

The Mech 5691

Chapter 5691 Are You Human, Or Are You Mech?

5691 Are You Human, Or Are You Mech?

Ves could not justify the development of a Carmine mech that devoured its own mech pilot and went crazy in the process.

However, if the purpose of adding this extreme option to his Carmine mech was to give people a last-ditch chance to save a losing battle and prevent millions or even billions of vulnerable humans from getting slaughtered by the native aliens, then the calculus had completely changed!

Ves still had a lot of difficulty coming to grips with this idea. He knew that if he followed through with it, he would definitely spark a lot of controversy, which was exactly what he did not need at this moment.

A growing movement had formed against his living mechs. More and more people who remembered the many AI rebellions of the past started to get freaked out at the amount of third order living mechs that had begun to show up wherever his mechs were used.

Enough Fey Fiannas and Ultimatums had been sold that the earliest and most actively utilized mechs had already evolved beyond their rudimentary second order states!

Still, as long as he retained the backing of the RA, Ves knew that his products would remain unrestricted. At most, the mechers would make sure to give customers plenty of warnings in order to make sure they knew what they were getting into when they bought one of his products.

This was not important at the moment. There was still a lot of time before he had to stand before his first tribunal.

His current issue was whether it was a good idea for him to advance the development of the Carmine System in this direction.

It was too extreme.

The consequences to the mech pilot were far too serious.

It was an irreversible process.

Yet... the gains might be worth it. Assuming that it was possible to induce an artificial breakthrough, the resulting merger might cause the newly combined whole to temporarily gain the power of a foundation builder or even a domain shaper as was the case with the Yuri Machine!

There were even more benefits than this. Professor Vector Loban's eyes practically shone as he imagined all of the possibilities!

"Your Carmine mechs are wondrous machines, solely due the fact that they are not limited to mech pilots. Theoretically, any human should be able to form a Blood Pact with them, though we have yet to test the full range of possibilities. Regardless, there are many humans among us who are severely injured, disabled or nearing the absolute limit of their lifespans. Many of them are treasures of our civilization. Their loss will deprive us from a large accumulation of knowledge, wisdom and personal experience that cannot be replicated through other means. If you can allow them to transcend their mortal coils and combine their failing spirit with the younger and much more

healthy spirit of a Carmine mech, they can attain a second life through a radical form of metamorphosis!"

So that was why Professor Loban continued to harp on this option!

The main benefit that the Transhumanist was striving for was not power, but longevity!

Ves knew that a lot of old mechers were extremely concerned about their lifespans. Many of them were multiple centuries old and had undergone so much genetic modification that ordinary limits no longer applied anymore.

The return of cultivation may have given these people brand-new options to extend their lifespans, but far too many methods were tainted by their association with the Five Scrolls Compact to earn the trust of the mechers.

The Red Association preferred to innovate new solutions rather than regress and blindly embrace the traditions of the past.

Mechs remained a strong focus for the mech designers and other members of the Association. To be able to turn themselves into mechs in human form was the dream of many people who had worked with them on a lifelong basis!

Ves faced a difficult situation. He did not really have this idea in mind when he came up with the idea of designing a mech that could be controlled by their pilots through alternate means.

A mech designer existed to serve mech pilots.

Even when it became possible to expand the range of people who could pilot a mech, Ves primarily intended to serve the needs of potentates with mech pilot training first and foremost.

It would be wrong for him to go off a tangent and serve the interests of old geezers who really should have died and left the future to the younger generation above that of his original target audience!

Of course, Ves would not have as many objections if there was no inherent conflict between the two goals.

What Ves needed to determine this time was to investigate whether he could replicate what had happened to Yuri Enfame and his Ultimatum.

As long as he was able to make this determination, he could choose whether to develop his precious Carmine System in a way that would ultimately cause the human to lose his body in the process!

"I need to speak with Yuri again." Ves told the Transhumanist. "I not only want to find out whether he is aware of the cause behind his... condition, but I also want to ascertain how rational he is and whether he is able to maintain sufficient separation from his flawed machine."

That caused Vector Loban to frown. "The Yuri Machine's rampage has subsided by now, but it remains in a volatile state as far as we have been able to ascertain."

"I am aware of the risks, but now should be the best time for us to approach the machine again. The Yuri Machine should have reached a state of exhaustion by now. Its mental and physical energy levels have dipped to their lowest points, which means that it will be easier for me to induce it into a more receptive state."

Ves did not bother to explain any further. Once he and the Transhumanist passed through the guarded chamber once again, the situation looked a lot more peaceful than before.

The Yuri Machine radiated clear exhaustion as it had clearly expended a lot of energy in a futile attempt to break past the azure energy shields locking it in place.

The machine had received a few more dents, scratches and bleeding wounds, showing that it had harmed itself to an extent.

What was interesting was that the mech was slowly repairing its damaged state. It was easier for the machine to heal its organic parts, but it surprised Ves a lot when he noted that even its metallic components were slowly being restored!

The Yuri Machine held a lot of value as a living machine!

It reminded Ves of a high-level artifact more than anything. It even absorbed a human soul that could serve as an artifact spirit more or less!

As the pair moved closer, both of them could feel the agitation and need to wreck stuff apart from the volatile machine.

Its mutated Onyx Cannon was still smoking while its black tentacle undulated in a feisty fashion.

"Hello, Yuri. Are you still there? Please respond."

The projection of the former mech pilot appeared once again.

His state looked a lot worse than before. Different from his initial appearance, his second one looked as if he had half-degenerated into a savage!

The blood-shot eyes, the heaving breaths, the fingers bent into claws really did not sell the notion that Yuri had regained his composure.

[YOU! Where are the aliens? Take me out of this prison! The enemy deserves death!]

Ves and Loban exchanged glances with each other.

"The pilot has not recovered."

"It's okay. I am pretty sure I can restore a measure of his rationality. Lufa! Come and give me a hand!"

Ves opened up his mind to the Angel of Tranquility. A calming aura spread from his body as the design spirit exerted his pure and neutralizing influence.

One of the traits of Lufa's glow was that it was remarkably good at dampening aggression.

The Yuri Machine immediately became less agitated. Its Onyx Cannon no longer maintained its charge and its black tentacle started to relax.

Another useful part about Lufa's glow was that it could suppress spiritual activity and purge other spiritual influences.

Though Ves was not able to channel Lufa's glow hard enough to purify the entire chamber, he was still able to push aside a copious quantity of E energy that had been fueling the Yuri Machine's negative tendencies for an extended period of time!

Professor Loban looked impressed at what Ves had done. "I did not realize that the glow that you have used in your popular Pacificier mech line is capable of calming such a powerful machine."

"The most important factor in my favor is that the Yuri Machine is not resisting this effect." Ves explained as he continued to channel Lufa's glow. "The subject is powerful enough to resist the tranquility glow if it really wants to. I am glad to see that there is still an aspect to this machine that recognizes that the glow is doing it a lot of good."

Once the Yuri Machine had become a lot more relaxed, the projection of Yuri Enfame appeared on its own accord.

[Thank you, thank you, thank you! The glow that you are supplying to me has given us just enough relief from our pain. You cannot imagine how long we have been suffering all of this time. Each second we spend outside of this glow is another second where we are being tormented by our pain and our inability to understand what is taking place.] Yuri's clear and concise remark caused both Ves and Loban to become pleased at this outcome.

This was exactly what they wanted to see and hear!

Ves was sure that the mechers were already scrambling to obtain a few Pacificiers in order to keep the Yuri Machine calm and subdued.

In the meantime, Ves quickly took advantage of Yuri's sober state and started to ask his question.

"Who are you?"

[I am Yuri Enfame, mech pilot of the... PP. Why... why do I not remember?]

"Don't worry about that. Do you know what mech you were assigned to pilot?"

[Of course! I received the first pick of Ultimatums. I love my heavy artillery mech. It is so powerful yet so comfortable to pilot.]

"Are you aware of your current state?"

[I...] Yuri looked down at his projected body. [Something happened...]

Ves asked a few more questions to fresh Yuri's memories of what had happened during his last battle.

"Do you remember what has happened to your Ultimatum that caused it to devour your body?"

[No... I do not think so. I remember that I wanted to obtain much more power than I had at my disposal at the time. My mech... may have obliged my wish, but I do not sense from my mech that it has taken action by itself. I cannot explain what has happened.] "I see. If you happen to remember what has caused you to merge with your heavy artillery mech, please let me know. Your answer is important."

[Mmm.]

Ves asked one of the most important questions.

"Now that you are sober enough to consider your own condition, do you feel that there is any way for you to separate your human side from your mech side?"

[I... ugh... thinking about it brings back the pain. I... do not see how that is possible. I am... no longer human. I am... a mech... I think.]

"You are not a mech." Professor Loban interjected. "Never think that you are a mech or an object. You are a human that has become fundamentally altered due to circumstances outside of your control. So long as you are still able to demonstrate that you have retained a measure of your humanity, we will always treat you as one of our own. Please feel at ease. We shall try our best to undo the transformation that has caused you to turn into this form, but if that is not possible... we would be more than willing to give you a new home in one of our safe and cozy experimental facilities..."

Chapter 5692 A New Wind Is Blowing

Ves had a brief talk with Pilot Yuri Enfame, or at least what was left of him. The man had lost a lot of memories, but only realized it after he consciously tried to recall moments of his past.

[I don't remember the face of my commander anymore. It is in my mind. I definitely have it somewhere, but why can't I bring it up anymore?]

At other times, Yuri completely started to talk as if he turned into an alien somehow!

[...I remember back during my Hu'Keanwa training that I wrestled Ckkea to the ground and bit his throat with my savage pointed teeth, tasting victory as his blue blood splattered across my two tongues...]

Ves and Professor Loban exchanged glances several times throughout this interview. To say they were freaked out was an understatement.

Still, aside from these obvious flaws, Yuri Enfame was technically still alive, in a manner of speaking. He currently existed as a 'companion spirit' of the Yuri Machine.

The original living mech itself had mutated beyond recognition. It had grown incredibly powerful by absorbing a lot of E energy in a short amount of time, but the sequelae of doing so without employing any measures to digest, process or filter the input were catastrophic!

[I can feel... my mech hungers for blood. It wants to use its weapons to crush its enemies. Each day that goes by without fighting any enemies will frustrate it. I... I cannot live without fulfilling my goal. The more restless I become... the less I can hold back, I think.]

Ves tried to probe Yuri several times on what he remembered of the moments before he broke through. All the pilot recalled was that he was in a desperate moment and that he felt as if the battle would be lost if he continued to deliver a disappointing performance.

The man knew nothing about the factors that might have been responsible for making his Ultimatum mutate. Even his more direct connection with his powerful machine did not help him in the slightest.

[I... do not want to look too deep into the mech that I have merged with.] The fuzzy projection of Yuri Enfame shook. [There is darkness, violence and depravity in there. I know I can't escape it, but please don't force me back in there. If you can't keep me separate, then please kill me now. Living with a mech as violent and savage as my current one is pure torture.]

"There is still hope for you." Ves said in an encouraging tone. He felt anything but. "You are still alive, and that is what matters. While you remain alive, you will remain under the care of the Red Association. I am sure they will be able to solve your problems one by one and allow you to live a dignified life again. Remember that you have already fulfilled your mission. Your heroic sacrifice has saved the Pellicky Praetorians and prevented another human colony from getting razed by the native aliens. There are still enemies to fight, but you will first need to get a better handle on your new state before you are ready to go back into the fray."

Yuri looked so confused that he did not even know what he wanted to do now that he had lost his body.

The machine he became a part of just wanted to wreck as much stuff as possible without too much regard for anything else. Yuri might not exactly know what he wanted out of his life anymore, but he emphatically did not want to degenerate into a mindless beast!

This was why he entertained suicidal thoughts. The man saw no reason to live anymore if he was not able to enjoy the remainder of his strange and undesirable state of existence.

Naturally, this was the last thing the Transhumanists wanted to see!

Professor Loban stepped forward and made a placating motion. "Now that we have developed a better understanding of your current state, we can employ specific measures to ease your discomfort and find new ways to improve your condition. It may take years to restore your condition to your satisfaction, but please believe us that we are committed to your wellbeing."

It was unclear whether Yuri believed that, but he saw no other choice to grasp at this life-saving offer.

[Please... help me. I do not... want to be in pain anymore...]

By the time the talk came to an end, a pair of Pacifier mechs stepped into the chamber and flanked the Yuri Machine.

Their active glows allowed Ves to relax and let go of Lufa. The Angel of Tranquility's continued presence helped to suppress the Yuri Machine's violent tendencies and maintain the original mech pilot's rationality.

There was nothing much that Ves could do at this point. Perhaps he could tinker with the mech pilot's spirituality even further in an attempt to root out the man's contamination, but there was little hope that this would work.

The mech pilot's spirituality had mixed so much with other factors that the latter had blended too deeply with the former. Trying to remove the contamination risked removing essential parts of Yuri's personality and memories. By the time Blinky was done with excising all of the undesirable portions, it was doubtful that the man would remain coherent enough to speak like a normal human!

As Ves and Professor Loban retreated from the guarded chamber, they shared their respective theories and conclusions.

"Our initial judgment has not changed too much." Loban said. "As flawed as the Yuri Machine may be, the human mech pilot is still alive, though his memories are clearly impaired. The troubling state of his 'living mech' is also a source of concern. However, it is clear that much of the reason why Yuri Enframe is in such a poor state is due to the circumstances of his accidental transformation.

We believe that it may be possible to conduct a much less flawed human-to-mech transference process in a completely clean and isolated environment, preferably one which is surrounded by active Pacifier mechs. We would like to conduct such a test as soon as possible. We have more than enough eager candidates who would be willing to volunteer for such an experiment."

"Isn't that too soon?"

"On the contrary. The Yuri Machine is not enough to satisfy our research needs. We need more samples. No matter how flawed or deficient they may be, more working examples of a human that has at least partially transferred his spirit to a mech will give us more data points to work with. We can also distribute the test subjects to multiple different research teams to conduct research in parallel."

Ves looked skeptical. "That sounds great, but you will need to reproduce the accident that caused Yuri Enfame to merge with his mech. I can tell you now that I do not have the information I need to reconstruct it. According to my current theoretical frameworks, it is impossible for this to happen. I never programmed this function in the Ultimatum design. I have not designed any growth trajectory that can allow a living mech to power up while absorbing a mech pilot. It is impossible for me to give you another Ultimatum that can turn into another version of the Yuri Machine."

That caused the RA Senior to frown. "I see. Do you have any theories or suspicions on how you can eventually induce your Ultimatum or another living mech to induce such a transformation?"

"No." Ves firmly shook his head. "Or at least not in a single step. The Yuri Machine may have showed that it is possible, but I highly doubt I can replicate it in totality. I suspect there may have been a mysterious factor on the battlefield back then that is the main cause of this radical mutation. Under normal circumstances, I think that only Carmine mechs have the capacity to gradually merge themselves with their bonded mech pilots. It will have to be a more gradual process where their fusion is split up into multiple stages that are spread out over several years or decades. The more gentle the process, the greater the control and the lower the chance of undesirable elements."

"How soon would you be able to design such a Carmine mech?" Professor Loban asked the most important question.

"We haven't finished testing the Blood Knights that I have supplied to you and your fellow mechers." Ves frowned. "While their current performance suggests that the Carmine System is working as intended, it will still take at least several more years to complete the earliest longitudinal studies, and even then we should keep monitoring the early adopters in case their condition deteriorates at a rapid rate in the following decades.. There is no guarantee that the Carmine mechs are truly safe to pilot for both potentates and non-potentates in the long run."

The Carmine System was so radical and subversive that there was an overwhelming need to verify its safety. This was why the Survivalists and later the Transhumanists always insisted that Ves keep a lid on its existence until its development had reached a mature enough stage to gradually introduce it to the public.

However, Vector Loban struck a different tone than Master Termaneo Dervidian, who had always emphasized the need for caution.

"Times have changed. The Red War is heating up. The native aliens are evolving. Our social order is gradually deteriorating. Our faction is changing as well. When we previously made decisions

about your Carmine System, we did so in a time when our faction was either stuck in the past or still in the process of transition. I can tell you now that a new wind is blowing within our ranks."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He previously did not think much of Professor Loban, but now he understood there may be another purpose behind this visit.

"Who are you, really? What happened to Master Dervidian?"

The Transhumanist responded with a coy expression.

"Your familiar contact person is still doing fine, Professor Larkinson. He is currently occupied with an important research project. As for myself, you know my name already. What you really wish to know is who is standing behind me. I think you are clever enough to deduce the answer. Back when we were still living in the Age of Mechs, the Transhumanist Faction was led by the Chosen Human. Divine Hussain Albedo is more than 300 centuries old. He is a product of his time, and grew up when the aftermath of the Age of Conquest still lingered in everyone's thoughts. He has developed a strong sense of protection towards the purity and integrity of the human race. He opposes unchecked genetic modification and has always emphasized the need to err on the side of caution in any experiments involving human test subjects."

Ves knew that the Transhumanists hadn't always managed to abide by the Chosen Human's principles, but the god pilot clearly kept these all of these crazy people in check while he was at least nominally in charge.

"I take it that has changed on this side of the greater beyonder gate." He remarked.

Professor Loban nodded and smiled. "That is so. We are cut off from the old galaxy, which means that the Chosen Human and many of the other old god pilots and Star Designers presiding over our branch no longer hold any authority over us. The only remaining leader that has the prestige and the support of our members in the Red Ocean is the Evolution Witch. She is only more than 170 years old and has grown up in a time where humanity has regained its hope for the future again. She... favors a much more proactive stance. As one of her subordinates, it is my responsibility to oversee some of the many research initiatives of our faction and ensure that they better reflect her newly instituted policies."

So this was it. The Transhumanists got rid of the restraint imposed by their old leader and embraced the desire for progress of their new leader!

Perhaps this was why the Transhumanist Faction remained so low-key in the past year. A new administration had taken charge. The new leader clearly made a clean sweep of a lot of old policies and put her own stamp on the powerful faction!

"So what does this mean for associates for myself?" Ves wondered. "Please be concrete."

"Well, for one, we would like you to roll out your Carmine mechs within the next 3 years instead of the 30 years that we originally envisioned."

"WHAT?!"

Chapter 5693 The Origin of the Evolution Witch

In all of his interactions with the Transhumanists, Ves thought that they were a little weird but pretty alright for the most part.

Many of them pursued the crazy dream of attaining human transcendence by merging themselves with mechs somehow, but they never let their worst impulses overtake their common sense.

At least that was what Ves assumed.

The Mech Trade Association originated as an off-shoot of the Five Scrolls Compact, and had always tried to be the opposite of its former parent organization.

The Association was supposed to serve as a holy land for enlightenment, rationality, science and discovery. The mechers prided themselves on being smarter and more civilized than anyone else. They carefully kept the space peasants under their rule in check to prevent the masses from degenerating like they did during the Age of Conquest.

The Chosen Human was not a perfect fit for a leader of the Transhumanist Faction in the old galaxy, but he commanded enough respect to sit in the highest position.

It was not difficult to figure out his stances and policies. The god pilot was a strong adherent of human exceptionalism, the belief that the human race was better and more superior than other sentient races.

His own meteoric rise to power was the greatest example of the amazing potential of the human race!

The man earned his title by being the first and only human whose genetic aptitude measured at S. His growth as a mech pilot was so smooth that he managed to advance to god pilot at the age of 76, thereby shattering a record that had never been broken since!

The Chosen Human represented one of the greatest ideals that the rest of humanity strove for. He was living proof that the human race held a lot of buried treasures that just needed to be unearthed for more people to become as powerful and transcendent as him one day.

Under his conservative leadership regime, the Transhumanist Faction of the Mech Trade Association tried its best to avoid any association to the highly maligned Five Scrolls Compact.

The scientific method had to be respected as much as possible. Unbridled human modification had to be avoided as much as possible.

The overall purpose of developing augmentations was to accentuate the strengths that humans already possessed. They were not supposed to bestow them with new capabilities of alien origin that came with plenty of nefarious side effects.

Though the Chosen Human's power clearly wasn't enough to curtail the practice of genetic modification entirely, one of the reasons why he remained in charge despite the more incessant demands from the rank-and-file members of his faction was because of his ability to earn people's trust.

As long as a god pilot like the Chosen Human remained in charge of the Transhumanists, the latter would never dare to act too flagrant and engage in reckless human experimentation!

There were many Transhumanists who agreed with his more restrained stance. They wanted to make it possible for humans to rise above their common origins and achieve transcendence, but they did not want to lose their own humanity in the process.

The Chosen Human's attitude not only made its mark among the Transhumanists, but also many other mechers.

No matter how much the factions kept themselves apart from each other, they were ultimately semi-formal divisions of the Association. They were all mechers who shared a common purpose in the end.

This was also one of the initial reasons why the Survivalists eventually handed over responsibility of supervising the development of the Carmine System to the Transhumanists.

It had always been a vain attempt of the Survivalists to keep the existence of the Carmine System a secret from the Transhumanists.

Both groups already paid close attention to Ves! Their spying methods were so good that any measure to keep secrets from each other was always flawed.

Even if Ves and the Survivalists conducted a lot of tests on Carmine mechs within the secure laboratory environment of the Tarrasque, the Bluejay Fleet was technically a detachment of the Red Association, not just the Survivalist Faction.

The Transhumanists were bound to find out so long as they had even an inkling of suspicion that something funny was taking place inside the flagship of the Bluejay Fleet.

Naturally, once they learned what was going on, they wanted a piece of action. The Carmine System represented a radical advancement that almost fully matched the ideals of their faction!

Compared to other forms of human augmentation, trying to integrate with mechs did not generate as much opposition because it could be seen as an extension of integrating implants.

In any case, the Survivalist Faction eventually agreed to hand responsibility over the Carmine System over to the Transhumanist Faction.

After the Polymath's dramatic fall from grace, the Survivalists had lost a lot of trust. They needed to make a lot of amends as well as rein in a lot of ambitious initiatives in order to return to their original focus.

The Survivalist Faction had become preoccupied with different matters nowadays. As the future of red humanity became murkier, Ves guessed that they had no time to worry about what the Transhumanists would do once they got their hands on the Carmine System.

This led to the present circumstance where the Carmine System became the joint responsibility of both of the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction, though the latter was a lot more passionate about its possibilities.

Ves initially did not experience much of a difference. No matter whether he reported his progress to Master Goldstein, Master Dervidian, Jovy Armalon or another researcher, they were all mechers to him. Both the Survivalists and the Transhumanists he talked to generally agreed with the stance to take it slow.

This was why he was caught off-guard by the brand new directive conveyed by Professor Vector Loban.

The man looked utterly serious, though.

"Are you surprised, Professor Larkinson? You shouldn't be. Both our policies and our calculations have changed. Although we do not like to spread this message to the public, red humanity's future outlook has worsened. Even the Survivalists agree that we must act more proactively in order to turn the tide against our current and future enemies. As for my own faction, our new leader has made it clear that time is of the essence. We can no longer afford to conduct far-reaching studies across multiple decades. Our society as we know it may no longer exist in a recognizable form by the time a full generation has passed."

That was a highly plausible assumption. Back in the old galaxy, most people were confident that their society would roughly remain the same after the passage of three or so decades.

Mechs became a little better and technology may have increased in sophistication, but the same families and states remained in charge as before. Human order in the Milky Way had become so solidified that the Transhumanists over there were much more concerned with maintaining the good times.

It was completely different in the Red Ocean. Trying to maintain the stability of a declining society was like delaying the inevitable. It was logical for the Transhumanists to conclude that they needed to let go of at least some of their constraints in order to help red humanity overcome the many challenges on the horizon.

Of course, the more radical and enthusiastic researchers within this faction may have been driven by more selfish and greedy motivations when they decided to throw their support behind the new regime.

"Does this instruction come directly from the Evolution Witch?" Ves critically asked.

Professor Loban shook his head. "I cannot make this claim. She is engaged in more important affairs. Perhaps she has been made aware of your ambitious research project when she assumed leadership over our faction. She should have entrusted this matter to her confidantes if this is the case. I am merely acting on the instructions of one of them. What matters is that the Evolution Witch expects everyone engaged in promising or productive research projects to speed up their progress whenever possible."

That was understandable. Ves probably knew more than the Transhumanist in front of him what kind of horrors may be waiting to pounce on red humanity.

Yet Ves also felt hesitant about this radical change in strategy. The contrast between abundant caution and expedient results was so extreme that he felt reluctant to embrace this shift!

The other man clearly sensed this hesitation. Both of them sat down so that the Transhumanist was able to explain the underlying factors behind the many changes in policy.

"Depending on the structure of an organization, a leader may have an outsized influence on how it is run. Your clan and your mech company closely reflect your values and ideals due to obvious reasons. Our faction is much larger and much older, but our leaders are also much stronger and more influential. The Chosen Human has set strong limits on what we are allowed to do, but the Evolution Witch has changed all of that because she approaches human transcendence from a different perspective."

"How so?" Ves asked.

"You should be familiar with the origin of the Evolution Witch, correct?"

"I am. According to her biography, the Evolution Witch was born as a mecher, but suffered from multiple congenital flaws on birth that the MTA were unable to cure for whatever reason. She had a rough childhood and has been told that she would likely die in her late 20's as long as her congenital defects remain unaddressed. Instead of accepting the inevitable and giving up, she instead used this threat as a powerful motivation to advance as a mech pilot. The only way for her to solve her ailments and get rid of the specter of death looming over her shoulders."

This had been the start of her obsession with the power of evolution.

To Divine Lucie Miyazaki, evolution was literally the force that had saved her life and granted power unmatched by almost everyone else! Her enthusiasm for human augmentation had always been high as a result!

"The biographies are a little short on the details of her early life, but your retelling is mostly correct." Professor Loban said. "What I wish for you to know is that the Evolution Witch is known as a strong proponent of human inferiority. Her stance is almost opposite of that of the Chosen Human."

"Human... inferiority? That... is not what I expected from a god pilot."

"It is not as bad as it sounds, Professor Larkinson. Human inferiority is a theory that assumes that humans are not inherently superior to other sentient races. It is inferior to many other alien races, most notably the Seven Apex Races that previously dominated the Milky Way. The fact that we have managed to overcome them during the Age of Conquest is not because our race is inherently superior, but because we acknowledge our inferiority and work harder to compensate for our many deficiencies."

"I see."

The Evolution Witch basically equated her own miraculous rise to power to humanity's own successes during the Age of Conquest.

"We are all ants." Vector Loban stated. "A talent as good as the Chosen Human only appears once per age at most. There is no possible way for more humans to be born with S-grade genetic aptitudes. He is an outlier that is unfit to be included in the general model of the human race. Most of us are far weaker and less talented than him, but that is not a problem because we have the power to actively control our own evolution. Inferiority is not a fault as long as it is not a permanent state. Acknowledging one's weaknesses is a virtue as long as you are willing to solve them or work around them. Our entire faction is slowly embracing this new attitude in favor of the old one. Red humanity is currently unfit to survive and thrive in this new age. Only by working harder to promote our own evolution will we be able to earn the right to dominate this age, just as we have done during the Age of Conquest. This has become our overarching purpose."

Chapter 5694 Transhumanist Dreams

Even though the Evolution Witch was born within the ranks of the Mech Trade Association, her tale of defying her deadly fate and overcoming all adversity by completely transcending her mortality still served as a powerful source of inspiration to many admirers!

Her amazing rise coincided with the trend of humanity's growing acceptance of more extreme forms of human augmentation.

Although there were many parts of human civilization that still rejected more extreme divergences from humanity, there were more and more population groups that had gradually lost their aversion for more radical forms of augmentation.

The Evolution Witch was hardly the only success case that supported their controversial beliefs, but she had definitely contributed to this trend!

She was part of a newer wave of god pilots who were born well after the end of the Age of Conquest and did not become burdened by its sins.

To the younger generations of the human race, all of the horror stories about extreme and unregulated genetic modification were no different than abstract history lessons.

As long as contemporary humans paid more attention and implemented more safeguards, surely it would be safe enough to explore more daring forms of implants and gene mod templates.

"Much of the old guard of our faction is left behind in the old galaxy." Professor Vector Loban continued. "Many of us who chose to transfer to the Red Ocean sought to move away from the stifling culture that reigned supreme in the center of human civilization. Now, we have freed ourselves from the idiosyncrasies of the past. By stepping out of the shadow of the Chosen Human and embracing the more enlightened leadership of the Evolution Witch, we shall play a more proactive role in directing and promoting the evolution of the human race."

"Uh huh." Ves said in a tone that made it clear that he had not entirely bought into this transition. "And how does my Carmine System fit into this picture? The way you have been talking about it makes it seem that you prize it more for its ability to help people overcome their human limitations than to help both mech pilots and non-pilots control powerful living mechs."

"Both functions are important, but we are primarily invested in the possibility of helping humans overcome their weak and fragile bodies. Think about what you can offer to many people. Your Carmine System may have been able to save the Evolution Witch's life back when she was still young. Whether she would be able to gain the motivation to work her way up to a god pilot is still questionable, but we believe that the people who have assumed their new forms should have expanded their own potential."

Ves frowned deeper. "The cost is too great. If this change takes place on a larger scale, humanity will become unrecognizable. I can understand the concept of trading away a part of our humanity in order to gain a large boost of power, but... if there are no actual humans left at the end, we may have already lost our struggle to survive in a sense."

"I think that many desperate civilizations who may one day find themselves left at the mercy of the native aliens will think otherwise. I understand your caution, professor, but our society is large enough to cope with accidents. We do not have to force every human to bond with Carmine mechs or merge with them one day. We can set up programs to selectively encourage volunteers to form Blood Pacts with your Carmine mechs. Think about how this will affect our performance in the Red War. Settlements are no longer forced to rely on mech pilots to defend them against the alien threats. We can effectively expand our manpower pool and pair Carmine mechs with a much larger

group of civilians. They can form large planetary militias that can mobilize into battle the moment an alien fleet has intruded in their star system."

That.... would definitely be an imposing sight!

One of the biggest shortcomings of defending red humanity's sprawling colony settlements was that it was impossible to make them all secure.

It cost a lot of money and resources to fortify them and station additional defensive troops to them. If the residents of a remote colony were able to defend their own territory by deploying lots of Carmine mechs in an emergency, then that would make any invading enemy think twice.

"What about fully transformed humans?" Ves asked.

"That would be even better. Their control over their new 'bodies' should be greater than a normal pilot. Transformed humans have an even greater motivation to fight for their homes because it is much harder to evacuate them from their colonies because there is not enough space to accommodate them all. They became our firmest shield in the colonies that we rely upon to expand our population and sustain our war effort."

It became clear that the Transhumanists had big plans in store for the Carmine System!

Whether it was its current implementation or its future possibilities, the Transhumanists practically salivated at the thought of leveraging Carmine mechs to transform parts of human society!

It was no wonder why the Survivalists initially expressed a lot of reluctance at the thought of letting the Transhumanists know about the Carmine System.

The Survivalists mostly saw the Carmine System and its vast potential as a tool that could solve existing problems such as restoring the piloting ability of a brain-damaged mech pilot.

The Transhumanists on the other hand wanted to take advantage of the Carmine System to make all of their wild fantasies come true!

They were much more crazy about human augmentation and transcendence, so it made sense that they were much more thorough in mapping out the many possible uses of the Carmine System.

The problem was that they possessed much less limits and were willing to go much further in order to make faster progress!

Now that Ves understood the intentions of the current regime of the Transhumanist Faction a lot better, he had a greater understanding behind the request to roll out Carmine mechs within just three years.

That did not make this request any less reasonable.

"I have great concerns about prematurely announcing the existence of the Carmine System and making it available to the wider public." He cautiously said. "It is not that I want to keep it out of the hands of the masses, but if anything goes horribly wrong, I will be the one that will pay the price for any mistakes. The Yuri Machine is not directly related to the Carmine System, but the fact that it was able to appear does not bode well for me and my work. I am lucky that out of millions of living mechs, an uncontrolled transformation process has only happened once. I am not eager to increase this statistic."

The Transhumanist mech designer comprehended Ves' caution, but his priorities were entirely different.

"Your Blood Knight model has already attained stable results so far. There are no obvious indications that your Carmine mechs pose any acute danger to their humans. The only cause for alarm is when the mechs are terminated. The consequences to the people that they have bonded with are serious. Other than that, there is much about your innovative new design application that is worthy of praise. If you cannot immediately develop a means to replicate the phenomenon of the Yuri Machine in a more controlled process, then there is another research direction that you can pursue."

"And that is...?"

"Let us collaborate." Vector Loban suggested with an eager expression. "I will be staying aboard the Tarrasque to supervise our ongoing studies of the existing Carmine mechs. I am also tasked with exploring the viability of integrating your Carmine System in a different kind of mech. A biomech."

"A biomech?!" Ves almost jumped to his feet! "That... that is too extreme! Biomechs are much more prone to go out of control than ordinary mechs! I have always doubted whether it is a good idea to combine the Carmine System with biomechs. The latter is a source of trouble and it is completely unclear how my original invention will interact with a purely organic mech. Not even the Survivalists have dared to make this suggestion, and they once ordered me to design a Carmine juggernaut!"

This indicated that the risks were too great to bear for the Survivalists at the time!

"We are not the Survivalists." Loban shook his head. "Besides, even if you consult their opinions, they should be much more open-minded towards more forward-thinking research projects. The Survivalists are pragmatists. They favor the survival and the stability of the human race above any other consideration. In times of stability, any excessively strong changes can destabilize our society and threaten our survival, so it is logical for them to oppose rapid development. Now that red humanity is in perennial peril, their stance has flipped. The Survivalists understand that we must push our boundaries harder in order to dig our way out of our adverse position."

In other words, the Survivalist Faction acquiesced to the Transhumanist Faction's more radical approach.

The entire Association was willing to invest a lot more into Carmine mechs going forward!

Ves felt mixed about this sudden shift in policy.

On the one hand, he was bound to make faster progress in the development of the Carmine System. This was good news because he had decided to center his design philosophy around this incredibly beneficial design solution. He might be able to realize his design philosophy significantly faster than he originally thought!

On the other hand, rushing through experiments came with its own risks. The chance of accidents became a lot greater. The lives of a lot of human volunteers might become ruined one day because Ves had overlooked a critical variable!

This was especially the case if he recklessly started to integrate the Carmine System in a biomech as opposed to conventional one! The sheer amount of risk factors involved in this particular combination frightened him into paralysis!

Besides, what exactly did the Transhumanist intend to do with Carmine biomechs?

Were they attempting to turn themselves into biomechs?

Ves suddenly connected the dots. "Wait, is this what you guys are after? You won't necessarily want to turn yourself into a conventional mech. What you truly aspire to become is a biomech!"

Vector Loban did not deny this accusation. "Is it not a dream to become a biomech? I will gain all of the power of a highly developed combat machine, but retain control of all of my faculties and most of my humanity. At most, I will have to live in a house and make use of tools scaled for a giant humanoid. This is a sacrifice that I am gladly willing to make. As long as we design our biomechs to resemble the human physique to a large extent, we can minimize any incompatibility issues and speed up the adaptation process. Each of us will be able to gain bodies as strong as a human phase lord as yours. In fact, it is not necessary for us to pursue this development trajectory anymore as turning ourselves into biomechs is an inherently more human and controllable process!"

Damn! The yearning in Professor Loban's voice was so strong that he would definitely jump at the chance to become an organic version of the Yuri Machine if possible!

The man's rabid enthusiasm for these possibilities signified that he would never give up on this research!

"Three years is too soon." Ves pushed back. "I understand the need to speed up our progress in the development of the Carmine System, but it is too soon to pair it up with a biomech, let alone make it available to the public. We should at least take the time to conduct small-scale experiments under highly controlled circumstances to see whether the idea is viable to begin with. I would much prefer it if we can perfect the Carmine System with conventional mechs before we tackle any other combinations."

Chapter 5695 Worthless Humans

The new wind blowing in the Transhumanist Faction had massive implications for Ves. The policies supported by the Evolution Witch were drastically different from that of the Chosen Human.

One of them was a born miracle, a potentate who held the unbroken record for possessing the most optimal genetic aptitude that humanity had ever measured. Despite his immense privileges, he never rested on his laurels and worked hard to realize his amazing potential for the good of the human race.

The other was a woman who had risen up from a life of struggle and adversity. She was a pilot who had been perpetually locked in a struggle against death. She overcame her many congenital flaws and evolved past all of them through sheer grit and determination. The force of evolution literally represented a newer and better life to her, and she grew eager to spread its bounty to the rest of the population.

Ves felt torn between the two faction leaders.

His inclinations as a researcher and innovator loved the younger and much more forward-thinking Evolution Witch for her more vigorous support and license to experiment more freely.

His perspective as a leader and a citizen of red humanity grew wary of the flood of changes that these policies may spark. The new leader's directives would definitely ripple throughout the entire augmentation sector. A lot of geneticists had long entertained all kinds of crazy ideas on how to push human boundaries beyond their limits, but they never dared to act on them due to ethical and safety violations.

Ves had met numerous biotech researchers throughout his career. Many of them had ideas swirling in their minds that would never get approved if they attempted to act on them. Everyone from this entire sector was crazy. It came with the territory, much like how most mech designers used to dream about piloting mechs rather than designing them for others.

He shook his head. This was none of his business. Since the Transhumanists dared to unleash this storm, they probably took enough measures to contain it. The benefits were clearly worth it for them to go through with this plan.

By the time that Ves' meeting with Professor Vector Loban came to an end, he still remained reluctant to move too quickly with the Carmine System.

"I feel my accumulation is too lacking to design more advanced Carmine mechs." He told the Transhumanist. "I can understand your eagerness to move forward and see whether the Carmine System will work well with biomechs, but I am simply not ready for it. Even if we design one, I think we should keep it as simple as possible in order to reduce the amount of variables that can produce complications."

That was not what Professor Loban wanted to hear.

"What are you willing to design?"

"Let us start off with designing third-class Carmine mechs." Ves suggested. "First-class and second-class mechs are more powerful, but that also makes them more difficult to control. They are much stronger in a physical sense when compared to the human physique. According to my understanding, an attempt to bring mechs and people closer together doesn't end up well for the latter if they are not strong enough to cope with the rapid increase in power."

The case of the Uranus came to mind. The Yuri Machine also supported this theory.

As eager as he may be to make rapid progress, Professor Loban was not a biomech designer who had lost all of his intelligence from the moment the new policies came into force. He understood the logic of Ves' argument and could not respond with anything better.

The Transhumanist expression grew a little sour. His main purpose for cooperating with Ves was to enable him and his like-minded colleagues to convert their own bodies into powerful biomechs. They could not do so when their only available option consisted of third-class mech models that easily collapsed when subjected to vastly more powerful enemies, of which there were many in the Red Ocean.

"Very well." Professor Loban's expression eased as he accepted this 'concession'. "You are correct. The space peasants of the lower zones are so abundant that they can easily absorb setbacks related to our Carmine mechs. They are more desperate for power than other red humans. We have always struggled to make them useful and bestow more meaningful roles to them. It should not be difficult to convince them to test the early iterations of our Carmine mechs."

The man spoke as it was already a given that the two of them would produce a range of collaboration works.

Ves did not like the fact that he essentially got brow-beaten by the Evolution Witch to fast-track the development of the Carmine System and steer it in a direction that sounded a lot riskier than the alternatives.

What could he do about it, though? It would be bad if he managed to attract the attention of yet another god pilot and got on her bad side.

This was why he settled for this 'compromise' with Professor Loban.

As much as he hated to admit it, third-class space peasants were truly too marginal. Their population was their greatest advantage as it did not take any fancy or expensive designer baby shenanigans for them to reproduce. Raising and educating third-class children was also a lot cheaper.

However, their industries were almost worthless and their mechs were so weak that they struggled to fight against the weakest alien raiding fleets that invaded the lower zones.

Funnily enough, their lack of worth also saved them from the brunt of alien aggression. Rather than wasting time and combat assets to crush all of these cockroaches, it was better to inflict greater losses on first and second-fleet mech forces.

No one important enough really cared about third-raters to sympathize with them if anything went wrong.

Ves also gradually assumed this mindset as he continued to consort with the likes of the mechers and other first-raters. Their problems and considerations were much grander in scope than the more trivial concerns of a bunch of poor and meaningless space peasants.

Even though he used to be a third-rater himself, Ves found it hard to stand up for his former people. There was no room for any redundant sentiment when the future of red humanity was at stake. If he had to treat the poorest and most deprived citizens of human civilizations as his test subjects, then so be it. Maybe he would be doing them all a service by enabling many of them to gain an easy power boost that they could never attain through other means.

Ves briefly discussed plans to begin their collaborative design work. His schedule was already packed, so Professor Loban had to wait at least a year or so before they could begin to work together.

"I can afford to wait." The mecher said in a much more measured tone now that he had reined in his enthusiasm. "The delay will benefit us as I will have more opportunities to study and familiarize myself with your current batch of Carmine mechs. I will also have ample enough time to refresh my familiarity with third-class mechs."

In other words, Professor Loban had no clue how to design a third-class mech and needed to do a lot of cramming to avoid making a fool out of himself!

Ves needed to do the same, actually. He had not caught up with the latest developments in third-class mech design. His lack of practice also caused him to grow rusty. If he wanted to be serious about serving his third-class customers, then he should at least treat them with the proper amount of respect.

"They used to be my people, after all." He whispered to himself.

He finally teleported back to the surface of New Constantinople VIII after he bid farewell to the enthusiastic Transhumanist.

There was plenty of work and obligations for him to get back to. Not only did he have to continue to raise his growing children, he also had to keep track of at least half-a-dozen mech designs at any time. He also had to keep up with his studies on top of everything else.

"Good work, leggie." He said as he patted the solid exterior of his cyborg left leg. "I see you have made a bit more progress in progressing the Dark Zephyr Mark III design."

It was silly of him to talk to the detached miniature brain that was embedded in his own leg. It was not even a separate incarnation of himself.

He didn't care. His wife complained about his habit many times, but she eventually gave up when he proved incorrigible.

"How much closer have we come to turning this into a viable combat asset?"

This was a good question. Gloriana had done much of the work while Ves still had to spend a lot of effort into studying archetech before he was able to make more meaningful contributions.

That said, he had already gained enough of an understanding of the exotic alien tech to know that it was not that easy to get an archemec to work.

One of the advantages of archetech was that everything became interconnected with each other.

This was also a disadvantage as it became difficult to troubleshoot anything made out of archemetal. Glitches happened a lot more frequently, and it took a lot of work to trace their causes as they needed to be isolated first to identify them. His lack of familiarity with archetech made this job a lot harder.

This made designing the Larkinson Clan's first true archemec a huge pain. The design remained completely theoretical for now. Neither he nor his wife had any access to a prototype or scale model of the new design. The lack of concrete examples of their work meant that they lacked a lot of proof that their design solutions were actually good enough to work.

The most probable scenario that would happen once they had completed enough work to fabricate a prototype was that the machine would not even turn online.

It could take weeks if not months for Ves and Gloriana to painstakingly trace and troubleshoot all of the errors that prevented the archemec from operating correctly.

Ves felt frustrated by all of the additional delays, but he persisted because he knew it was worth it in the end.

Once he or more rather Gloriana cracked the code on how to design a functional archemec, they would be able to apply all of their lessons and template solutions on their subsequent archemechs.

The Amaranto, the First Sword, the Riot, the Bastion, the Everchanger, the Minerva and all of the other Larkinson expert mechs would gain the massive benefits of transitioning to a superior tech base!

It would take less and less time to design the subsequent archemechs as Gloriana gradually worked out all of the common issues of trying to apply her knowledge in her design projects.

Ves would benefit as well, though his lack of priority in this particular field would make it unwise for him to dabble in archemechs by himself.

This was not good news because he aspired to build up a mech roster that exclusively consisted of archemechs to the Premier Branch of the Larkinson Clan.

"Maybe I need to scale back to those plans." He considered with a frown.

He still needed to study for at least two more years before he was confident enough to design an advanced first-class mech, so there was still plenty of time for him to work on his shortcomings.

Ves turned his attention back to the current design and tried to speed up his progress. The sooner he and his wife managed to produce a prototype, the sooner they would find out if they had done a good job all of these months.

"Let's hope that it is not a total failure."

There was a chance that the entire foundation of the new archemech was rotten to begin with. The only way to prevent this was to show the mech design to a knowledgeable consultant, but this was unacceptable. They just had to work blindly and hope for the best.

Chapter 5696 Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III

Work on the Dark Zephyr Mark III Project frustrated Ves so many times that he frequently had to step away from it to prevent his mood from deteriorating too badly.

As much as he wanted to get it done as soon as possible, there was no way to rush the development of a first generation archemech design, especially one designed for a high-tier expert pilot.

Gloriana dictated the pace of this project, and she was determined to succeed. She slowed down her progress enough times because she wanted to do stuff right instead of quickly.

Her attitude may be correct, but it ensured that Ves would have to wrestle with this project for at least several more months.

Fortunately, he also had other mech design projects to sink his teeth into. A lot of old mech lines were finally receiving their long-awaited updates to bring them up to the standards of the Hyper Generation.

One of the more noteworthy among them was the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III.

For a long time, the Valkyrie Redeemer had served as a consistent bestseller and a source of enduring profits for the LMC.

Not only had the feminine mech model conquered the Hexer mech market, but it had also allowed Ves to gain a growing amount of sway over the Hex Federation!

Though Ves had not signed any formal treaties with the Hexers as of late, more and more people treated their second-rate state as his semi-private back garden.

The reality was that he was no longer as dependent on the support of the Hexers than before. It was nice to have a large base of support, but Ves would not even notice if the Hex Federation disappeared one day.

He had not forgotten about all of the help that the Hexers provided to him in the past. No matter what, the Hexers were his friends, and they deserved to receive his attention every now and then. Perhaps one day he might thank himself for keeping this relationship alive.

Designing the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III was a serious endeavor. His wife also insisted that she had to be involved when he initially decided to embark on this update.

"Aren't you busy enough, already?" Ves questioned. "You already have your hands full with raising our children, studying first-class mech design and trying to put together our first archemech."

"I shall free up the necessary time somehow. I can help you collect feedback from the Hexers who have been piloting the Valkyrie Redeemer for years. They have a large range of complaints and requests that can give us clearer directions on how to improve the next iteration of our successful mech line."

She had a point. Ves did not really look forward to talking to a lot of Hexers in person. Offloading this responsibility to his wife made a lot of sense as she essentially spoke the same language as her former people.

Gloriana did a good job at collecting a large amount of user feedback and compiling them all into a common set of points.

"One of the most acute problems we need to solve is the lack of effectiveness against alien warships. The base form of the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II is optimized for combat against mechs. Outside of employing battle formations, they are not as good as other mech models in tackling the alien threat. This persistent shortcoming has forced the Hex Army to switch to other mech models in order to reduce their losses when they participate in the Red War."

This was a problem that Ves had been neglecting for too long. He knew exactly what his wife was talking about and agreed with her assessment.

"Do the Penitent Sisters have any issues with their own Valkyrie mechs?"

"Not as much. The Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers are the only mech forces who have the ability to employ battle formations that allow them to channel the power of Helena. This function is single-handedly carrying the Valkyrie mech line and ensures that it still retains an important place in our mech roster."

"Is death E energy still effective enough to kill the native aliens inside their warships outright?"

Gloriana nodded. "That is the case for the most part. The strongest aliens may be able to cling to their lives, but it doesn't matter anymore if the others have perished. E energy radiation is not only making them stronger, but it has also made it easier for Helena to exert her might in realspace."

Ves looked intrigued. "Interesting. That is an important development. I already have an idea on how to leverage this. I can understand why the current Valkyrie Redeemers aren't cut out for fighting against enemy warships. Their firepower can't catch up to rifleman mechs and their ability to inflict damage up close is largely dependent on their charges, which is not a good idea to employ against a strong transphasic energy shield or an immense hull."

"The Hexers are also forced to apply aftermarket modifications to their Valkyrie mechs in order to give them access to space suppressors, but this is a clunky and inefficient solution." His wife continued. "The Mark III must have a space suppressor built into its mech frame. It may not be

powerful enough to neutralize all transphasic technologies, but it can at least reduce the gap in performance."

There was no need to argue against this measure. This had become a mandatory feature for all melee mechs.

The only melee mech models that got released these days were mostly intended to be used in a mech arena or other special purposes.

Anything else that could be employed against the native aliens must come with effective countermeasures against phasewater technology.

Ves quizzed his wife a bit further. She conveyed a few other common requests and complaints that needed to be addressed in the Mark III design.

"Between speed or defense, what is more important for the Valkyrie mech pilots?" He asked.

"That is a difficult question, Ves. I would say that the mech pilots ideally want to see improvements in both. Better armor or a stronger shield generator will give them greater fault tolerance and ease much of their concerns. Higher mobility will enable them to close the distance faster and increase their ability to evade powerful warship attacks that can crush their mechs in a single hit regardless of defense."

Ves studied the outdated design of the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II. It had been powerful back when he first released it, but the mech industry and the Red Ocean had moved on since then. The Valkyrie mechs were no longer regarded as one of his most impressive living mech designs anymore.

This annoyed him. It made sense for the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II to lose a lot of popularity, but what rankled him was that people thought that his work had lost its star.

This fueled his motivation to bring it back onto the scene. It did not matter if the Valkyrie Redeemer remained exclusive to the Hexers. He wanted to reward his fans and his fixed customers for maintaining their faith in his products. He needed to show them that it was worth it for them to wait for him to deliver a proper update to an older work.

As Ves came up with a lot of ideas, went through them and selected the most useful ones at a rapid pace.

"I know what I need to do." He declared to his wife. "Let me show you what I have on my mind."

He activated a new projection and quickly sketched out a draft design that roughly reflected his vision for the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III.

It had many clear improvements over the previous iteration. The extensive use of hyper materials was definitely a key change, but Gloriana grew surprised when she noticed his selection of hyper materials.

The design of the Mark III became a little lighter and more streamlined. It gained a number of advanced systems that Ves somehow planned to cram inside the fairly slender mech frame. The design budget went up as he was forced to employ higher quality materials in order to keep its mass and volume within an acceptable range.

This happened to be one of the requests of the Hex Federation. They wanted slightly greater quality and were more than willing to pay for the additional expense.

Ves did not leave his improvements to material design choices. He also wanted to enhance its utilization of E energy and leverage its close connection to the power of death in a more useful fashion.

It would be a waste to ignore this potential!

If Ves was still the same mech designer as he was a few years ago, he would have never dared to go this far into strengthening the Valkyrie Redeemer.

However, Ves gained a lot more courage now that he had been promoted to a tier 3 galactic citizen. He was able to disregard a lot of rules and restrictions and no longer had to be afraid of provoking other people's greed.

So long as he continued to enjoy the protection of the Red Association, he could add features to his mechs that he previously did not consider due to a variety of reasons.

Gloriana slowly realized that her husband wanted to make another statement with the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III.

"Ves..."

"Yes, honey?"

"The luminar crystal rifle..."

"The fourth generation luminar crystal rifle of the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III should still be fairly light and compact. This won't increase the firepower that much, but what is special is that it is not only confined to making use of the hyper versions of all of the six standard attack phase crystals. What truly makes this weapon different and unique when compared to other luminar crystal weapons is that it is permanently embedded with a gray beam attack phase crystal."

"You mean the same as in the Gray Lotus?!"

"Not exactly." Ves shook his head. "I made use of a unique high-end hyper material when I initially built the Gray Lotus. It is a uniquely powerful hyper pistol that has proven to be an excellent complement to the Everchanger. The gray beam attack phase crystals reserved for the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III will be a lesser variant that is much more suitable for mass production."

He and his clan had yet to find any samples of Black Demon Steel in the new frontier. It may not even be a natural product since it contained the word steel.

That was a shame. Black Demon Steel was such a good hyper material that was not only compatible with death E energy, but all kinds of other negative energies as well. Ves could think of so many uses for this material.

In any case, there were many lesser alternatives that were much more widely available. The Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III was still meant for mass production, so Ves could not go too far in this aspect.

"How effective do you think these rifles will be?" Gloriana asked.

"They offer an alternate means to neutralize enemy warships. I don't think the lesser gray beams will be as effective as the Gray Lotus in penetrating the transphasic energy shields of enemy warships, but I don't know for certain. We do know that hyper energy shields are remarkably more

effective at neutralizing these sorts of attacks. It is only a matter of time before more and more aliens upgrade the defenses of their warships with stolen human technology."

"Even if they can only really start slaughtering alien crew members inside their own warships after breaching past transphasic energy shields, that is still a lot more effective than trying to tear through meters of thick hull plating." Gloriana consoled Ves.

"Hm, I guess you are right. This is only a part of the package, though. I have other features in mind that will make this mech a lot more amazing, but the gray beams should serve as their most dependable killing tool."

Chapter 5697 A Big Gift

Gray beams enabled the Hexer mech pilots to neutralize enemy warships without inflicting excessive damage to their integrity. This would make it easier to recoup the losses of a battle and plunder larger quantities of intact phasewater.

Gloriana still did not think this change was extreme enough.

"A luminar crystal weapon that can fire gray beams will most definitely increase the versatility and combat effectiveness of the Mark III, but it is not a unique advantage anymore. Death hyper materials are becoming increasingly more prevalent, and most notably appear in greater quantities on past battlefields. I think that more and more mechs will be released that are able to employ similar attacks."

"I know." Ves shrugged his shoulders. "We definitely enjoy a head-start compared to the competition. We also have Helena backing up the Valkyrie Redeemers. There won't be any other second-class mech models that can match their performance. Besides, this is only a single piece of the puzzle. I think we can be a lot more ambitious about preparing the general version of the Mark III for combat against alien warships."

"What do you mean by that, Ves?"

He smirked and pointed at the draft design. "There are two more gimmicks which will further cement the Valkyrie Redeemer as the premier mech model in harnessing the power of death. The more subtle of the two is a change in how my living mech grows through battle. Aside from the normal means of growth, I think I can make it so that the Valkyrie mechs grow a lot faster when they harvest more lives."

That certainly attracted Gloriana's interest. "That sounds troubling... but also promising. Are you sure that the Valkyrie mechs can absorb death energy without suffering any negative consequences?"

"It does not come without its risks." Ves admitted. "However, I know it is possible to turn my Valkyrie Redeemers into carnivores because they already have this capability. It is just too weak to attract much notice. My comprehension of spiritual engineering has advanced a lot further since then, and the introduction of E energy radiation and hyper materials has given me a lot of new tools to enhance this previously obscure function. The speed in which the next iteration of Valkyrie Redeemers can grow will be noticeably greater so long as they are actively used in battle."

"Will this produce any major differences in performance that is obvious enough to make a substantial difference in battle? Do not take offense at this, Ves, but much of the growth of a living

mech is 'invisible'. The mech pilot may notice the differences and perform better as a result, but it is difficult to attribute these improvements to the machine."

"I know what you mean, honey, but this will definitely make the older Valkyrie Redeemers stand out more. The Mark III's will all be fourth generation living mechs, which means that they can only evolve to a third order living mech a lot easier, but acquire Ascension Runes as they grow further. The faster their growth, the further they can develop along an Ascension Path. I am still not entirely clear of their origin and their working principles, but what I do know is that a Valkyrie mech with multiple Ascension Runes will be able to harness E energy to a stronger degree. Their attacks and other properties related to E-technology will definitely be stronger, and the best part about all of this is that this growth should have a very high ceiling, which means that there is hope that the best Valkyrie mechs will eventually grow as powerful as expert mechs!"

This was an ambitious claim!

He had no idea whether this was possible, but that was no reason for him to set aside this dream!

Ves possessed a lot of faith in his fourth generation living mechs. He had incorporated a few useful principles related to traditional blacksmithing into the latest version of his most famous design application.

The recent changes and additions had brought his latest version of his living mechs closer to high-level artifacts.

This meant that each of them had the potential to become as powerful as the Oceancaller one day!

"How will you ensure that the Valkyrie mechs will not be overtaken by contamination?"

"I will employ multiple safeguards to slow or limit the absorption rate." He answered. "If the mech has killed a lot of aliens at once, there will be a hard limit in place that will make sure that the mech will only absorb enough death E energy that it is able to handle. Helena will remain as its design spirit and will help to regulate this process as well. Even so, I expect that it is impossible to completely filter out every undesirable element. The mechs will probably grow more flawed as they get older, but it is a worthwhile tradeoff for a substantial power boost."

The addition of this accelerated growth measure ultimately pleased his wife. Gloriana was glad that the Hexers would gain a powerful advantage that was not accessible to other people. More power ultimately benefited the Hex Federation and ensured the second-rate colonial state would remain strong enough to survive the coming tribulations.

"I see. The Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III will become a powerful force on the battlefield if you can deliver on your promises."

She deliberately emphasized the latter words, as if she was questioning whether Ves could deliver on his bold claims.

Ves possessed plenty of confidence in his ability to do so. This was a feature that was tailor-made for the Valkyrie Redeemers.

"Don't worry. Most of the building blocks of my planned Soultaker System already exist in other living mech designs. I just need to borrow them and put them together to produce this powerful result."

They continued to talk a bit more about this special E energy system before they moved on to another addition to the Valkyrie mech line.

"If the Soultaker System is supposed to be the more subtle addition to the Mark III, what else do you have that will make the Mark III even stronger?" Gloriana asked with anticipation in her voice.

He smirked. "It's quite simple. I will free up the restraints that prevent unauthorized people from employing battle formations."

"What?!"

His wife looked shocked! As far as she knew, Ves had always been stingy about the use and the proliferation of his precious battle formations!

Their power was undeniable, but it also served as one of the strongest and most effective trump cards of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves had already shown a lot of tolerance by allowing the Glory Seekers to pull it off as well.

To open the floodgates and potentially allow any serving member of the Hex Army to make use of battle formations while they piloted a Valkyrie Redeemer sounded crazy even to Gloriana!

The Hexers would definitely generate a lot of fear and envy once they employed battle formations on a larger scale.

A dozen of them could easily appear in a single battle, thereby overwhelming any typical alien raiding fleet and scouring all of their powerful starships from life!

Hyper energy shields might be able to take the edge off these attacks, but strong enough battle formations should still be able to overwhelm them due to Helene's overwhelming power!

"Is it possible for the Hexers to employ battle formations on demand?" Gloriana asked. "I thought that they impose strict requirements that necessitate special training."

"You are not wrong, but I do not think it is a challenge for many more Hexer mech units to meet all of the requirements. The Glory Seekers managed to do this for years. They have learned a lot of lessons and can easily pass on their teachings to the soldiers of the Hex Army. A high degree of homogeneity is still essential, but this is a condition that can be accomplished through training."

"I see..."

Not every Valkyrie mech unit would be able to launch devastating battle formation attacks, but the more elite and well-trained ones should definitely be able to do it. This would guarantee that the Hex Army would utilize these attacks on a wider scale!

Though Gloriana had her concerns about this radical shift, she was happy that her husband was willing to go above and beyond to strengthen the Hexers.

"This is an extreme change that is not typical of your decision making. What prompted this, Ves?"

"I have slowly begun to realize that I can get away with a lot more stuff than in the past. Status makes a huge difference in our society. I have become a part of the upper echelon, so I have already joined the group of people who are able to dictate the rules as opposed to following them. It is really nice to be able to stop being afraid of stepping too far out of line."

Gloriana felt that there may be more to this, but she let it go. She already began to look forward to how this feature would benefit the Hex Federation.

She leaned forward and shared her body warmth with her husband. "I can already imagine it. The Hexers will be able to defeat more enemies while suffering much less losses. They can accumulate war merits at a considerably faster rate and exchange for much more benefits compared to the Fridaymen and other local rivals. As long as the Hexers are able to keep this advantage, they can even begin to promote their most promising elites to first-raters, thereby enabling them to keep up with our growth and be of greater use for our clan! How wonderful!"

"Hehehe. I never leave my friends behind."

Ves knew that he was bound to generate a lot of controversy with this radical design choice.

Since the Transhumanists were already pushing him to release his Carmine mechs to the public in the near future, he figured that making his battle formations available to a wider audience would hardly make a difference at that point.

Perhaps it could even prime red humanity for all of the other crazy stuff that he intended to phase into his works over the coming years and decades.

Once Gloriana got over her initial joy over this planned gift to the Hexers, she slowly began to frown as she considered the potential downsides of this move.

"The native aliens are not static opponents. They are slower to change, but once they start to lose so many of their warships to death energy battle formations, they will work harder to develop countermeasures against them. Not only will they speed up their adoption of hyper technology, they will also be able to figure out other solutions through repeated exposure to these powerful attacks. This means that our trump card may lose its effectiveness over time."

Ves shrugged. "I am aware of that, but that is a price that I am willing to pay. We can't keep relying on our old hits to prop us up. The power of mechs ultimately comes from themselves. We just have to design better mechs with even better innovations if we want to maintain our competitive edge."

He also wanted to make a greater contribution to the war effort. If the Transhumanist Faction felt compelled to speed up the pace of technological innovation, then he might as well follow suit.

He was more confident that if he provoked any trouble or generated any controversy, the Red Association would continue to have his back. This was the benefit of becoming their honorary member.

Ves was beginning to warm up to this bolder approach to mech design. The Fey Fianna and the Ultimatum mech lines had already changed second-class battles forever, and this was just the start as far as he was concerned!

"Dare to design."

"Dare to design." Gloriana echoed with an approving smile.

It was always a lot more beneficial for a mech designer to do his job with less restraint. Ves believed he could make a lot more progress if he stopped holding back as much.

This not only applied to updating his existing mech lines, but also in the design of brand new mechs based around completely new concepts!

Chapter 5698 Gavin's Upgrade

The Larkinson Clan had a decent range of well-established mech models whose concepts still remained relevant to this day. They just needed to be refreshed and brought up to the standards of the Hyper Generation in order to become useful again.

The Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III was not the only project designed to give mech workshops and factories throughout the new frontier a lot of upgrade commissions.

Ves also aimed to satisfy a range of different consumers by updating old hits such as the Desolate Soldier and the Ferocious Piranha.

The former served as a cheap and affordable option to turn more irregular mech pilots into useful combat assets, particularly in planetary defense battles where planetary militia could quickly hop into their mechs and fight to save their colonies.

The latter was not only useful in disrupting the crew of a warship when it came close enough, but it had proven to be remarkably effective at destabilizing alien starfighters.

There were even cases where the Ferocious Piranhas easily caused the downfall of the more elite phasefighters!

Not every species possessed strong mental resilience, and their training varied considerably. As long as the alien pilots were susceptible to the disorientation glow, it was even possible to capture a precious phasefighter intact!

However, as much as Ves prized his existing designs, all of them had been conceived before the Age of Dawn. They were all products of their time. Fighting against alien warships was a whole different game than fighting against human mechs.

In order to meet the changing demands of the mech market, Ves and his fellow Larkinson mech designers could not afford to rest on their laurels. They needed to study the gaps that currently existed in the mech market and conceive of a new product that should hopefully be enough to satisfy this need.

Market research was an important activity. Gavin usually supervised most of this effort, but he had finally traveled to the core territory of Streon Ancient Clan in order to install a powerful but extremely invasive first-class digital brain augment.

Just like the original Benny, Gavin wanted to become a better and more competent assistant to Ves by digitizing his mind to a much more extensive degree than ordinary people.

It was an extreme choice that could not be reversed once it was done. People who had turned over half of their brain into circuitry lost so much of their humanity that they had lost their ability to sleep!

"Are you sure about this, Gavin?" Ves asked with a concerned expression. "We are no longer living in the Age of Mechs, you know. There are more ways for people to improve than cutting out whole parts of your brain and replacing them with electronic equivalents."

Gavin looked utterly serious when he responded.

"I have already discussed this matter extensively with the Senechal over the galactic net. I know more about this process than you. I have made my decision. All of this cultivation stuff sounds

great, but it is slow and can lead to unpredictable changes in personality. I don't want to gamble my future on methods that are notorious for making people more irrational. No offense, boss, but you already have plenty of that. What you need is a more rational and sober counterweight to keep you on your toes and remind you of variables that you have overlooked."

That made sense, but Gavin would still be making a large sacrifice by undergoing this procedure.

"What about your humanity? Don't you value the stuff that most people take for granted? I heard that people with heavily digitized minds are unable to experience emotions as strongly as unaugmented people."

Gavin smiled. "It's okay, Ves. Look, nothing satisfies me more than to stay by your side as you rise in status and become a man respected by all of red humanity. However, not everyone is as insanely smart and talented as you. Don't forget that I used to be a kid from Cloudy Curtain. I was not born as a designer baby or received the most elite education of a first-rate state. I am already struggling to keep up with the increasingly higher-level affairs that you have got mixed up in these days. I am not even qualified to handle most of the administrative burden imposed by your recently established partnership with Isthmus Manufacturing. Once I come back with an upgraded brain, that won't be an issue anymore. I will be able to accompany you even if you are promoted to a Star Designer one day."

The personal assistant cared so much about his job that he could not be dissuaded from this upgrade. The only way to change his mind was to offer him a better alternative, but Ves did not have anything in mind.

Although cultivation increasingly started to become the latest dominant trend, the older methods were still valid.

"Tell me about the digitized brain that the Streons want to install?"

"I can transfer you the technical details, but in short it is a recently developed hyper version of a similar model that Benny Smith has installed. The Streons had gone above and beyond to improve the performance of the implant by acquiring fragments of a rare hyper material called Mentalist Crystal that is purportedly able to make people smarter by exposing them to the right kind of E energy."

Ves' eyebrows shot up. "That is the same hyper material that is integrated in my wife's implant set! I've been trying to get my hands on a Mentalist Crystal, but it is so rare that I have yet to receive an offer to this point. The Streon Ancient Clan is really going all out to boost your competence. This is a heavy favor that I will have to repay in the future one day."

He no longer felt concerned that Gavin was making a choice that he would regret over the long-term.

Even if the personal assistant's newfound capabilities became inadequate in the distant future, Ves could just spend a lot of money and resources to upgrade Gavin's digitized brain to a new model.

Organic growth was hardly the only way for people to improve. Ves reminded himself that not everything had to abide by the principles of his design philosophy.

"Very well. I trust the Streons. You shall be in good hands. Just make sure that your operation will take place within the range of General Axelar Streon's Saint Kingdom."

General Axelar had proven himself to be a reliable friend and ally, but the same could not be said for the implant surgeons and other members of the Streon Ancient Clan.

Gavin chuckled. "You do not need to remind me of that. I would not ever allow my new additions to be compromised in any way. It would be a dereliction of my duty if I was negligent about the risks."

The Streons projected that it would take months to complete this augmentation process, so Ves was left to work with other assistants that he was not familiar with. While the recent hires from the Terran Alliance were clearly a lot more knowledgeable and more adept at working with numbers, they lacked the personal connection that he took for granted.

Nonetheless, Ves was able to gain a lot of detailed market research data on the second-class mech market.

The mech landscape was evolving quickly. Hyper technology had become widely available for a while now, and most large players had already released their initial batch of proper hyper mech models.

It became increasingly hard to steal their market share as mech designers did their best not to get overtaken by their faster rivals.

They did not want to end up as the next SKL Mech Industries by having one of their reliable cash cows taken away from them because they had been a bit too slow to refresh all of their aging mech lines!

"Most of the immediate gaps in the markets have already been filled by the established mech companies, but there are still many niches that you can fill, sir." One of the assistants of Terran origin explained to Ves. "Landbound mechs sales have diverged. Melee mechs without flight capabilities have become so unpopular that many mech companies are forced to suspend production on them because inventory kept piling up. They are partially able to recoup their losses by offering to convert them into aerial mechs, but that is not a high-margin activity."

"What about ranged mechs?"

"Landbound ranged mechs have become more popular as of late. What sells especially well are cheap and simple frontline mechs. Colonies have been buying them up in droves because of their affordability, lower maintenance requirements, disposability, ease of piloting and so on. They are being used by planetary militia to put any remotely decent potentate in a cockpit in the event of a planetary invasion."

Ves furrowed his brows as he imagined this mobilization scenario. "I suppose these mech models are able to do their jobs, but I get the feeling that they are mostly employed as mobile turrets, and even their weapons are only able to attack targets that have dipped into the atmosphere of a planet. Their calibers are probably not enough to strike warships hovering in high orbit."

"Many buyers are aware of the limitations, but people are desperate for security, sir. They want the comfort of being in the presence of a large quantity of mechs and guns. The frontline mechs can still play a useful role in repelling or slowing down planetary raids where troop transports and smaller

warships try to approach a settlement to plunder it as opposed to bombarding the entire site into oblivion."

Ves tapped his chin in thought. "We already have the Desolate Soldier, which can already play a similar role in a better capacity so long as they are stored on orbital space stations. The margins of this model are already very low. If we proceed to design a frontline mech, I doubt we'll earn any meaningful profits. Let's leave this to the other mech companies who are able to make significant savings by producing on a wider scale."

"Very well. Our mech company is already contributing to planetary defenses by selling the Ultimatum. Although it is a highly specialized mech that is not only vastly more expensive, but also requires much more competent mech pilots to be utilized in an effective manner, their ability to strike targets from land-to-orbit has made them increasingly more popular in more and more settlements throughout the middle zones."

In other words, there was no pressing need for the Larkinson Clan to design any further mechs meant for groundside deployment.

Ves expected this to change in a few years once the deep strike operations came online. A lot of alien planets accumulated a huge amount of wealth and phasewater that would be difficult to recover without deploying a lot of forces to the ground. Demand for premium landbound mechs and possibly even demimechs that were able to navigate small and complex urban environments should probably shoot up during that time.

"Tell me about the most immediate unmet demand for premium spaceborn mechs." Ves instructed. "At this time, it is most worthwhile to focus on selling good spaceborn mechs that people are willing to pay a hefty premium for. What do the mech forces fighting in the border need the most? What sort of mech are we able to make that can produce the greatest impact?"

The young man paused for a few seconds before he offered a response.

"Most mech companies have put their focus on two types of products. First, they have prioritized the release of hyper ranged mechs that can more effectively strain the defenses of alien warships. Second, they developed new hyper melee mechs that are equipped with space suppressors that can effectively finish off the weakened vessels. This is the basic strategy employed by most mech forces in the Red War. What is missing from this approach is a third pillar."

"And that is...?"

"An auxiliary mech. An effective support mech can act as a force multiplier that can increase the survivability of both ranged and melee mech units."

Chapter 5699 Auxiliary Mech Focus

Auxiliary mechs generally received much less appreciation from the mech community than more direct combat-oriented machines.

Mech pilots generally wanted to become the hotshots that beat up their opponents and saved the day.

However, auxiliary mechs served their purpose in battle. There were many roles that mechs could perform that would otherwise weaken and burden a combat mech.

Ves was not entirely unfamiliar with support-oriented mechs. He had designed a number of them including the Blessed Squire Hexer-exclusive heavy supportive knight mech, the Buzzy Bee commercial light ECM and communication mech, the Cherub Hexer-exclusive communication mech, the Bright Boy Hexer-exclusive ECM mech and the Light Hunter Vandals-exclusive scout mech.

The fact that most of his support mechs ended up getting used by the Hexers was a reflection of their greater use and integration of machines that depended on others for protection.

Of course, the real reason why the Hex Army employed a disproportionate amount of support mechs compared to other military mech organizations was actually quite banal.

The Hexers insisted that male mech pilots were not qualified enough to make use of mechs with real teeth!

Real combat was reserved for the stronger and much more competent female mech pilots.

It was already a privilege for male mech pilots to step onto the battlefield at all. They could be somewhat trusted to cover the backs of their betters as long as they stuck to piloting harmless support mechs.

Whatever the case, Ves accrued enough experience in designing support mechs to possess a decent understanding of their place and their uses.

As the Hexers had already shown in a less than stellar manner, auxiliary mechs generally had lower requirements on the pilot.

Depending on the role and functions of a support mech, the pilot might need to possess greater situational awareness or special analytical skills in order to effectively employ sophisticated instruments.

However, it was not that difficult to educate mech pilots in these skills. They just needed to be smart enough to pass the required classes.

This granted a lot of mech pilots an alternate career trajectory that did not require them to risk their lives in a more direct way. Many people found it fulfilling to play a vital support function and cover the backs of other mech pilots.

As Ves turned his attention to the subject of a support mech, he immediately thought of a recent release that already fulfilled this function to a degree.

"The Fey Fianna is already being leveraged as a support mech as far as I am aware of." He said. "The fey all come with an inherent decoy function that can attract a lot of firepower that would otherwise hit a real mech. They can also carry space suppressors, shield generators and other support functions."

The LMC even organized a contest meant to encourage enterprising mech designers to develop new fey types to enhance the versatility of the overall mech platform. A lot of new and interesting third-party fey models became available as a consequence.

Gavin's temporary replacement nodded. "That is correct, sir. The nature of your Fey Fianna model enables it to adopt any role, including support. It may not be the best or most cost-efficient means to fill up auxiliary mech roles, but your popular drone mech is filling a need in a good way."

"Doesn't this mean that it is not entirely necessary for us to design an auxiliary mech?"

"The Fey Fianna is a flexible drone mech model. It is not supposed to be a universal solution for everything. It is a high-end mech that is more expensive and more difficult to pilot than most second-class mechs. There are many mech organizations that have already developed a mature mech doctrine where they have devised the most optimal mech compositions for their forces. It is not entirely necessary for them to employ expensive Fey Fiannas when they can resort to much more efficient auxiliary mechs instead. The latter might not have the flexibility and decoy function of the former, but it is usually capable of performing a single support role to a much more extensive degree due to their specialized focus. It is also much easier to recruit and train mech pilots for this singular purpose."

In other words, the market demanded a specialized tool that was really good at doing a single job, not a multitool that could adequately perform multiple jobs at the same time.

Ves leaned back and clasped his hands in thought. "I get it. So what sort of support functions are in demand?"

"There are multiple support functions that are in demand. They generally fall into three categories: electronic warfare, direct damage mitigation and battlefield replenishment."

"I see. These are already functions that were in demand before the start of the Red War."

"That is true, sir, but the current solutions are not adequately helping linefighters reduce their loss rate. The Red War is shaping up to become a war of attrition. Both sides are grinding their forces against each other, hoping to exhaust the war-making potential of their enemies first. Our side is at a heavy disadvantage in this contest due to obvious reasons. The mech forces at the frontlines cannot sustain all of the casualties that they are incurring for long. Any solution that can shrink their losses and allow more of their mechs and mech pilots to return from the battlefield alive is beneficial."

This would become more important when the Red War dragged on. The small gains made over time could add up to a lot of lives being saved down the line.

This was not just because mech pilots managed to survive where they otherwise would have died.

The presence and availability of those additional troops would go on to win a lot more battles and prevent a lot of human territories from getting razed by the aliens!

The question was what sort of mech Ves should design to effectively satisfy this burning demand.

"What are your thoughts on the categories of support mechs that I should delve into?" Ves asked.

"The specific demand for electronic warfare solutions encompasses any means that directly or indirectly makes it harder to damage friendly troops effectively. As you have previously pointed out, the Fey Fianna is actually doing well at this already. However, mech forces have found out that the decoys produced by the living fey can fool alien sensors much more effectively if they are paired with ECM mechs such as the Buzzy Bee. By generating additional jamming, it becomes harder for alien sensor and scanner systems to discern the real mechs from the fake ones."

"The Buzzy Bee is already on the waiting list to get updated into a hyper mech." Ves explained.

"That is excellent, but the Buzzy Bee model is largely optimized to degrade the combat effectiveness of opposing mechs and mech pilots. They are not adequately equipped to disrupt the

performance of warships, especially at a distance. They are also not able to support a large quantity of mechs. They are ultimately designed to excel in a different sort of warfare. I do have to note that the Buzzy Bees still perform well when deployed against alien starfighters, which are slowly becoming more prevalent among the native aliens. There is no need to retool the design to optimize it against alien warships."

"Hm, I agree. What about direct damage mitigation, then?"

"Dedicated energy shield mechs have seen a decline in demand because it is not feasible to resist the powerful damage output of alien warships." The temporary assistant explained.

"Evasion is much more effective than blocking."

"That is generally the case, but not always, sir. Not all mechs are shot down by the powerful main cannons of a large battleship. The firepower of these enormous guns is overwhelming, but their firing rates are slow and not capable of tracking fast-moving targets. It is mostly the smaller and more rapid-fire gun batteries that are responsible for eliminating the majority of mechs in space. It is still possible to resist their firepower for a short amount of time. It has become increasingly important to rescue distressed mechs that have suffered crippling damage on the battlefield but can still be recovered. A remote shield mech can come forward, deploy an area shield that can block follow-up attacks and buy enough time for the mech to limp back to safety or for the mech pilot to eject from a heavily damaged machine. Mech forces that are attentive enough to deploy these mechs have managed to reduce their average loss rate by as much as 20 to 30 percent!"

This showed that a lot of mechs struck by a powerful warship was not beyond saving. They could still be recovered and put back into use in the future as long as the mech force made an effort to rescue these assets.

"I imagine that being more serious about rescuing distressed and injured units also helps to raise morale." Ves remarked. "I can see how this sort of mech can be useful, but the problem is that I am not entirely confident in designing a remote shield mech that can outperform the products that are already on the market. There is little point in designing my own version if it isn't actually better. I know that this role is a lot more prevalent in first-class mechs, but the technological limitations of second-class mechs makes it too difficult to develop ones that are effective enough to reach mass adoption."

He might revisit this sort of mech once he started to design first-class mechs, but for now he decided it was best to leave it aside.

"Then that leaves battlefield replenishment as the final option. Whether it is ammunition or energy, mechs are expending their resources at a rapid rate. Any mech force that engages an alien warship must go all out right from the beginning. Holding back will cause small losses that will eventually produce major losses. Battles are generally shorter, but the intensity is much higher due to the need to overwhelm the defenses of the other side. It is becoming especially difficult to sustain an assault against a larger alien fleet. It takes so much effort to break down their defenses that mechs may find themselves running dry before all of the enemy vessels have been neutralized. It is vital that the exhausted machines can be replenished quickly without needing to return to their motherships."

Ves nodded. "I see. The old Blessed Squire design used to fulfill this function in landbound combat. Are you suggesting that I should design a spaceborn version of this concept?"

"It is a possibility." The assistant responded. "It is up to you to make this determination. I can tell you that the demand for a mech that can not only replenish supplies in the field but also comes with a glow that can lift the mood of battleworn mech pilots may be high enough to invest in its development."

All of these possible auxiliary mechs sounded useful in one capacity or another.

Ves actually felt the urge to design all of them, but that was not a wise course of action. The competition was heavy. A half-hearted effort would not be able to stand out in the mech market.

He would rather limit his options and focus heavily on designing a single excellent auxiliary mech that did its job than any other equivalent on the market.

"I will need to think about this." Ves eventually decided. "I agree that it is probably a good idea to add a new auxiliary mech to our lineup, but I haven't thought about them for a while. I need to delve into them myself in order to refresh my understanding and get a read on the sentiment of mech pilots. Thank you. I will make sure to read your full report on this subject."

He wanted to talk about auxiliary mechs with other people aside from a newly assigned assistant who never worked directly with mechs in his life. There were plenty of people that Ves could think of who might be able to provide much greater insights on this matter.

Chapter 5700 Impossible Request

Ves wanted to make a serious effort into designing an auxiliary mech this time.

While he had designed a number of them in the past, he mostly treated them as ordinary design projects. He never held the expectation that they would not only be popular in the mech market, but also make a substantial difference in the conflicts that raged throughout human space.

This time was different. Buoyed by the immense success of the Fey Fianna and the Ultimatum mech lines, Ves wanted to maintain his 'winning streak' and dominate yet another market category when he released another original mech design.

Sure, he could gain a lot of satisfaction by refreshing existing mech lines such as the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Ferocious Piranha, but much of the novelty of them had already worn off to him. He was addicted to designing new mechs and would not feel satisfied if he kept revisiting a lot of old stuff.

Since he wanted to make a serious attempt at designing a groundbreaking auxiliary mech, he first decided to consult one of the best authorities in this field.

He attempted to call Master Vayro Goldstein.

Naturally, he got redirected to one of his secretaries, who luckily informed Ves that Master Goldstein would become available for an hour in a few days.

"Please schedule this appointment for me." He said.

"What is the priority of this meeting? Please be both accurate and honest, Professor Larkinson. Master Goldstein carries numerous responsibilities that may necessitate his personal intervention at any time. We may have to reschedule your appointment if that happens."

That was annoying, but understandable.

"The priority is low, I suppose." Ves honestly said.

"Noted."

A few days passed without incident. Ves had gone on to inquire other people about auxiliary mechs in the meantime.

His wife did not have much to say about the topic.

"I cannot think of any mech that you can design that can offer much greater support than existing ones." She said. "Glowers cannot be the main feature of your next product because your current mech catalog already covers the most common use case. You have the Desolate Soldier to inspire duty, the Ferocious Piranha to evoke fear, the Pacifier to calm humans and aliens down and so on. You will have to do the hard work to develop a more concrete and practical benefit to potential buyers."

Ves sheepishly smiled. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Play to your strengths." His wife answered. "You are more adept in both hyper technology and E-technology than most other mech designers. If your new auxiliary mech can provide assistance from a more metaphysical angle, then your product will not only fulfill a need that has never been met before, but also make it harder for the competition to imitate your new mech model."

"I already figured that out myself, Gloriana. Thanks anyway."

Commander Casella Ingvar offered a more informed opinion. As a mech commander and a high-tier expert pilot with plenty of experience under her belt, she was much more able to identify shortcomings that mech designers would be able to address.

"We need better ECM." She bluntly said over the remote connection. "Mech pilots everywhere are dying needlessly because they are being asked to deploy into a vacuum environment where there is no cover to be found and where their emissions can easily be traced by enemy warships."

"Haven't you guys taken to employing the Fey Fiannas to divert enemy firepower?"

"It has helped, but not enough, patriarch. The issue with using decoys is that it can increase the amount of targets that the aliens have to shoot, but that does not mean our actual mechs are free from harm. Enemy guns can still strike them down if they happen to choose the correct targets. The lower the quantity of decoys, the higher the probability of suffering serious losses."

"Aren't you able to utilize Buzzy Bees or other ECM mechs to interfere with enemy targeting even more?"

The female commander shook her head. "I am sure you know your own tech better, sir. The Buzzy Bees cannot completely negate alien sensor systems, especially when they are so powerful. The space environment isn't helping either. The emissions of our mechs are high because they need to operate at full power. Our ranged mechs must fire their rifles as fast as they can while our melee mechs must accelerate forward as much as possible to avoid getting shot down."

That was true. It was much easier for mechs to obscure themselves in a complex planetary environment. Fighting in space was so damn risky because every mech became completely exposed once they entered the great void. The lack of cover meant that mech pilots always had to take into account that they could get blasted to pieces from a sudden attack at an unreasonable distance.

"What do you need the most, then?" Ves asked instead.

"Hmm..." Commander Casella thought for a moment. "If it is possible, please design a mech that possesses similar functions to the Jedda Sandivar."

"The ace mech of the Adelaide Mercenary Company? Oh, you mean the Saint Kingdom that it is able to project thanks to its ace pilot. So if I am understanding you correctly, you want a mech that can project a powerful energy field that can completely interfere with any attempts at observing through it, no matter whether the enemy tries to do so through visual or other detection means."

"Yes, patriarch. I know that my request is not realistic, but it is truly the most effective form of battlefield concealment that I have personally witnessed in action. Saint Marissa Lewandowski is able to save the lives of many mech pilots when her ace engulfs a powerful warship in her obscuring Saint Kingdom. Nothing else can compare to them. We have tried to experiment with auxiliary mechs that are able to produce particle clouds, but their area of effect is not great enough to protect a lot of units in space. Even if mechs attempt to hide in these smoke clouds, an enemy warship just has to fire their huge main cannons into the clouds to destroy multiple mechs at a time."

Mechs designed to produce sensor-blocking particle clouds always performed a lot better on land than in space.

It was far too easy for a smoke cloud to continue expanding in every direction. This would quickly cause the small particles to get dispersed to the point where they no longer produced any useful effect.

The only way to counteract this problem was to produce a huge amount of particles, but they were not exactly abundant and easy to carry by mechs. It took a lot of particles to produce a dense smoke cloud for a short amount of time, but they dispersed so quickly that it quickly became useless.

There were ways to reduce their dispersion rate and keep them in a single area around a mech, but these were only effective at shorter ranges.

This was useless when a cannon with a diameter that could fit several mechs fired right into this obvious smoke cloud!

Besides, it was a lot harder to keep a smoke cloud intact when on the move, which was practically a necessity to prevent easy targeting.

Ves nonetheless felt intrigued by this kind of solution.

"It would be great if I can design a mech that can imitate the power of an ace mech, but it is easier said than done. There is a good chance that I will not be able to fulfill your wish."

"I am not expecting you to, but you can save many lives if you do." Commander Casella earnestly said. "If you can design a mech that can produce a persistent and movable smoke screen that is 10 percent as effective as Saint Lewandowski's Saint Kingdom, then you can single-handedly deprive the native aliens of their greatest advantage. Their ability to strike at human mechs at extended distances will degrade so much that it will cut the loss rate of both our ranged and melee mechs in half, if not more!"

Her suggestion planted a promising idea in Ves' mind. He knew that an effective smoke screen mech would be able to give a powerful edge to the Larkinson Army and many other mech forces. It could effectively render warships so much less effective that the aliens could only fight back

effectively if they deployed a lot more starfighters in order to fight against mechs at much shorter distances!

Ves deeply wanted to design such a mech.

However, he also wanted to fulfill many other ambitions such as becoming a Star Designer, producing a grand work and defeating the threat that originated from Messier 87.

Just because he wanted it did not automatically mean his wish came true!

The difficulty of designing the mech envisioned by Commander Casella was insanely high.

If it was any easier, then another brilliant mech designer would have already completed this challenge!

The only feasible ways to realize this mech concept in a practical form was to rely on exotic alien technology or leverage the power of E energy.

Ves was only familiar with a few forms of alien tech, and none of them offered any obvious solutions.

Hyper technology and E-technology offered better prospects to a mech designer like himself. He felt that it may be possible to develop somewhat effective solutions by relying on these fields.

He still needed to do a lot more work before he could figure out whether his vision was viable enough to form the basis of an experimental design project.

"Thank you for your feedback. I will try my best to see whether I can work with your idea. If not, I will try to offer other solutions that can help reduce your casualties."

After talking with a few more people, Ves finally managed to get a hold of Master Goldstein. The man did not reschedule the appointment, so that was nice.

Ves had been in sporadic contact with the bald and well-dressed Master Mech Designer, but much of their discussions were purely related to serious business such as the deployment of kinship networks or the growing proliferation of companion spirits.

It was rare for Ves to request a talk with Master Goldstein mostly to take advantage of his specialization. He was known as a powerful specialist in support mechs, with a focus on wide-area support systems.

When the Master quietly listened to Ves' explanation, he immediately understood his role.

"I am willing to provide consultation to you. The investigation that you have conducted so far shows that you have adopted the correct attitude. Your earnestness and respect for the actual needs of mech pilots is what we always want to see in other mech designers. I think you are biting off more than you can chew by weighing the mech concept that you have mentioned. Imitating the reality-defying power of an ace pilot is impossible through normal means. You need to develop a powerful advantage in order to overcome this steep challenge. If you do not have a solution or a plan to come up with a solution, it is better to put it aside and pursue another direction."

Ves shook his head. "I don't want to give up so easily, Master. I have spent a bit of time coming up with potential solutions. I would like you to review them and tell me whether you think they are viable."

"I would be happy to do so, but first I want to ensure you possess a proper assessment of the purpose and positioning of auxiliary mechs in the current age."

Master Goldstein wanted to make sure they were on the same page before they proceeded any further.

The man began to conduct an oral test where Ves had to answer numerous questions based on his current knowledge base.

The Survivalist did not look completely satisfied with every answer, but he judged that Ves knew enough that there was no need to go back to the basics.