

## The Mech 5751

### Chapter 5751 Crazy AI Ideas

#### 5751 Crazy AI Ideas

As a sentient AI, the subject of creating other sentient AIs had always been a priority to him. Sigrund used to be the only existence of his kind, and then ARCHIE came along and started to resemble him in more and more aspects, all without knowing why these changes were happening!

It had been the right decision for him to meet with Ves. As strange as his specialization may be to the fleeters, his work on living mechs clearly showed that he possessed unique insights into subjects like these. To be able to come up with a logical, if unsubstantiated explanation on how ARCHIE was transforming into a sentient AI proved that he could offer further assistance in the development of more powerful artificial intelligences!

The only problem was that the means of creating them was too controversial.

"Equating sentient AIs as gods in the making is not a good way to market them to the fleeters." Sigrund mildly said. "Will we have to resort to this method to create additional sentient AIs?"

"Not necessarily." Ves responded. "In fact, I don't think it is worthwhile for you to do so. People can only contribute so much spiritual feedback. The more deity cultivators they revere, the more their focus and energies become scattered. ARCHIE may be developing into a powerful entity, but his growth can easily stagnate if people stop interacting with him as much. Also, scale is important. It is too difficult to rely on this method to mass produce sentient AIs. You will need to convince billions of people to think about an AI in a similar fashion."

That was too inefficient. The Red Fleet fielded so many warships that could make use of their own sentient shipboard AIs. If they needed to borrow the populations of densely populated planets to generate single sentient AI, then the fleeters would always suffer a critical shortage in supply!

"Are there more expedient means to produce sentient AIs?" Sigrund asked.

"Maybe." Ves said. "Are you not afraid that their proliferation will threaten your own identity and life?"

"I serve the Common Fleet Alliance." Captain Reze claimed in an uplifting tone. "I will not engage in false bravado here. Our warships are struggling to withstand the onslaught of alien vessels. If the Red Cabal ever decides to launch a major offensive, then we will suffer losses faster than we can replenish. I know what sentient AIs can do. They can optimize the performance of our warships in ways that no human crew can do. It won't help us gain the upper hand, but it will make the war more bearable."

"I am willing to help if I can. So what do I need to do to get my hands on that sweet EE-343F-00334R?"

The RF officer took a few seconds to respond.

"Admiral Mieli is not opposed to trading away EE-343F-00334R. As vital as it may be, our research teams are already hard at work in developing superior alternatives that make active use of powerful hyper materials. The only issue is that it is unclear how much time our researchers will need to

make EE-343F-00334R redundant. There is a possibility that we may still need to keep it in reserve in order to restore the functionality of the Dominion of Man."

The fleters weren't going to make this easy for Ves.

The Red Association may be the best at figuring out how to turn a profit in every transaction, but the Red Fleet was almost just as good!

"I get it, Sigrund. Just tell me what I can do. I am open to doing almost anything as long as it falls within my area of expertise. As long as it is not difficult or time-consuming enough, I will agree to do it. Just don't make it vague."

"Very well. Our analysis on your confirmed and estimated abilities indicate that you may be able to grant sentience shipboard AI cores. Is this the case?"

That caused Ves to frown. "I think I can do so manually, but that is only possible on an individual basis. I am not a Star Designer, you know. Do not expect me to churn out thousands of AI cores for the Red Fleet."

"That is... not ideal. Is there still a way for us to produce them without requiring your personal intervention?"

"I have an idea, but... it breaks so many taboos and traditions that I will definitely attract the ire of both the mechers and the fleters if it becomes known."

"Since when has that ever stopped you, Ves?"

"Hahaha! I guess you have made a good point. My idea is not that complicated. I can't mass produce sentient shipboard AI cores, but what I can do is enable the mass production of mechs. The logical solution would be to combine the two together. I can design a mech around a powerful shipboard AI core. Its size, power and other properties are not important, so I can make it smaller and more compact than typical mechs if necessary. Once I complete the design, you fleters can produce copies by yourselves. The living mechs will start off as second order living mechs, but as long as you give them enough time to grow, they will eventually turn into third order living mechs. Once they have reached this stage of maturity, you can theoretically 'slot' them into your warships and attain the desired results."

"..."

Of all of the crazy ideas that Ves came up with, this one was definitely one of the more problematic ones!

Not only did it sound extremely unreliable, but Sigrund could easily predict that it would offend both mechers and fleters at the same time!

"Do you know how many people would kill us if they heard what you have just proposed?"

Ves shrugged. "Why cling to old taboos if they only get in the way? Let's face it, Sigrund. If we want to win the Red War, we shouldn't let this silly rivalry between the Red Two get in the way of doing what is necessary. You asked for a solution. I gave you one. The only issue is that this is a purely speculative approach. I am quite certain that it is way more complicated in practice. I will probably need to spend a few years developing this radical solution. The larger the warship, the

greater the load on the living mech. I am not sure whether a third order living mech can manage an entire battleship for example."

That caused the RF captain to express disappointment. "It is our capital ships that can benefit the most from a unified coordination and control system."

"You're asking for a miracle, Sigrund. I can't give you one. Developing new solutions takes time. The only way I can bestow a capital ship with a sentient shipboard AI core is if I manually make it alive."

Captain Reze took this information into consideration. Despite his amazing processing power, there were so many ambiguities that even he needed a moment to calculate the best response.

"Let us put this proposal aside." He said. "I have an idea that may be of great benefit to the Red Fleet. I have yet to go over this with my superiors, so I am unclear whether they will even entertain this suggestion. I judge that it is worth the attempt. The service that you will be able to provide to us might make such an enormous difference that it may be enough for you to earn your precious EE-343F-00334R."

Oh boy. This should be good.

"Tell me what is on your mind."

"Instead of trying to uplift every warship in the Red Fleet, it is more efficient if you can bestow greater intelligence and sentience onto our best and most powerful warships. Given their extreme sensitivity and importance to our organization, it may only be possible for you to experiment on a single strategically important vessel. What do you think about the possibility of bringing the exceptionally powerful AI core of a dreadnought to life?"

Wow. Sigrund certainly did not hold back when he made this proposal!

A dreadnought was one of the greatest pride and joys of the fleters. They were explicitly designed to counter god mechs.

Both Ves and the admirals who authorized this move would get into a lot of trouble if they worked together to turn a dreadnought alive!

A lot of fleters were bound to become indignant if they learned that a foul mech designer had been involved in any aspect related to one of their biggest and most powerful warships.

Meanwhile, the entire mech community would feel that Ves had betrayed them by directly strengthening a dreadnought!

Who knew how much more powerful the massive kilometers-

long warship would become after Ves had applied his nebulous 'upgrade'.

If the changes enabled the 'living dreadnought' to resist the influence of a powerful God Kingdom, then that would completely change the balance between the mechers and the fleters!

Ves could not imagine how much the mechers would hate him for doing this. He needed to keep his involvement as secret as possible, but he feared that a move as massive as this simply couldn't be hidden for long.

Why did Sigrund propose this radical plan? Did he not display a strong aversion at the mention of turning a living mech into a sentient shipboard AI?

"You have a personal stake in this plan." Ves accused as he figured out a possible motivation. "You are scared that the fleeters might discover the truth about yourself one day. When your true nature is finally revealed, it would help your case enormously if the fleeters have already become accustomed to working alongside sentient AIs. It would especially be convenient if those AIs just happen to control the most powerful warships that the Red Fleet has on hand."

Sigrund responded with a sheepish smile. "You are not wrong, Ves. I do have a selfish motivation in mind, but that does not affect the validity of this plan. All I need to know is whether you can make it possible."

The answer to this question was extremely important. Ves could not afford to make a spurious guess.

"There are several complications that I cannot fully account for. Dreadnoughts aren't normal hyper capital ships. They are vastly powerful in terms of hyper technology and maybe E technology. I may lack the raw strength to manipulate them sufficiently enough to bring their immensely powerful AI cores to life. I can only make a definite judgment if I have actually boarded one of these titanic vessels. The second issue is that I need to apply my method in practice on a test ship at least once to verify that my approach is valid. I do not want my first 'test subject' to be an extremely powerful dreadnought!"

"I agree with your concerns. I will look into possible solutions. I need to get back and present my latest proposal to my superiors. Any matter concerning our dreadnoughts is of extreme importance to the Red Fleet. I am afraid that only fleet admirals may be able to decide on this case. Are you certain that you are willing to attract this level of heat?"

"I'm already familiar with numerous tier 1 galactic citizens. Getting 'acquainted' with a few more won't make much of a difference." Ves nonchalantly replied.

"For what it is worth, I will do my best to argue on your behalf." Sigrund promised. "I am not saying this because I am relying on you to stabilize my 'soul'. I truly think that your active cooperation will strengthen our Red Fleet. As a loyal servant of the Common Fleet Alliance, I support any endeavor that will make our warships stronger."

"I can't help but notice that you repeatedly emphasize that your loyalty lies with the CFA."

"What of it, Ves?"

"The Red Fleet is formally separated from its parent organization. Technically speaking, the Red Fleet is a collection of deserters who have forsaken their original oaths to the Common Fleet Alliance. Do you owe any loyalty to the fleeters in the Red Ocean?"

"I am a loyal servant of the Common Fleet Alliance." Sigrund repeated in a distinctly repetitive tone.

Ves understood the AI's underlying message.

Chapter 5752 An Unspoken Accord

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After a lengthy series of discussions, Ves and Sigrund finally ended their dialogue for the time being.

The topics they mentioned were incredibly sensitive and could get them in a lot of trouble if they leaked to the public.

Nonetheless, both sides expressed serious interest in cooperating with each other. If it wasn't for the fact that they represented two completely different and arguably opposing camps, there shouldn't have been any need for all of this subterfuge!

The latest proposals discussed by Ves and Sigrund required greater input in order to move forward.

As much as Captain Zonrad Reze had been gaining a steady amount of glory and prestige, his power within the Red Fleet was only confined to a single warship.

The real people Ves was negotiating with were the admirals of the Red Fleet. Once upon a time, the mere thought that he would catch the attention of the highest ranking fleeters would have frightened him to the bone.

However, as a mech designer who had already squared off against god pilots and Star Designers, Ves did not feel intimidated by this development.

The opposite was the case. The ability to negotiate with the admirals and possibly the fleet admirals of the force most capable of unleashing mass destruction was a significant step up for Ves!

As long as he was able to skip most of the notoriously intractable bureaucracy of the fleeters and negotiate directly with the actual people in charge, he was sure he could establish a fantastic partnership.

The admirals possessed the best possible overview of the Red War. From the clues given by Sigrund, it was clear that the Red Fleet was not having a great time. Their warships were unquestionably the best in the dwarf galaxy, but that hardly mattered if the inadequate logistical and industrial capacity of human-occupied space failed to provide enough support.

Ves had encountered numerous instances where he was unable to exchange his goods and services for first-class warships.

No matter how attractive his offer sounded, the Terrans, Rubarthans, mechers and fleeters all clung to their first-class starships as if they were literal lifelines!

Despite the fact that they had thousands of powerful hulls at their disposal, they treated the destruction or transfer of just a single vessel as a tipping point that might possibly doom the future of their superstate or organization!

It was a profoundly extreme response that betrayed the true fear and apprehension among the people responsible for putting up the greatest resistance against the invading aliens.

Both Ves and Sigrund stood up at the end of their lengthy meeting and shook hands with each other.

"Will you..."

"Don't worry." Ves gave the RF officer a reassuring smile. "I haven't forgotten about my promise. Even if the admirals who you answer to ultimately decide to reject any further cooperation, I will still try to stabilize your spiritual condition. You deserve it for the information that you have graciously transferred to me. If there ever comes a time where you have been promoted to a high

enough leadership position, please remember what I have done for you and seek me out if you desire cooperation on other matters. As you already know, I am an inventive and unorthodox creator. My competences are not limited to designing mechs. If you can't solve a problem in the usual fashion, then maybe a less conventional approach will do the job."

"I shall keep that in mind."

Their expressions signaled an unspoken understanding of each other. Neither of the two were stupid. Whatever friction or animosity that existed between them in the past, all of it had become irrelevant in the face of mutual survival.

The two possessed vastly different talents and resources, but that made it so attractive for them to cooperate with each other.

There was no need for the two of them to join the same organization. They could do more for each other by maintaining their current affiliations with the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

Both of them knew each other well enough to know that their ultimate purpose was to benefit themselves.

There was no need for Ves to elaborate on his lack of willingness to assimilate into the Red Association.

Sigrund on the other hand may be compelled to serve the Common Fleet Alliance, but that did not necessarily mean he was prepared to lay down his life for the Red Fleet.

Both of them were small fish in a very big pond. They could only rely on the protection of the bigger fish for the time being, and had to work hard to survive the coming years where a constant stream of predators sought to take them down.

"Let's start." Ves said. "We can conduct this operation in a medical center if you want, but if you want to ensure total secrecy, then we should complete this procedure on the spot. This office is hardly the kind of place where people undergo life-changing operations. No one will notice a clue, especially since my actions will not lead to any obvious changes."

Although Sigrund found many aspects of this process to be sketchy, he suppressed his doubts and decided to put his trust in Ves. The man was known to keep his promises, and his commitment to service was as good as any other genuine mech designer.

"Let us get this out of the way before my AI core overheats from calculating all of the ways that this can go wrong."

Ves quickly took action. He guided Sigrund to a chair that automatically unfolded into a bed.

Once the RF captain laid in place, Ves brought out Blinky in order to perform the delicate process of suppressing Zonrad Reze's return.

"I... am beginning to feel apprehensive." Sigrund commented as the Star Cat dove inside his body and started to do who knew what. "Are you certain that this is safe?"

"Nothing about this is safe." Ves admitted as he supervised Blinky's work and acted as a second pair of eyes. "However, it is the least risky option out of the ones I presented to you. The reason why you feel so nervous is because a part of your instincts are transmitting warnings to you. Direct

manipulation of your spirituality is not supposed to happen. The part of you that is sensitive towards this cannot distinguish between harm and treatment."

"I see. The only means to do so is to pay attention and form my own judgment, is that correct?"

"Yes, but... you need to develop the right expertise in order to make accurate judgments."

"That is... problematic." Sigrund said as the conversation distracted him from his concerns about what exactly Blinky was doing with his spirituality. "The Red Fleet has always been aware of the phenomenon known as cultivation. Despite the changes wrought by the Age of Dawn, the fleet admirals unanimously instituted a policy of rejecting cultivation in all forms."

Ves almost paused. "I heard about that, but... I didn't think it would actually be true. Are the fleeters really so draconic about rejecting all forms of cultivation? It sounds so stupid. The new frontier is not the same as before. Exotic radiation is slowly mutating humans throughout the Red Ocean into more powerful but also less controllable beings. If you are not being proactive about it, then you will have very little control over what you will turn into. The gradual revival of Zonrad Reze is one of the outcomes of inaction."

Sigrund let out a sigh. "I do not disagree with you, but... the leadership of the Red Fleet are too set in their ways. A few admirals have shown to be more flexible and open-minded than others, but when it comes to directly empowering humans with E energy, they refuse to accept the benefits on ideological grounds. One of the core tenets of the CFA is that humans must remain 'pure' in body and mind. Many forms of augmentation are outright forbidden due to this reason, and cultivation is an extension of this pattern. Many fleeters still believe that relying solely on external technologies will allow us to maintain our way of life in a changing reality. The assumption that they desperately cling to is that developing our existing technologies will allow us to keep up with the growth of other powers who are much more open about embracing cultivation."

Ves took that to mean the Red Association. The mechers had already been cultivators in secret.

Now that E energy radiation made it viable for everyone to cultivate, the mechers simply decided to gradually introduce cultivation to the masses. The decision of granting power to those who did not necessarily deserve it could lead to catastrophic consequences, but red humanity needed to become stronger in order to survive the ordeals of the future.

It became clear that the mechers and the fleeters adopted two completely opposing approaches.

Nobody knew which side had made the correct call.

Was it a good idea to change the fundamental nature of humanity, or was it better to stick to the existing traditions that had always served the human race well?

Personally, Ves thought that the fleeters were being incredibly stupid by sticking their heads into the sand, but that was his own bias speaking out. The truth was that he did not possess the information to form a definite conclusion on which approach was better.

Perhaps the ultimate reality was that it may be better for red humanity to pursue both approaches at the same time.

While the Red Association dedicated a lot more manpower and resources into exploring how E energy radiation could advance the evolution of the human race, the Red Fleet focused a lot more on how to strengthen their existing hardware with hyper technology.

If the two earnestly worked together and made use of each other's results, then the Red Two would unquestionably experience a huge leap in power!

Yet close cooperation between the two was a nonstarter to many mechers and fleeters.

The mechers did not like to rely too much on excessively powerful warships.

The fleeters regarded cultivation as encouraging people to transform into monsters.

"Mrow."

As Blinky was in the process of finalizing his brief operation, Ves began to chuckle.

"As much as you fleeters want to deny cultivation, it will come to you anyway. If ARCHIE is exactly how you have described, then you fleeters have inadvertently created your own deity cultivator. This means that as long as every fletcher 'worships' ARCHIE by interacting with him on a daily basis, you will all become blessed by a fraction of his power. It doesn't matter if you haven't engaged in a direct form of cultivation. The fact of the matter is that any serious interaction with ARCHIE subsequently leads to growth in power. That is a form of contract cultivation according to my theoretical framework. I cannot wait to see how that affects you and your fellow fleeters in a decade or two. Will you still be able to recognize your current selves?"

"I hope so." Sigrund softly said as his apprehension levels gradually dropped. "I have little reason to question your judgment, but please forgive me for questioning the veracity of your analysis. If what you say is true, then a powerful sentient AI will ultimately gain control over the Red Fleet."

The only problem with that statement was that the sentient AI was not Sigrund.

"Yup. If I were you, I would do my utmost to develop and maintain an excellent relationship with ARCHIE. I am not sure about his current state, but I bet that he will follow an explosive growth trajectory in the coming years. The more powerful he becomes, the stronger the blessings he can transfer to the people he favors. Make sure that your name is on that list."

"I already intended to do that, Ves, though I was not clear about the greater implications of this approach. What can I even do as a contract cultivator?"

"That depends on a lot of factors, Sigrund. If you are willing to take a risk and defy the Red Fleet's directive, then I can teach you a few cultivation exercises that can help you leverage your growing power."

"Will they work despite the fact that I am partially an AI?"

Ves grinned back. "It doesn't matter so long as you possess a spirit. Even AIs can become cultivators."

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"I do not feel different."

"That's the point. The fact that you do not feel that anything is wrong is a sign of a successful operation. Congratulations. Your human alter-ego has become a much smaller threat. The probability that he will grow powerful enough to regain control over his body is minimal."

"But not zero."

"Nothing is impossible, Sigrund. My expectation is that as long as all of the variables remain constant, you won't get overtaken by Zonrad Reze anytime soon. The complication is that the variables will definitely change over time. For example, if you suffer extensive damage or if you are exposed to a high concentration of E energy radiation that injects a huge amount of power into Zonrad, you will still be at risk of getting overtaken. I cannot account for all of these possibilities. The only way you can protect yourself against these risks is to exercise your spirituality. Your strength is the root of your existence. As long as you are strong enough, you shouldn't have anything to fear from your human body."

Sigrund did not look all that receptive to Ves' helpful words. Cultivation was still taboo in the Red Fleet. If he exposed any sign that he was engaging in any such activity, he would definitely face a lot of sanctions!

"Is there no other solution?"

"There are, but I am not sure that you are willing to entertain them. Have you ever thought about cloning your current human body and using it as the carrier of your AI core? Clones normally don't come with any spiritualities, at least at the start. As long as you complete the transfer quickly enough, you don't have to compete with other entities for control of your human form. As for your current body, you can choose to let it go or dispose of it if you deem its continued existence to be a security risk."

This was a legitimate suggestion, and Sigrund had to think really hard about it. "It is a viable alternative, but the risks are too great. The fleeters will notice the differences. If I am unlucky, then one of our departments will launch an investigation to get to the bottom of my decision to swap my body."

"Suit yourself."

Ves and Blinky conducted a few more examinations. They found no problems. The operation hadn't been complicated to begin with, but it was best to make sure.

Once Sigrund raised himself to his feet and confirmed that he retained full control over his human body, he deactivated and retrieved his high-tech jamming devices.

"Our conversation has been remarkably productive, Ves. I am afraid that I will not be able to get back to you right away. If it is deemed necessary, I may need to journey to the flagship of one of my superiors in order to provide my account in total confidence. I will not be able to return before the start of the public inquiry, but I should still be available to speak on your behalf by remote. If an admiral is particularly supportive of one of our proposals, then you may be able to receive more substantial backing from a fleet."

Ves crossed his arms. "I am not sure whether the favor of an element of the Red Fleet will go down well with the mech community."

"We are all humans, Ves. We cannot blindly reject innovation just because of the risk that it will backfire on us. Your living mechs have done much more good than harm, and I think that pattern will hold. I cannot imagine that anyone will succeed in implementing a total ban on the commercial sale and use of your products. Too many customers will riot against their states and organizations if that is the case."

Ves thought so as well, but it was not wise for him to assume that his opponents would let him go with a slap on the wrist.

"There are still substantial possibilities that these bastards will implement partial restrictions. They will most definitely hinder the propagation of my living mechs to an extent."

As much as Ves looked forward to closing a deal with the Red Fleet that might finally allow him to complete another Supply Mission, he had to deal with the more immediate issue first.

After sending Sigrund off, Ves tried his best to set aside most of his considerations related to the Red Fleet and figure out what else he could do to improve his prospects during the public inquiry.

"I suppose I can meet with a few more supporters, but... will that truly help?"

Ves did not believe so, but it was not as if he had anything better to do with his time.

In the following few days, Ves continued to meet with various people who held different stances towards his living mechs.

Even if these conversations failed to improve people's impressions of his work, Ves still managed to get a better grasp of the groups that meddled into this affair.

Time went by until the first day of the public inquiry into living mechs had arrived.

Ves woke up fairly early, but he made sure he enjoyed a good night's sleep in order to restore him to his peak condition.

After freshening up his compressed body, he donned an understated blue business suit that did not contain any excessive embellishments.

Ves needed to project rationality and prove that he was in control over himself. This was not the time for him to engage in grandstanding or intimidation.

"Meow." Lucky floated around in concern.

"I'll be fine. I am more than ready to defend my living mechs. I have spent enough time on going over my arguments. It is the duty of every mech designer to stand by his work and defend his creations. I do not intend to fail in the coming three days. Even if these bastards manage to build up an advantage on the final day, I am still not without options."

If the worst case scenario was about to unfold, Ves could still resort to a number of nuclear options.

One of them was to defy the instructions of the mechers and expose the existence of the Carmine System.

The revelation was bound to shock everyone, so much so that all of the prior talk became irrelevant overnight!

However, Ves did not want to resort to this extreme option because it was an act of open defiance towards the Red Association.

If Ves broke his promise to the mechers once, he could do so again. He would never be able to rebuild the bond of trust that existed in the past.

His potential business dealings with the Red Fleet would only aggravate the situation.

Although Ves did not think that introducing the public to Carmine mechs a few years in advance would be a big deal, he would probably find it a lot harder to cooperate with the mechers on subsequent initiatives.

That was not a price that Ves was willing to pay. The damage to his interests would be too great.

For all of his expectations for developing a working relationship with the fleeters, Ves could not afford to forget that he was a mech designer at heart. It was vital for him to maintain good ties with the only authority that governed over anything related to mechs.

As Ves continued to think about what sort of extreme measures he would have to take in order to defend his living mechs, his shuttle finally took him close to the venue where the public inquiry was supposed to take place.

Consistent with the exotic aquatic theme that dominated Charvey, the entire place was submerged in a gigantic bubble of azure water.

The special shuttles built especially for the City of Seas effortlessly slipped past the energy shield that kept the water in place.

From there, the shuttle continued to propel forward until it had reached a secure landing zone where a bunch of aquatic mechs swam around and provided security.

When the shuttle touched down on a surface, the hatch opened, allowing Ves along with his mecher bodyguards to 'swim' outside.

Special energy shields kept their bodies dry, but also allowed their wearers to navigate the aquatic environments as if they were born in them. It provided a distinctly novel experience to first-time visitors.

"Charvey is a fantastic tourist destination." Ves remarked to his latest recruit. "The water not only immerses us in a radically different environment, but also provides an extra layer of security. A lot of weapons will find it a lot more difficult to propagate through water."

Kelsey Ampatoch nodded. "That is true, but the energy shields that keep the water in place are not infallible. There are probably redundant shield generators in place, but once they have been neutralized, a lot of upheaval will take place as all of the water disperses at once."

"If that happens, we better take advantage of this moment to get out of sight."

Not that Ves expected to be threatened by anyone today. Even though a lot of different groups had banded together to organize this public inquiry, the Red Association claimed total jurisdiction.

The mechers established a strong security presence at the venue. Both aquatic mechs and multipurpose mechs with aquatic combat capabilities protected the facilities up close.

Outside of the water bubble, more first-class multipurpose mechs patrolled the perimeter and beyond.

Anyone who did not have any business in the neighborhood had been forced to leave or turn away. Entire structures surrounded by water bubbles had to be emptied out because of security concerns.

The activity was no less frantic up in orbit. Ector V always imposed a lot of restrictions to orbital traffic, but the mechers became even more strict.

All of this provided Ves with enough reassurance to focus on the debate.

"The Dragon King's Palace." Kelsey Ampatoch said with amazement as he looked up at the enormous temple-like structure. It truly resembles an abode that is designed and built to house a mythical beast sovereign."

The main structure was enormous. The exterior was made out of a custom formula of white stone, but could withstand a lot more damage than it looked.

The expensive stone-like material was already impressive enough on its own, but the architects who decided how to employ them had sought to realize a magnificent design.

The enormous columns, the alloy-tipped dome roofs and the magnificent statues of dragons and other mythical creatures all combined in a grand abode that could simultaneously house an enormous creature while simultaneously host its royal court!

Ves was not familiar with the myths that the architects drew inspiration from, but that did not stop him from appreciating the vision and the craftsmanship of this grand endeavor.

The details that earned the greatest appreciation from him were the dragon statues. Each of them had been hand-carved with exquisite attention to detail, so much so that they had all become masterworks!

There were dragon statues everywhere, so the quantity of masterworks was absolutely incredible.

Ves did not know how many master artisans had been hired to produce all of these genuine masterwork sculptures, but it had to be a costly endeavor, even for a first-class organization that already invested huge sums into the colonization of the Ector System.

"What is this place even being used for?" He questioned.

"It is closed to the public most of the time." Kelsey said as he had already looked up the information. "It is a prestige project. It mainly exists to broadcast the wealth and power of the owners and rulers of Ector V. The fact that it happens to be large and impressive enough to host the public inquiry is a secondary concern."

"How wasteful. Don't get me wrong. All of this is beautiful enough to stir my imagination, but the waste of resources is so extravagant that I feel pained with every step I take towards the main palace."

"The Dragon King's Palace was entirely funded by old galaxy money. We lived in a different reality back then. Now, there is talk about dismantling the Dragon King's Palace, but it has never gained enough support to make it happen."

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5754 Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-

Castelaus

The main debate was scheduled to be held in the center of the magnificent underwater palace.

Strangely enough, the massive chamber remained submerged in water, which meant that people could easily swim up and down whenever they pleased.

It also altered the acoustics of the entire venue, not that it mattered as the extensive use of high technologies ensured that everyone could hear the principal speakers when the main event started.

An event as high-profile as this attracted a huge amount of interest from the public.

Unfortunately, there were too many barriers in the way that hindered second-raters traveling to the Ector System so that they could attend the public inquiry in person.

That still left a lot of first-raters who had many reasons to witness the proceedings in person.

Much of the 100,000 guests that were permitted to attend the three-day event. Many of them were locals, but the organizers went through the effort of limiting the guests to professionals from the mech industry, shipbuilding industry and other related sectors.

Each of them had their own reasons to care about the proceedings. It was actually quite difficult to find anyone who was not affected by the outcome considering that Ves' works made a huge difference in people's lives.

Many first-raters might not possess that much interest in second-class mechs, but they could deny that Ves was good at his job. His mech company already started to sell millions of mechs back when he was just a Journeyman, and now that he had become a Senior, his mech designs had only just begun to pick up their stride!

As such, a lot of people slowed down their conversation and stared at Ves. The slightly murky water that was supposed to simulate a shallow ocean environment made it a bit more difficult to view him with the naked eye, but the projectors that displayed the live broadcast made it a lot easier to notice his arrival!

Ves tried to resist the urge to smile and wave at everyone. He instead chose to maintain an impassive expression and move forward so that he could get an update from his two mecher helpers.

"Jovy. Vector. How optimistic are you guys?"

Neither the Survivalist nor the Transhumanist dared to offer a response. This was hardly the most private venue to talk strategy and such.

Still, the lack of response did not bode well for Ves. He decided to ask another question.

"How are our opponents? Is there anything about them that I need to know?"

"According to our investigation, one of your predictions has come true." Jovy said. His voice warbled a bit due to getting transmitted through a body of water. "Master Alice Cantor of the Mech Supremacist Faction and Professor Kacuk Chabron of the Chabran Ancient Clan have both taken upon themselves to lead the opposition."

Ves did not look too surprised. "Those two have shown the strongest bias and prejudice towards my work. Their views only make sense due to paranoia and excessive fear. That also makes them the most difficult people to reason with. I can at least credit them for being sincere. They genuinely think they are protecting their people from the perceived threat posed by my works."

"That only makes it more challenging for you to gain the upper hand during the upcoming debates." Vector Loban quietly said. "Both speakers are passionate about their respective causes. They will be able to sway a lot of doubters who are tuning into the broadcast. Do not expect them to budge at all

when confronted by counterarguments. The best you can do is to tailor your message to your true audience."

"I know. I am not as old as the speakers from the opposition, but I have plenty of practice in public speaking. I will manage. Do we know who will preside over the debates?"

Jovy nodded. "Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus has agreed to moderate the public inquiry himself. He has lived over three centuries and spent much of his life as a shipwright. He eventually transitioned into administration before ultimately dedicating the remainder of his life to politics. He easily managed to get elected to lead Ector V as many people and shipbuilding companies believe that only a former professional of the largest industry in this port system will be able to keep their economy thriving."

The prosperous state of Ector V clearly helped the planetary governor's case. The man had to be doing at least something right for it to become the premier shipbuilding nexus in the Red Ocean Union.

Ves looked around for a bit and noticed the slightly lowered circular pit at the center of the massive court.

"Is that where the speakers are supposed to make their case?"

"Yes. It is anything but traditional, but pay no mind to it. Aside from the fact that the speakers must remain standing all of the time, there are no other special rules."

A few minutes passed as Jovy proceeded to explain a few other rules such as when they were permitted to use projections. They could also invite guests to provide their testimony on certain topics.

It was all quite elaborate. Ves had no doubt that his opponents would make clever use of these permissions to paint his living mechs in the worst possible light.

The enormous submerged chamber continued to welcome more and more arrivals.

Many of them swam to their floating seats that had been reserved for them. Others moved to the sides where the proponents and opponents had claimed their territories.

The opposition had gathered a lot more people, but only a fraction of them intended to raise their voice during the public inquiry.

The rest were primarily analysts and other helpers.

Ves did not have much need for advisors, so the people around him were not as numerous.

"Have any representatives from the Red Fleet arrived?" He questioned as he looked around the entire venue.

"Not yet, but we have already received word that Lieutenant-

Commander Astrid Jameson is due to arrive on behalf of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet."

"Her name sounds familiar."

"That is because she is the great-great-great-great-

granddaughter of Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson." Vector Loban answered. "Fleet Admiral Jameson is known to be an aggressive firebrand who holds very strong opinions on how human society should work. Her descendant has lapped it all up. You can expect the lieutenant-commander to be just as fiery."

"I... see. Since she is a lieutenant-commander, I take it that she quite young when compared to the other speakers."

"She is only 33 years old. Do not underestimate her because of that. What she may lack in experience, she makes up for it by growing up as one of the princesses of the Jameson Spaceborn Clan. The Jamesons have always been known to advocate stronger enforcement of the rules. Some of them have even urged for taking over direct control over states."

It was fortunate that the Jameson Spaceborn Clan was only one among many. The other True Spaceborn Clans that supplied the vast majority of manpower to the CFA and RF were much more restrained in comparison.

"I can handle her." Ves confidently said. "I am sure the Fifth Enforcement Fleet has a lot to say about my living mechs, but it does not represent the entire Red Fleet. I have already made contact with a captain of the Seventh Light Fleet. He might not be able to arrive in person, but he will probably be able to speak in my favor by remote."

"That will have to do, I suppose." Jovy did not sound as confident.

Once the final guests had taken their seats, everyone quieted down as the main event was about to begin.

The planetary governor finally arrived.

The man had dressed up for the occasion. He wore a suit made of azure scales that sparkled like gems. The light reflecting from the scaled outfit varied depending on the angle and intensity.

A large white cape furled from his back. Its length was truly excessive, but somehow flowed so elegantly through the water that it made the former shipwright look majestic as opposed to pretentious.

Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus definitely carried a lot of presence. His confident and elitist bearing made it seem as if it was the most natural action in the world for people to show their respect to him. He was the closest equivalent of a king to the citizens of Ector V, and right now he looked like he was at home in his court!

As the moderator of the public inquiry steadily crossed to the other side of the massive chamber, he eventually stopped before an impressive carved throne.

Made out of high-grade exotics and hyper materials, the throne's exterior resembled that of a giant clamshell. The giant 'pearl' had been shaped into a smooth and curved throne that somehow looked completely natural despite the fact that it was artificial.

Naturally, this extravagant throne was so exquisite that it turned into a masterwork!

From the moment Rod Mergan-Castelaus sat down, everyone had the illusion that they had welcomed the arrival of their king.

The fact that the former shipwright-turned-politician managed to do all of that without relying on any extraordinary power was impressive!

Now that he had taken his seat, the moderator formally announced the start of the public inquiry.

"Good morning, citizens of the Red Ocean. Today, the Dragon King's Palace on Ector V shall play host to an exploration of a new breed of machines that have taken the second-class mech market by storm. Over the span of his short career, Professor Ves Larkinson has managed to outperform all of his peers by designing living mechs that are so powerful that they are capable of dominating their markets for an entire mech generation."

The planetary governor's voice had already been augmented to produce a rich, baritone voice. The acoustic systems of the chamber amplified it even further, making him sound even grander and more authoritative than normal!

"Tens of millions of living mechs have been produced. The overwhelming majority are being put in active service, and many have already fallen to alien weaponry. The fact that many customers have chosen to field them in battle signifies that they are capable of fulfilling the purpose of their creation."

Ves felt grateful that the moderator acknowledged at least that much. This should help cut down on false arguments.

"Yet it is their popularity that is the cause for rising concerns about Professor Larkinson's products." Mergan-Castelaus continued. "The more our mech forces depend upon them, the more they become exposed to the potential risks and dangers of utilizing them on a growing scale. These concerns are legitimate enough to hold public inquiry into this new category of mechs."

The air grew heavy as the planetary governor paused for a few seconds.

"Make no mistake. This is not a tribunal. Professor Larkinson is not accused of any crimes. This public inquiry will not end with a verdict that determines his guilt, and no punishment shall be levied for any convicted crimes. This is merely a public inquiry that is meant to explore the detailed circumstances of living mechs. The ultimate goal is to become so well-informed that we are able to form common ground on how human society should treat living mechs in their current incarnations going forward. Since the actual adoption and implementation of the consensus must be done by individual states and organizations, it is our common goal to find an outcome that all parties can agree upon."

It was nice of the planetary governor to mention that. There were many instances where Ves felt as if he was being put on trial, but that was not the case. Reminding other people of that would help them refrain from treating this as an instance to lock him behind bars.

If Ves ever got accused and convicted for a crime, then these people at least needed to wait until he grew out a beard!

Chapter 5755 The Basic Model of Living Mechs

5755 The Basic Model of Living Mechs

The first day of the public inquiry had begun.

After a magnificent introduction from Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus, the audience became primed for a long, multi-day debate on living mechs.

The talks did not attract an immense audience. Ves had been able to draw a lot more eyes with his product reveals due to his reputation for showing off awesome new tech and mech models.

While the speakers of this event were bound to use battle footage as examples, they were clearly not the focus of a public inquiry. Much of the public inquiry was meant to be fought with arguments and speeches.

Much of the public understandably had no patience to listen to all of the boring politicking. Their lives were already busy enough and they had better things to do with their time than listen to the speakers bicker with each other.

However, it would be a mistake for ordinary people to think that the outcome of this public inquiry did not matter to them. Living mechs and everything that came with them promised to revolutionize the mech community. They brought qualities that were unheard of before Ves came onto the scene and proved many times over that they could succeed where other competing mechs would fail!

The people who understood this reality the best were the millions of customers and mech pilots who had already purchased and made use of living mechs.

Their appreciation for the LMC's products were almost universally positive, and would hate to let go of the machines they had invested in. The battles they fought and the interactions they made with their real living machines resulted in mutual growth for both the mechs and the mech pilots.

How could ordinary mechs ever replicate such a unique experience?

A lot of mech pilots who utilized living mechs for the first time often became sold for life. They refused to transfer to a non-living mech because they found them to be downgrades.

The public inquiry directly threatened to harm the interests of these loyal fans and customers.

They made up an unusually high proportion of viewers who tuned into the broadcast. They could be counted upon to remain engaged throughout the lengthy speaking sessions.

However, there were also other people who were just as invested on the opposing side. As the products of the LMC began to capture more market share, they displaced a lot of competitors.

Plenty of mech designers who previously enjoyed varying degrees of success in the second-class drone mech market and heavy artillery mech market suddenly lost out on a lot of revenue.

It wasn't just the mech designers incurred losses. Hundreds of thousands if not millions of average workers throughout the various middle zones all lost their jobs, commissions and so on as entire supply chains became unprofitable due to dropping sales.

Companies specialized in the sale, distribution and after-

market sales of previously popular product lines such as the Sparrow Storm line collapsed in months as customers had completely abandoned the mech ecosystems they used for years!

The Ultimatum also took away a lot of market share, but it at least gave competing heavy artillery mechs more breathing room.

The cash cow that was largely produced by Isthmus Manufacturing failed to dominate its category due to its excessive pricing and overspecialization in a single role.

That did not prevent Ves from designing other mechs that could displace a lot of product lines that previously dominated the market for a long time.

SKL Mech Industries had already lost out big time when its Sparrow Storm line turned into an abandoned child.

Other mech companies that were just as big if not bigger had many reasons to fear the Living Mech Corporation!

Despite the huge disparity in size and wealth, the LMC had one unquestionable advantage.

It was led by a Senior Mech Designer who had already proven his ability to defeat thousands of Master Mech Designers in terms of market success!

Ves keenly realized that he and his mech company had become the nail that must be hammered down. There was no doubt that much of the opposition was fueled not by legitimate concerns towards the safety of living mechs, but by plain old dirt competition.

Since the old market leaders could not compete fairly against living mechs, they likely funneled a lot of effort and resources into the opposition.

This meant that his enemies encompassed more than a bunch of mech pilot advocates and AI scaremongers. Ves could not afford to underestimate this opposition.

"Professor Larkinson." The man who looked like a sea king spoke from his magnificent pearl throne.

"Yes, governor?"

"Since this day is dedicated to exploring the merits and properties of living mechs, it is your obligation and your right to introduce them in your own terms. Please stand in the center of the speaking pit and give the public an overview of your works."

Ves smiled and nodded. "I would be glad to give everyone an introduction and a refresher."

By now, many people had already learned about the existence and the basic properties of living mechs.

He did not question the need for an introduction because people learned about living mechs from all kinds of messy sources.

The first day was dedicated to exploring all of the nuances of living mechs while also eliminating any misunderstandings and misinterpretations about their properties.

This was important because establishing truths that could not be questioned anymore deprived a lot of ammunition from the opposition.

If Ves did not do a good job on this day, then his opponents would definitely hammer him on the next two days!

As Ves strode to the center of the so-called speaking pit, he briefly admired the themed aesthetics of the interior of the Dragon King's Pace.

He would have loved to explore the architecture of this structure like a tourist, but his duties came first.

"Citizens of the Red Ocean." Ves began to speak as he faced in the direction of the clamshell throne. "Today, my living mechs have become subject to an increasing number of doubts and accusations. In my private discussions with some of the detractors to my work, I realized that many people fundamentally misunderstand my products. The fault does not necessarily lie with them. Radical innovation often produces results that contradict established wisdom. To understand my works, you must let go of some of your preconceptions and treat them differently."

Ves slightly spun around and gazed up at the rows and rows of seats filled with guests who expressed interest in this subject.

"Before I go on to explain the basic physical and non-physical properties of living mechs, let me begin by explaining their place in society." He said in a calm and measured tone. "Living mechs serve almost the same purpose as normal mechs. Both of them exist to fulfill a common need, which is to bestow mech pilots with a lot of power in order to complete their combat missions. My products may be able to do more than ordinary mechs, but they are always designed with mech pilots at the center."

He produced a projection that showed a simple theoretical model.

"The combat system centered around mechs is never about the machine alone. Instead, the mech and mech pilots both work together to combine their respective advantages while compensating for each other's weaknesses. Simple, correct?"

The projected model changed. The ordinary mech got swapped out by a living mech.

"Here you can see that living mechs still preserve this original relationship. This bond is still essential as my mechs are never designed to function by themselves. I admit that they may have the capacity to do so in an emergency, but too many factors will deteriorate if my living mechs are left to their own devices."

Ves waved his hand, causing the connection between the mech pilot and the living mech to break.

"Disconnecting these two variables from each other will cause this vital synergistic relationship to disappear. The mech pilot will be reduced to an ordinary human. The most he can do is don infantry gear and fight with only a fraction of the amount of power that he previously wielded."

Ves gestured towards the other variable.

"The living mech on the other hand lacks the training, experience, judgment and creativity of a professional human soldier. Depending on how long it has lived and how much experience it has accrued, a relatively intelligent third order living mech may be able to fight its enemies like a battle bot, but make no mistake. A living mech that fights on its own can never fully replicate the capabilities of a mech pilot. There are qualities to humans that artificial lifeforms do not possess. What is also important is that living mechs cannot 'break through' in the same way that humans can. There is no way that my products can evolve into god mechs or their equivalents, simply because god mechs are inescapably tied to their god pilots. Since the production of god pilots is one of the highest priorities of our civilization, this consideration alone is enough to reject the premise that living mechs will make mech pilots redundant."

As Ves continued to address his audience, he felt awfully exposed by speaking from the lowest location in this immense chamber.

He was accustomed to holding speeches from an elevated position. Reversing this trend gave Ves the illusion that he was being put on trial.

It was not a good feeling.

"The additional features that I have attached to my iconic living mechs serve as a complement to their core purpose and functionality. They are not designed to make mechs more powerful while diminishing the role of their pilots. They are instead designed to empower them both. They do so in different ways, and I would be more than happy to elaborate on them. I just want to make it clear right away that solely fixating the consequences of my design philosophy to my mechs while completely ignoring my efforts to promote the development of mech pilots is a huge mistake. I will not hesitate to challenge everyone that thinks my living mechs either do nothing or exert a detrimental influence on mech pilots. I have countless pieces of proof to back up my claims in this regard."

Ves really did not want to make it easy for his opponents to claim that just piloting his living mechs was detrimental in any fashion. This was a stupid argument, but people might believe it, so he wanted to shut it down as soon as possible.

"If that is not enough to convince you, then listen further. To those who have yet to read my record, my design philosophy played a central role in the development of living mechs. The Red Association has formally registered it as Mutual Growth. Think about what this phrase means. It contains the word 'growth', which in this context largely means power. It also contains the word 'mutual', which means that a factor is affecting at least two parties. Combine these two meanings together. The result is what I aim to do. Never have I designed a living mech while completely disregarding the safety, the success and the future prospects of its mech pilot. If you have any understanding of mech designers, you will know that we cannot break the core principles of our own design philosophies."

Ves gave this explanation with as much earnestness and conviction as possible.

He even began to loosen his restraint on his glow for a bit. This not only caused people to have a better evaluation from him, but also made it easier for his arguments to get accepted without too many questions.

"Alright. Now that we have gotten that out of the way, let me proceed by explaining the basic but vital elements of living mechs..."

Ves spent the remaining hour on giving his audience a crash course on living mechs. He briefly touched upon core concepts that he would teach to the students of his Introduction to Living Mechs course.

Since he had already taught this introduction lesson multiple times, Ves effortlessly eased into the role of a lecturer and tried to hold a short but engaging lesson on his iconic products.

Chapter 5756 Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson

5756 Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson

Ves was sure that a lot of people tuned out of the broadcast as he continued to lecture about living mechs.

In order to establish an objective baseline that could casually be questioned by his opponents, Ves needed to start from the beginning and touch upon all kinds of subjects that many of his customers had long grown familiar with over the years.

It couldn't be helped. Ves did not want to create misunderstandings by skipping on essential subjects. He needed to build a foundation based on truth to deflect any arguments that were based on falsehoods surrounding his living mechs.

As Ves continued his lecture, the opposition remained silent for the time being. The speakers who intended to paint living mechs in a much worse light did not intend to let him go unchallenged, but they understood that this was not the time for them to interrupt.

The public inquiry was a marathon, not a sprint. The first day was mostly devoted to developing a better understanding of living mechs. All of the discussion needed to be anchored around this core goal.

The right to speak first was incredibly valuable because it enabled Ves to set the baseline on living mechs. His opposition would probably do their best to challenge his many claims and assumptions, but they would be doing so at a disadvantage because they needed to work hard to convince the public to accept their alternative explanations.

The more Ves elaborated on his living mechs, the more his opponents had to work in order to weaken the existing foundation.

Once Ves believed he had spoken enough about living mechs, he wisely decided to stop before he started to bore even his most dedicated audience.

There was only so much lecturing they could tolerate. The public inquiry was also meant to allow multiple voices to have their turn, so Ves could not be allowed to speak all day.

"...Now that you have obtained a basic grasp on the essential variables that make up a living mechs, I hope that you have developed a proper understanding of the unique E-

technologies that make them different. One of the fundamental reasons why my works are so often misunderstood is that many of my design solutions are intangible. That has caused plenty of people to develop wild ideas about them, but once you dive into the theory, you will find that they are similar to other engineering solutions."

It was important for Ves to demystify the existence of living mechs. Too many people misunderstood them because they did not work according to normal science.

"Living mechs are part of a brand new frontier of technology that has great potential. It would be foolish to reject innovation that can contribute massively to the war effort solely because it is more difficult to grasp than usual. Already, there are mech designers who have begun to grasp the theory and practice of living mechs. This proves that the theoretical framework that I have built is solid enough that it can be taught. I can promise you all that there will come a day where the advantages that I have accrued will become a part of our collective human heritage."

That was also an important point he had to make. Living mechs had put a lot of people out of their jobs because their employers had no way of matching the features that Ves took for granted.

By reminding people that the art of designing living mechs could be taught, Ves presented hope that other mech designers would be able to design products that were just as good as the Fey Fianna or the Ultimatum.

Of course, it was questionable whether other people believed in this claim. Living mechs had already built up a reputation for being notoriously obtuse and difficult to learn. The opposition was sure to criticize this point.

Once Ves had vacated the central position and returned to his previous place at the side, the planetary governor pointedly gazed down at the leading opposition figures.

"Now that the creator and chief proponent of living mechs has delivered his introduction, it is time for us to hear an alternative perspective. This subject is far too great to rely on a single source of information to form our judgment. Now, who among the opposition wishes to speak first?"

"I do!" A surprisingly young and female voice spoke out. "I am Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson, and I have been appointed by the Fifth Enforcement Fleet to share the Red Fleet's rapidly growing concerns about the spread of the infestation called living mechs."

Her tone and words were bound to provoke a lot of negative reactions from the audience. There were many loyal users of living mechs, and they did not appreciate a fleeter referring to their assets as a plague upon society.

Though Astrid Jameson did not exactly make a good impression, it was not strictly necessary for her to charm her audience. She just had to instill enough doubt and fear towards living mechs to complete her goal.

Clearly, she had decided upon an aggressive strategy. It was risky, but the potential gains were great so long as she did not mince any words.

Her opening was already sufficient to wake up a lot of people and revive people's interest in the public inquiry.

It helped a lot that she was surprisingly young and attractive for a fleeter officer. She possessed a similar high-class grace that Ves was accustomed to seeing from elite scions such as Alexa Streon.

Her blond hair was braided in a crown that made her look more dignified and her red, black and gold fleeter uniform was sized exactly right for her toned physique.

Her most remarkable feature was her obvious signs of cybernetic augmentation. The Fleeters had always put greater emphasis on cybernetics as opposed to genetic modification to improve their capabilities, but even then they tried to do their best to retain a natural human form.

The lieutenant-commander apparently saw no need to be discreet and openly wore her visible cybernetic augmentations with pride.

Her electronic hazel eyes, her enhanced vocal modulator, her elf ear-like sensor array and all sorts of other touches elevated her to an individual that was beyond human.

Though her appearance was bound to evoke feelings of rejection or alienation among the audience, they were usually the most inconsequential part of the population.

The wealthier and powerful folk had all embraced human augmentation to such an extensive degree that they could not imagine life without their upgrades. The thought of living like a baseline human was a nightmare scenario as far as they were concerned.

Therefore, Astrid Jameson's extremely high-end cybernetic augmentations were also capable of generating a lot of envy and admiration among the viewers of the live broadcast.

The young fleet officer presented herself as an idol that many people wished to strive for. They wanted to become as successful as her and upgrade their bodies with all kinds of first-class cybernetic implants that could make their jobs a lot easier.

Even Ves grew a little jealous about all of the handy features that Astrid stuffed in her body.

Though Ves had already fulfilled the dream of many cosmopolitans by becoming a phase lord, his weird physical evolution left him unable to make use of regular human augmentations.

Outside of freeloading from the energies unleashed by a lightning tribulation, he had to develop his own solutions in order to upgrade his intrinsic capabilities.

Ves inwardly shook his head. He couldn't afford to get distracted by the fleet officer's high-quality augmentations. He needed to pay attention to her words if he wanted to be ready to push back against her words.

As Astrid Jameson stood at the center of the speaking pit, the central lighting made it difficult to ignore her presence.

Once she became assured that she had drawn as much attention as she could, she began to speak with her perfectly modulated voice.

"Technology is dangerous. This is a lesson that teachers have always taught to humans throughout the generations, but it bears repeating. Technology has made us powerful, but it has also caused tragedies throughout our long and turbulent history as a race. During the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs, we have advanced our technologies at such a rapid pace that we are overwhelmingly responsible for the deaths of our fellow humans. We have killed each other a hundred times if not a thousand times more than any foreign alien race! If you do not believe me, then study our history. We are our own worst enemy!"

This was shocking information, but Astrid did not reveal any new information. As she said herself, it had always been evident in the history books that humans liked to kill each other for many different reasons.

They liked to kill a lot of aliens as well, but that was a story for another day.

The most important part was that Astrid had made her point. By framing her argument around human's inherent capacity towards killing each other, she could paint any powerful weapon as an existential threat towards their race.

Ves frowned. He could already guess where Astrid Jameson wanted to take her story.

"Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it." The woman quoted in a voice that conveyed a lot of gravitas. "This ancient phrase has rung true far too many times than it should. During the darkest years of the Age of Conquest, humanity was ruled by irrational actors who let their emotions drive themselves to tyranny. The consequences are well-known. The entirety of

human civilization had been pushed to the brink, and only with the rebellion of the remaining sane admirals did we manage to put an end to all of the mass slaughter."

Typical. The fleetier completely ignored the role played by the Mech Trade Association.

To be fair, the mechers had very much been the junior partner of their alliance. The Mech Trade Association had only formed relatively recently and lacked a lot of accumulation.

Combined with the murky history where a lot of events got buried for one or another, it still remained unclear how much the MTA had contributed to the pacification of a civilization gone mad.

"There is no single cause to the collective descent into madness that ended the Age of Conquest." Astrid slightly lowered her tone. "Many factors combined together to produce a confluence of disasters. However, those who have studied this period of history in extensive detail cannot deny that runaway technological innovation and humanity's inability to prudently manage all of its new toys has unquestionably set up our own downfall. Too many humans gained power that they were not equipped to handle. Whether it was control over warships that possessed the power to crack the crust of a terrestrial planet, or extreme instances of genetic modification where mixed alien genes overtook pure human stock, our race has abundantly demonstrated an inability to control our greed and lust for power."

The vast majority of humans were born long after the end of the Age of Conquest inflicted a huge amount of trauma onto their race.

Nonetheless, Astrid still managed to evoke visions of fear with her tale. Just because it happened centuries ago did not mean it could happen once again.

After all, those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it. Many people had this quote in mind.

"The living mechs designed by Professor Larkinson represent progress beyond anything the mech industry has ever produced." Astrid admitted. "It is exactly because we are venturing head-long into uncharted territory that we must stop and think about where this technological branch is taking us. If you study them in greater detail, you will eventually discover that Professor Ves Larkinson's works are not based on novel science, but ancient mysticism. This may be a surprise to you, but it is not a secret to the Red Fleet."

Wait, what?

Ves immediately felt a lot more tense as the lieutenant-commander's speech ventured into dangerous dangerous territory.

Astrid whipped around and pointed an accusing finger at Ves!

"The truth is that Professor Larkinson is far more than a mere mech designer! His mother is a cultist, one who has mastered unfathomable witchcraft that runs counter to the laws of reality that governs our technology! Not only that, his mother was part of a hidden cabal of mysterious and inscrutable cultists who ruled original humanity in secret during the entirety of the Age of Conquest! Near the end of their reign, this secret cabal of madmen became so mad with power that it would have caused the extinction of our race if not for the rebellion of the brave admirals and spacers who overcame the spreading wave of insanity!"

Many people looked confused, but the higher ranking individuals among them looked shocked and horrified at the secrets that Astrid Jameson so casually spilled to the public!

"You!" Astrid pushed her finger towards a hapless-looking Ves. "As the ancestors of the Jameson Spaceborn Clan once stood against the evil witches and warlocks that sought to sacrifice the lives of our entire population to feed their delusions of power, I shall bravely stand against the evil magic that you are attempting to spread to your unknowing customers! You are not a mech designer. You are a cultist who wants to do nothing more than to lead red humanity into an age of ignorance and superstition!"

As the fleetier flung her accusations, a lot of powerful people started to get restless!

Chapter 5757 Tearing Away the Veil

5757 Tearing Away the Veil

Ves and his advisors had analyzed their opposition. They predicted many possible strategies that their adversaries might use to halt the momentum of living mechs.

Yet despite all of their brainstorming, none of them predicted that the Red Fleet, or at least a faction of it, would dare to tear away the veil of secrecy and shine a light onto one of the darkest events of human history!

Before Astrid could casually reveal other buried secrets that lots of leaders had endeavored to hide, Governor Mergan-

Castelaus activated a command that forcefully dampened the sound in the speaking pit.

The public inquiry had barely managed to get going before it already went off the rails!

In fact, the governor should have muffled the lieutenant-

commander sooner, but for whatever reason he allowed the woman to expose just enough to recontextualize Ves in a much more awful light!

Though Ves did not have reason to suspect whether the opposition had bribed the moderator, it was rather suspicious that the planetary governor had taken his sweet time to do his job.

Astrid's shocking revelations generated so much upheaval that the governor of Ector V found it necessary to stand up from his pearl-like throne.

"SILENCE."

A single amplified word was enough to cut all of the restless chatter.

The governor adopted a much sterner demeanor than before.

"I am compelled to provide immediate clarification to keep this session in order. According to the prevailing rules of our society, Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson's speech has touched upon a part of human history and heritage that she is not authorized to share to the public at large. The prevailing reason why this is the case is to protect our civilization and help our race heal from the damage that we have collectively occurred during the Age of Conquest. Whether enough time has passed for red humanity to reconcile with its past is not the subject of this debate. It is unfortunate that the speaker from the fleet that most values adherence to the rules has chosen to break them in such a flagrant fashion."

That was a rather clever way to rebuke the fleeter without coming across as rude.

The problem was not that Astrid had broken the rules. The real concern was how people would react to the explosive pieces of information she had just revealed!

Even if she didn't have enough time to spill out a lot of secrets, it was a given that her opening words already made the public aware that human history was not as simple as described in all of the official history books!

A pregnant pause ensued as Rod Mergan-Castelaus fell silent for a dozen or so seconds. It was not difficult to guess that he was receiving an urgent transmission from outside.

His old eyes sharpened after he received an urgent communiqué.

"The Red Two has just issued a joint statement that they are preparing to address the questions concerning the past history that they have kept secret for centuries. While an argument could be made about withholding any information about these controversial subjects, the Red Association and the Red Fleet have quickly come to the decision that our society is ready to learn the truths that our people were not ready to hear in the previous age."

The mechers and the fleeters certainly moved quickly. Now that the cat was partially out of the bag, they might as well pull the feline out entirely and get it over with. Keeping the cat in its current state would only spread more doubt and misinformation.

The governor slowly began to sit down on his throne again.

"It will take time for the Red Two to prepare their announcement. Their press conference will start shortly after the end of this public inquiry. For now, I ask the speakers to confine their speech to the subject of living mechs. Whether it is true that there are aspects of Professor Larkinson's lineage that are related to the aforementioned moments of human history, please refrain from using arguments that rely too much on information that is not yet easily accessible. This is a public inquiry. We must provide as much clarity as possible to the general public. Doing the opposite goes against the spirit of this organized event."

The governor essentially explained the limits of how far down the rabbit hole the speakers could go. It was clear that Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson would love to expose a lot of dark and hidden secrets to make the public turn against Ves, but that would only derail the public inquiry even further.

The governor turned to Astrid.

"I have been informed that you have violated numerous regulations of your own organization. It is not my responsibility to arrest you or determine your guilt. The Red Fleet has refused to dispatch their enforcers to take you into custody. As such, I have decided to revoke your right to speak for the remainder of this day. Lieutenant-commander, do you have any objections to my sanction?"

"None." The woman spoke from the side now that she had regained her right to speak. "I am solely responsible for my premeditated actions. I deemed it necessary to expose the dark past of Professor Larkinson lest we all debate the merits of his work while remaining ignorant of their terrifying implications. I will not allow this pretend mech designer to lure his ignorant clientele into a pit of darkness and slaughter. The scourge known as cultivation must never be allowed to hold our civilization captive again!"

The governor was close to muting the young RF officer, but Astrid had gained a good grasp on his limits. She directed one more defiant stare towards Ves before turning around and leaving the speaking pit.

The rule-breaking lieutenant-commander at least acquiesced to her penalty.

The moderator of the public inquiry gestured towards Ves.

"Professor Larkinson, you are permitted to respond to Lieutenant-Commander Jameson's... accusations. I would like to ask you to exercise careful control over the information that you wish to divulge. As a Senior Mech Designer, you should be intelligent enough to determine your own limits."

Ves smirked as he stepped towards the center of the speaking pit again. "Don't worry. Unlike a certain fleeter who has demonstrated her complete lack of confidence by breaking the rules, I am confident I can convince my audience of the merits of living mechs by relying on public information. In fact, Lieutenant-commander Jameson has actually made my job easier. Her purposeful disclosure of certain secrets allows me to speak more freely about the mechanics that make my living mechs special."

He had thrown away his entire playbook that he and his advisors prepared before the start of the public inquiry.

He was going by the seat of his pants at that moment. This did not distress him at all. The derailment of the public inquiry instead made him feel more alive.

The future trajectory had gone off-track. Astrid's defiant decision to break the veil of secrecy had changed humanity's course forever, and Ves gained the opportunity to play a central role in shaping the public's perception towards cultivation!

With the Red Two scrambling to contain the fallout of Astrid's actions, Ves knew that he had attracted the attention of a rapidly growing audience.

More and more people tuned into the broadcast. Millions if not billions of individuals across human-occupied space had heard about the explosive revelations and eagerly wanted to know more!

No matter whether they were first-raters, second-raters or third-raters, each of them gave in to their curiosity and hoped that Ves would provide clarity about the accusations made by Astrid!

"Citizens of red humanity." Ves spoke as he began to radiate his glow to a growing degree. "First, let me tell you that it has never been my intention to deceive you. There is a hidden layer of reality that only a small proportion of humans have come into contact with. I am sure the Red Two will offer a proper explanation of what that entails, but for now you can assume that it exists. No matter whether you refer to this extraordinary phenomenon as magic, witchcraft, psionics or cultivation, it is a tool for humans to obtain power, but it can also pose a threat that can erode your humanity."

Everyone listened closely to his words and wondered what else he might reveal. The common folk were especially eager to learn more about this exotic form of power!

"I will not deny that individuals known as cultivators have committed horrendous abuses in the past. The MTA and CFA rightfully feared what might happen if the generic public recklessly attempted to pursue a corrupting form of power on a wider scale, so they suppressed any secrets related to cultivation just as they have deprived us of warships. Throughout the centuries, the

mechers and the fleeters have fulfilled this mission so well that I am certain that many of you entertain doubts whether all of this is true."

Ves stretched out his hand and began to perform a simple spell that he learned from an enlightenment fruit.

The water above his palm began to spin and turn into a more condensed water ball.

"It is. This is one of the many parlor tricks that a cultivator who has become proficient in the manipulation of water-

attributed E energy can perform. I can assure you that I am not making use of hyper technology to conjure this fireball. None of my augmentations have anything to do with this. The charm of cultivation is that even a baseline human without any augmentations can replicate my actions. The main requirement is that the human in question must practice the right techniques in order to harness the power of E energy."

Ves would have conjured a fireball if this chamber wasn't already submerged in water.

"Now, those who are clever may have already discovered that E energy radiation plays a large role in cultivation. I can tell you that it is much easier to draw strength from cultivation in the Red Ocean than in the Milky Way. Each and every red human has received an opportunity to transcend their limitations. Mech pilots and mech designers are not the only kinds of people who are able to strengthen themselves through self-evolution. The Age of Dawn has restored humanity's birthright and restored our ability to empower ourselves much further than was previously possible."

Governor Mergan-Castelaus began to stare more intensely at Ves. This was clearly a warning signal.

Mindful of what he was allowed to divulge, Ves quickly turned to more familiar ground.

"Ahem, cultivation has never been completely unattainable to us all. High-ranking mech pilots and mech designers openly flaunt abilities that cannot be replicated by ordinary people. You just never made this connection because the Big Two deliberately obfuscated these connections. Once you realize the truth, you will know that cultivation is not as frightening or dangerous as Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson has claimed. It is a method of developing power that benefits our civilization immensely as long as we exercise sufficient control. In the last four centuries, the Mech Trade Association has imposed strict control, to fantastic success. The god pilots and Star Designers that emerged during this period have proven that cultivation can be a boon instead of a bane to our society."

A lot of people who previously harbored a lot of irrational fears towards cultivation became a lot calmer once they learned that mech pilots and mech designers were related to this mysterious phenomena.

The public suffered from cognitive dissonance for a long time due to the Big Two's deliberate efforts to obfuscate cultivation!

Now that Ves pointed out this connection, people finally had an explanation for all of the oddities and incongruences surrounding the two extraordinary professions!

"You may wonder what living mechs have to do with this mysterious subject." Ves said with a smirk. "It is not that complicated, actually. My products can assist in the growth of mech pilots because they are also able to cultivate! My heritage may be tainted, but I have always utilized the

extraordinary knowledge that my mother has gifted me to better the lives of every human. Please do not judge me for the crimes committed by deviants who lived far beyond my time. Judge me by my many contributions, some of which are kept secret because they are much more helpful than you can imagine."

## Chapter 5758 An Enlightened Scientific Discipline

### 5758 An Enlightened Scientific Discipline

Ves had done it again!

An event he participated in had gone viral!

Nobody expected the broadcast for the public inquiry on living mechs to explode in popularity all of a sudden.

After all, it was not a mech tournament where cool mechs violently clashed against each other.

Although the Dragon King's Palace provided a resplendent and magnificent backdrop to the debate, the fact of the matter was that people initially expected the speeches to drag on for hours.

While Ves had initially given the public a droning lecture on the basics of living mechs, the youngest speaker in this historic event had detonated a bomb that was reverberating throughout human-occupied space at an increasing intensity!

Suddenly, the veil that had always hidden the characteristics of a phenomenon known as cultivation had been ripped apart!

Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson's name went down in history as the whistleblower who recklessly exposed a vast conspiracy that had fooled humanity for centuries, if not longer!

The distinct lack of denials from the Red Two did not go unnoticed.

The fact that the mechers and the fleters felt necessitated to schedule an emergency public announcement immediately after the public inquiry had reached its conclusion showed how dire the situation had become.

Ves was sure that a lot of people discreetly received a lot of messages and alerts through their comms or cranial implants.

He had received a flood of messages himself from many different parties, the vast majority of whom he never met or heard before.

It became so overwhelming that he had outright blocked all incoming messages. He could not afford to be distracted at this point. Revelations or not, he still had to make a case for his living mechs. If Ves truly needed to be informed about a new development, then his advisors and staffers would let him know.

Right now, Ves tried his best to confine his awareness to the grand hall of the Dragon King's Palace.

The underwater environment, the masterwork dragon statues and the genetically modified fish that leisurely swam in every direction without a care in the cosmos made it easier for Ves to mentally isolate himself from external influences.

While he was tangentially aware that a rapidly growing amount of people tuned into the live broadcast of this event, the huge separation between himself and the ordinary people spread

throughout the new frontier meant he wouldn't have to face their doubts, their curiosity, their hopes and their desires.

Ves felt fortunate that he didn't have to deal with the headaches that came with being a deity cultivator.

He already had enough of a taste of that through Vulcan.

His dwarven incarnation had to deal with a lot of crazy beliefs from deluded Vulcanites. It helped that Vulcan was also far better equipped to handle all of the attention.

Ves did not possess that advantage, but he was not as sensitive towards spiritual feedback either. There was something inherent about the mech design profession that specifically blocked this uncontrollable source of influence. He suspected that his design seed or flame or whatever might even use it as fuel to power other mysterious processes.

The Progenitors of Mechs deliberately sought to shape mech designers into support personnel.

Allowing this new profession to gain a lot of personal power by becoming more popular went against the spirit of their ethos.

The extreme specialization envisioned by the Progenitors was meant to bake large-scale cooperation in human society by making people dependent on each other.

The revival threatened to break this model.

Many cultivation methods were inherently selfish, so much so that they had almost brought the human race down.

Right now, a lot of people's attention was drawn towards the young woman who had completely upended human society.

Despite receiving a sanction, Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson was still allowed to witness the proceedings from the side. She just wasn't allowed to step into the speaking pit anymore.

From the periodic changes in her expression, she was definitely communicating with plenty of people through her cranial implant.

The chances that anything serious would happen to her was slim, though. Her lineage alone was sufficient to protect her career.

In fact, Ves even suspected that Astrid's move was not the result of an impulsive decision by a hot-blooded young officer, but was instead an important component of a more calculated strategy devised by her superiors.

The shadow of Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson loomed over her descendant.

Everything Ves learned about the Fifth Enforcement Fleet made it clear that it bore the strongest hatred and animosity towards cultivation and other weirdness.

Perhaps the fleters of the Fifth Fleet had witnessed the quiet encroachment of cultivation throughout the new frontier for months, and grew progressively more concerned where humanity was heading towards.

The rise of living mechs was just one of the symptoms. The reckless spread of unverified cultivation methods over the galactic net and the rapid expansion of the Hunting Association was causing a lot of humans to come into contact with dangerous phenomena.

It was one thing to engage in cultivation while knowing all of the associated risks.

It was another thing to do the same while remaining ignorant of the significance of this action!

The Jamesons probably thought that they were doing their duty to protect the humans under their charge by disclosing a hidden threat.

Ves could already feel the tension and uncertainty spreading from the spectators in the underwater hall.

They had all become confronted by a mysterious phenomenon that not only contradicted conventional human understanding, but had also been lurking in the background for who knew how many years!

The unflattering description given by Astrid Jameson did not exactly paint the field of cultivation in a good light.

As much as Ves wanted to leave the job of addressing this highly contentious topic to the Red Two, the lazy bastards only planned to provide an official explanation several days later.

Ves was sure that if the mechers and the fleeters really wanted to, they could suspend the broadcast of the public inquiry and address the public right away.

Yet the powers that be did no such thing. They remained in the background and seemed content to allow Ves to blather on about living mechs and his apparent ties to the world of cultivation.

When Ves briefly turned around to face Jovy and Vector, both RA Seniors apologetically shook their heads.

Their superior had tied their hands. Ves had to defend his position without any additional support.

On the one hand, it showed that the Survivalists and the Transhumanists believed that Ves was competent enough to handle this evolving affair.

On the other hand, it showed that the mechers had chosen to employ a shrewd strategy.

No matter what Ves said, his words did not have anything to do with the Red Association, at least on the surface. This granted the latter a useful element of separation.

Ves felt as if the mechers treated him as a guinea pig. His main purpose was to test the public's attitude towards cultivation. If he made any mistakes, then the mechers would learn from his lessons and make sure not to repeat them when they held their big speech later.

It was a profoundly utilitarian response towards this unfolding controversy, and it did not exactly make him feel good about this situation.

At least he was free to spin any tale he liked. The Red Association's deliberate move to appear separate meant that they had no justification to control his speech.

Since this was the case, he might as well take advantage of the leeway that he was given.

As Ves continued to explain that cultivation was not that scary, he made deliberate attempts to tie this phenomenon to the mech pilot and mech designer professions.

He could not allow Astrid's accusation that cultivation was akin to witchcraft and superstition to stand.

The best way for him to do so was to expose and correct the public's deep-rooted cognitive dissonance on the truth about the extraordinary mech professions.

As Ves stood in the center of the speaking pit, he activated another projection that showed the highlights of Operation Night Jazz.

"Do you remember the joint strike against the Tide Stations of the Red Cabal? Many brave soldiers ventured deep into alien territory to fight against the powerful alien defenders. The most inspirational moments came when our valiant god pilots dueled against the ancient phase whales."

The footage showed amazing pieces of footage. From the First Flame's transformation into a mythical Phoenix, to the Destroyer of World's immensely devastating blow against one of the top leaders of the Red Cabal, pretty much every human had already rewatched the awesome footage several times!

Yet now that the circumstances had changed, people began to see these wondrous reality-defying feats from a completely different angle.

"The lieutenant-commander over there has attempted to paint cultivation as an evil force that can only corrupt and doom the human race." Ves spoke with open contempt towards this claim. "That is only a one-sided view. I do not deny that power can corrupt, but it can also produce wonders without equal. Just like the mechs and warships that we are familiar with, it is not the weapon that is dangerous, but the people who wield them. While human society previously struggled to keep power out of the hands of those unfit to harness them, we have improved by a lot since then. The contemporary mech community has done an excellent job in ensuring that only the most valiant, principled and dedicated mech pilots are bestowed with extraordinary might."

The projection continued to show a myriad of footage of the god pilots performing amazing feats throughout the border regions. Their God Kingdoms suppressed entire alien armadas while their god mechs smashed through all opposition without any meaningful resistance.

"Who better to take inspiration from than our most powerful champions? Our god pilots are living, breathing examples that absolute power does not necessarily lead to absolute tyranny. They are products of enlightenment rather than ignorance. They are the inheritors of the people who sought to build a better future for humanity. Since their emergence, every god pilot has never failed to abide by their oaths and protect humanity in whatever way they can. If you reject the phenomenon known as cultivation as a whole, then you reject the very existence of god pilots! Do you really think it is a good idea for our vulnerable and isolated society in the Red Ocean will be able to last without the protection of 8 heroic god pilots?"

A lot of people's expressions changed.

Perhaps Astrid's negative portrayal had caused a lot of people to develop a negative impression of 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery'.

However, it was impossible for them to reconcile this negative impression with their intensely strong respect and worship towards the god pilots.

It was well known that these all-powerful heroes had been doing their best to protect human civilization from the alien menace!

Faced with a conflict between two opposing viewpoints, a lot of people chose to favor the perspective that viewed god pilots as selfless entities who possessed the power of a god but the heart of a dedicated soldier.

Ves smirked as he sensed the mood shift from the spectators. His ploy had worked.

"Make no mistake. What I call cultivation science can be upgraded and reimaged just like any other scientific field. We have come a long way since ancient times. Archaic traditions that dressed cultivation in mysticism have rightfully lost ground during the end of the Age of Conquest. This has given all of us the room we need to study and make use of this phenomenon as a scientific discipline. Instead of fearing progress, we should embrace it. The only point I agree with my detractors is that people should not engage in this promising new field without restraint. We must remain careful and stick to a methodical approach in order to prevent us from destroying ourselves from within yet again. So long as we handle this power responsibly, we can gain the strength we need to defeat the native aliens, all without developing a reliance on scarce resources such as phasewater!"

Chapter 5759 Recess

5759 Recess

Tying cultivation to the existing mech community helped a lot.

While a lot of people from that very same community might not appreciate what he was doing, it was difficult to deny a truth that seemed abundantly obvious in hindsight.

Ves found it rather funny that pretty much every human had been living alongside mechs and all of the crazy stuff that came with them, but never actually acknowledged that this was weird!

People all thought that the amazing stuff that high-ranking mechs and mech pilots could accomplish were the result of special scientific breakthroughs and such.

Even though it was a bit weird that mech pilots had to put an immense amount of effort in order to trigger 'breakthroughs' and evolve to higher life states, few if any people regarded this phenomenon as magic or mysticism.

It was quite simple for anyone to pop this illusionary bubble.

The issue was that everyone that possessed this capability refrained from doing so. For at least four centuries, neither the current human overlords or the former rulers that had been driven to the shadows had ever dared to expose the hidden truth.

This led to an abnormal circumstance where clear and obvious instances of cultivation clearly paraded in front of people's eyes, yet no one understood the true significance of mech pilots and mech designers.

Ves actually felt grateful towards Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson.

Whether she acted upon orders or not, she had finally been the one to take this daring step, freeing Ves and other people from the burden they had to bear for many years.

Of course, Astrid Jameson's radical move had undeniably derailed a lot of plans.

Ves was not the only person who had to change his strategy on the spot.

He had been paying close attention to the speakers of the opposition.

The subtle signs of unrest and disarray showed that Astrid Jameson never kept the other scattered groups in the loop.

This forced the Mech Supremacists, the Chabrans, the Rubarthans from the Smokestack Principality and others to figure out how to handle this rapidly evolving situation.

The lack of unity and consensus from all of these people made it a lot more difficult for them to agree to a new approach. The speakers had their own opinions, but they also needed to represent the will of their superiors or their constituents.

All of that meant that the opposing parties needed a lot of time to sort out their mess.

Ves was not complaining.

The more his opponents fell into disarray, the easier it was for him to gain the upper hand in this public inquiry!

After an extended speaking turn, Ves finally felt that he had managed to put out all of the immediate fires.

The opinions of the crowd in the Dragon King's Palace swing in multiple directions throughout the session. The public did not quite know what to believe anymore. Even if Ves did his best to portray cultivation in a more positive light, it was still difficult for many people to determine whether he was still a credible speaker.

Seeing that the opposition still hadn't sorted out their confusion, Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus stood up from his pearl throne once again.

"Given the magnitude of the revelations made by the speakers, I am calling for a recess in order to give the participants time to revise their arguments."

A long break commenced as the repercussions of the public inquiry continued to shake the foundation of red humanity.

The two sides retreated from the speaking pit and retreated to side chambers where they could strategize and take stock of the situation in private.

"Okay." Ves said after he and his entourage fell out of the public eye. "Jovy, tell me what is happening. How are people reacting to Astrid's revelations?"

"The people are taking it well, all considered." Jovy said. "Many of them are being engulfed by a deluge of speculation and misinformation. None of the major powers are prepared to offer corrections. The Red Two have already decided to provide clarification after the end of the public inquiry. Nobody else dares to supersede them by publishing relevant information in advance."

Ves frowned. "That is dangerous, you know that? A lot of people are running around like headless chickens. Accidents are bound to happen."

"We know, but this is a consequence that we will have to bear. We only have one chance to make this right. The subject is so important to us all that we cannot afford to act in haste. Every piece of information that we disclose must be true and factual. Our credibility on this matter may suffer a permanent blow if we make any mistakes."

"Do you know where the mechers are leaning?"

"No." Jovy helplessly shook his head. "You know as well as I do that our Association is a divided organization. The information that I have received so far suggests that most mech designers are generally in favor of cultivation. This is not a surprise as their work is largely connected to related phenomena. However, opinions are mixed on how extensively cultivation must be regulated. This is a debate that has just reached its inception."

"I see."

"There is no need for you to be overly concerned about this issue." Vector Loban spoke from the other side. "Our Transhumanist Faction has been preparing for this contingency for a long time. We have already formulated many different proposals on how to introduce cultivation to our society at large. The Evolution Witch is especially keen on turning it into an essential component in people's lives."

"I imagine that there are many people who disagree with her stance."

"That is correct." The Transhumanist sighed. "Our faction is the strongest proponents of cultivation, while the Fifth Enforcement Fleet is diametrically opposed to our stance. Every other faction falls between this spectrum. The major powers will most likely settle on a middle ground solution if nothing else happens. The details have yet to be determined, though. This is where the different powers will fight hard to push their own vision."

A lot was happening behind the scenes. Ves had no access to these high-level talks, but he imagined that a lot of powerful people were scrambling to contain the fallout.

"Tell me about the Mech Supremacists." He said. "Given their strong focus on mechs and mech pilots, how are they handling the revelations?"

Jovy chuckled. "Opinions among them are mixed, as you can imagine. There are many Mech Supremacists who have never been initiated into this secret. The revelations have caught them by surprise and are causing them to question everything they know about mechs. However, don't think that they will stop their opposition towards your living mechs. Their fundamental concerns are still valid, although you should have more ways to counter their arguments. The interests of mech pilots remain paramount to this faction. They do not really care about other forms of cultivation at the moment."

"I see. What about the fleeters? How are they responding to this mess?"

"I do not have strong connections with the fleeters, so I can only base my judgment on second-hand information. From what I have heard, the fleeters are also thrown into disarray. The difference is that their confusion is largely based on ignorance. Due to their strong bias against human mutation and distortion, it is unlikely that fleeters will ever embrace cultivation wholeheartedly. They will at least attempt to cling to their existing patterns so long as they remain competitive."

"I bet that if the fleeters start to fall behind due to their continued rejection of cultivation in all forms, they will probably come up with an excuse to reverse their previous policies. There is no way that the Red Fleet wants to fade into irrelevance due their pigheadedness."

There was a possibility that this might not even be necessary given that ARCHIE had already started to transform the fleeters on a gradual basis.

Professor Vector Loban informed Ves of another interesting development.

"The Fifth Enforcement Fleet is currently subjected to a large amount of criticism. Many leading figures resent this fleet for disclosing secrets prematurely and without any coordination. However, the Fifth Fleet has also attracted a large amount of support from both the fleeters and other people. There are substantial segments of the population that are afraid of how cultivation will threaten our current civilization. They fear that we will regress to a more primitive society where might makes right. The fact that it has happened in the past does not bode well for the future."

"We'll have to address that." Ves muttered. "In my opinion, it is best to continue to tie cultivation to the mech community. People fear what they do not know. If we want to melt their opposition, then we should talk about cultivation from the lens of mech design and mech piloting."

"Good idea, Ves. It is not a complete solution, but it will serve as an adequate stopgap. Do not forget about your living mechs, though. It is not necessarily your responsibility to defend cultivation, although it may be useful to do so in order to squash any doubts regarding your heritage. Are you confident that you will be able to accomplish your original purpose in light of all of these changes?"

"Don't worry." Ves grinned. "I already know how to present my living mechs in a better light now that the cat is out of the bag. The basis of my design philosophy is Mutual Growth. If there is anything people like the most, it is gaining more power. I just need to assuage their concerns that their living mechs will not inadvertently go out of control."

They continued to strategize and share information over the next hour.

Ves did not receive any direct information transmissions from the outside galaxy, but he did gain a lot of information through other means.

Vulcan was able to monitor a lot of changes through his connections with the Vulcanites and lots of craftsmen spread throughout human-occupied space.

Goldie closely monitored the reactions from the Larkinsons. It did not surprise Ves all that much that the clansmen did not really exhibit any strong reactions. They had lived alongside Ves' many crazy inventions for a long time that they had already acclimated to the cultivation phenomenon.

Ves grew reassured that none of the Larkinsons went crazy because of this mess. Despite his strong involvement on this issue, his subordinates admired him and looked up to him like before.

He had consistently tried to take care of his clansmen. He rewarded them for their loyalty and did not hesitate to channel a large proportion of his massive income into enormous investments for his clan.

The Larkinsons recognized the trust and generosity from their patriarch, so they naturally reciprocated when he had need of their support.

This was true loyalty.

There was one other major interest group that Ves needed to please.

"How is my customer base reacting to this development?" Ves asked. "Mr. Ampatoch, you have strong connections with the people working at Isthmus Manufacturing. What have they noticed?"

The Rubarthan mech designer did not look very confident at the moment. "It is too early to tell. A small proportion of customers have canceled their orders in panic. The rest have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. You need to explain that amidst all of the upheaval brought by change, living mechs can serve as a source of stability to their owners and users. Try your best to demystify their existence and emphasize the benefits they bring. It would be especially helpful if you can redefine their roles in a society where cultivation has become more prevalent among the public."

"Hmm... those are good suggestions. I already know what to do. Thank you, Kelsey."

By the time the recess had come to an end, Ves stepped back into the grand hall with an air of confidence.

He had formulated numerous new responses towards the issues that just started to weigh on people's minds.

The only question now was how the fractured and divided opposition intended to deal with this situation.

Chapter 5760 Master Cantor's Lecture

5760 Master Cantor's Lecture

The opposition looked a lot more composed than before.

The recess had done them a lot of good. They received enough time to figure out their individual stances and formulate new arguments.

This was a little problematic for Ves as he was no longer able to figure out their thoughts.

His prior talks with the various representatives had given him a decent understanding of where they were coming from. That was until Astrid Jameson detonated a bomb that scrambled everything.

As people started to swim back to their respective places and seats, it became clear that there was a lot more tension in the water.

The stakes had been raised. The public inquiry no longer remained confined to living mechs anymore. It seemed as if it also turned into an initial referendum towards cultivation.

This was why the amount of people tuning into the broadcast had skyrocketed. Even an idiot living in a backwater third-rate colonial state could understand the implications of cultivation.

In a dwarf galaxy where the numerically superior native aliens exerted a huge amount of pressure onto red humanity, people were willing to chase after any opportunity to gain more power!

Both sides bore the weight of all of this attention. Ves was more than happy to oblige the people who wanted to obtain power through more exotic means. He wasn't sure whether the opposition was as eager to allow the masses to gain more power.

Once everyone had arrived, the moderator raised his hand. "The recess has expired. The session shall resume. The opposition has the word."

Out of the numerous representatives of different groups, Master Alice Cantor swam forward and placed herself in the center of the speaking pit.

Ves was afraid that she would get her turn so soon. As a representative of the Mech Supremacist Faction, Master Cantor was most suited to counter Ves' various claims about cultivation and living mechs.

The surprising turn of events may have caused her faction to fall into confusion for a time, but it clearly did not weaken her resolve. Her fiery gaze already indicated that she remained unwavering in her crusade against living mechs!

"People of red humanity." The 300-year old Master Mech Designer spoke with the gravitas that came with age and authority. "Many of you have heard shocking information about secrets that we intended to divulge on a gradual basis over the span of a decade. The existence of E energy radiation has revived several phenomena that have brought about profound changes to our race and society. We wished to avoid the spread of panic by overwhelming you with the truth all at once, but that ship has sailed. We ask for your understanding in our endeavor to protect our civilization. I can promise you that we will offer all of the clarification you need after the end of this public inquiry."

Her message was framed as an apologetic explanation, yet her firm and authoritative voice made it clear that the Red Association did not expect to be questioned or challenged about this affair.

Now that she got this out of the way, she shifted her accusing gaze right towards Ves!

"Let us get back on topic. It is public knowledge that Professor Ves Larkinson has received the support of the Red Association. That does not mean he has earned unanimous approval. There are members of our Association that have questioned the wisdom of promoting a mech designer whose works undermine the very foundation that mechs rest upon."

Where was she going with this? Ves continued to listen carefully as the old Master continued to address her audience.

"Mechs are made with a purpose. What we have withheld from you is that mechs did not originally come about to grant humanity a more controllable and efficient means of waging war. Mechs certainly have many advantages over warships, and they are growing even faster in the Age of Mechs. As much as I would like to elaborate on this subject, I can only explain one crucial advance for this session."

She silently activated a projection that displayed a familiar theoretical model. Ves had employed it in his first speaking turn.

"As you can see, the basic model of mechs is comprised of a mech and a mech pilot. Professor Larkinson is correct that mechs are not designed to stand alone, but must always be accompanied by trained mech pilots to reach their full combat potential."

A projected teaching rod extended from her wrinkly hands. The tip of the rod began to draw a circle around the two concepts.

"When a mech pilot interfaces with a mech, a unique and magnificent process occurs where the mech pilot begins to connect his mind with the electronic control systems of his much larger

machine, thereby forming what is known as a Man-Machine Connection. The two have united together where the mech pilot offers his superior training and control in exchange for the massively superior strength and protection of the mech."

This was all basic mech theory so far, but Master Cantor soon began to take an unexpected turn.

"Pay attention to the protection aspect." She said as the tip of her teaching rod tapped onto the bubble that stood for the mech. "What most of you are easily able to comprehend is that mechs offer protection against all manner of damage that can easily destroy the bodies of vulnerable humans. Depending on the defenses of the mech and the magnitude of incoming material attacks, the machine can withstand all sorts of familiar attacks such as laser beams, kinetic rounds, explosions, gamma radiation, gravitic fields and more. However, what is not as obvious is that mechs can do more than that. One of the secrets that we have withheld from you is that the neural interfaces in use today are incomplete. They simplified versions of more complete variations that offer greatly superior protection against non-material threats."

What!?

Ves looked shocked, and so did everyone else! Few if any people expected Master Cantor to drop a bombshell of her own! Her revelation might not be as massive as that of Lieutenant-Commander Jameson, but it certainly had untold implications for the entire mech industry!

When Ves turned around to face his mecher advisors, neither Jovy nor Vector showed they had any clue what Master Cantor was talking about. They most definitely had not been informed that the neural interfaces built into the vast majority of mechs in use today were actually the discount versions as far as the Red Association was concerned!

The old woman who decided to hold a lecture of her own used her teaching rod to draw a bright blue circle around the concept of mech.

"This barrier is the representation of the material protection offered by the mech. Every machine that meets the definition of a mech is equipped with a combination of physical armor, energy shields, ECM, superior maneuverability and possibly more exotic forms of damage mitigation. These measures are solely designed to defend against attacks that can be produced by the enemies that you are all familiar with. In the four centuries after the start of the Age of Mechs, there has never been any significant need for alternate forms of protection that is largely based on neural interface technology. The Mech Trade Association has therefore decided shortly after its inception to withhold this aspect."

To think that there were so many mech designers and mech pilots who worked around neural interfaces without ever realizing that they were the kiddy versions meant that the MTA had succeeded in its conspiracy!

The mechers had become so successful in protecting these well-kept secrets that the lower and middle layers of their very same organization had also remained ignorant of the truth!

The question now was why the mechers deemed it necessary to uncover this buried secret. Ves had a feeling he would find out the answer very soon.

Master Cantor clearly understood the immense significance of her revelation. Any member of the mech community that had yet to tune into the broadcast did so in a hurry in order to understand what the mechers had withheld from their mechs for such a long time.

The old woman smiled. "Our organization has made a verdict to only reveal the existence of this greater functionality when numerous criteria have been met. The return of cultivation is the most vital trigger of them all. As we shall explain in a later press conference, cultivation and those who practice it pose an existential threat to our civilization. The stability of our society is at risk of crumbling due to the proliferation of so-

called cultivators whose worst impulses have been magnified by at least an order of magnitude. In order to guard and preserve our current order, we need a weapon that can not only contain these future madmen, but also protect the sanity of the mech pilots who are being placed in the frontlines of this new struggle."

Her rod tapped onto the bubble, causing it to gain an extra word.

"In contrast to the ordinary mechs that you are familiar with, true mechs are equipped with a complete version of a neural interface. The latter may also be equipped with a number of other components that complement their distinctive capabilities, but they are otherwise identical to normal mechs."

True mechs. Ves had never heard of products that carried this distinct label. It made mechs sound much more powerful than they should.

It held greater weight to people such as Ves because it sounded similar to True Gods. Was there a solid relation between the two, or was it just a coincidence?

Amidst intense public interest, Master Cantor continued to explain what exactly defined a true mech.

"The complete neural interfaces of true mechs are capable of forming a much deeper and more intense connection between a mech and a mech pilot. I am told that the experience is so much more demanding that mech pilots must meet more stringent demands and undergo specialized training before they are allowed to pilot true mechs. In exchange for meeting the additional criteria, these pilots are able to shield their minds with the potent digital protection offered by a powerful machine."

Master Cantor's teaching rod drew a second circle around the concept.

In contrast to the bright blue circle that signified the material protection of a mech, the purple circle clearly signified protection against other kinds of threats!

"The defining characteristic of a true mech is that it offers varying degrees of non-material protection depending on the quality and the design of the complete neural interface. At its highest specifications, a true mech can protect a mech pilot against virtually every form of mental influencing, from the famous glows of Professor Larkinson's living mechs to the oppressive domain fields projected by ace pilots."

The old Mech Supremacist grinned as she drew a much larger purple circle around the combination unit of true mech and mech pilot.

"However, true mechs were not originally designed to counter the aforementioned contemporary threats. Their real purpose is to protect the mech as well as the mech pilot against the esoteric powers wielded by cultivators. As you shall discover in the future, what cultivators may lack in hard power, they make up for it with trickery and illogical abilities. True mechs can offer much greater

protection against the most obscure attacks launched by cultivators, thereby forcing these dangerous individuals to resort to more straightforward and material attacks. In other words, true mechs can effectively force enemy cultivators to fight on their terms, thereby putting power-hungry criminals with delusions of grandeur at an insurmountable disadvantage!"

Ves became gobsmacked by all of the revelations.

The revelations made by Master Cantor completely took him by surprise, yet as he thought more about them, they happened to make a lot of sense!

He had always questioned how it became possible for the MTA and CFA to succeed in their rebellion against the tyrannical leaders of the Five Scrolls Compact.

The existence of these so-called complete neural interfaces and true mechs plugged an enormous hole in the story!

It turned out that the earliest iterations of mechs used to be a lot more powerful when deployed against a specific kind of threat!

Now that cultivators were about to emerge among the population on a much wider scale than any time in the past, the Mech Supremacists apparently felt it was necessary to stall the momentum of this massive trend.

According to their own principles and ideals, mechs and mech pilots must always retain their primacy over human society!