords developed a stronger affinity towards phasewater. He indeed benefited a lot from this, and wished to strengthen it even further.

The opportunity costs were too high, though. He could spend his time and resources on much more productive pursuits.

Designing mechs would always remain his primary occupation. This was his main 'cultivation method' and one that he could not afford to give up just so that he could play at being a better phase lord.

Ves proceeded to attend a number of other sessions for the remainder of the second day. He tried to catch up on a decent variety of subjects as opposed to focusing on one subject in particular.

This reflected his varied interests and his engagement in so many different facets of reality.

He attended an open session on the predicted changes to red humanity as E energy radiation continued to affect every part of people's lives.

Since this session was organized by a supporter of the Polymath, the presenter tried to sway her audience into supporting a total reformation and centralization of their scattered and divided society.

"The lengthy history of the human race has taught us that we are our worst enemies. Each period in history where humans gain too much power in a short period of time, conflict, misery and instability follow suit. From the invention of gunpowder in ancient times to the rapid conquest of large swathes of the Milky Way Galaxy, humans have shown time again that they are unable to restrain themselves when granted power beyond their prior means. If we want to prevent this foreseeable calamity from occurring again, we must preemptively solve the time bombs embedded in our fractured society and heal the old wounds before it is too late!"

Although the presenter tried to sell the Polymath's Unity Plan a bit too much, she raised a lot of good arguments.

Perhaps it might be a better idea if red humanity did not remain so divided and mistrustful towards each other.

"What do you think, Jovy?" Ves casually asked afterwards.

"I agree that our society is too flawed as it is. The Polymath has taken the initiative to present a plan to solve the fault lines that continually cause us to treat each other with vigilance and suspicion. It is

not the only choice we have. It is up to our wise and capable human leaders to determine the best way forward for us all. I am merely a tier 6 galactic citizen. My voice is irrelevant."

It was not hard to pick up the mocking and jesting tone in Jovy's voice. The RA Senior Mech Designer indirectly reminded Ves that he might also find himself in the company of those 'wise and capable human leaders' by the end of the week!

It all depended on the final verdict of the faction leaders or their chosen representatives.

Ves had learned that the gap between a tier 4 and a tier 3 galactic citizen was enormous. It took way more than a large quantity of average contributions to bridge this enormous void.

Tier 1 and tier 2 galactic citizens consisted of the contemporary leaders of both branches of human civilization. They were the god pilots, Star Designers, the galactic mech councilors, the grand admirals and so on. Even though none of them possessed absolute power to rule as they wished, their collective authority was near total in human society!

Tier 3 galactic citizens existed only a single layer below all of these major leaders.

They were typically MTA Masters and ace pilots who had made amazing contributions and had reached the threshold to the next rank.

They also encompassed CFA admirals who led their own fleet with a wide degree of autonomy.

The leaders of most first-rate states also qualified as tier 3 galactic citizens so long as they wielded enough real power. Figureheads were out of luck.

To think that Ves could become as powerful as those widely recognized and celebrated leaders was unimaginable to his current self!

He was just over 40 years old! He had only advanced to the rank of Senior Mech Designer a short time ago! The gap between himself and people such as Master Termaneo Dervidian was too great!

Ves forcibly calmed himself down before his head became too inflated.

"Why is it the case that only a select few people get to decide on the plan?" He changed the topic by asking another question. "Tens of thousands of people have boarded the Khamater Reign. Each of them are talents and leaders in their own right. None of them are stupid or immature. Why don't you Survivalists extend a voice to them as well? I think that will allow your faction to make a decision that is more representative of human society."

"That is the thing, Ves. We don't want to make a decision that is an accurate reflection of the will of the total population of red humanity. We do not trust the judgment of people who are more ignorant and less aware of the intricacies that keep our society functioning. We have chosen to limit decision-making power to the upper leaders during emergency situations because we cannot get bogged down by bureaucracy and the demands of too many stakeholders."

"I see."

"This won't last forever." Jovy reassured Ves. "Once the emergency has lifted, we can return to a more reasonable decision-making approach."

"I think it will take a long time before that happens." Ves cynically remarked.

He predicted that the state of emergency might last for a century if not more depending on whether the aliens of Messier 87 made an appearance during this period of time.

That reminded Ves to attend a session held by one of the researchers who stared at the supergiant galaxy with really big space telescopes and other advanced stellar observation machines.

Ves and Jovy managed to find an open session that presented a lot of speculations on the possible forms of life that might have evolved in an extreme high energy environment.

Unfortunately, the attendees gained much less out of the presentation than they expected. There simply wasn't enough data to work with. None of the fancy high-tech observation machines were capable of discerning too many details of artificial construction and other activities due to the immense amount of light and energy pollution produced by Messier 87.

In the end, Ves did not get any closer to understanding the possible native aliens that resided in Messier 87 than before. The investigation in this crucial subject had only just begun. It might take decades before people could get a clearer ideas on the monsters they had to compete against.

#### Chapter 5196 Meet The Friends

Ves continued to attend various sessions over the course of the second and third day.

His next obligation was scheduled to take place on the fourth day of the conference, which left him with plenty of time to learn and absorb new insights.

As he continued to attend a wide variety of sessions, he became exposed to a lot of new information.

He also became more familiar with a lot of other Survivalists besides Jovy Armalon, Vayro Goldstein and the Polymath.

This was particularly important as Ves urgently needed to expand his network. A tier 4 galactic citizen was already a side leader in human civilization.

Normally, these kinds of distinguished figures invested decades if not centuries of their life on climbing up the ladder a single rung at a time. This gave them plenty of time and opportunities to form new business relationships and make a lot of friends.

Ves had somehow made an enormous shortcut that caused him to skip much of this essential process. This resulted in many deficiencies which he hoped to mitigate over the course of this conference.

Jovy happened to understand this as well. At the start of the third day, he invited a few of his friends and peers to partake in breakfast together.

"Ves, let me introduce you to my friends, colleagues, rivals, collaborators and so on. They're only Journeymen for the time being, but they all have a chance of catching up to us in the future."

"There is no need to stroke our wounded egos." A woman responded. "You defeated us all and won first place in our race. Ah, it is an honor to meet with you in person, Professor Larkinson. I am Kelly Herrera. My great-grandfather is a senior official of the Mech Trade Association back in the old galaxy. Would you prefer to be addressed by your title?"

The female Journeyman wore a modern but fairly subdued black suit that gave off the impression of an assistant. The only obvious touch of personality in her appearance was her hair. She had styled her purple locks in the form of waves in constant motion.

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "We are not too far apart in terms of age. We're also mech designers. We should treat each other as colleagues and professionals who share similar passions for mechs."

"You are much more approachable than I expected." Kelly smiled in response.

The man standing next to her made a short bow as he introduced himself.

"It is an honor and a pleasure to meet you, Professor Larkinson. I am Journeyman Polak Neziri. My grandfather is a Master Mech Designer who also remains in the Milky Way Galaxy, much to my regret."

Polak Neziri possessed darker skin and striking orange eyes that were clearly cybernetic in nature.

Ves found it curious that Kelly and Polak felt the need to state their family connections right away. It was as if he wouldn't take these RA Journeymen seriously if they lacked sufficient backing.

He had to admit that it was handy to know this sort of information. He could make a lot of inferences about the RA Journeyman right from the start and avoid a lot of misunderstandings.

The last man introduced himself as well.

"I am Osman Carter-Tezrein. I was born in a second-rate state, but the Mech Trade Association recruited me when I was young and started to attain excellent results in school."

That was certainly different from the rest! Jovy, Kelly and Polak were all born and raised within the Mech Trade Association. This affected them in many ways. It was refreshing to meet with a mecher who possessed space peasant roots.

Once they all sat down and started to order breakfast, they began to chat with each other.

The conversation started off awkward as there was a pretty big status gap between Ves and the rest.

Ves had made several assurances that he did not care for etiquette and formality. This finally enabled them to speak without too many pretenses.

As mech designers, Ves expressed a lot of curiosity towards the specializations of Jovy's friends and peers.

"I have chosen to specialize in designing transphasic armor systems, which is classified as a Class III design philosophy." Kelly Herrera responded as she left her materialized plate of food untouched. "Many mech designers in the Association have made the same decision as this is an exciting new subject where Masters such as my great-grandfather have yet to make too many advancements."

This was not unusual. Back in his fleet, his subordinate Sara Voiken already started to shift her focus to transphasic armor systems as well.

"What aspect of transphasic armor systems are you hoping to improve?"

"Mass." Kelly responded. "To be more precise, I am researching a method to reduce the effective mass of the armor system of a mech. We know that phase whales and phase lords are actually much larger and more enormous than they appear in the open. They are able to manipulate phasewater to produce a dimensional folding effect that reduces their size, but that does not necessarily explain where all of their mass has gone. Somehow, they can also fold their mass in a manner in which they can shunt it in other dimensions that are less consequential. This is how they can make themselves lighter and faster. Some phase lords are better at this than others. I think I do not need to explain the advantages if we can apply the same principles to mechs."

She did not. This had great implications for any sort of mech, with light mechs benefiting more than others!

Mass was a great necessity for mechs as denser and heavier metals usually translated into stronger defenses.

However, light mechs could least afford to pile up on too much mass as it would make them too big and too sluggish!

If Kelly managed to produce several breakthroughs in her work, then she might be able to find a way to greatly increase the resilience of a light mech without impacting its mobility!

The only downside that Ves could think of was that the cost of production and repairs would probably skyrocket, but that was not a serious problem if this powerful new solution was confined to high-end mechs.

"How much progress have you made in your main research projects?" Ves curiously asked.

"We have made modest results so far, but not to the degree that it will change the landscape of light mechs overnight." She replied. "It will take many more years to attain more progress if there are no sudden discoveries that can help us leap forward."

That meant that she was unlikely to advance to the rank of Senior anytime soon. Ves did not look down on her, though. Kelly sounded like a typical late bloomer who bet big on a groundbreaking specialization but needed to work a lot more to reap the fruits of her efforts.

"What about you, Polak? What do you specialize in as a mech designer?"

"I am a neural interface specialist with a Class VIII design philosophy. My primary interests lie in developing viable multi-pilot mechs."

That certainly sounded like a bold choice! Ves gazed at Polak like the latter was crazy.

"A specialization like that sounds like it should be labeled as Class IX, not Class VIII. Multi-pilot mechs have fallen out of vogue centuries ago when it became clear that there aren't enough potentates to waste on single machines."

Mech pilots were too scarce to sustain this approach on a larger scale. A state that fielded mechs that needed at least two pilots each would quickly find itself short on manpower as every single total defeat inflicted twice as much manpower losses than normal!

Polak smiled in a depreciating manner. "You are far from the first person to make this remark. I disagree with the general consensus. Too many mech designers have reflexively dismissed the idea

of multi-pilot mechs for many generations due to early setbacks and failures. I am trying to defy this trend by adopting a new take on mechs piloted by multiple individuals."

"Oh? How so? What do you intend to do differently?"

The ambitious Journeyman had been waiting for this question. He grinned as he activated a projection that explained his model of multi-pilot mechs in a simple and easily understandable way.

"The traditional image of a multi-pilot mech is a slightly larger machine that features a cockpit where two or more pilots sit next to each other in tandem."

Ves nodded. "Yes. From what I understand about neural interface technology, it is possible for multiple pilots to control the same mechs as long as they know each other well and form a system where they don't get in each other's way."

"Well, my vision of multi-pilot mechs is different from this. I frankly despise this primitive approach as it offers far too little added value compared to single-pilot mechs. If we employ multiple pilots in the same machine, then there has to be sound reasons for this design choice. My justification for this is to increase the size of the mech."

A new projection appeared that displayed a mech that was much larger than normal!

"That... that's a juggernaut!"

"Almost. Not quite. It depends on how you define a juggernaut." Polak responded. "I do not like to use this loaded term if I can help it. What I am trying to realize is still a mech, only larger. It is so large that a single pilot cannot adequately control the exponentially more numerous systems and subsystems of the upscaled mech. This is where there is a rationale for additional pilots."

The projected schematic changed to include 6 more mech pilots, several of which were located in different places!

"Seven pilots. Does this actually work?"

Polak grinned. "It does. The central mech pilot is the primary controller. He is the commander and the primary controller of the multi-pilot mech. The secondary controllers are only responsible for the control of specific limbs and associated weapon systems. They do not need to be distracted by what takes place in the other sections of the large machine."

That... actually sounded like a clever way to approach multi-pilot mechs. Ves respected Polak a lot more for coming with this idea and committing to it for so long.

"I have tried to increase the practicality of my multi-pilot mechs by adopting another solution. Only the primary controller has to be a pilot whose genetic aptitude and other properties are good enough to command a machine of this size. The secondary controllers that are responsible for parts of the large mech are not required to be as qualified. Depending on the design and configuration of the multi-pilot mech, the secondary controllers do not have to process a large amount of data, especially of the dynamic variety. My simpler designs can adequately accommodate potentates that are afflicted with D or even E-grade genetic aptitudes."

"What?!"

Polak Neziri's specialty was no secret to the other mechers, but Ves was shocked and impressed by the man's idea!

Potentates whose genetic aptitudes fell well below the standard needed to pilot first-class multipurpose mechs basically had nothing to do. They couldn't even get admitted to any mech academy because everyone thought it was a waste of time, money and resources!

This could change if Polak's approach to multi-pilot mechs became viable enough.

"The addition of secondary controllers also increases the redundancy of my work. If the primary controller becomes incapacitated for whatever reason, any secondary controller can take over and become the new commander of this battle machine. It is preferable if the controller has a high genetic aptitude, but if not, the loss of control will not immediately cripple the multi-pilot mech as the other secondary controllers can share the burden."

Polak created several new uses for mech pilots who would otherwise remain completely useless. His vision presented a way for red humanity to better utilize its existing pool of manpower.

Still, just these changes alone was not enough to justify the adoption of multi-pilot mechs in reality.

"These large mechs of yours suffer from many of the same logistical downsides as juggernauts." Ves spoke. "Not only do they require vastly greater amounts of resources to construct, but you can't even transport them to different battlefields without dedicating an enormous cargo hold for them. Most forces would rather allocate their precious starship capacity for more useful purposes."

Everyone around the table suddenly began to exchange knowing smiles with each other.

"I have thought about that problem as well, professor." Polak confidently stated as he changed the image in the projection. "Transportation is not a problem in my opinion. That is because recent advancements in the development of warp drives and superdrives has made it easier to grant superluminal travel capabilities to a wider variety of machines."

Realization dawned on Ves' expression. "You mean..."

"Rather than relying on large starships to transport my multi-pilot mechs to different star systems, my preferred solution is to enable them to traverse the stars by themselves."

Instead of relying on starships for transport, Polak Neziri essentially wanted to transform his multi-pilot mechs into starships in their own right!

This was the true essence of his design philosophy!

The incredibly ambitious Journeyman wanted to blend the properties of a starship with a mech to produce a fusion that possessed the advantages of both!

In order to emphasize this approach towards mechs, Polak Neziri even showed off a ridiculous multi-pilot mech that was actually able to transform between two different modes.

The form optimized for interstellar travel looked no different from a streamlined starship.

Once battle was about to commence, this 'starship' could readily unpack and shift into a gigantic humanoid machine!

The warship-grade weapon systems of this transformable juggernaut looked formidable enough to crush any alien warship in a direct exchange!



## Chapter 5197 Dream Chasers

The mech designers of the Red Association belonged to a different class from the rest of their kind. Their circumstances were far different from that of the space peasants that had to work under greater pressure.

Ves did not think that any mech designer outside of the sheltered garden of the Red Association would have the luxury to pursue a career based on designing a combination of disproven concepts such as multi-pilot mechs and juggernauts.

Only the Association had the wealth and resources needed to raise a mech designer like Polak Neziri to an exceedingly high standard only to allow him to pursue an absurd design philosophy!

Although the mechers had correctly designated his design philosophy as Class VIII, it sure sounded like Class IX to Ves!

Still, Polak's rationale was superficially logical enough that his ideas might actually produce useful results.

Ves agreed that juggernaut mechs might be able to make a comeback now that overall mech technology had advanced a lot compared to the earlier generations.

The ability to mount an actual warp drive or superdrive onto their massive frames massively expanded their utility and significantly reduced their logistical burden!

By treating them as a combination between a mech and a starship, Polak's gigantic multi-pilot mechs had the potential to field a war machine that combined the raw firepower of a small warship with the control and finesse of an ultra-heavy mech.

That said, Polak's ambition still had a lot of questionable aspects to it that limited his chances of realizing his ambition.

"Your idea is daring, but it doesn't entirely address all of the shortcomings of oversized machines." Ves gently responded. "Resources may be easier to obtain within the Red Association, but I doubt that your fellow mechers will be pleased to expend a lot more resources for a single machine. You can get a lot more combat power out of it if you use all of the raw materials to construct as many normal-sized mechs as you can squeeze out of them. Oversized mechs also do not stimulate the growth of mech pilots as much as the ones that we use today. Our industry has spent multiple generations on dialing down their sizes and dimensions to the most optimal parameters."

Polak remained undeterred. "Respectfully speaking, professor, I have considered all of those arguments more times than I can count. I believe in my idea. There are so many assumptions about mechs that have been set in stone centuries ago. While there were good reasons to establish those facts in the past, our context is much different than before. We have access to much more advanced technologies. We have come into contact with many new and amazing materials. As far as I am aware, many mechs are struggling to fight against warships because they lack the scale to compete against a combat platform that far exceeds their tolerance."

"So your answer to the problem of getting outscaled by alien warships all of the time is to reduce the disparity in this aspect?" Ves curiously raised his eyebrow.

"That is partially what I am attempting to realize. If I can present a set of multi-pilot mechs that can strike as hard as an armed starship while also possessing the transphasic armor and transphasic shield generators that make the alien vessels so difficult to defeat, we can fight and resist the aliens on the same front."

"That sounds... convoluted." Ves furrowed his brows as he continued to question the practicality of Polak's design philosophy. "I do not deny that your large multi-pilot mechs might actually be able to hold their own on the battlefield, but... these designs of yours are intricate and complex. These are niche products that are not necessarily competing against other mechs, but seek to replace the role of warships. Armed starships are much more fleshed out and have an enormous amount of infrastructure backing them up. I think it is probably cheaper and less demanding in terms of manpower to stick with warships whenever you need to employ heavier firepower."

Warships had become so entrenched within the Red Two that they could not easily be displaced.

Any proposed replacement did not just have to match the performance of a warship, but had to go above and beyond in order to push back the inertia that protected warships from getting threatened!

Despite the persistent problems and overall lack of practicality of Polak's bold vision, Ves still admired the man for possessing the courage to explore a branch of mech design that had fallen into neglect for so many years.

If Polak failed, then he would pay the price for his overreach as well as his lack of ability.

If Polak somehow defied the odds and succeeded in his venture, then he would make a substantial contribution to red humanity!

This was why Ves did not look down on Polak's ideas. The Journeyman Mech Designer put his very career on the line by embracing an unusual design philosophy, just like Jovy and Ves himself for that matter.

After chatting a bit more with Polak, Ves turned towards the last friend that Jovy brought over.

"What do you specialize in?" He asked Osman Carter-Tezrein.

The olive-skinned man looked and dressed himself in a more subdued manner than the rest of his colleagues and peers. The only abnormality that stood out was when he spoke his words.

The man had integrated a special vocalization device in his throat that caused his sounds to echo and take on additional dimensions that human speech lacked.

"My design philosophy falls under Class IX, just as yours. I am actually a biomech designer. To be more specific, I am not concerned with designing brand-new biomechs from scratch before growing them out of a pool filled with raw materials. Instead, I specialize in the sub-branch of biomech design that takes existing beasts from various origins and essentially convert them into pilotable biomachines."

His friends were already familiar with Osman's highly unusual and macabre design philosophy, but it was still a shock to Ves!

If the previous design philosophy wasn't already crazy enough, the idea proposed by Osman sounded even more insane!

"Does it actually work?"

"It does... more or less." Osman replied with less certainty in his tone. "My progress is slow because it is not possible to design and 'build' my biomechs in a virtual reality environment. The Design World is fantastic in many ways, but it has never been able to simulate biomechs as well as I would have liked. I am glad that the Association has taken the limitations of my work into account. I am entitled to an allowance that allows me to occasionally gain access to a real exobeast or designer beast that I can convert into a dedicated war machine."

The enthused biomech designer projected a few clips of his 'biomechs' in action.

Ves immediately understood the appeal of this unconventional approach. The biomechs were all made out of excellent beast stock. The monsters harnessed by their pilots retained a significant portion of the advantages of the converted beasts, but also received a lot of enhancements derived from all of the technological upgrades.

As Ves continued to study the select pieces of footage, he began to entertain another question.

"Since all of these large beasts were technically alive when you started to operate on them, are they still... alive and aware after they have been converted into biomechs?"

"Only barely." Osman replied in a manner that made it clear that he had supplied the same answer countless times before. "It is perfectly safe and controlled. Before I do a conversion, I study the brain structure of the alien beasts before selectively removing parts of the neural tissue that are redundant."

In other words, Osman lobotomized each beast that passed through his hands to make sure his works did not regain a mind of their own and went on an uncontrolled rampage!

Suffice to say, Ves had a lot of doubts about this idea as well.

One of the areas he was most concerned about was that lobotomizing the beasts might not be enough to turn them into mostly empty husks.

If their spiritualities were strong enough, these beasts might still be able to retain greater awareness despite losing much of their brains!

With Messier 87's exotic radiation making everyone and everything stronger, all of those dangerous beasts that Osman depended upon to do his work might not remain as docile as he expected anymore!

Ves did not voice his suspicions in this area. The Red Association should have enough knowledgeable experts in its ranks to spot or anticipate this possible danger well in advance. There was no need for him to meddle into the affairs of such a powerful organization. At least some of Osman's teachers and mentors had to be aware of the greater dangers.

"It sounds rather challenging to mass produce any of your works." He remarked. "You need to have an enormous supply of beasts that are all consistent enough to perform a standardized transformation procedure on their bodies. All of this work has to be conducted or supervised by trained specialists. Then you have to convince mech pilots to put their lives on the line by piloting your unusual biomechs."

Osman merely smiled in response. "My work brings additional challenges and complications, but I enjoy the work. The Association is willing to provide me with a modest amount of support so that I can bear the extra expenses of exploring this approach to biomech design."

"I see. Have you ever thought about letting mech pilots interface with a biomech that retains a greater vestige of a conscious mind?"

"I do. All of my teachers and supervisors forbade me from conducting any experiments in this direction. Similar attempts have been made in the past, and all of them ended in disaster. I am not allowed to touch this research direction until I have thoroughly exhausted all of my current possibilities."

That would take a long time. Ves did not think this idea had much chance of success. Beasts were fundamentally different from living mechs in too many ways.

Osman decided to ask a question of his own at this time.

"I have studied your living mechs and I find that your work has a surprising amount of parallels with my own. Both of our machines are alive. Their living properties may diverge from each other, but the common characteristic of both of our design philosophies is that the machine possesses at least a small amount of autonomy and awareness. Have you ever designed or participated in the development of an actual biomech? Did you manage to make it alive according to your own definition?"

Ves briefly recalled the meat suit that he had neglected for a long time. Joshua and the Everchanger had grown strong enough to reduce their dependence on external add-ons.

The development of the Everchanger's mounted wargear had also become stalled as more important projects rose to greater prominence.

Ves did not think that his clan should phase out the use of mounted wargear. He developed a number of interesting new ideas on how to make use of them in the age, but he needed to clear his current workload in order to dedicate enough time to turn his vision into a reality.

"I have not yet designed a complete biomech from the ground up," Ves responded. "I intend to try out in the future, but I am not in a hurry to do so. Right now, metallic mechs present plenty of possibilities to me. I am not lacking for options and I have not yet reached the point where I have grown bored to the point where I need to work on radically different design projects in order to stimulate my mind."

"Understood, professor."

Ves knew that Osman wanted to propose a possible collaboration, but the man did not dare to voice this request.

Their status had grown too far apart from each other. Osman needed to advance to the rank of Senior at the very least in order to for a collaboration to make sense!

Chapter 5198 First Secret Session

Ves learned a lot more about what life was like for the mech designers of the Red Association.

He had already heard a decent amount of stories from Jovy, but his three friends and rivals all had their own stories to tell as they had embraced vastly different specializations.

They ultimately said goodbye to each other after a time. Everyone had a busy schedule, not all of them were able to attend the same closed sessions.

For example, Kelly Herrera had a dark blue dot that permitted her to attend closed sessions related to phasewater and phasewater technology.

Osman Carter-Tezrein had a dark green dot that allowed him entry into closed sessions centered related to biotechnology and biomechs.

Ves respected the two mech designers a lot for earning these dots. The theoretical knowledge threshold required to receive them was incredibly high by his standards.

Once they finished their neglected breakfasts, they went their separate ways. Ves intended to attend a bunch of interesting sessions related to various different topics such as cultivation, alien sociology, puelmer technology and more.

"So what do you think of my friends?" Jovy asked.

"They are... interesting." Ves responded. "They remind me of myself in certain ways. They are all as stubborn and invested in their own vision of mechs. That is admirable, though I am not sure if it is a good idea for them to go through such extremes."

"Our Association encourages exploration. I think you can deduce the reasons why. Many mech designers among the general public are so concerned with attaining quick results and meeting the more immediate demands of the mech market that they rarely take risks with their design philosophies. My cohort and others exist to compensate for this shortcoming and ensure that decades and centuries from now, the mech industry is still able to make healthy progress through our work."

It was a clever and forward-thinking strategy. It spoke to the determination of the mechers to stay ahead of the competition by willingly investing a lot of time, manpower and other resources on exploring a wide variety of outlandish design philosophies.

Even if a hundred of them eventually got nowhere, as long as one mech designer succeeded and realized his unorthodox design philosophy, then that was a definite win for both the Association and the mech community as a whole!

Ves developed a greater appreciation for the Mech Trade Association and the Red Association that splintered from it. The mechers were highly technocratic and possessed the will to make forward-thinking decisions that might not necessarily pay off in a long time.

This was especially the case when it came to the Survivalists!

The only fault was that they occasionally took their logical approach too far. The Polymath's Unity Plan made a lot of sense, but it damaged the interests of so many stakeholders in human society that she was bound to generate a lot of animosity!

Regardless, the Survivalists were among the few groups of people that possessed the foresight and determination to make the harsh but necessary choices that others eschewed.

The more time he spent among the mechers during this conference, the more he became affected by this common attitude.

It was one thing to get exposed to this ideology and approach from a single figure such as Jovy.

It was another thing to be surrounded by Survivalists who all shared the same attitudes about this kind of stuff!

Ves understood that this was one of the main reasons why the Survivalist Faction insisted on holding a conference in reality.

The associates were all getting indoctrinated by the Survivalists. This was not a particularly hidden scheme. It was obvious to everyone with greater awareness towards this kind of stuff.

It still worked regardless of whether the associates knew what was going on or not. The Survivalists did not deliberately set out to fool their guests. They were mostly earnest about converting associates into more committed supporters of their cause.

Ves continued to think about this throughout the remainder of the third day.

By the time the fourth day commenced, he thought about the long-term implications of the invention he was about to present during an upcoming secret session.

Many of the presentations and discussions that took place during the conference emphasized the need to think about the consequences of every action.

Each and every new technology produced a huge amount of ripple effects. The Survivalists were supportive of innovation, but not without limits. Not every new discovery or invention deserved to be released to the public.

As Ves checked his notes, he struggled to determine whether his Carmine System and all of the accompanying baggage truly made life better for red humanity.

He found it a bit more difficult to make up his mind about this issue.

This matter distracted him so much that Jovy had to smack a bit of sense in Ves.

"You are still a long way from becoming a tier 1 or tier 2 galactic citizen." The RA Senior spoke. "Let the leaders of our faction and Association ponder over how to roll out your Carmine System. It is not your job to set policies that affect our entire civilization. When you enter the secure chamber where the secret session is held, you go in as a mech designer, nothing less, nothing more. Just present your work without wasting your time on espousing your interpretation of what will happen. The experts on the panel are smart enough to do a much better job of projecting the consequences of releasing your work."

Jovy's advice was sound. Ves knew that he had fallen into the bad habit of overthinking the situation again.

"Thankyou for that. I needed to hear this. Let's head to the location."

The secret sessions took place in an entirely different deck and section within the Khamater Reign.

Both Ves and Jovy had to enter a security station where both had to be subjected to stringent examinations.

Any possible microscopic bugs or listening devices that had somehow gotten attached to them needed to be cleared out to the greatest possible extent!

Jovy passed through the security inspection without incident, but the security officers became perplexed as they came across a large amount of anomalies when inspecting Ves' body!

It was pretty clear that the security officers had been forewarned about this. Yet when they started to make a lot of unusual discoveries in quick succession, they could not withhold their surprise and vigilance!

"These blood test results..."

Just the presence of phasewater in his blood marked Ves as a greater security concern!

The mechers weren't afraid that Ves would abuse his meager phasewater manipulation abilities to sneak into areas that he was not supposed to be in. His coordinates were tracked at all times, and the Khamatar Reign also maintained a strong warp interdiction field that prevented Ves from pulling off any shenanigans.

As the examination became more invasive and annoying, Ves started to suspect that this was a scheme for the mechers to collect detailed data on his abnormal physique for the secret session that was scheduled on the sixth day.

"You are free to proceed now, Professor Larkinson."

"It was about time." Ves grumbled as his uniform automatically zipped up again. "Where do we need to go next?"

"The Khamatar Reign will take you directly to your next destination."

Before Ves could ask what that meant, he experienced the typical feeling that preceded a teleportation event.

Both Ves and Jovy disappeared from the security station and appeared into a completely enclosed compartment that was almost completely bare!

Only a single raised table floated in the air. Seated behind it was a panel of just three Master Mech Designers.

Each of them were envoys of the faction leaders.

Ves already recognized Master Xena Wintress from his first presentation.

The representative of the Xenotechnician looked impassive, but this was probably a facade. She must have formed a strong opinion about the Carmine System based on the limited information that she was entitled to know.

Ves became a little more reassured when he spotted the friendly and more familiar face of Master Vayro Goldstein.

Although Ves had never shown any desire to join the camp of the Polymath, he believed that Master Goldstein was professional enough to show enough understanding and consideration during this secret session.

The big surprise to Ves was the identity of the envoy of the Fist of Defiance.

The grandson and the most successful descendant of a god pilot had decided to attend this session in person!

The man occupied the center of the rectangular table as if he was the chief judge whose words weighed greater than that of the two Master Mech Designers.

Ves immediately put more effort into straightening his posture and schooling his expression.

He already understood the implications of this unexpected development.

Even though an ace pilot such as the Mace of Retribution was nominally on the same level as Master Wintress and Master Goldstein, this was not the case during this conference.

The Fist of Defiance was the only faction leader who couldn't be present, so the Mace of Retribution gained all of the authority he needed to speak on behalf of his grandfather's clique!

The fact that such a high-level leader found it worthwhile to attend this small-scale secret session indicated that the Mace of Retribution possessed a greater interest in the Carmine System.

The stakes had just been raised. So long as Ves managed to win over the Mace of Retribution, he would face a lot less obstacles in his effort to gradually make the Carmine System available to the general public!

As Ves stepped forward until he stopped at a lighted circle, he bowed in front the elevated panel of three.

"Greetings. It is an honor to present one of my more fascinating works to you all. I hope that my presentation will give you a good understanding of the tech that can make a difference in the war against the aliens."

Master Goldstein smiled as he looked down at Ves. "The protocol for this secret session is not strict. Only five of us are here at the moment. You can speak freely without fear of leaks or offending the sensibilities of one of our own. We merely ask you to do what you can to explain the principles and the mechanics of your innovation as extensively as possible so that we can perform our own analyses on your work."

Ves held his hands together. "I will endeavor to offer as much clarity as possible. How much time do I have? The schedule has not made that entirely clear."

"It depends." Master Xena Wintress answered in a more neutral tone. "If this closed session proceeds as expected, we will likely remain twice or thrice as long as a normal session. We wish to get to the bottom of your work. This is one of the reasons why you are presenting your findings in a secret session as opposed to the alternatives."

The Mace of Retribution wave started to look annoyed. "Let us dispense with these superfluous questions and begin already. Professor Larkinson here is a man of action. Let us give him room to speak on his terms. If his invention is nearly as good as his companion spirit, then I do not want to be delayed any further."

This was a clear signal for Ves to begin. He briefly glanced at Jovy who gave a look of encouragement in return.

Seeing that there were no more interruptions, Ves activated a projection that displayed the Bastion, the successor of the Shield of Samar.



"Let me start from the beginning. I ended up developing the Carmine System by trying to deepen the synergy between a mech pilot and a mech beyond normal means. I have a considerable number of mech pilots in my organization that have developed a strong commitment to pilot their assigned mechs on a permanent or near-permanent basis."

This was what he always wanted to accomplish as a mech designer.

"My assumption at the time was that neural interfaces have reached their limit. I needed to find another measure that could bind the two together. Then I thought about how blood relatives are always close to each other. That is when I came up with a strange idea. My living mechs are already family to the Larkinsons. Why don't I try to reinforce this intimate relationship by forming a literal blood of blood?"

#### Chapter 5199 Piloting Limitations

The start of the presentation proceeded according to expectation.

Ves had prepared his explanation of the Carmine System ahead of time. He just needed to stick to his plan and convey all of the information that he deemed necessary to share to the panel of three.

Throughout his lecture, the ace pilot as well as the two Master Mech Designers refrained from making any interruptions. They calmly listened as Ves began to explain the lengthy and convoluted journey that ultimately led to the invention of the Empowered Blood Sharing System.

When he explained how the Carmine System was partially responsible for the massive boost in resonance strength for Venerable Jannzi, he finally saw a shift in the expression of the Mace of Retribution.

As a powerful pilot himself, the Mace of Retribution understood better than the other people in this completely enclosed chamber how significant it was to experience a major rise in resonance strength.

The only problem was that there were more factors that contributed to this outcome. It was difficult for Ves to determine how much of a difference it made that Jannzi had formed a Blood Pact with the Bastion.

"Venerable Jannzi Larkinson has always been one of the fastest growing expert pilots of my clan." He explained. "I like to think that I contributed greatly to her success by designing and tailoring her mech over the course of her service to me. She is not only strong-willed and dedicated to her cause, but she has also bonded with her living mech a lot more intimately than my other pilots. This has made her the most suitable candidate to pair with my Carmine System."

The results matched or exceeded his expectations. By interfacing with the Bastion by utilizing both the neural interface as well as the Carmine System, Jannzi became much more spiritually in tune with her machine.

Many of her parameters increased as a result!

Ves even saw indications that Jannzi and the Bastion benefited even more from their permanent symbiotic relationship now that E energy radiation became a factor.

All in all, the Carmine System provided powerful proof that a single expert pilot and expert mech could drastically improve their synergy and cooperation by forming a Blood Pact with each other.

Unfortunately, this was not definitive proof that the Carmine System could provide similar benefits to every other expert pilot.

The sample size was too small!

What if Jannzi was the exception?

What if other expert pilots needed to become just as devoted to their mechs in order to form a working Blood Pact?

What if the Blood Pact led to detrimental or potentially fatal side effects in the future?

What if there was a chance that other mech pilots experienced physical rejection when they started to circulate artificial blood generated by a mech in their veins?

Ves could not provide answers to all of these difficult questions. This clearly disappointed the two Master Mech Designers as they were accustomed to receiving reports that were much more comprehensive and detailed.

This was partially Ves' fault. He had rushed to present his work early as soon as he discovered its greater implications.

He did not regret the decision to present the Carmine System to the Survivalist Faction so prematurely. The conference taking place this week was by far the best venue for him to present a possibly groundbreaking new design application in front of a panel that represented all three camps of the Survivalist Faction.

In any case, once he was done with talking about how the Carmine System provided a lot of added value to an existing expert pilot, he moved on to the next case.

When Ves explained the basic details on how he managed to restore his grandfather's ability to pilot mechs and helped him revive his extraordinary willpower, the reaction from the panel was much more obvious!

Master Goldstein already learned about this beforehand.

Master Xena Wintress and the Mace of Retribution received a lot less information about what had happened to Venerable Benjamin Larkinson. Now that they received more details, they became fascinated at how a young second-class Senior Mech Designer managed to solve a long-standing problem!

For all of their knowledge, wisdom and experience, none of the Masters or Star Designers had managed to develop a solution to this problem, at least as far as they knew!

Even if one of these impressive and competent figures managed to develop a solution, it was clearly too demanding and impractical to be adopted on a wider scale.

Nobody missed the fact that the Carmine System clearly came with a lot of limitations and restrictions. Yet despite all of its shortcomings, it was still a much more practical and affordable way to restore the combat effectiveness of brain-damaged mech pilots on a wider scale!

Gears already started to turn in their heads about what this could mean. They thought about the large number of veteran mech pilots that had been forced into retirement against their will.

Every war or major conflict produced casualties where mech pilots suffered from all kinds of injuries.

All of that was wasted manpower as far the leaders of red humanity were concerned. Many states and organizations had poured a lot of money and other resources into training to become the deadly soldiers that they needed in their ranks!

All of that skill, wisdom and experience could be tapped once again if the Carmine System offered this group of disabled veterans a second chance to compete for glory!

The Mace of Retribution couldn't hold in his growing curiosity any longer.

"Is the Carmine System exclusive to expert pilots or is it also rated to work with standard mech pilots?"

Ves shook his head. "I cannot provide a definite answer to that question. I have yet to try it out. I can only give you my estimates and predictions regarding this technology. Theoretically, normal mech pilots should be able to pilot their mechs by relying completely on the Carmine System. However, I am pretty sure that genetic aptitude can still play a considerable role in the responsiveness and data processing speed of the mech pilot."

"How certain are you that this estimate is accurate?"

"I am not entirely certain." Ves admitted without any fuss. "My work is still rough and the sample size is far too low. I need to apply this tech to a lower-end mech in order to provide you with valid and significant information. That will take a lot of time."

He continued his presentation. Soon enough, he was ready to touch upon the most crucial implication of the Carmine System. It was the entire reason why this secret session existed in the first place.

"I have left out an incident that occurred during the first successful test of the recently fabricated Bastion. Venerable Jannzi informed me that... piloting her mech through the Blood Pact that I have briefly described before has led her to form a radical conclusion that may or may not be true. She has told me that the Carmine System can facilitate a new and alternate mode of piloting mechs for herself and others through an alternate channel."

Master Xena Wintress suddenly had a look of shocking realization on her face.

Her self-control had briefly failed due to the magnitude of the conclusion that she had just inferred!

"You mean...!"

"The Blood Pact is a metaphysical channel that can allow any bonded individual to operate a mech without the need for a neural interface. Forming a traditional man-machine connection certainly helps. Venerable Jannzi and the Bastion have proven that. However, if you leave out the neural interface, the brain is not subjected to excessive strain due to the need to process a lot of data. Instead, the pilot effectively processes a lot of data directly with his soul. This is also why the Blood Pact is so good at facilitating closer cooperation between the mech and mech pilot. It bypasses all of the detrimental elements that are not really necessary anymore."

Only now did the Mace of Retribution make the same realization as Master Wintress.

The strong Saint Kingdom that surrounded the pilot surged after his mind finally caught up to the magnitude of this development!

"Are you claiming that your Carmine System can make mech pilots obsolete?! Can any human pilot a mech through the Blood Pact regardless of whether they possess the right genetic aptitude?"

"Yes." Ves simply replied.

This caused Master Wintress and the Mace of Retribution to truly think about how such an invention could shake the entire mech industry and beyond!

Ves continued his presentation while much of the panel fell into thought.

He emphasized that he had never tested this hypothesis in reality due to lack of time. He also stated that even if a Carmine mech could theoretically allow norms to control its systems, the very obvious lack of training for all of these untrained 'pilots' meant that the results likely wouldn't be that good.

In addition to that, the bandwidth of the Blood Pact for norms was probably limited as well.

"The strength and bandwidth of the Blood Pact is highly dependent on the strength of the soul of the parties involved." Ves explained. A living mech of my own design usually has a decent amount of strength to begin with. Expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Benjamin can also contribute a lot to quickly improve their Blood Pact. Ordinary mech pilots with weaker souls will not be able to match the aforementioned results. They will probably have to start out simple and slowly work their way up through constant practice and the passage of time."

This was heavy information. The ace pilot and the two Masters continued to process a lot of different thoughts as they understood that just the hint that this was possible already justified the need to hold a secret session!

Ves quickly wrapped up his presentation after that. Though he wanted to share more of his own opinion to his distinguished listeners, he took Jovy's advice in mind and did not try to mention his predictions on what would happen if the Carmine System became ubiquitous.

It was up to the leadership and cadre of the Survivalist Faction to make those judgments.

Once it was time to entertain questions, the panel members were in no mood to remain relaxed.

Master Xena Wintress immediately asked a thorny question.

"Since genetic aptitude is irrelevant, what about race? Is it possible to develop a version of the Carmine System that is designed to allow aliens to pilot mechs without any technological restrictions? What measures can you take or have already taken that can prevent your work from getting abused by the aliens?"

Ves truly hadn't thought about that. He had always assumed that the aliens were unlikely to make good use of mechs due to the lack of working neural interfaces for their respective species.

However, a disruptive technology such as the Carmine system could easily change!

"I... have never attempted to do this before." Ves slowly responded. "I can try it once I return to my fleet after this conference. My preliminary judgment is that it is plausible."

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That was another heavy revelation. Mechs were one of the biggest advantages of red humanity.

It would be devastating if the aliens managed to get on par with the red humans with the help of this alternate control method!

Master Wintress looked as if she didn't mind this, but the same could not be said for the Mace of Retaliation and Master Goldstein!

Both of them entertained a lot of valid concerns. Once the threshold to pilot a mech had dropped, it became a lot more likely that the aliens might be able to find a way to take command of a mech!

"I have a question of my own." The Mace of Retribution spoke up. "The effects of the Carmine System that you have described sounds similar to the first stage of the Mech Body Merger Process. Is it plausible that forming the Blood Pact is actually a method to complete this stage well in advance?"

"Uh..."

Chapter 5200 Testing The Boundaries (Corrected Name)

The panel grilled Ves intensely about the Carmine System and its enormous implications.

When Ves realized the Carmine System for the first time when he completed the Bastion, he mainly fixated on two specific functions.

First, the Carmine System enabled an existing mech pilot to increase their effective control and synergy with a bonded mech. The comprehensive combat effectiveness of the combination was bound to increase, especially when the pilot and mech were already strong by themselves.

Second, the Carmine System could be used as a standalone control mechanism. This could theoretically enable norms who did not possess the right aptitude to pilot mechs, if only barely.

These were the main functions of his latest invention as far as he was concerned. He barely spent any time on thinking beyond these two features. Either of them were already amazing and groundbreaking enough to completely transform the mech community as he knew it. This was because his work catered to both the lowest and highest segments of the mech market!

However, the three older and much more experienced leaders on the secret panel possessed much broader visions.

They were in touch with many more aspects of society than a young Senior Mech Designer. Their positions of power also granted them a greater understanding of the actual state of the mech industry and how mechs affected every aspect of human society in different ways.

Any single variable could completely upset the current balance and order of human civilization!

It was the job of these high-minded leaders to fully contemplate as much of the consequences of introducing new technologies as possible.

This was why this secret session had to be held. Master Vayro Goldstein had thought way beyond Ves when he initially learned of the Carmine System.

He knew that this invention was too great for him to pass judgement on by himself. This was why he called over representatives from the two other sub-factions of the Survivalists so that they could form a proper consensus on this issue.

The Master Mech Designer currently leaned over the bare alloy table as he expressed increasing interest in what the inventor had to say about his explosive work.

Ves clearly looked out of his depth as he struggled to formulate his words on a matter that went deep into speculation territory.

"I... cannot speak with any authority on any aspect of the Mech Body Merger Process. I have obviously heard about it, but I have never worked that closely with any ace pilot that has entered this process. I only have a shallow understanding of the four phases of this process. As far as I can determine based on the information that I have collected, the Blood Pact's effects share a lot of similarities with the operation union phase. However, I would argue that they are ultimately different."

"In what way?" The Mace of Retaliation asked.

As a peak ace pilot who was capable of entering the Mech Body Merger Process but lacked the courage to do so, anything related to this subject always aroused his intense interest.

His domain field shook and became more focused as he directly conveyed his mental state to the surrounding people.

Fortunately, those present in this secure chamber were all strong enough in their own ways to remain unaffected by the Mace of Retaliation's extraordinary willpower.

"From what I have read and heard about the operation union phase, the ace pilot forms a complete and permanent mental bond with the mech. The two are intricately joined together in a way that already blurs the line between the two. It is not quite clear anymore where the pilot ends and where the mech begins as far as operations are concerned."

The representative of the Fist of Defiance nodded. "That is a simplified but correct description."

"The Blood Pact is different from that." Ves proceeded. "One thing that is common with the first phase of the Mech Body Merger Process is that it forms a permanent bond. However, I am not sure if this bond is the exact same kind as the one you are more familiar with. The Blood Pact can only be formed with living mechs. It may be that your ace mechs are also alive in a sense after being subjected to a lot of willpower baptism, but I don't really know as I have never examined such an impressive machine in person."

"Our ace mechs become more than simple machines after years of usage." The Mace of Retaliation spoke. "I believe I know what you are alluding to. Every pilot wants his own mech to be his own. In many cases, that may also include a desire for their mechs to become more... alive, if only in a limited sense."

That was handy to know. Ves continued his analysis.

"Another point of difference is that I am not sure to call the Blood Pact a complete bond. It starts out weak and grows in bandwidth and resilience over time. This proves that there is still a lot of room for improvement. The operation union that you are referring to sounds a lot more drastic. Instead of forming a weak bond and building it over time, you create it directly in one go, which is much more drastic and much more dangerous in my opinion."

That caused all three members of the panel to develop interesting thoughts.

Master Vayro Goldstein tapped his finger against the alloy table. "Are you suggesting that forming a Blood Pact to complete the first phase of the Mech Body Merger Process is a safer alternative to the conventional method? What about the other phases? It sounds as if your Blood Pact includes variables that may also lower the difficulty of completing the second and third phases."

The Blood Pact sounded like a bond that brought a pilot closer to his mech on a mental, a physical and spiritual level. It was no wonder that the members of the panel thought that Ves' invention had strong relations to the Mech Body Merger Process!

Ves quickly raised his palm. "I am making no such claim, Master! I do not have enough empirical data or theoretical knowledge to make any judgements on this matter. I can only state that while this theory sounds plausible, I would never subject anyone to experiment to see whether it is true. I only developed the initial versions of the Carmine Systems a few months ago. I have broken completely new ground with this invention, and it is clear that there is a lot of depth behind this tech. I will require years of research to clarify all of the unknown variables. I will be able to provide a lot more answers to your questions at that time."

The three panel members all looked frustrated by this unfortunate reality, but there was little they could do about it. They were all forced to hold back to an extent.

That did not mean they were done with their speculative questions.

Master Xena Wintress decided to open up a new inquiry.

"Please bring up the schematics of your Bastion again."

Ves obediently did so. A wireframe diagram of the Bastion came to life and displayed a lot of technical details of every single technological aspect of the expert space knight.

Under normal circumstances, it was incredibly stupid and dangerous to expose the full and unredacted design schematics of one of the trump cards of his mech army.

However, Ves couldn't get away with withholding this design considering how it played a central role to the development of the Carmine System.

He did not think that any of the panel members were duplicitous and dishonorable enough to leak the design to others. They were all tier 2 galactic citizens, which meant that they were preoccupied with much greater affairs. It was beneath their station to abuse the trust of an associate.

After she spent a dozen seconds on studying the design of the Bastion, Master Wintress took control of the projection and discarded every component aside from the biomechanical parts that made up the Carmine System.

She then began to weave her hand as if she was spinning a web. Parts appeared in rapid motion and slotted in like raindrops falling from the sky.

Before Ves knew it, Master Wintress had designed a complete first-class multipurpose mech around the unchanging Carmine System!

It took only a minute for her to design a complete mech in this fashion!

The impressive display of design ability completely mesmerized Ves to the point where he had missed the female Master's latest question.

"...Larkinson? Are you paying attention? I am asking you to determine whether this is a viable mech design, and if not, elaborate on the reasons why you believe it is defective."

"Oh." Ves snapped out of his professional fascination. "Uhm, I don't have a thorough understanding of first-class mechs, but the first point I would like to say is that the Carmine System can come in different varieties. The one I designed for the Bastion is specifically designed with Jannzi's DNA and blood type in mind. Technically, she should be able to pilot this mech of yours, but her existing Blood Pact prevents her from 'cheating' on her existing bonded machine."

"Is it possible for other pilots to interface with the mech based on this design?" Master Wintress pressed. "What if we attempt to use a clone of Venerable Jannzi Larkinson as the test subject?"

"I... sincerely don't know what will happen." Ves admitted. "It heavily depends on how closely the clone is able to match up to Jannzi. I know that it is impossible to produce clones that possess the abilities of high-ranking mech pilots. They just don't have the willpower for it. However, as long as the clone is functional in other ways, the Carmine System should be able to accommodate her as it is not inherently exclusive to high-ranking pilots. At most, I will have to make targeted adjustments to its biomechanical design in order to optimize it for low-ranking mech pilots."

He had no idea why the Survivalists wanted to know this. Were they planning to produce millions of clones based on DNA of successful high-ranking mech pilots?

Master Wintress proceeded to make adjustments to her rapidly generated mech design. She stripped a lot of large and bulky components of the first-class mech and molded it into a slimmer and less bulky light mech.

"How does the mass and volume of a mech affect the Carmine System? Will it improve in performance if the mech is larger or smaller?"

Ves blinked. "Uh, I don't think it matters too much. It should work equally well on light mechs, medium mechs and heavy mechs. The greater concern is how much capacity it takes to integrate it into a machine. It produces a proportionately greater impact on lighter mechs as any additions in the design are more noticeable."

"Is the size of your Carmine System fixed or variable?" The female Master pressed.

"Uhm, certain aspects are difficult to downsize." Ves answered. "The most essential mechanisms of the Carmine System are the components that are responsible for circulating the blood of the mech in the body of the pilot and vice versa. I admit that my design for these systems is not the most sophisticated. I opted to keep it simple and rugged to the best of my limited abilities in order to maximize its reliability and resilience under heavy stress. I suppose that a mech designer with a much better grasp on advanced biotechnology can do a much better job on this end. To be honest, these mechanisms are just a means to an end. What truly makes the Carmine System work is the E energy construct that exists in other dimensions."

Master Wintress' sharp eyes glinted as she took in this insightful answer. She began to weave her fingers yet again.



An entirely new design emerged. This time, the scale was a lot smaller as she developed a radical variation of the Carmine System on the spot!

Her grasp on biotechnology was far greater than that of Ves. She also had an excellent grasp of sophisticated biotech systems that could do the same jobs as the components of the Carmine System but at a much more reduced scale!

Once Wintress completed the design of a superficial miniaturized version of the Carmine System, she began to add a lot of technological components around it. Only a short amount of time passed before she developed a 'mech' that was barely larger than the human body!

To call it a mech was actually a misnomer. Master Wintress did not even bother to add a neural interface to the design. Its scale and design characteristics had more in common with a suit of combat armor rather than a mech.

Yet the inclusion of a deep control mechanism that enabled the 'pilot' to directly interface with the 'machine' was a design element that combat armor lacked!

A traditional suit of combat armor might include shallow interfacing methods, such as forming a normal data connection with the cranial implant of the wearer, but the responsiveness and fidelity of this method was not sufficient enough to turn the heavy suit into a second body.

Ves looked utterly confused as he struggled to define the latest work of Master Wintress.

Was this a mech or a suit of combat armor?