

## The Mech 5731

### Chapter 5731 A Whole New Battle Tactic

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The shield infiltrator fey possessed a huge amount of potential.

This was clear to many people, especially those who struggled to penetrate or overwhelm the transphasic energy shields of alien warships.

The mech industry had been working hard to release new mechs and technological innovations that could make this job a lot easier.

From the relatively basic but effective stormblade technology to the recently introduced anti-shield pulse fey, it became clear that the demand for effective solutions against the ridiculously powerful defenses of enemy warships still remained high!

This was a powerful indication that the mech industry had failed to meet the needs of all of the mech pilots and mech forces struggling to defeat the alien raiding fleets in the frontlines.

At the very least, the mech industry had yet to come up with an effective answer thus far. The lack of progress could be excused for the time being as the Red War had raged for only less than two years.

Was this because the mech industry was incompetent?

Ves did not think so. The challenges were just too great to overcome. The most difficult variable to work around was phasewater. It was too damn scarce, and it did not help that human space occupied so little territory that red humanity was starving for this precious substance!

In contrast, the aliens were literally swimming in it. They occupied the Red Ocean for so long that their stockpiles were astronomical. Even if they wasted most of it on promoting the cultivation of their phase leaders, they still had plenty of phasewater left over to equip every decent warship with at least a basic set of transphasic energy shield generators.

Red humanity was fighting an uphill battle. The lack of territory, manpower, combat assets and more placed a lot of pressure on mech designers such as Ves to come up with a silver bullet that could pierce through transphasic energy shields as if they were nothing.

Such a solution was simply not available at this time, but the successful development of the shield infiltrator fey at least showed that they were taking a step in the right direction.

The only aspect that Ves did not like about the product was that it originated from a first-class mech designer.

The Fey Shaper Contest was supposed to be an event that celebrated the innovations of second-raters. Ves had set the prize pool low to the point where no first-class mech designer would find it attractive enough to bother with the competition.

Even if they had other motives in store, it was quite risky for them to compete against many other second-raters. If they did not have absolute confidence that they could win first place, then any other outcome would be a huge stain on their record! Their reputation would plunge as they had essentially proven themselves to be inferior to people who were supposed to be their lessers!

It was one thing to admit one's inferiority to an anomaly like Ves. He had long transcended his roots as a second-rater.

It was another thing to rank lower than 'ordinary' second-class mech designers such as Tristan Wesseling!

The loser might as well quit the industry and retire after suffering a humiliating loss.

Yet... that did not happen.

Somehow, Kelsey Ampatoch not only made a huge gamble, but managed to win his bet!

Ves had thought deeply on whether he should designate the shield infiltrator fey as the winner of the competition.

After all, Tristan Wesseling's luminous fire fey and Dr. Czilia Avoqee's stealth field fey were both so powerful that their presence could easily sway the outcome of a battle!

However, the single most important factor that set these two fey models apart from the shield infiltrator fey was their affordability.

The Rubarthan Journeyman somehow managed to outclass many second-raters by developing a living fey that was cheaper and easier to fabricate than almost any other contest submission!

The man could teach a master class on cost-saving measures. The sheer amount of work and effort he put into slimming down the shield infiltrator fey was so extreme that even Ves learned a few useful tricks from studying the design!

It was clear that Mr. Ampatoch did not randomly take part in the Fey Shaper Contest because he wanted to win a grand prize of 10,000 MTA credits.

He had greater motives in mind.

Ves already had a guess what they may be. Participating and winning this contest was certainly a good way to catch his attention, but all of that had to wait until they formally wrapped up this event.

As the first-rater deftly completed his initial presentation of the shield infiltrator fey, the audience still looked fascinated by this amazing new product.

Perhaps the ability to pass through enemy transphasic shields by pretending to be a friendly vessel may have been done before in first-class combat, but this capability was unheard of in second-class combat!

Why had these people never heard about it? Why was it only available now? How come the tech was first applied in a fey as opposed to a mech or shuttle?

Ves entertained these doubts as well.

"Mr. Ampatoch."

"I am at your service, Professor Larkinson."

"Is the shield infiltrator fey based on existing first-class technology?"

"It is." The Journeyman admitted. "The technology is relatively niche. When the original developers discovered that its effectiveness was vastly reduced against the modern warships of the major alien

racers, the decision was made to shelve it as there was little point in developing specialized solutions that are only effective against lesser warships."

Typical. The first-raters could already rely on brute force to overcome the defenses of weaker warships.

"What has led you to repurpose this tech for a second-class fey?"

Mr. Ampatoch smiled. "I took it on myself to give this tech a second chance. It may not be particularly compelling for first-

raters, but it is clear that second-raters and third-raters feel much differently about the ability to pass through enemy shields without encountering any hindrance. I recognized an opportunity to service the needs of the brave mech and women who have taken upon themselves to challenge powerful warships with fairly weak mechs, and I took it. I am pleased that my hard work in the development of my shield infiltrator fey has earned your appreciation."

"The ability to infiltrate enemy transphasic energy shields by imitating the patterns of enemy craft should not be an easy process. How have you managed to control the cost of your shield infiltrator fey considering that it was originally based on first-class technology?"

Mr. Ampatoch exuded a lot more pride as he offered his response.

"The secret is your Fey Fianna. My previous competitors have already mentioned how your drone mech platform is able to enhance the computational and decision-making processes of all of their fey. I have made the same discovery, and specifically took advantage of it. The intelligences that are driving the fey may not be most effective at performing an immense amount of raw calculations, but they possess a measure of wisdom, intuition and judgment that enable them to adapt to specific scenarios and bypass a large amount of redundant processes. I have been able to produce large gains in efficiency. There are other means to reduce the processing load on my fey. As long as you are not afraid of interference and interception, you can have the AI cores of your starships do the heavy lifting for you. This is not always possible, but as long as the circumstances are favorable enough, the shield infiltrator fey will not have to wait before they can attempt the crossing."

"I see. Is it possible to apply this tech on larger constructs such as mechs and boarding shuttles?"

"It is possible, but the difficulty is exponentially greater. The smaller the object, the easier it is to calculate and imitate a friendly pattern. I do not believe it is possible to reproduce this result with first-class mechs, let alone second-class mechs. Not even the assistance offered by your living mechs can compensate for the exponential increase in necessary calculations. It is only a solution that should be applied to smaller objects such as fey or explosive warheads, at least for the time being."

That was a disappointment. It would have been a lot more practical to grant mechs the ability to bypass transphasic energy shields, but oh well.

"Your shield infiltrator fey are remarkably cost-effective, but they also happen to be very vulnerable to enemy fire. Is there a means to bolster their defenses while preserving their main effect?"

"It is possible, but I will have to redesign the fey from the ground up." Ampatoch apologetically said. "The materials I have selected for my fey are inherently softer and weaker. This does their defense little good, but the greatest advantage to utilizing this collection of materials is that they are

considerably more malleable. It is much less cumbersome to alter their properties and successfully imitate a valid pattern. Employing harder and tougher materials will result in the opposite. I believe that the cost of developing more damage resistant shield infiltrator fey will result in a much more expensive variant."

That made it practically useless. The shield infiltrator fey were clearly disposable by nature. They had to take on a lot of risks in order to subvert the expectations of the aliens.

Once the fey successfully slipped in and approached the vulnerable hull, the alien crew members were bound to become alarmed!

If their gunnery crews weren't sleeping, then the point defenses of any decent warship would definitely open fire on the approaching shield infiltrator fey before they could complete their mission!

This made it even more important to keep the shield infiltrator fey affordable. Only by employing them in greater numbers would allow at least some of them to successfully make the journey.

Ves gained a much better understanding of the context surrounding the shield infiltrator fey.

It was still an incredibly useful product, but they needed to be utilized correctly in order to make the most of them. The risks were too great to load them all up with human commandos. Who would possibly be crazy enough to enter these death traps that had a high chance of getting shot to pieces by enemy point defenses?

The only approach that made sense was to load them with as much explosives as they could carry!

Ves could already imagine how the shield infiltrator fey would be used in the coming years.

The Fey Fianna that ferried them across the battlefield probably had to bring along a set of spare fey in order to maintain their full combat effectiveness after they had 'delivered' their initial payloads.

Kelsey Ampatoch clearly came to the same conclusion, because he activated another projection that showed a simulation of how they could be employed.

It showed a swarm of hundreds of Fey Fiannas accompanied by thousands of shield infiltrator fey.

They all approached an alien raiding fleet that was actively trying to shoot down the incoming machines as much as possible.

The fey made this a lot more difficult by dispersing their formations and generating decoys.

Once the Fey Fiannas successfully came close, they sent forth their shield infiltrator fey towards half-a-dozen warships!

Even though the fey started to get blasted to pieces at a much higher rate, there were simply too many of them. Roughly half of them collided against the transphasic energy shields as their attempt to pass off as friendly units failed for whatever reason.

The remaining half successfully passed through the energy shields before their crossed the remaining distance and detonated their payloads next to powerful gun batteries, open hangar bays and massive thruster nozzles!

The enemy warships had become crippled!

What an inspiring demonstration.

Even if it was just a simulation, it successfully captured the imagination of many people.

Ves' eyes lit up as he realized what this approach entailed.

"The Fey Fianna... have turned into bombers!"

The shield infiltrator fey opened up a brand new battle tactic that had not been seen since the early days of the Age of Conquest!

Chapter 5732 Priority Supply

5732 Priority Supply

Bombers.

Ves was not the only person who associated this word with the shield infiltrator fey.

By stuffing the expendable fey with as much explosives as their limited capacities could accommodate, they could be sent out on a one-way trip through the transphasic energy shields of enemy warships and blast their surface modules to pieces!

It did not matter that most warships were so large and massive that it was impossible for the relatively small payloads of the shield infiltrator fey to knock out any core systems.

Just the ability to damage the gun batteries and the propulsion systems of an enemy warship was already enough to end her participation in battle for the most part.

To think that all of this became possible so long as a mech force committed to utilizing the Fey Fiannas as bombers.

From what Ves could recall from his history studies, this was a type of small craft that had seen limited use in the Age of Stars and the early years of the Age of Conquest.

Human warships at the time were nowhere near as great as the ones in use today. They were the equivalent of third-class vessels for the most part. What was most important was that they had yet to be equipped with good enough energy shields to provide strong coverage.

This granted an opportunity for starfighters to get close and bomb the hell out of these large and lumbering vessels.

While the pilots of these fragile craft inevitably suffered a lot of casualties in every serious fight, the loss of a bunch of starfighters and easily replaceable pilots was trivial compared to the destruction of a much more expensive warship!

This became such a popular strategy at one time that specialized bombers made an entry. They had sacrificed nearly all dogfighting capabilities so that they could launch the strongest anti-ship strikes possible.

Unfortunately for starfighter romantics, the golden age of starfighters ended too soon.

Once the Age of Conquest started to kick into overdrive, humanity rapidly improved their warships as they continued to steal powerful alien technologies and secured access to better materials.

At the same time, they began to attract the attention of much more powerful alien empires. The warships that humanity needed to defeat were even more perverse in many cases!

In any case, warships improved so quickly on every front that employing starfighters against them was no different from committing suicide.

As brave and reckless as starfighter pilots had been at the time, even they balked at a 90 percent chance of never making it back to their motherships!

Since starfighters failed to keep up with the development of warships, it no longer made any sense to employ them anymore. Bombers naturally disappeared as well as people found it much more convenient to rely on big warship gun batteries to do the same job a lot more effectively.

Ves never imagined that bombers, or rather the mech version of them, would randomly make a return due to the development of a curious piece of technology.

It remained to be seen whether 'bombers' would return as a viable combat solution in modern times. The simulation certainly made it look possible, but until Ves and many other people saw the Fey Fiannas being used for this purpose, they intended to reserve their judgment.

That did not mean that the shield infiltrator fey was worthless. The product granted so many advantages that it had definitely earned first place in the Fey Shaper Contest.

The fact that very few disputed this ranking showed that Ves had made the right choice.

Now that everyone gained a good understanding of the shield infiltrator fey, Ves began to wrap up the vent.

"Alright everyone, this is it for the Fey Shaper Contest! I am grateful to all of the participants for utilizing their boundless creativity and their diverse skills to develop a large variety of useful fey. Your work has not only done a fantastic job at enriching the possibilities for my ever-expanding Fey Fianna line, but you have also opened the eyes of many people, including my own. I hope you will be able to maintain your persistence and do just as good if not better in any of your future endeavors. No matter whether you see promise in continuing the development of fey, I hope that the experiences that you have gained while taking part in my contest will improve your subsequent works."

Half an hour went by as people steadily departed from the exhibition hall on foot or via shuttles.

In the meantime, Ves had retreated to a private lounge.

He was not alone.

Ves had purposefully invited the top 3 winners of the Fey Shaper Contest for a talk.

Nobody declined the invitation.

Tristan Wesseling, Dr. Czilia Avoqee and Kelsey Ampatoch all took their seats opposite to Ves.

Despite their varying ages and backgrounds, none of them came close to matching the presence of a tier 3 galactic citizen.

In the span of just a few years, Ves had followed a legendary trajectory that saw him rise from an eccentric Journeyman into the most powerful Senior Mech Designer in the Red Ocean!

His huge reputation alone seemed to press onto the winners, making them feel smaller and less significant before a figure who had begun to consort with god pilots and Star Designers.

"Relax." Ves said as he lifted up his cup of tea and took a gentle sip. "I am not here to impose anything on you. I merely wanted to discuss business with you all. The fey that you have designed exists in a class above the rest. That is not to say the rest of the top 10 are bad, but if my clan ever wants to make use of them, it is already enough to make use of regular channels. Your products are different. They are so good from my perspective that you deserve the courtesy of a personal meeting."

While the three invited guests all felt nervous, they were all remarkable enough to maintain their composure in this setting.

Tristan Wesseling already knew Ves from a long time ago. The changes did not faze him too much as he knew that his old friend was still as approachable as before. Not many years had passed since their last personal meeting.

Dr. Avoquee was an older woman who had plenty of experience with meeting all kinds of superiors. She was able to regain her balance now that it became clear that Ves did not have any bad intentions in mind.

Kelsey Ampatoch was a special case. The Rubarthan mech designer clearly wanted to gain an opportunity to talk with Ves, and now that he had attained his goal, he constantly worried about screwing up his only chance of speaking directly to a bigshot. The stakes were so high that the man could not help but expose small signs of imperfection.

As Ves evaluated all three guests, he decided to start with the most familiar of the bunch.

"Tristan."

"Yes, professor, I mean Ves?"

"Long time no see. How have you been?"

"I am doing... well." Tristan slowly replied. "As you may have already surmised, my business is steadily gaining momentum. The market for my hyper gems continues to grow. The only challenge is that it is difficult for me to develop an improvement of my existing work. I am lacking in inspiration, so I am considering whether I should take a page out of your book and start to travel around."

Ves responded with an encouraging smile. "That is always a good idea. Settling in a routine for too long will make you stuck on the same track. There is only so much you can gain from sticking to the same path. Taking a few detours every now and then will broaden your perspective and challenge your views in ways that you have not even imagined. If you decide to go on a journey, then make sure to think about safety. This is not exactly the best period to go on a sightseeing tour."

"Thank you for your advice, Ves."

They chatted a bit more before Ves finally addressed the topic that he truly wanted to talk about.

"Your luminous fire fey is quite powerful compared to the regular version of my luminar crystal cannon fey, but it is still a product that is developed for the market. The Larkinson Army will predominantly make use of quasi-first-class mechs and often transphasic ones as well. Their power is so much greater than general second-class mechs that your fey need to keep up in order to become relevant for my armed forces."

Tristan was somewhat familiar with the Larkinson Army. He quickly understood the nature of the request.

"You want to commission the development of a transphasic quasi-first-class variant of my luminous fire fey?"

"Yes. Can you do it? I can assure you that my clan will compensate you well for your labor."

Tristan eagerly nodded. "It would be my pleasure to help you, Ves. I am confident enough in my skills to be able to make it work, but it may take time because I do not have much experience with phasewater technology and other higher-end technologies."

The former Fridayman beamed with pride because he recognized that this was a serious request.

Ves essentially signaled that he did not have the time and expertise to design an upgraded version of the luminous fire fey. He could only rely on Tristan's services to equip the Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fiannas with offensive fey that were even more powerful than the ones they utilized at this time!

The challenges were myriad for Tristan.

"If I want to complete this job, I will have to complete a large amount of work. I have to design new and improved hyper gems in order to produce effects that are strong enough to be effective on quasi-first-class mechs. This will likely take months, so do not expect to obtain quick results."

"I understand. Just make sure to deliver a good product. Once you have completed this commission, are you interested in accepting more? There are many other useful fey and mechs that could perform a lot better if they were all embedded with your amazing gems."

This time, Tristan looked a lot more hesitant.

"I would like to oblige you, Ves, but... I have my own research and projects to work upon. I cannot set aside all of my workload just to work on your priorities. I am not rejecting your proposal, but I want to ask you to be patient."

That was a bummer. Ves fully understood Tristan's concerns, though.

If his old friend spent so much time and effort developing hyper gem-integrated fey, then he would eventually turn into a de facto subordinate of Ves.

That was not what Tristan wanted out of his life. This was why he set a clear boundary and made it clear that he wanted to maintain his independence.

Fortunately, Ves already took this possibility into account.

"Then let's talk about your hyper gems. I want them. The higher the quality, the better. If it is possible, I want you to ramp up your production and supply thousands if not tens of thousands hyper gems of various different attributes to the Larkinson Clan. We figure out how we can embed them into our living mechs ourselves."

"You won't be able to produce the most optimal results if you are not making use of my expertise." Tristan warned.

"It's fine." Ves dismissively waved his hand. Any boost in performance is better than no improvement at all. If you can produce more, then all the better. We will always find more mechs to



house them. What I must insist upon is that my Larkinson Clan gains priority on the supply of your hyper gems. I don't care if you sell your gemstones to other customers, but if there is any limit on their availability, I want to ensure that my clan gets first pick before every other client."

That request put Tristan in an awkward spot.

"You have come too late, Ves. I... already signed a partial exclusivity contract with the Colonial Federation of Davute."

Surprisingly enough, Ves did not show any dismay. Instead, he crossed his arms and adopted a confident smirk.

"No problem. I will buy out this contract from Davute. I will tell my staff to make a call right away. We can probably complete this transaction within a day."

That was certainly a way to solve a problem.

## Chapter 5733 Straight Talk

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Ves felt rather bad for the Colonial Federation of Davute.

President Yenames Clive must be gnashing his teeth once learned that Ves had taken away another toy that should have belonged to his colonial state.

Ves had already done it before by depriving Davute of ownership of the Ultimatum model and many future commissions.

Now he pulled off a similar stunt by denying Davute a guaranteed supply of Tristan's valuable hyper gems.

It was bad form to resort to this measure, but Ves decisively pressed through because this was too important for him to miss out on. He did not want anything to jeopardize his clan's supply of these strategically significant products!

Though Tristan was taken aback by Ves' boldness, he ultimately shrugged and accepted the changing reality.

If Ves was really able to convince Davute to transfer the contract, then how could Tristan possibly resist?

As far as Ves was concerned, there was no possibility for failure. His clout and reach had grown so much that he no longer needed to show an excessive amount of deference to a second-rate state.

The abundant finances of the Larkinson Clan also helped a lot. Ves had no intention to coerce Davute into suffering a loss. If a problem could be solved with money, then that was great.

"That is all. I do not have any further requests and proposals for you, Tristan. Of course, if you wish to propose other forms of cooperation, then feel free to voice them. Do you need help with research? Do you require access to special goods and services?"

The Journeyman shook his head. "No. I already have enough."

"Don't you need a steady supply of high-quality exotics and hypers in order to progress your research?"

"That is so, but I can already obtain them by relying on my existing channels. I do not need any special treatments."

"What about phasewater? Can you secure that as well?"

That caused Tristan to frown. "I may need your help in procuring a small sample. I am not confident I can complete your first submission if I have not personally worked with phasewater."

"No problem."

"Why do you care so much about my gems, Ves?" Tristan asked.

"They're good."

"They are... effective, but also costly."

"We have the money. It is quite simple, Tristan. What my clan and I need the most is a strong Larkinson Army. Our armed forces must be as powerful as possible in order to earn more war merits and secure other useful gains. Stronger mechs will also result in fewer casualties, which will make a significant difference in the long run. So what if it makes my mechs twice or thrice as expensive as normal?"

"The sums do not add up this way." Tristan shook his head. "My gems are quite effective when used on regular second-class mechs, but the same cannot be said for quasi-first-class mechs. Unless I have made a breakthrough in my research, do not expect to see the same level of performance gains as I have managed to reach with my luminous fire fey. If I succeed, then the resulting hyper gems will most definitely be at least an order of magnitude more expensive than my current products. Will you still be willing to pay for my hyper gems when they are effectively several times more expensive than one of your quasi-first-class mechs?"

"I think you are underestimating my present financial strength. The money you are talking about is nothing compared to the stuff I am engaged with nowadays. What matters is that most of my troops all have access to the most powerful second-class mechs that we can supply to them. Perhaps ordinary states and organizations think that investing so much money on personnel is wasteful, but I do not agree with that. Mech pilots deserve a lot more care. So long as my finances allow it, I am more than willing to splurge on your gems on a yearly basis just to give my mechs an edge that cannot be replicated by the competition."

Tristan was the only mech designer that Ves knew of that could produce these special gems. That put the former Fridayman in a much more powerful bargaining position than he realized.

However, Ves dominated the conversation from beginning to end. His presence and his prestige continually strengthened the impression that he was the one who occupied a superior position in this negotiation.

Ves was well aware of this effect. He was not above taking advantage of his power, but he made sure that any agreement he made remained mutually beneficial to both sides.

What ultimately mattered was that he secured his desired goal. It did not matter to him that Tristan's gems were not strong enough for the time being. There was always room for improvement.

Ves had already seen what vastly improved gems could do for mechs. He just had to bide his time and wait until Tristan progressed far enough that even first-class mechs benefited from his gems.

That may take years, though. Ves could not solely focus on meeting his long-term needs. He also needed to work on accumulating more short-term advantages.

His gaze shifted from his old friend to the only woman in the room. The dusky-skinned engineer was not a mech designer, but that did not reduce her value at all. She was still capable of developing advanced technological applications without needing to rely on esoteric mech designer stuff.

It was developers like Dr. Avoqee who supported the mech industry and supplied mech designers with a lot of fancy new tech and gadgets to put into their mech designs.

"Dr. Czilia Avoqee. Thank you for accepting my invitation. As you may surmise, I have an interest in cooperating with you and the company you are working for. The stealth field fey that you have successfully developed is a remarkable product, but the base product is too low-end for my clan. Are you able to develop an improved first-class version of your stealth field fey?"

"It should be possible." Avoqee said. "The durability, energy reserves, heat management, overall run time, fault tolerance and other factors should all experience comprehensive improvements. More importantly, the higher specifications will also make it possible to hide the emissions of more powerful mechs, such as the quasi-first-class mechs that your clan are known to prefer. Do not expect us to be able to do so without limit. First-class mechs are so much more powerful that we will have to develop a completely new version of stealth field fey to hide their powerful emissions."

"That is okay. The need for area cloaking is not that acute at the first-class level. I would be more than happy if you can deliver a quasi-first-class solution."

"It should not take too long for us to design an enhanced stealth field fey as our development teams will primarily be working on an existing technological template. The cost will be much greater, but you should not have a problem with that. How many units do you expect to order from our company?"

"It depends, doctor. If your product is good enough, then I have no objection to ordering a thousand of them at the start. I don't think we will employ them all of the time, but I will make sure that my armed forces make regular use of them. Perhaps they can even be used to covertly escort the vulnerable shield infiltrator fey into close proximity to an alien fleet."

There was nothing much for the two to discuss. The stealth field fey did not contain anything interesting like Tristan's hyper gems that held far greater significance than the product itself.

Ves was fine with that. If Heq-Lock Integrated Technologies managed to come up with a more powerful technological application, then there would always be opportunities to negotiate another deal.

It did not take long before Ves turned to the final guest.

"Your shield infiltrator fey has impressed a lot of people, including me. It is a product that combines amazing capabilities with manageable weaknesses. You have already clarified that it will be a lot more difficult to develop an improved version of your product, but is it still possible for you to do so without letting the cost go through the roof?"

Ves might not have any money problems for the time being, but he needed to be careful about where he spent his money.

The difference between the shield infiltrator fey and all of the other fey models was that the former was expected to be non-retrievable.

Once it passed through a transphasic energy shield, it was not expected to come back.

This meant that anyone who made regular use of them had to treat them as consumables rather than more durable combat assets.

Making heavy use of consumables was a surefire way to strain the finances of any organization. Not even the Larkinson Clan could employ improved shield infiltrator fey without a limit, especially if they were loaded with transphasic explosives.

"It is too premature to develop an upgraded version of my work." Kelsey Ampatoch honestly said. "I have little confidence in my ability to keep the costs under control. I do not think that better mech designers are able to produce better results either. The greatest constraint is that we lack access and awareness of higher grades of exotics and hypers that are tough enough to resist more damage, but also malleable enough to imitate enemy patterns. I intend to wait for material scientists to identify or synthesize the specialized materials that I need to develop the upgraded variant that you need."

"I see. That is a decent plan I guess. I think our clan will make do with your regular shield infiltrator fey for the time being." Ves decided. "Now, let us stall no further. You must have worked quite hard to catch my attention. You have come a long way from home, Rubarthan. Why have you decided to participate in a second-class design contest?"

Kelsey Ampatoch had been preparing for this conversation for a long time. He had studied Ves extensively and figured out that the Senior Mech Designer generally liked it when people were being sincere and honest without showing any duplicity.

The first-class mech designer could appreciate that as the Rubarthans tended to be fairly direct as well.

"I want to work for you. Consider my shield infiltrator fey to be my resume and my proof of sincerity."

Interesting. Ves calmly folded his fingers. He already predicted this response, but that did not help him decide how he should proceed.

"Let me say that your solicitation comes as a surprise. I was not actively looking to recruit more first-class mech designers at this time."

"Yet you have already hired one in the form of Alexa Streon. Since you have found it acceptable to recruit a Terran mech designer, I think you should have no objections to hiring a Rubarthan one. I can assure you that my loyalties to the princes are not high. I will pass any test you give me, whether it is centered around mech design or other qualities."

The more Ampatoch spoke, the more Ves admired the Rubarthan. The man demonstrated plenty of confidence and daring.

Yet that also made Ves more suspicious about the man. This situation seemed way too convenient to him. There had to be a catch.

"Why do you insist on joining my clan? Are you dissatisfied with your existing opportunities in the Rubarthan Pact?"

"Yes." Ampatoch replied. "I am merely one among many Journeymen in Rubarthan space. Your clan is still short on first-class mech designers, so by joining you at this early stage, I can be of much greater significance to you and your organization. I see an opportunity to help you build up your mech organization and gain access to far better conditions than if I continue to work for Isthmus Manufacturing."

"You do know that I partially own that company, right?"

The first-rater nodded. "That may be true, but I doubt you understand how our company is actually run from the inside. I can help you analyze and monitor Isthmus Manufacturer if you are willing to bring me into your clan. It may not be clear to you, but I have observed many faults that are holding it back. None of the managers or leading mech designers are willing to upset the status quo after the disruption caused by the Great Severing, but if you are different from them, then maybe you will be able to push through the necessary reforms."

"Hmmm..."

## Chapter 5734 Latent Dangers

### 5734 Latent Dangers

What was Ves supposed to do in this situation?

It was usually him that sought to recruit mech designers into the clan.

He was not accustomed to situations where other people personally walked up to him and requested to join his clan instead.

Sure, there were billions of people across the new frontier who would do anything to join his rapidly rising clan, but the recruiting offices usually kept these folk at bay.

Only by separating all of the wheat would the Larkinson Clan be assured that they obtained the most suitable recruits from the masses.

It should never be the case where random people could just walk up to him and offer their resumes in the hopes of getting accepted on the spot.

Ves probably would have said no just because he did not like being interrupted while he was in the process of conducting other activities.

The complication here was that this was not one of those situations. Tens of thousands of people participated in the Fey Shaper Contest, but ultimately only a handful of them managed to squeeze in the top 50.

Of these 50 skilled and fortunate individuals, just 1 of them managed to take first place.

Regardless of his background and his allegiance, Kelsey Ampatoch had honestly managed to defeat his fellow 12:15

competitors by designing a fey that provided more value than anything else.

More importantly, his contribution to the Fey Fianna's developing ecosystem was massive. Ves and the Larkinson Clan ultimately benefited from the Rubarthan's work as the shield infiltrator fey was bound to become a popular tool to many customers who recognized its value.

Given all that Mr. Ampatoch had done for the Larkinsons, the least Ves could do was give him a fair opportunity.

As Ves continued to mull over this situation, he realized that the real reason why he felt so unsettled over this unexpected application was mainly because he did not feel in control.

If he set this particular problem aside, he recognized that this may be a pretty good opportunity to recruit another highly capable mech designer who had proven his ability with actual deeds.

The winner of a fair contest deserved to receive special attention. Ves had been in a similar position in the past. He had worked hard to attract the attention of the likes of Master Carmin Olson and successfully managed to promote to a higher stage as a response.

Now that his position was a lot more similar to that of Master Olson nowadays, it was his turn to identify rising talents and give them the stage they needed to realize their potential.

The only weird thing about this situation was that Kelsey Ampatoch was around the same age as Ves. Both of them were in their early 40's, so there was no generational gap to speak of. Ampatoch still did not dare to carry on any airs in front of Ves despite being a vaunted Rubarthan and first-rater. The hierarchy between them was very clear.

"Tell me about yourself." Ves said as he leaned back on his comfortable seat. "Who are you? Where do you come from? How did you come to be employed at Isthmus Manufacturing?"

"I was born in a fairly average middle-class family back in a quiet star system located in the periphery of the New Rubarth Empire. I grew up far away from the power centers of the Empire, which meant that I did not grow up owing my loyalty to any of the princes. I managed to excel in my studies and earn increasingly more generous scholarships through earning merit. Isthmus recruited me in advance. The company not only covered my substantial tuition, but also paid for a better augmentation package than what I could earn through my own efforts. After I graduated, I worked at one of my employer's many design laboratories in another region of the Empire."

That sounded like a fairly normal civilian trajectory. There was nothing about the story that stood out to Ves.

"So how did you end up in the Red Ocean? Did you volunteer, or did your owner push you through the greater beyonder gate?"

"I volunteered. Isthmus is an excellent employer, but there are so many other low-ranking mech designers over there that I found it difficult to compete against those who had better connections and augmentations."

"I thought you Rubarthans placed a lot of emphasis on merit over nepotism."

A complex expression appeared on Ampatoch's face. "That is true, and to be fair, Isthmus has always tried to maintain this principle. It is just... people are not strangers. They make friends. They have families. They are more comfortable with working alongside the names they already know. It is impossible to root out this kind of behavior. As a civilian who came from a fairly rural part of the Empire, I had no backers or powerful friends to put my name ahead of others. This is why I submitted an application to transfer to the Red Ocean. I wanted to get away from the tangled web of connections and interests."

"Since you are here, your application clearly got accepted. So what happened next? Did you discover that the Red Ocean branch of Isthmus Manufacturing was not as idyllic as you thought?"

"Partially." Kelsey's expression softened for a bit. "The work environment in the new frontier is better than in the old galaxy. A younger generation of leaders have taken charge here, and they were not afraid to implement changes that would have never gotten passed back in the New Rubarth Empire. While many of the same people that played favorites with each other had decided to transfer to the Red Ocean, there was so much more work for us to do that there were far more promotion opportunities than before. I was making better progress than before, until..."

"The Great Severing."

The Rubarthan's expression became grave. "Precisely. The period of instability that followed after the start of the Age of Dawn generated a large amount of unrest in our company. We lost so much support from the old galaxy that we were scrambling to make everything right again. Many of us were forced to change and adapt in order to preserve our jobs, and while we managed to make it through with the help of the supporters that we have left in this isolated galaxy, many of my superiors and colleagues have fallen back on old habits. Now that it has become clear that our Red Ocean branch has to stand on its own, everyone around me... changed. Their shareholders may have changed, but they no longer have to follow the directives of a distant headquarters. They can make their own rules so long as they do not run afoul of the board of directors."

Ves made an understanding expression. "I think I can figure out what happened. This is yet another instance that proves the old adage that power corrupts, am I correct?"

"You are close to the truth, professor." Ampatoch looked mildly impressed. "You have to realize that the executives and managers who transferred to the Red Ocean branch were considered middle management back then. Now that an entire layer of bureaucracy that previously pressed down on them from above has disappeared, they all gained a lot more power than before. You have to realize that it usually takes decades if not centuries for these careerists to climb their way up the ladder. For them to complete this ascent in a matter of days and months has given them no time to adapt and settle into their growing responsibilities. Too much has changed, and not all of it is for the better."

That caused Ves to frown. This sounded like an incredibly concerning pattern. This kind of problem never took place in the Larkinson Clan because most of it was already in the Red Ocean by the time the greater beyonder gates got cut off from each other. It also helped that Ves was around to keep all of his subordinates under control.

The situation was obviously much different for companies like Isthmus that were still mainly rooted in the old galaxy.

Normally, Ves would not care about these matters, but he could not afford to do so this time.

The Larkinson Clan recently acquired a 20 percent stake in Isthmus Manufacturing.

Any problems with the latter had a large chance of affecting his clan's bottom line!

"Are you suggesting that Isthmus Manufacturing is being mismanaged at this time?"

This was a serious problem if it was true. Ves wanted to be absolutely sure whether the large Rubarthan mech manufacturer had become rotten from within.

Ampatoch shook his head. "I would not go as far as to make this accusation. Isthmus is still a company that is governed by centuries-old rules that have withstood the test of time. It is just that the leaders who are responsible for interpreting them and implementing them cannot help but apply their own ideas as well. I do not think the company will go on a decline, but I think it is not able to grow as fast as it should. The main reason why everything is going well as of late is due to its partnership with you. It needed to cooperate with you much more than you realized."

That was an odd interpretation of the situation, but Ves did not discount it. Perhaps he should have been able to drive a harder bargain if he obtained more insider information.

"I do not have the impression that Isthmus Manufacturing is on a downward trajectory." Ves shared his own thoughts. "The business model adapted by your company is quite mercenary in nature. I see no reason why it should fail in the current market environment."

"Hahaha!" Ampatoch couldn't help but laugh this time! "I apologize, professor. I couldn't control myself when I realized that the people over at Isthmus did not inform you of its latent dangers. You see, Isthmus Manufacturing is primarily engaged in the production and distribution of mechs, but that hardly encompasses the complete value chain of this sector. The company does not perform any significant upstream activities at all. It relies on an extensive collection of long-

term contracts and partnerships to secure the vast amount of input it needs to churn out first-class and second-class mechs from its factories. However, Isthmus does not actually own these mining companies, resource processing companies and bulk transportation services. There is always a risk that those upstream companies might decide to break their agreements one day."

If that actually happened on a large scale, then Isthmus would immediately enter into a crisis!

The company not only had to fulfill a lot of commitments related to supplying a huge number of mechs, but also relied heavily on economies of scale in order to earn a handsome profit!

If the production volume dropped by a huge degree, then there was no way to keep up the business model of Isthmus Manufacturing. It would immediately enter into a crisis that could threaten its very survival!

Ves narrowed his eyes. "I'm sure the executives over at Isthmus recognizes this danger as well, right? They should be doing everything in their power to reinforce its existing contracts with suppliers while also forging new ones... correct?"

Ampatoch let out a sigh. "They have made attempts, but their work is being hindered by the ongoing division in the Rubarthan Pact. The war for the throne has continued to heat up. Many principalities have become less open with each other. This is a problem for Isthmus as many of its suppliers are based outside of the Impresario Principality. If relations between the Impresario Prince and the other power blocs ever deteriorate any further, do not be surprised that many suppliers will find a way to break the contracts, even at the cost of paying huge penalties for doing so without good cause."

Damn!

That was a petty move, but that did not mean Ves could rule out this possibility. The Rubarthans cared so much about who they should put on the throne that their infighting was growing worse with each passing month.



"There is also another risk." Ampatoch continued. "Ever since you became a large shareholder of our company, your enemies have started to poke around. I am afraid that they may force Isthmus into a crisis just so that they can hinder you. For better or worse, your enemies have become our enemies as well."

Chapter 5735 Intertwined

5735 Intertwined

Isthmus Manufacturing had become immensely important to the Larkinson Clan.

Not only was this company responsible for producing the vast majority of Fey Fiannas and Ultimatums in existence, it also channeled an enormous amount of wealth to the Larkinsons.

Ves had a strong interest in seeing it prosper for that reason. Anything that threatened the current status quo demanded his utmost attention!

He leaned forward and studied Kelsey Ampatoch a lot more closely. Was the man truly just a civilian Rubarthan who managed to get recruited by Isthmus Manufacturing, or did he hold other identities as well?

The mech designer was remarkably well-informed about the latent dangers of his mech company.

"Can you identify the possible enemies of mine that might try to strike at me by messing with your current employer?"

"I have only heard sporadic rumors in my old workplace, so I cannot guarantee the veracity of this information." Ampatoch said. "It is well-known that you have a relation with the Destroyer of Worlds. That is making many people assume you have thrown your support behind the Inferno Spear Prince."

"That's not entirely correct." Ves shook his head. "I would like to maintain a neutral posture as much as possible. I am not invested in the decision of who gets to rule over the Rubarthan Pact. The only issue is that other people don't believe me, and constantly treat me as if I am in someone's camp already. Their behavior is pushing me away from my neutral stance."

"Be that as it may, the fact of the matter is that the Smokestack Prince and the many people who answer to him regard you as their adversary. You are not an enemy that they want to kill. Even they are not mad enough to betray red humanity by doing the native aliens a favor. They merely consider you an obstacle to their own ambitions. It would be better for them if your power and influence are contained, just as with the mechers that you have grown close with. Sabotaging Isthmus Manufacturing by strangling its supply of raw materials is a good way to make this happen."

Ves looked more and more upset. The damn Rubarthan succession crisis was threatening to get in his way! As much as he wanted to ignore this silly conflict, he could not stand by and allow it to drag down his latest crown jewel.

"I seriously doubt that all of those suppliers can unilaterally break through contracts with Isthmus Manufacturing." He skeptically said. "All of these large and long-standing companies place a huge value on their reputation. Trust is essential for companies to stay in business for more than a century. Those who try to screw over their business partners might be able to harvest a lot of short-term gains, but their long-term prospects will subsequently be ruined. Even if many of these suppliers that Isthmus depends upon are indirectly or directly controlled by the Smokestack Prince,

their credibility will take a huge hit if they break their agreements all at once. The prince himself will also take a huge hit by making such a move."

It was one thing for an emperor to make a tyrannical move. It was another thing for a prince to do the same!

Ves did not have a deep understanding of Rubarthan society, but even he knew that the only person who really got to break the rules with impunity was the Star Emperor.

The original New Rubarth Empire was deliberately set up this way. Much of its administration had to play by the rules. The Star Emperor was only supposed to make a move if all of the existing laws and policies failed to produce the desired outcomes.

Since the Rubarthan princes were supposed to be extensions of their sire, the only instances where they were allowed to break the rules was if they were acting on the instructions of their sovereign.

This obviously did not apply to the current scenario as the Rubarthan Pact was currently leaderless. The recently built throne still remained empty and pristine at this time.

This caused Ves to grow puzzled. How could the Smokestack Prince and his inner circle possibly think they could get away with using coercive methods to disrupt Isthmus Manufacturing's stability?

Kelsey Ampatoch happened to have the answer.

"It is not entirely unrealistic for this to happen, professor. As I have mentioned before, your enemies are our enemies as well. Any weaknesses on your part will reflect onto Isthmus due to your close association with the company. Right now, I have heard rumors that the people supporting the Smokestack Prince have formed an informal coalition with your other enemies to put pressure on you. The upcoming public inquiry on your living mechs is their best chance to impede your growth and prevent your influence from expanding any further."

Ah.

So that was it. The inquiry, which was actually shaping up to become a tribunal, had been looming over his head for a while now, but he did not recognize how it tied to Isthmus Manufacturing until this moment.

Ampatoch's words made a lot of sense. Ves had harmed the interests of a lot of people and groups during his rise, so it would be unnatural if they did not strike back.

Though Ves had already recognized the potential danger posed by this public inquiry, he did not realize that the consequences of a poor showing would be so bad.

If this contentious debate turned against his favor, then his reputation would undeniably suffer a large blow.

That might just give the faction led by the Smokestack Prince the excuse it needed to force a lot of suppliers under its sway to stop doing business with Isthmus Manufacturing.

After all, the mech manufacturer was currently responsible for producing huge quantities of LMC products that all had the potential to evolve into third order living mechs.

The warning conveyed by Kelsey Ampatoch had changed Ves' perspective on the upcoming public inquiry. He was forced to take it a lot more seriously now that he knew that the stakes were a lot higher than he previously thought.

Ves grunted in frustration. The fundamental problem was not that a poor showing at the public inquiry threatened to cripple his cash cow.

The real source of his difficulties was that Isthmus Manufacturing was not vertically integrated enough to satisfy its enormous demand for raw materials.

Even if his enemies lost a chance to deliver a painful blow to his business operations, they would wait for another opportunity to try again at a later date.

"If every external partner suddenly decides to stop doing business with Isthmus, how much can the company meet its own immediate needs?" Ves asked.

"I am not in charge of logistics and such, so I cannot give you a precise answer." The Rubarthan mech designer responded. "From what I have heard and inferred, I think that production will easily drop by 80 percent in a matter of months. While our company does own numerous mining companies, they can only supply a fraction of the materials needed to produce our current output. It is impossible to increase this in the short term as every other material supplier is already locked in their own contracts. Their output is nearly fully reserved by other manufacturers."

Too many industries required raw materials to produce starships, buildings and many other useful stuff. It became harder and harder for independents to do business because they found it far too difficult to obtain raw materials at reasonable prices.

This was why Isthmus Manufacturing's existing collection of long-term contracts were so important. They guaranteed the company's continued operation without needing to worry about getting cut off all of a sudden.

Though Ves felt a little guilty that his problems had spilled over to the company, the two had become too intertwined with each other to keep their problems separate.

For the sake of his 20 percent ownership of the company, Ves needed to save it from a potential crisis.

"I need to have a good talk with Mr. Micky Tarukan." He grumbled. "He is most certainly aware of these issues. His failure to inform me of this potential danger is a severe shortcoming."

"Isthmus is still de facto owned by the Impresario Prince, professor. Our leaders should have notified His Highness first. He may already be working towards a solution."

That sounded plausible, but it did not stop Ves from growing annoyed at being left out of the loop.

Ves sighed. "Whatever the case, I cannot allow my adversaries to disparage my living mechs and paint them as a threat to human society. I will do my best to defend my work when it is put on trial, but even I cannot completely predict its outcome."

He had a feeling that it wouldn't be as easy as he thought to get away from the public inquiry without suffering any consequences.

Perhaps he needed to think about taking additional measures in order to stack the deck in his favor.

He already had a plan in mind. It was risky and might cause him to owe a few more favors, but Ves could not afford to compromise his current business success just because he was afraid of making serious concessions.

The conversation eventually wound back to Kelsey Ampatoch's job application.

Ves had less objections to allowing the Journeyman join his clan than before, but that did not mean he was done with his questioning. He still had to figure out if Ampatoch was able to add anything useful to the Design Department.

"Let's talk about your work as a mech designer. What is your specialization?"

"I specialize in a Class I design philosophy that is broadly categorized as Subversion Systems."

A Class I design philosophy, huh? That was interesting. Mech designers who formed them tended to be very ambitious. His wife Gloriana happened to be among this relatively small group.

"What does Subversion Systems entail?"

Kelsey Ampatoch smiled as he began to explain his passion. "As a mech designer, I have never been content with working within the existing rules and expectations of technology. Back when I was a student, I had already acquired the habit of taking apart devices and trying to see if I could make them behave outside of their expected parameters. I became good at subverting their original functions and caused them to behave completely differently. By the time I graduated from university, I became much better at hacking, finding loopholes and exploiting all of these vulnerabilities. No system is perfect. There is always a hole, a gap or an unanticipated interaction that you can take advantage of. It is due to my specialization that allowed me to get in touch with the research of infiltrating enemy transphasic energy shields. Much of the theory is relevant to my own strengths, hence why I was able to adapt the tech into a fey."

Interesting. Kelsey Ampatoch sounded like a mech designer that would do particularly well in identifying flaws and shortcomings.

He also sounded like a dangerous person as he could easily help nefarious parties point out the flaws of their enemies before telling them how to best exploit these weaknesses.

Ves would rather have such an asset under his wing than to leave open the possibility that Ampatoch would work for his enemies one day.

All of this was pushing him into snapping up Kelsey Ampatoch on the spot.

Yet the more he felt this way, the more he grew suspicious about this entire sequence of events.

It was as if reality was going out of its way to ensure that Ves recruited the Rubarthan mech designer.

This entire circumstance favored Ampatoch so much that it just did not sit well with Ves!

Why was this the case? Was Ampatoch truly just the man he presented himself as, or was he hiding another identity?

Ves could not afford to let his doubts linger in his mind any longer. He needed to confront them once and for all if he wanted this job interview to go any further.

Chapter 5736 A Matter of Trust

## 5736 A Matter of Trust

Ves asked a few more questions to gauge Ampatoch's skills, work experience and mech designs.

Everything he heard painted the man as a talented civilian Rubarthan Journeyman who lacked the opportunities to fully realize his potential.

His case was not all that rare.

Ves had come into contact with many promising Terran mech design students while he taught at the Eden Institute of Business & Technology.

In an ideal society, commoners who were able to keep up with the progress of much more advantaged scions of Terran clans should have earned a lot more investment.

They already managed to overcome the limitations imposed by their inferior augmentations by relying on their abundant talent and their impressive learning speeds.

How much more amazing would they become if they received much better treatment?

Alas, Terran society did not have the resources to support all of these deserving mech designers to the fullest. Connections and quid quo pro mattered far more than raw talent.

Not even Ves could afford to pick up all of these deprived talents, though he was willing to recruit the ones he liked the most once they completed their studies.

The situation in Rubarthan society was a lot better in this aspect. Kelsey Ampatoch received a lot more opportunities and managed to become a respectable employee of a major mech manufacturer.

However, he was still far behind his colleagues who received a lot more privileges due to their wealth and family connections.

Kelsey Ampatoch was a fantastic fit for the Larkinson Clan if that was the case. The Design Department would be more than willing to give the Rubarthan the resources and opportunities to bloom his potential.

As long as Ampatoch did not disappoint the clan's expectations, he had the potential to become just as amazing and effective as Alexa Streon.

Although a direct comparison was not possible as they possessed different backgrounds, augmentations, ages and so on, they were still products from powerful first-rate superstates. The only mech designers who started off with a stronger foundation from them were those who were born and raised among the mechers.

However, it was also because of their insanely high competence that their influence in the clan was bound to become significant.

Already, Alexa was shaping up to become his deputy in all matters related to his design philosophy, product lines, his relations with the Terrans and many more strategically important affairs.

Ves had no qualms about trusting Alexa because he understood her quite well. As the granddaughter of General Axelar Streon, she understood that working for him was the best way for her to design or improve a legendary mech like the Ouroboros one day.

What about Kelsey Ampatoch? What drove him to work so hard?

Ves decided to ask this question directly.

"What is your ambition, Mr. Ampatoch? What sort of mechs do you dream of designing once you have become powerful enough?"

The Journeyman smiled as he thought about the goal that he was striving towards.

"I... want to design a mech that is not all-powerful, but can defeat enemies that can make this claim. I want to develop systems for that mech that enables it to defeat the strong while it is weak. Instead of relying on brute force, my ideal mech should be a highly efficient machine that is able to apply a minimum amount of leverage to topple the greatest of giants. I have met many mech designers who are doing their best to advance their careers so that they can design god mechs one day, but I want to be the first to design a mech that can defeat them without reaching their astounding level of strength. Don't you think that is a far more interesting challenge, Professor Larkinson?"

Amazing. Truly amazing. Ves had grown thoroughly impressed by Kelsey Ampatoch's ambition. It was no wonder that he managed to win the Fey Shaper Contest.

"So you dream of designing a godslayer."

"That... is a pleasant description of what I hope to make one day. I do not know how long I have to work in order to complete this goal, but I have no intentions of giving up. This is why I want to join your clan. I believe in you, your work and your clan. We have entered a new age. The old powers that are currently in control won't be able to adapt and exploit the new conditions as well as a smaller and more agile organization like your clan. I am more than willing to stake my future on your rise."

"Mhmm. I appreciate the vote of confidence. It is just..."

"What is the matter, professor?"

Ves paused for a few seconds before deciding to go out with it. "Let me be honest, Kelsey. Your work and qualifications appear to be in order. I see great promise in you, and I believe that your design philosophy can contribute much to our mech designs going forward. It is just... the picture you paint seems too good to be true. One of my biggest dislikes is getting scammed. I am not accusing you of being deceptive towards me, but you are not doing a good enough job of assuaging my concerns."

That caused Ampatoch to look disappointed. "That is regretful to hear. I am willing to undergo any test you give me in order to put your concerns to rest. I have heard that your clan has a unique method to test the loyalty and commitment of applicants."

"That is correct. It has proven to be incredibly effective for us, so much so that other parties are about to roll out similar solutions in the near future. Still... if you are a suspicious individual who is secretly working for a powerful organization, then it is not outside of the realm of possibility that you have prepared yourself against our methods."

"Please believe me that I am not a spy or an agent or anything! Your clan must have a professional interrogation department. Let them examine me. I have nothing to hide from you. My history and my studies are simple and can be corroborated by many people. My augmentations are clean and

based on standard commercial templates. You can ask me any question. I shall answer without reservations."

"I don't trust in words." Ves frowned. "Anyone can make up a good story. I need more than that in order to put my trust in you. I apologize, Kelsey. I am not being fair to you. I have not subjected other applicants to this kind of treatment. However, almost all of my other recruits applied to join my clan through regular channels. They have already passed many tests and examinations before they came to my notice. Your sudden appearance has caught me off-guard, and given the important role you can play in our clan shortly after you join, I cannot be too careful about this matter."

"I do not blame you, professor. I only ask that you give me a chance."

"That's the issue. I cannot think of anything thorough and decisive enough to give me a definitive answer."

This was starting to move towards an impasse. Ves was asking for proof that Kelsey could not provide.

Logically speaking, Ves was being way too paranoid about this. He should just take a gamble on Kelsey and hire him right away. Even if he turned out to be an issue, the Golden Cat and other monitoring systems should be able to catch him in time and prevent him from doing greater harm.

Yet... Ves still felt unsettled by this straightforward course of action. There was no logical reason for him to feel this way, and his intuition did not give him any obvious warning signals either.

"Stay still for a moment. I am going to resort to various unusual methods to examine you. Don't do anything unless I tell you to, are you okay with that? Do not resist if you start to feel weird. It is part of the process."

"Very well."

"Mrow!"

The first step that Ves took was to peek inside the body and spirituality of Kelsey Ampatoch.

Blinky moved forward and began to run through Kelsey's body. The companion spirit also took a really close look at the Journeyman's spirituality.

Nothing seemed suspicious or out of place.

"Ylvaine, lend me your sight!"

Ves then asked the Great Prophet to predict Kelsey's future trajectory if he got accepted into the clan.

Though effort was rather cumbersome to Ylvaine, his conditions were much better these days due to exposure to E energy radiation and the explosive proliferation of the Ultimatum model.

Of course, that did not mean that Ylvaine was able to see Kelsey's future with great clarity, but he was at least able to observe general glimpses through a fuzzy lens.

None of the visions that Ylvaine observed from Kelsey's potential future signaled that there was anything amiss.

The Rubarthan mech designer proved to be just as productive as Alexa Streon. He distinguished himself with his specialization and managed to make substantial improvements to his shield infiltrator fey, though the specific upgrades remained unclear.

This was not enough to convince Ves. What Ylvaine saw was only one of a huge amount of possible futures. Perhaps the highest probability outcome was for Kelsey Ampatoch to serve as a loyal, diligent and productive Larkinson mech designer, but that might only be because he was biding his time.

"May I make a suggestion?"

Ves had forgotten about the presence of the other two participants of the contest.

"What do you want to say, Tristan?"

"I cannot claim to understand your troubles. You are burdened with many more responsibilities than anyone else at your age. From my perspective, I think that you are being too unreasonable. Our society works because people are willing to lend each other a measure of trust. As long as the other parties are reasonable enough, why not give them the benefit of doubt? Any organization that hires a new employee faces the exact same problems as you, but they do not have the range of solutions that you have at your disposal. I cannot say that every hire they have made has worked out for them, but they made progress more often than not. I think it is much healthier if you just stick with what has worked for humanity for many millennia."

Tristan's reasonable works broke through Ves' fog of suspicion.

His old friend made a powerful point. Though Ves had reasons to be highly suspicious towards any powerful recruit, it was not healthy for him to indulge too much in his paranoia.

Ves took one more look at Kelsey Ampatoch. The Rubarthan mech designer tried to present himself as earnestly as possible. The man possessed a genuine desire to become a Larkinson and prosper alongside the rest of the clan.

"Fine." Ves eventually decided. "I won't recruit you right away. You have skipped the normal process, which is not supposed to happen. I will direct you to my staff who will let you go through the motions. Once we have conducted all of the necessary steps such as a background check, a health inspection, a test of your knowledge and so on, I will permit you to join my clan. As far as I am concerned, you should have definitively proven your qualifications to become a part of our growing family."

"Thank... thank you, professor!" Kelsey said with clear jubilation in his voice. "You will not regret your decision. I am looking forward to working under you soon."

Ves did not know whether he made the right decision, but he could not let his lingering fears and doubts dictate all of his behavior.

Of course, just because he was willing to let in Kelsey Ampatoch did not mean he was willing to trust the Rubarthan without reservation.

Ves also transmitted a set of instructions to his staff to arrange his Black Cats and other security personnel to monitor Kelsey's every move once he entered the clan.



Trust, but verify. It was not wise for the Larkinson Clan to drop its guard completely. Kelsey was bound to operate under intense monitoring in the years to come.

## Chapter 5737 Gloriana's Roadmap

### 5737 Gloriana's Roadmap

The Bluejay Fleet departed from the Keynar System and made its way over to the Ector System.

Ves took Kelsey Ampatoch with him since he was applying to become a Larkinson.

They rarely spent time together during the journey. Ves needed to catch up on his scheduled work

Meanwhile, Kelsey had to go through numerous rigorous tests and examinations to ensure he was fit to join the Larkinson Clan.

Neither of the two expected the screening to uncover problems that would cause Kelsey's application to be denied, but it was still useful to collect a thorough amount of data.

When Ves informed his wife of his decision to recruit Kelsey, she did not exactly react well to the news.

"I watched the broadcast of the event." Her physical projection said while pacing across the stateroom. "I admire his shield infiltrator fey. It is a well-designed piece of engineering that has managed to make the most out of its materials. That said, it is too hasty for you to recruit such a Journeyman. Alexa has been able to wield an outsized influence in the short time she started to work in our design lab, and now you have taken on another highly qualified first-class mech designer to our Design Department."

"What are you worried about, honey?"

His wife stared at him for a few seconds before she let out a sigh. "Control. I am worried that we are at risk of losing control to these first-class upstarts. Unlike the Journeymen you have recruited in Bortele, these first-raters exist in another dimension. They are so smart, so productive and so capable of adapting to new circumstances that I am afraid they may overtake us one day. You may not be so concerned about this problem given that you have already become a Senior, but what if Alexa or Kelsey manage to become a Senior just a few years later? What if they manage to progress their design philosophies faster than you? If they ever manage to realize their design philosophies while you are still decades away from doing the same, how will we be able to maintain our authority in the workplace?"

She had good reason to worry about this problem. Her chief concern was that she was still a Journeyman Mech Designer.

Unlike Ves, the chance of getting overtaken by the young guns was a particularly realistic possibility!

It was clear that she cared a lot about maintaining her voice and authority in the Design Department. Mech designers paid a lot of attention to rank and accomplishments because the ones who scored well in these aspects tended to know what they were talking about.

Ves could not imagine that proud and confident Terrans and Rubarthans would be willing to listen to a Journeyman who had failed to catch up to their progress.

Of course, if highly talented mech designers such as Alexa and Kelsey continued to make rapid progress, there was a chance they might be able to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer ahead of himself!

That would be a considerable embarrassment to say the least.

Fortunately, Ves did not care too much. Mech design was not a race. It paid to be thorough at times.

"So what if they advance first?" Ves shot back. "We are all Larkinsons here. If they have proven to be more competent, then let them be in charge. Our common goal is to help the Larkinson Clan. While I am not a Rubarthan, I kind of like their emphasis on meritocracy. I have tried to implement this principle into our clan as much as possible. It would be hypocritical of me to not put the best person in charge of our Design Department. As long as the candidate has proven he or she can be trusted to have our best interests at heart, I do not have any strong objections to letting them take control."

His wife looked scandalized. She looked as if she could not believe that Ves would actually be willing to bestow a lot of authority to a mech designer outside of their immediate family!

"Are you mad, Ves?! The Design Department is our most important institution! It is not only the foundation of our clan, but also the sacred temple that will help us attain our godhoods! How can you be so cavalier about handing over the keys to a Larkinson who may not be as diligent or well-meaning as us? This is our future!"

Her concerns were valid. Ves also shared the same mindset, but the difference between him and her was that he was more willing to put his trust in his subordinates.

"Leading the Design Department is different from leading the clan." He said. "Whoever I put in charge of it will still have to answer to me regardless. The only stuff the appointee can control is the specific operations of this department. In other words, administration and paperwork. That is boring work that is only taking away time for more productive pursuits."

His wife still did not look receptive to his arguments. She made a noise of discontent.

"I do not agree with you, but it is clear that I cannot change your viewpoint."

"Our clan must be fair. Everyone deserves a fair chance. The only condition that they must meet is that they are loyal and considerate to the clan and their fellow Larkinsons. I don't want our clan to become as stagnant and stratified as Terran society."

"Look, if you are so adamant on following the Rubarthan model, then at least you should take a page out of the Star Emperor's book."

Ves shook his head in disapproval. "For all of the Rubarthan pretensions of valuing merit over connections, their reality is not too dissimilar from that of the Terrans. I think we can do better, but the only way to ensure that is for the leaders of our clan to set an example. Our behavior will either serve as a positive or negative example for the rest of our clansmen. Let us make sure we do the former as opposed to the latter."

"..."

"Look, Gloriana. If you want to maintain control so badly, then you need to work for it. Earn your right to lead the Design Department through deeds, not words. How soon will you be able to

advance to Senior? The last time we talked about this, you told us that with the help of your new Arachne 01 implant set, it shouldn't take long for you to attain your breakthrough."

His wife's expression darkened.

"It is not that simple, Ves. If I chose to design the Dark Zephyr Mark III as a conventional expert mech, then I would have broken through by this time. However, my ambitions are not so limited anymore. Despite its alien providence, archetech is clearly a superior tech base. It can serve as the perfect foundation for a new class of high-end mechs that can outperform any conventional equivalent. The problem is mastering it, as you very well know. I cannot turn it into a core component of my design philosophy if I am not able to design a single mech with this tech. Completing the Dark Zephyr Mark III is not enough. I will have to design at least half a dozen more archemechs in order to gain a sufficient grasp in archetech. On top of that, I have to do more than imitate the arche. I need to develop my own innovations in this field, and that is a separate challenge that will require a large amount of trial and error."

Ves was glad that his wife had managed to figure out a clear roadmap to become a Senior Mech Designer. She was in a better position than many other Journeymen who toiled for years but still did not have a clue on how to take a meaningful step forward.

However, it still remained uncertain how long it would take for Gloriana to satisfy these conditions. She might experience delays if she continued to struggle with mastering the fundamentals of archetech.

Aside from that, Journeymen also had to meet other requirements in order to earn the Red Kingdom's approval. These hidden conditions separated the children from the adults. Ves had reason to worry whether his wife would be able to broaden her horizons and think beyond her own selfish interests.

It was best for Gloriana to come to a realization about the purpose of mech designers by herself. Ves doubted that the truth would sink into her stubborn mind if he just told her outright.

"Well, good luck with that. I hope you will be able to make good progress. The Dark Zephyr Mark III Project has been falling further and further behind schedule."

"I. Know." Gloriana gnashed her teeth at this reminder. "I am working on it. I have invested more time in my studies in order to overcome my latest hurdle. I should make good progress soon."

Ves was not so sure about that, but he gave her all of the encouragement she needed.

Once the call came to an end, he turned his attention back to his own studies and tried to move closer to earning the qualifications of a first-class mech designer.

The distance between him and his goal was shrinking every day. It felt gratifying for him to be able to make smooth progress. The more he interacted with first-raters, the more he yearned to design the powerful first-class multipurpose mechs they took for granted.

"Soon."

Time passed by. The Bluejay Fleet's rapidly traversed multiple zones before reaching its target destination.

Located in the middle of the Zelmar Upper Zone, Ector stood out as a particularly busy and prosperous first-class port system.

The trade hub's favorable positioning made it convenient to ship over lots of valuable alien warship salvage.

Large orbital salvaging centers efficiently broke down the debris and preserved any intact alien tech if there was any value to them. Their output subsequently got transferred to one of the many shipyards operating in other orbits.

All of this heavy industrial activity took place in and around Ector V. Its orbital traffic was so heavy that strict traffic control applied. No vessel was allowed to approach casually due to the high risks of sabotage and accidents.

Only a few top figures and organizations were able to receive an exemption from these strict rules.

The Red Association happened to enjoy this privilege, so the full Bluejay Fleet did not get blocked by the port system's powerful defensive garrison.

As the Tarrasque and her escort vessels settled into orbit, Ves moved to an observatory chamber and gazed at the globe where he would reside in the coming week.

He did not look forward to what was about to happen next.

He agreed to attend a public inquiry that was determined to shine an unflattering light on his living mechs because he had no other choice.

If he was not present to defend his own works, then his adversaries would be able to make any argument without receiving any serious pushback!

For better or worse, Ves had to be there and stand up for his living mechs because no one else was qualified to do his job.

"I am not afraid."

Despite knowing that multiple powerful parties had come together to impede his rise, Ves willingly accepted this challenge because it was a necessary process.

If he wanted red humanity to not only tolerate, but accept the proliferation of third order living mechs, then he needed to be proactive rather than reactive.

Rather than letting his rivals and adversaries continue to wield this issue as their club, he needed to take it out of their grasp and turn it into a torch that could inspire hope among the people!

Ves already had a gameplan in mind, but he needed to do a lot more strategizing if he wanted to pass this important hurdle.

"Let's see what I am up against. Who dares to stand against my living mechs?"

Chapter 5738 Ector System

5738 Ector System

The Ector System was a beacon of human civilization in the Red Ocean.

While it was not as well-developed as the central star nodes managed by the Red Two, Ector had become a veritable paradise for private shipbuilding companies!

Ector V's most prominent feature was not its heavily urbanized and industrialized surface, but the myriad of high-

tech shipyards orbiting around the globe.

Their sizes, shapes, architecture and technologies varied considerably depending on their construction date and ownership.

However, they all made second-class orbital shipyards look like shabby junk shops. The expense put into their construction made it clear why their owners were loathe to sell them to other parties.

They were too damn precious to build!

Almost all of the shipyards in orbit of Ector V had been constructed with the help of bountiful financial and resource support from the old galaxy.

Without the enormous economic interests from the Milky Way subsidizing the constructing of all of these high-tech facilities, there was no way that the immigrants of the Red Ocean could amass such an enormous concentration of shipbuilding potential.

With 20 capital shipyards, 78 sub-capital shipyards and 48 repair drydocks, many orbital bands had been completely overtaken by these massive orbiting giants.

They were so large and prominent that many of them could probably be seen with the naked eye on the surface of the planet!

"Amazing, are they not?" Ves grinned as he continued to appreciate the shipyards and all of the cargo traffic that flowed between them. "Hopefully, one of these shipyards will be mine after the end of the grand auction."

"Meow." Lucky listlessly responded as he floated behind Ves' back.

Ves had almost forgotten about Lucky back when he was about to depart from the Keynar System.

He had sent his gem cat on a covert exploration mission in the hopes of uncovering hidden cosmopolitans or evidence that suggested that people were not what they seemed.

Unfortunately, Lucky hadn't been able to catch a cosmopolitan in the act of plotting any nefarious moves.

Either they weren't present on Keynar, or Lucky had been poking around in the wrong places.

It was basically impossible to identify a cosmopolitan if that person did not speak or act like an alien lover, so observations alone were probably not enough to catch them in the act.

What Lucky did manage to do was hack into a lot of databases and steal a lot of random data.

The chances were great that the vast majority of data was useless to Ves, but there might be a few nuggets of useful records among them. The task of filtering out anything of value among an entire ocean of junk was incredibly cumbersome, however.

Given the source of the data, it was not convenient to leave this job to mechers he was traveling with. It was not acceptable to hand it over to the Black Cats as Ves would have to transmit his entire haul over an unsecured channel.

Ves decided to skim through the database himself. He did so as discreetly as possible by partitioning a part of his mind on manually going over a lot of miscellaneous data.

Lucky had grabbed bits of everything during his days long exploration trip. He obtained everything from experimental logs, accounting ledgers, personnel files, procurement lists, design specifications and even literature.

Naturally, much of the data taken from organizations based in a second-class port system was useless to Ves. He had access to much more valuable stuff from the Red Association. What other parties treated as valuable trade secrets was simply not relevant to a tier 3 galactic citizen.

Just when he thought that Lucky failed to gain anything of value, he suddenly hit the jackpot when he stumbled upon a small library of ancient cultivation treatises!

The scanned texts had all been translated into standard language, which allowed Ves to gain a cursory understanding of what they were all about.

The contents initially delighted him, but that did not last long.

He stumbled upon clues and snippets of information that cast a much more ominous light on the cultivation treatises!

Ves frowned and stopped his examination. While he badly wanted to get at the root of the latest mystery to fall onto his lap, he could not afford to get distracted at this time.

His overarching goal at this time was to successfully navigate his way through the upcoming public inquiry.

It would do him little good to conduct an investigation if his living mechs were no longer allowed to be sold anymore!

He let out a tired breath. "I need to know what I am dealing with. Let's go, Lucky."

"Meow."

Ves and his cat left the observation chamber and moved to an office compartment.

Two mech designers had already arrived beforehand. Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban suspended their chat and looked up at Ves with grave expressions.

"Ah. You have arrived. Good. Please sit so that we can share our findings."

When Ves took his seat, Jovy briefly summarized what he and his network managed to discover.

"The format of the public inquiry has become known. It will last 3 days in total, each day dedicated to exploring a specific subject."

"I see. Do I have to be present on all days?"

"Not necessarily, but I recommend you do so, if only to stay in the loop and prevent any misunderstandings from occurring."

"So what will we be talking about?"

"On the first day, the panel of experts is mainly tasked with exploring and analyzing the existing and future potential for living mechs to develop autonomy. In order to discuss the problem, people

first need to recognize that it exists. The opponents of your works will do whatever they can to amplify any risk and danger."

That caused Ves to frown. "As far as I know, there are no causes where living mechs have abused their autonomy and turned against thier pilots or the people they are supposed to protect."

Both Jovy and Vector shook their heads.

"There may be edge cases where the truth is difficult to discern. There may also be cases that have failed to reach your ears due to misunderstandings or other issues." The Transhumanist mech designer said. "You can be assured that your opponents have all of the resources they need to dig up every suspicious case. I advise you to be mentally prepared to answer for any possible misdeeds committed by your autonomous living mechs."

Ves almost growled. "I will do so as long as the cases are real, Vector. If they are not, then it should be my opponents who will have to answer for themselves."

Jovy took the word again.

"Once the first day has passed, the panel will reconvene on the morning of the second day. The central topic of discussion is whether living mechs have any place in our society. They introduce a lot of changes to the mech community that may or may not be desirable."

Vector leaned forward. "Your role is important here. You must present your living mechs in the best possible light. Only by emphasizing the many benefits of your work will you be able to tilt the scales in your favor."

"I can do that." Ves said after a brief moment of thought. "It is not the first sales pitch that I have given. Am I allowed to talk about the Carmine System?"

"No."

"No."

Both mechers offered the same response without hesitation.

"Why not? I bet that a lot more people will be inclined to accept my work if they know that a lot of norms will gain an opportunity to pilot a mech in the coming years."

"The rollout of Carmine mechs must be carefully managed to minimize the disruption to the current order." Vector Loban said. "Announcing them too soon while we do not have any suitable models for mass adoption in place will lead to severe unrest and confusion. This can do real damage to society and ultimately the war effort."

Jovy brought up another reason. "I have little doubt that the promise of Carmine mechs will instantly convert a large proportion of opponents into supporters, but... have you truly won the argument if that is the case? The fundamental problem that the public inquiry was meant to solve will still remain unaddressed if you make this move. You cannot bribe your way out of this issue. The human race has a long history of relying too much on artificial intelligences and paying the price for their lack of concern. You need to prove to the public that your living mechs are either not a threat, or that their gains outweigh their demerits. Only when you have put this particular matter to rest will you be able to sell your living mechs without encountering any opposition based on safety grounds."

The Survivalist was right. Ves needed to win this debate the proper way instead of trying to postpone it by dangling something shiny in front of people's faces.

"Okay. I get it. I will keep the Carmine System under wraps. That will make my case a lot harder, but I think I can manage."

Jovy smiled at Ves. "It is good to see that you are still confident. Let us move on to the third day. This is the most decisive moment for you, because the central topic is to determine whether living mechs should be allowed to proliferate without changing any rules, or whether we should impose restrictions regarding their sale and usage."

"Who do you refer to with 'we', exactly? Do they even have the power to enforce their judgment?"

"We will get to that later, Ves. For now, just assume that they can definitely enforce their rule throughout human-occupied space. There are at least three possible outcomes to the public inquiry. The most ideal outcome that you should be striving for is to maintain the current status quo. Living mechs can be sold without any official restrictions. It is up to the consumers to make their own judgment about whether they want to make use of mechs that can develop human-like intelligence and autonomy one day."

"How likely will we be able to secure this outcome?"

"No one can tell you that, Ves. There are too many interests and too many variables in play to make an accurate assessment."

"I see."

"The second possible outcome is that the opponents will impose partial restrictions on the use of living mechs. This can range from suspending their sales in certain zones, to forcing you to prohibit your living mechs from promoting to third order living mechs."

"What?!"

Ves grew so outraged that he stood up from his seat, causing Lucky to be startled.

"Meow!"

"I will not deliberately cripple my living mechs, especially when the only reason to do so is to placate the fears of ignorant people. My products are not killer AIs waiting to exterminate humanity the first chance they get! They are our partners, our helpers and maybe even our family. Making them smarter and more autonomous is only meant to help our troops, not hinder them in any way."

"We know that, Ves, but not everyone is able to accept this claim of yours. If the public inquiry proceeds so badly that your arguments hold no sway anymore, then the worst case scenario may happen."

"And that is...?"

"The total suspension of sales of your living mechs." Jovy slowly responded. "On top of that, a recall of all of your living mechs that are in private hands. Not all living mechs will be recalled if this verdict is made. You can probably allow your clan to keep making use of your products. Our Association operates outside of normal boundaries, so we can keep your living mechs as well if we have any. The real setback is that you will no longer be able to sell your living mechs to general



clients and customers. You can still sell other mechs to customers, but you will only be permitted to do so if your products do not contain any of the properties deemed objectionable."

"How... how likely will this happen?"

"The chance is low, but not impossible. If I were in your shoes, I would develop a contingency plan based on this possible outcome."

Chapter 5739 Opponents, Not Enemies

5739 Opponents, Not Enemies

The potential consequences of the public inquiry on living mechs was dire.

Ves did not know whether his opponents would actually be able to remove the vast majority of living mechs in use from the hands of their satisfied customers, but the fact that it was a possible outcome was already scary enough!

Even if his opponents gave him a bit of mercy by continuing to allow his Larkinson Clan to make use of his own products, that was poor consolation given that he served the needs of tens of millions of mech pilots just before.

A partial restriction sounded a lot better, but still did not sit well with him. He could cope with the decision to prohibit his living mechs from use in certain zones or geographic regions.

Ves doubted that this would hinder any of his serious fans and customers. At most, they would just have to relocate to a territory where the use of living mechs was still allowed.

It became a little more difficult for him to accept a restriction on the features of his products.

Third order living mechs were so much more powerful and promising than their second order counterparts that there was no competition between them. Their growth rate was astonishing and their real combat power was unquestionably superior to other mechs.

Ves did not know what he would do if his customers were no longer allowed to make use of third order living mechs anymore.

If all people had access to were first and second order living mechs, then many of them would grow up to become different versions of the original Ouroboros.

These living mechs should have enjoyed a much brighter future, but because of the unreasonable paranoia against AIs, their development would remain capped in many essential areas!

This was as stupid as the Hexers trying to keep their boys below 1.66 meters in height.

Ves feared that a compromise solution was the most probable outcome of this public inquiry.

If neither Ves nor his opponents made an overwhelmingly powerful case for their arguments, then the people who decided on this matter might just decide to go for the 'middle ground'.

Suffice to say, this was absolutely unacceptable to Ves!

The only outcome that he could truly tolerate was total victory. Nothing else would make him feel satisfied.

"Now that you have explained the three-day schedule, can you finally tell me about the people who have chosen to stand against my work?"

Both Jovy and Vector exchange another glance with each other.

"I suppose it is time for you to know who is trying to hinder you." Jovy said. "Before I say anything further, please note that their motivations vary considerably. There are people who merely want you to tone down your work so that their mech designs have a fair chance of competing in the mech market. There are also people who possess a genuine fear towards AIs, and equate your living mechs as a variation of them. Then there are people who are on the opposite side of the political arena from you. Your rise will cause them to suffer a loss in one way or another. That alone motivates them to stop or slow down your progress."

Vector Loban added his own opinion as well. "The majority of these people and groups are not your enemies. They have no intentions of killing you or ruining you utterly. Maybe they still appreciate your other products and hope you can succeed regardless of this possible setback. They merely think that you have gone... astray by conducting illegal research and experimentation. This is a distressingly familiar problem to Transhumanists such as myself. When you begin to push the boundaries with your work, you must accept the possibility of incurring a backlash. The public inquiry was already years in the making given the way your living mechs continued to affect human civilization. It only started sooner than we anticipated because exotic radiation is rapidly promoting the evolution of your impressive third order living mechs."

When mechs transitioned from being warm but mostly silent guardians to talking metal giants that could move on their own, it was no wonder that a lot of people got spooked!

In hindsight, Ves should have taken a lot more measures to prepare the mech community for the onset of third order living mechs.

His mistake was that he possessed so much confidence and appreciation in his third order living mechs that he automatically assumed that other people would be the same.

However, most people weren't as familiar with living mechs as him. They just saw a nightmare scenario come to life and may have found it difficult to treat the third order living mech as casually as before.

These people bore no fault, and neither did the people who opposed him for other reasons. A political enemy was not the same as a mortal enemy. Ves was still able to make this distinction.

He had no doubt that his real enemies were mixed into this gathering as well, though. Ves still needed to remain on his toes and defend his interests as best as possible.

"Enough stalling. Just tell me who is arrayed against me in this public inquiry."

"Well, we have formed a tentative list of known opponents. It is not an exhaustive list, but it should be enough to give you an overview of which parts of red humanity are trying to hinder your work on living mechs. The first group of opponents comes from our Association. I am afraid to say that the Red Association is not able to form a united front around your living mechs."

Ves already expected as much. He had known a long time ago that the MTA and RA were so immense that they were split up into multiple factions.

"Who among the mechers dare to stand against my work?"

"As far as we know, approximately 72 percent of the Mech Supremacist Faction, 20 percent of the Transhumanist Faction and 30 percent of the Survivalist Faction are opposed to your living mechs."

Ves pressed his lips. "These guys don't know what they are dealing with. If the Mech Supremacists understood the full potential of my living mechs, they would not be so strongly opposed to my work!"

"The Mech Supremacists are under the impression that increasing the intelligence and autonomy of your living mechs will eventually make mech pilots redundant." Vector Loban spoke in a sardonic tone. "You must think they are wrong or misguided, but you have to understand this situation from their perspective. They do not know as much about living mechs as you. They can only judge them by relying on their own observations."

Jovy gave Ves a reassuring expression. "This is what the public inquiry is meant to solve. It is not a show trial that is mainly organized to bash your living mechs. It is an opportunity for you to enlighten the Mech Supremacists and other people with insufficient understanding of the true qualities of living mechs. As long as you can clarify the mysteries of your living mechs and resolve any misunderstandings, there is hope that you can melt the opposition from the Mech Supremacist. They are most fanatical about protecting the rights of the mech pilots. A mech is not a mech anymore if it can fight our opponents by itself."

"I understand." Ves responded in a calmer tone. "I share a common value with them. It is just sad that they think that my living mechs are trying to replace all of their mech pilots. Do you know if any of the factions are opposed to my work?"

"We are still looking into that. There are many factions that do not have a strong opinion on this matter. Other factions are simply too small and inconsequential to have any say."

"Do you know if there are any god pilots or Star Designers that have come out in opposition to my work?"

Jovy immediately shook his head. "No. They may have formed certain opinions about your living mechs, but this is a matter that should be decided by the people. The influence of our top leaders is too strong. Anything they say will have a lot of blind supporters. Nobody will bother to think critically anymore. This will stifle any true and honest debate. As much as this may displease you, this is not a problem that can be solved by resorting to force or intimidation. The only weapons you are allowed to use are logic, ethics and philosophy."

"...Why are you looking at me as if I'm a caveman who only knows how to solve problems by bashing my club at them? I am a Senior Mech Designer, just like you! I know how to hold a civilized discussion!"

"Ahem, let us get back to the original topic. You can rest assured that no tier 1 galactic citizen will take the initiative to speak out against your work. However, you cannot count on them to speak in your favor either. If you think you can make your case by having the Destroyer of Worlds put in a good word on your behalf, then think again."

"Bummer."

"This public inquiry is about building up acceptance from a broad audience. The only way you can secure a good outcome is by appealing to the masses. The parties who have aligned against your living mechs are not immune to public criticism. They must respect the overall sentiment of the people in order to preserve the legitimacy of this inquiry."

"So what other enemies have I attracted? Has the Red Fleet moved against me as well?"

"It is difficult for us to discern the full inner workings of the Red Fleet, but we have confirmed that the RF Fifth Enforcement Fleet has come out in opposition to your work." Jovy replied.

"That is not a surprise." Vector Loban calmly said. "The enforcement fleets are usually tasked with solving the mistakes made by other people. They have a more jaded view of human nature than most."

"How powerful is the Fifth Fleet?"

"Do not underestimate them. That is all I can say. The most disconcerting aspect about the Red Fleet is that it is unclear whether you have any supporters among them. If the fleeters as a whole are either indifferent or opposed to your work, then that will mean that you will be impeded by an entire super-organization."

Ves scratched his head. "I guess I should do something about that."

"Let us move on." Jovy pressed. "You have detractors among the two first-rate colonial superstates as well. The Chabran Ancient Clan has come out in opposition against your work, though it is certainly not the only Terran group to do so. The Rubarthan Pact is much more problematic for you as the entirety of the Smokestack Principality has put its weight behind its opposition."

Ves had already been informed of the latter, so the news did not come as a shock.

"What about the other Terrans and Rubarthans?"

"A few are explicitly on your side. Think of the Streon Ancient Clan, the Devos Ancient Clan, the Inferno Spear Principality and of course the Impresario Principality. However, the remaining first-raters might not necessarily have a strong opinion on this subject. Your products have yet to proliferate among them, so they consider it beneath their notice."

"I see. That is logical."

The names mentioned by Jovy hardly encompassed the full spectrum of opponents against his living mechs, but they were already far too many for Ves to deal with by himself.

If he wanted to come out of this public inquiry in good shape, then he needed to gather allies by his side!

"Tell me you guys will help me out. Don't leave me to defend my works by myself."

"There are plenty of mechtechs among us who have a vested interest in your living mechs. We shall lend our aid whenever we can, but there are limits to what we can do. The opponents among the mechtechs will do their best to impede and limit our permissions, so you will still be obliged to make your own case."

"I see."

Chapter 5740 Charvey

5740 Charvey

The capital city of Charvey was the center of the Ector System.

Much like other first-class cities, Charvey featured a distinctly exotic architecture that was not only meant to showcase the wealth and sophistication of the governing powers, but also immersed its people in a unique setting.

As befitting Ector V's heavy reliance on its orbital shipbuilding industry, Charvey embraced the theme of water and utilized extravagant technologies to make a dream come true!

Ves and many other visitors grew astonished at the sight around them when they initially arrived in Charvey.

Water bubbles that encompassed large structures and entire city blocks dominated the cityscape. Specialized energy shields permanently locked the water bubbles in place, holding immense volumes of water in perfect spheres so that they submerged the structures within.

While there were still plenty of parks and pockets of dry places, these areas were clearly not the focus of Charvey.

It was the exotic sea-themed architecture and sea gardens contained within the many bubbles that truly evoked people's imagination.

The architects working for different organizations each went wild as they implemented all sorts of imaginative visions.

A mech arena took on the shape of an entire conch shell. Each time a fight took place, the unusual acoustics of the place amplified the sounds and ultimately caused the entire water bubble to channel low vibrations that could instill the lust of battle in any nearby bystander.

A restaurant situated in the middle of a floating water bubble was shaped like a giant but fairly slender dolphin. This creature gracefully flew through the air across a predetermined trajectory and made all of the patrons who looked out of the windows feel as if they were leisurely swimming across a sea.

The headquarters of a large shipbuilding company adopted the form of a wooden shipwreck of all choices. It looked like a haphazard ancient wooden seafarer that had crashed in the bottom of an ocean. Random pieces of wood, smoothbore cannons and even treasure chests with golden coins spilling out of them made the entire place resemble a theme park for children rather than a multi-trillion MTA credit shipbuilding company.

Of course, anyone who thought that this structure was so fragile that it could easily be demolished by a single mech would be sorely mistaken.

"Do not let your sight deceive you, sir." Kelsey Ampatoch said as he accompanied Ves while his recruitment application was still being processed. "Aside from all of the invisible transphasic energy shields, the wooden material itself is made out of a special organic formula that is designed to match the resilience of first-class exotic alloys. Since Ector V is a key star system, the authorities mandate that every structure must be as resilient as a fortress. First-class architects often see this as a challenge. The most efficient fortress designs are usually plain and geometrically shaped, but what their customers truly want is the opposite. This had produced a trend where the most expensive and well-designed structures are often those that do not look as if they can withstand a heavy blow."

This fell in line with the desire for first-raters to flaunt their wealth and power in the most extravagant ways possible. This was reflected in their architecture, mech design and their personal fashion.

Ves still found it difficult to get accustomed to this mindset. The Terrans and the mechers were relatively more constrained in this aspect, but the groups based in the Ector System were a lot less shy about expressing their individualism.

"First-raters." He sighed. "You guys are so weird at times, do you know that? You are willing to spend billions if not trillions of MTA credits on the most trivial of stuff. I cannot imagine how much money the local organizations have invested in this enormous sea bubble wonderland. All of that money could have been spent on more practical investments such as additional shipyards or a couple more colonies."

Kelsey shrugged. "Much of this city had been built during the Age of Mechs. Times were much different back then. I do not think that any red human is looking forward to building a city as unique and distinctive as Charvey in the coming decades. The Red War takes priority over everything else. The decline of culture is inevitable."

The man sounded a bit sad about that. Ves shared the same sentiment. There were many wonderful facets about humanity, but if the aliens continued to press onto human-

occupied territory, a lot of artworks would have to make way for more efficient use of resources.

"Meow." Lucky voiced his own opinion as his black archemetal form floated up and landed on Ves' shoulder.

"Yeah, you're right. A humanity that is completely engulfed in war is no fun anymore. It is only when people get to enjoy a more rounded life that they will truly be able to realize their potential. Cities like these... are part of our human heritage. Charvey needs to be protected as much as possible, and the same goes for all of the shipyards up in orbit."

As Ves and Kelsey Ampatoch continued to spend a bit of time on admiring the exotic sight before them, Jovy soon arrived through teleportation.

"Hello again. I apologize for the delay. I have been coordinating with multiple different factions. The public inquiry is scheduled to start in a few days, so you need to make the best use of your time. I have taken the liberty of arranging multiple meetings with the representatives of the opponents and proponents of your living mechs."

"What am I supposed to talk about with them?" Ves questioned. "I mean, these guys are all really smart. They have definitely done their homework on my products. Even if they have developed a number of misunderstandings about my living mechs, that is mostly because their judgment is clouded by their bias. In my experience, it is nearly impossible for me to change that. I don't think I will have a productive discussion with any of my potential opponents."

"I am aware of that, but you should still make the attempt to understand their public positions in advance, Ves. You will be better prepared to counter their arguments once the inquiry begins. You may even be able to soften their objections and convince them to pursue less extreme restrictions. If all else fails, you may be able to make a deal with them, though this is not a real solution."

"Hmmm... I guess that sounds useful enough."

Jovy shared a schedule where Ves would have to meet with a lot of representatives in the coming days.

There was little time for him to explore Charvey, not that he had any desire to do so due to safety concerns.

"Very well. Let's start to prepare, then. I also have suggestions of my own. I already took the initiative to contact an old friend. I hope he will be able to come in person, but he should at least be able to talk to me over the galactic net."

With that, Ves and his entourage began to get busy.

Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban went to their respective factions to persuade the skeptics and opponents among them to throw their support behind living mechs.

Kelsey Ampatoch utilized his Rubarthan background to scope out the detractors from the Rubarthan Pact and see whether they could be persuaded to change their minds.

Since Alexa did not accompany Ves on his travels this time, he had taken upon himself to figure out the Terrans.

The leading representative of the Devos Ancient Clan in the Ector System was a man called Peiter Rexha Devos.

Although he was just a branch member of his ancient clan, he had worked hard and managed to steadily climb up the ranks despite starting from behind. By the time he surpassed a hundred years, he had attained various successes as a businessman and a diplomat.

The direct descendants of the alien clans might enjoy a considerable head start, but even the Terrans did not discount the value of meritocracy. An organization ultimately had to be led by competent people if it wanted to withstand the test of time.

When Ves met Peiter at the compound owned by the Devos Ancient Clan, the man looked quite grave.

"The Terran Alliance as a whole is largely... indifferent to your living mechs. It has become difficult to persuade Terrans to embrace your living mechs, primarily because they do not have access to any first-class mechs that possess its traits. The only people who actually have personal experience with handling your work are the armed forces of the second-rate colonial states that are operating within our sphere of influence. However, their exposure to your work is not only far too recent, but also much reduced due to the problematic associations with your popular Ultimatum model."

Ves grimaced. It sounded silly, but the second-class customer base within the Terran Alliance had almost universally rejected the Ultimatum.

This was weird because the second-raters reacted a lot more positively towards the Fey Fianna!

The only reason why the Terrans rejected the very notion of the Ultimatum was because it was intrinsically tied to a Rubarthan god pilot.

Even a faint connection was enough to taint the Ultimatum as a Rubarthan mech in the eyes of the Terrans!

Ves found this attitude to be incredibly stupid and illogical, but the bad blood between the Terrans and the Rubarthans ran so deep that this sort of behavior could not be eradicated.

"Does that mean you have little confidence in our ability to drum up more support for living mechs among the people living in Terran space?"

Peiter Rexha Devos nodded. "I cannot think of any way for you to change their minds before the start of the public inquiry. There is not enough time to implement measures that can bolster your case in the short term. If we had a year of preparation time, I would have advised you to offer discounts to increase people's exposure to your living mechs. It would be even better if you designed a compelling first-class mech that can hold strong attraction to the Terrans. As it is, the best we can do is to engage in a short and expensive marketing campaign."

Ves shook his head in rejection. "That is too expensive, and I doubt it will be effective."

"Then I do not see any other measures you can take that can increase your support base in the short term. Let us shelve this topic for the moment and focus on the other side. Most Terrans ancient clans are indifferent to your living mechs, but the Chabran Ancient Clan has strongly come out against your works. Do you have a grudge or feud against the Chabrans?"

"No. Not directly, at least. The only possible explanation that I can think of is my clan's cooperation with the Boojay Family. The Boojays are former Terrans who got exiled from the Greater Terran United Confederation a long time ago. They still dream about returning to Terran place and usurping their original usurpers, who are presently known as the Chabrans. I am not sure if this is the only reason that this ancient clan has spoken against my work, but it is definitely a contributing factor."

"That is... an inconvenient circumstance, but not an insurmountable one." Peiter reluctantly said. "If the sole reason why the Chabrans object to your work is due to your relations with this Boojay Family, then there is no direct reason for conflict. It may be worthwhile for you to approach the Chabrans and see if you can forge a compromise with them. The chances of success are low, but they are not zero."

"I see. I guess I can make the attempt."

Politics. How tedious. Ves did not look forward to meeting with all of these scheming bastards.

He still needed to make the effort to come to an accord with his current adversaries. He owed it to his living mechs to defend their rights as much as possible.