

The Mech 5761

Chapter 5761 Complete Neural Interfaces

5761 Complete Neural Interfaces

Ves had never heard of the existence of true mechs.

Neither did Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban.

From the expressions of the mech designers and other people in the grand hall of the Dragon King's Palace, it appeared that no one else in the area knew anything more!

This was remarkable, because it showed that the Red Association managed to protect this secret extremely well!

Perhaps the old-timers who lived during the transition from the Age of Conquest to the Age of Mechs had been aware of them, but they collectively agreed to keep their mouths shut and let its awareness fade as the years continued to pass.

By limiting mechs to the castrated versions of neural interfaces, the ones that held the more complete versions simply went into hiding or got dismantled in order to prevent them from exposing any clues.

Ves had so many questions now that he learned about the existence of this newer and arguably superior variation of mechs.

What made true mechs different from ordinary mechs?

How much did the mechers advance the development of the complete neural interface since its inception?

What sort of additional requirements did mech pilots had to satisfy in order to pilot these true mechs?

How much greater were the risks and dangers of piloting a true mech greater than piloting an ordinary mech?

What was the cost and technical complexity of complete neural interfaces? Were they confined to first-class mechs, or could they be applied to lesser mechs as well?

Did mech pilots have a greater or lower chance to break through when piloting true mechs?

What was needed to develop and build a complete neural interface?

Why exactly did the Red Association insist on keeping these complete neural interfaces a secret?

Ves had over a hundred different questions that he deeply wanted to be answered.

He was not alone.

Every mech pilot and mech designer in the venue looked hungrily at Master Alice Cantor. The old woman had become the only source to a hidden piece of tech that held great promise!

Her words ignited the entire mech community!

If people hadn't already been tuning into the broadcast after Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson's shocking exposure of cultivation, then they definitely would have dropped what they were doing in order to listen to the old Master Mech Designer.

The Mech Supremacist commanded the attention of an immense audience.

Despite attracting more attention than any other point in her long and storied life, Master Cantor remained absolutely composed as she continued with her lecture.

She had just drawn a purple circle around the concepts that represented the mech and mech pilot.

"The full technical explanation of how a true mech is able to protect a mech pilot against a large variety of metaphysical threats is beyond the scope of this presentation. However, I can offer a simplified explanation that will suffice for most of you. To understand what enables true mechs to grant an additional dimension of protection, we must first consider the purpose of a neural interface."

A new projection came up. It depicted one of the earliest and most rudimentary versions of a third-class neural interface.

Despite the incredible simplicity and lack of features that subsequent mech generations had tacked onto the technology, the primitive neural interface was so stripped down that it was easy for beginners to understand.

Ves had once received a crash course on neural interface technology, and he managed to pick up a few more pieces of information in subsequent years.

Nonetheless, he did not understand neural interfaces in depth, nor managed to obtain a certification from the Association that permitted him to tinker with the devices.

The MTA and RA typically allowed mech designers to do whatever they want with their mechs as long as they did not violate a number of well-defined taboos. This was a boon to the mech industry as many mech designers emerged that experimented with all kinds of new and unusual technologies. Excessive regulation and restriction of technological innovation would have stifled research and led to slower developments.

Yet despite the obvious benefits of letting people play around with different technologies, the mechers had always imposed abnormally strong restrictions on neural interfaces.

The excuse they used was that badly designed neural interfaces posed a serious threat to the health of the mech pilots that depended on them. This was a logical reason and had been broadly accepted by the public without much challenge.

Did neural interface specialists know more about this subject? Ves narrowed his eyes. Perhaps they did. It might be rather obvious that most neural interfaces in use today were deliberately restricted.

The mechers were known to supervise neural interface specialists more closely. This meant that the former may have issued warning to the latter about maintaining their discretion about this particular observation.

"The purpose of a neural interface is to form a bridge between the mech and the mech pilot." Master Cantor said as she used her projected teaching rod to draw a very clear line between the concept of mech and the concept of mech pilot. It is considered an essential if not a defining trait of a mech.

Without the neural interface, the pilot can only resort to utilizing vastly inferior and much more inefficient means of controlling a machine. This has been tried many times in the years preceding the Age of Mechs, and it has always been dismissed as an imperfect and flawed method of controlling a mech."

That was certainly true. Humanity already possessed the technological capacity to develop a mech since the Age of Stars. However, the control systems had always served as an insurmountable block. Whether these protomechs were controlled by buttons, levers or mirroring body movement, the huge separation between the mech pilot and mech always produced disappointing results.

"Neural interfaces are capable of solving this crucial control problem. The man-machine connection that they are able to form between the two parties allows the mech pilot to control the mech as if it is his own body. While there are many variables in play that limit the extent to which the mech pilot can treat a mech as if it is his own body, the results are still far better than every other alternative."

Ves smirked. It appeared that while Master Cantor had been initiated in the secret of true mechs, she clearly did not know about Carmine mechs, or else she wouldn't have made such an arrogant statement.

"What is not as obvious is that this is not a one-way connection." Cantor continued. "The mech pilot is able to extend his mind to the machine, thereby enabling him to control the latter's enormous physical mech frame. At the same time, the mech is able to extend its digital logic to the mind of the mech pilot, thereby allowing the latter to process data as if he is a machine. If the mech extends its logic engine deep enough into the mind of the mech pilot, the individual in question will effectively gain a layer of protection to his relatively fragile mind and soul."

Ves' eyes lit up! He figured out what Master Cantor was alluding to! How could he have missed this observation?!

Master Cantor did not withhold the most crucial piece of information from the public for long.

"A complete neural interface is able to establish a man-

machine connection where the logic engine and the mind of a mech pilot are able to combine almost exactly as if they are one. This means that they can no longer be treated as separate components, but must instead be regarded as a fusion of the two. This results in a remarkable synergy where the weaknesses of both components are much more extensively protected by their respective strengths!"

It was that simple!

Ves along with many other mech designers still looked amazed. What did it mean for a mech to extend a huge portion of its logic engine to a mech pilot?

The risks were probably greater as the neural interface produced a much deeper and more integrated connection between the two. Any accident that caused this close bond to break by force would definitely cause the mech pilot to incur a lot of damage!

There are many other aspects of complete neural interfaces that I have yet to mention, but what I have just explained is the most relevant and critical pieces of information that you should know. The reason why complete neural interfaces are able to grant elevated protection against metaphysical threats is that it either shields the mind of a mech pilot or renders it into a mode that closely mirrors the digitized thinking processes of a pure mech. Depending on the training of the mech pilot, the

person in the cockpit can draw more of the logic engine into his mind without negatively affecting his judgment or combat effectiveness. This is enough to neutralize many possible attack methods utilized by cultivators."

Master Cantor sneered as she mentioned this group.

"The Red Two is in the process of forming a thorough introduction package on cultivation. Those who practice it may seem as if they have mastered the use of magic, but many of their techniques are dangerous. They exert a corrupting influence on the minds of their practitioners, driving them to extremes and causing them to develop a superiority complex towards ordinary humans. However, we cannot deny that there is strength to cultivation. Certain practitioners are particularly adept at manipulating and hypnotizing humans. Most humans do not have any inherent defense against these invisible and difficult-to-detect techniques."

Her teaching rod tapped onto the connection between a true mech and a mech pilot.

"That is where this complete man-machine connection serves its secondary purpose. Humans who are not high-ranking mech pilots do not possess the inherent qualities that allows them to resist these esoteric attacks, but their machines are different. Cultivators cannot affect the mind of a mech because it does not have one in the first place. That might not matter if the mech pilot of a typical machine has not received strong enough protection against these sorts of threats. It is different for a true mech because both sides of the partnership effectively share the same advantage."

The explanation made sense, though Ves had the distinct feeling that Master Cantor left out a few crucial facts.

There was no way that true mechs were as simple as she described, but Ves had no time to speculate what the Master Mech Designer had left out in her simple lecture.

The information she already revealed so far was enough for Ves to chew upon for the time being.

"In conclusion, true mechs are specialized solutions that are much more effective at combating the threat posed by 'cultivators'. Their capacity to do so is far superior to warships, which are crewed by large quantities of ordinary spacers whose minds are not protected by any machine. Cultivators are highly effective at neutralizing and subverting large warships because they can make them themselves unnoticeable and convert the crew members to their cause one by one. Even automated defense systems that should ordinarily attempt to eliminate the hidden interlopers can be fooled through special techniques that target their rigid programming. It is only when man and machine combine their forces together that they can both offer effective resistance against such nefarious foes!"

Damn! A lot of people suddenly grew really frightened as they imagined how easy it was for cultivators to torment an unsuspecting mech force.

Even though there had never been any obvious cases where cultivators utilized their strange voodoo to completely subvert a large force, the awareness that this might be possible was enough to frighten a lot of previous self-assured individuals|!

Ves was no exception to this. He knew more about the potential threat posed by cultivators because he encountered plenty of weird stuff in the past.

One of his most iconic memories was the apparent discovery that dozens of cultists had been hiding in plain sight in a compartment on a starship!

Despite the fact that they filled the entire space to the point where there were no unoccupied spaces anymore, Ves and other people had no clue that these scary bastards were present.

It was only once Ves utilized his spiritual perception that he figured out the frightening truth!

Given how a bunch of cultists lurking outside civilized space managed to learn this unsettling technique, then more powerful cultivators should easily be able to master more effective variations of this technique!

Chapter 5762 Design Philosophy Challenge

5762 Design Philosophy Challenge

As Master Alice Cantor provided a simple explanation on how complete neural interfaces worked, Ves finally understood why his living mechs were not quite suited to this tech.

"As you can see, true mechs are able to resist any influences that act on the minds of living humans simply because they are not valid targets to begin with. Aside from very rare exceptions that will not be elaborated upon, true mechs are lifeless objects that can only be affected by material attacks. Yet that is exactly the type of attacks that mechs are well-

suited to withstand."

The projected theoretical model changed upon Master Cantor's command.

Instead of depicting a basic pairing between a true mech and a mech pilot, it showed a model between a living mech and a mech pilot instead!

Ves grew a little more tense as he already had a good guess why the old mecher summoned this diagram.

"Complete neural interfaces bring great advantages to mechs and enable mech pilots to gain the upper hand against all manner of unusual opponents. However, in order for true mechs to serve their other purpose, they must be as divergent from mech pilots as possible. The relationship between a mech and a mech pilot is at its strongest when the two are different from each other. Maximum synergy can be achieved when both are specialized in completely different aspects. There is little rationale to bring them closer together for the purpose of developing a true mech, as is the case for Professor Larkinson's deviant works."

Her projected teaching rod tapped onto the bubble that stood for a living mech.

"Living mechs share much in common with all other mechs in that they offer vastly superior material protection. What they do not possess is absolute protection against most forms of mental and other esoteric attacks. The reason why this is the case should be clear. They are alive. They have souls, as best as we are able to determine. While this undoubtedly grants these so-called living mechs numerous useful advantages, they are afflicted with a fatal flaw: they are vulnerable to many of the same metaphysical attacks that can directly affect the mech pilot."

Ves knew it. The logic was clear. While living mechs still retained the digital logic engine that ran every mech, their spiritualities added a vulnerability that could potentially allow cultivators to mess with the machines.

It was as if making mechs alive did not just make them stronger, but also created an enormous loophole that could potentially allow powerful cultivators to disable them with disturbing ease!

To say that Ves was not pleased was an understatement. He was furious and outraged that he had completely overlooked this massive vulnerability!

Though he did not dare to take Master Cantor's exaggerated claims as absolute facts until he conducted his own experiments, he found her theory to be very plausible.

If living mechs truly did not possess the qualifications to become true mechs, then Ves was in deep trouble!

His mind was already racing to come up with counter arguments. If true mechs became the new standard in the mech industry going forward, then he needed to move quickly to remedy or mitigate the damage to his living mechs.

Ves refused to give up, though. Living mechs served as the core of his design philosophy. There was no way he could abandon his products after he had invested his entire career into them. As long as there was a single mech pilot left that still favored his living mechs over these true mechs, then he still had a purpose in his work!

As Ves continued to think on how to handle this unexpected problem, Master Cantor suddenly pointed her teaching rod straight in his direction!

"Professor Larkinson! As the inventor and chief developer of living mechs, you should be able to answer this question. When you work on improving them, are you doing so with the aim of converging their properties with the properties of mech pilots? In other words, are you working to reduce the differences between your products and their users?"

The old woman had put Ves on the spot. He was obliged to answer.

While it would be best if he could massage his reply, his pride and his principles did not allow him to lie or obfuscate anything about his design philosophy.

As a mech designer, he had an obligation to stand up for his own work.

Ves took a step forward and radiated his voice across the underwater environment.

"My living mechs present an alternate framework of mechs as a combat platform. They do not abide by all of the rules that govern ordinary mechs, and I have never accounted for the possibilities brought by true mechs. It is indeed true that I have sought to make mechs more similar to their human partners by making them alive. However, I am not pursuing this goal to the extreme. I still believe that a pairing between living mechs and mech pilots can retain strong synergies by preserving much of their existing advantages."

"Thank you for your clarification on this matter, professor." Master Cantor respectfully nodded before she addressed her audience. "As you have heard, living mechs do indeed take after their mech pilots. They gain life, which means they become susceptible to the same attacks that target this aspect. Normal mechs are akin to outsized suits of armor that offer excellent protection against material attacks and only slight protection against mental attacks. True mechs are enhanced suits of armor that offer protection against both material and mental attacks. While living mechs offer identical material protection as the former two, their ability to resist mental attacks may not be that

much better than a normal human! Instead of pursuing divergence as is the case in all other mechs, living mechs are pursuing convergence, which is counterproductive to their purpose!"

The woman seemed determined to hammer home this point in people's minds!

Though Ves wanted to open his mouth and challenge her assertions, he held back and tried to maintain his cool.

It would be better for him to address her various points after it was his turn to speak again. He could use the additional time to develop more sophisticated counter arguments.

The projection of the theoretical model vanished. This signified that Master Cantor was done with this argument.

"Further details on true mechs and complete neural interfaces will be forthcoming when the Red Association has released an information package on cultivation. For now, the development, modification and use of complete neural interfaces by parties other than our own organization is prohibited. The threat posed by out-of-control cultivators to our society is growing with each passing day, but true mechs are more dangerous and onerous to pilot. We will consider expanding the right to make use of true mechs at a later date."

Ves felt a lot of relief after he heard this. Sure enough. The mechers couldn't help themselves. They wanted to retain as much good stuff to themselves whenever possible. True mechs had the potential to be extremely powerful against the right opponents. Why give away this advantage for free?

By retaining a stranglehold on true mechs, the mechers effectively retained the most effective countermeasures against cultivators.

This would give the Red Association the power to keep cultivators in check and enforce their own rules.

This was a capability that not even the Red Fleet could match!

The mechers were playing a deep political game after they chose to disclose the existence of true mechs and complete neural interfaces.

At the very least, they took the wind out of the sails of existing cultivators as well as those aspiring to grasp this power!

Every cultivator in the Red Ocean knew they could not let go of their restraint and throw their weight around.

If they ever stepped too far out of line, the Red Association would dispatch a bunch of true mechs and crush the offenders by relying on impenetrable defenses and vastly superior material might!

This was a clever power play on the part of the mechers.

Master Alice Cantor did not elaborate on true mechs any further. Her primary goal was to push back against living mechs, so she brought back a familiar argument.

"Let me explain another reason why it is not wise for our society to embrace living mechs on a large scale. Mechs are weapons of war that are designed to give humans the power to fight with strength far beyond what we can manage with our weak physiques. Our race has used an endless variety of weapons over its lengthy history. Weapons ranging from spears, firearms, tanks, warships and ultimately mechs demonstrate continuous progression in the sophistication and power of our

preferred means of combat. Yet no matter how powerful they become, each of these weapons are still firmly controlled by their human wielders."

The Master Mech Designer directed another accusing stare at Ves.

"Every proper mech designer is taught from the beginning that they must serve mech pilots. The mechs they design must empower their users in some fashion. They are never instructed to design a machine that can reduce or replace the role of mech pilots. Doing so will result in the creation of combat machines that are no longer reliant on humans to wage war. This is unacceptable! This not only breaks the most important principle of the mech industry, but also violates one of the fundamental taboos of our civilization!"

Ves could see plenty of looks of concern among the audience. Even if they were originally well predisposed towards living mechs, they were still human. That meant that they had all been raised with the common values and principles that humans were expected to carry.

This also included the principle of never allowing humans to make themselves redundant in their own society!

"Mechs exist to serve mech pilots." The stern old woman stated with strong conviction. "There is an inherent master-

slave relationship between the two. Mech pilots are the masters while mechs are their slaves. As cruel as this may sound, this is the natural order. Technology is meant to serve our race. It is not meant to hold dominion over us, which is a possibility so long as we grant too much power and autonomy to our machines. Please answer this question for me, Professor Larkinson. How do you envision the relationship between your living mechs and their mech pilots in the context of your design philosophy?"

Ves tried his best to suppress an ugly expression. She was putting him on the spot yet again. She had most definitely studied his living mechs quite well for her to address this specific point.

Just like before, Ves provided an honest answer even though it weakened his position.

"I reject the attitude of treating mechs as subordinate to their human users. While I understand why this is the current norm, I think that mechs deserve more respect than that. I design my living mechs with the explicit desire and assumption that they will only reach their full potential when their mech pilots treat them as equal partners. I emphatically do not want my living mechs to overpower their mech pilots and become the dominant partner in their relationship. All I aspire towards is true equality. Instead of forcing mechs to serve their pilots, I prefer that the two befriend each other and become close comrades-in-arms as they fight together. While I am cognizant that not every mech pilot will be able to develop a harmonious relationship with a living mech, the vast majority of my customers have come to utilize their products with great satisfaction."

Naturally, Master Cantor sneered when Ves mentioned his aspiration for living mechs to develop equal partnerships with mech pilots.

"A truly equal relationship is only possible if we live in a utopia. We do not. We live in a reality where our civilization is being pushed into a corner of the Red Ocean. If we are to survive and win the Red War, we cannot afford to be softhearted. This is the wrong time and place to pursue fanciful and unrealistic ideals. Red humanity must instead remember how their ancestors managed to defeat the aliens of the Milky Way in ages past and remain uncompromising in the face of adversity! No

alien, living mech or other exotic life form must stand in the way of the ascension of our race! Only a proper mech can give our race the conditions to defeat the enemies of the present and the future!"

Chapter 5763 Defending Living Mechs

5763 Defending Living Mechs

The revelation of complete neural interfaces and true mechs was enough for Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus to call for another recess.

Ves could dearly use one because he had lost his mental balance after Master Alice Castor directly challenged his work with her biting arguments.

As soon as Ves and his entourage returned to a private room, they faced each other with grim expressions.

"What Master Castor has done is much more damaging than we anticipated." Jovy stated the obvious. "Her arguments have successfully swung much of public opinion in her favor. Those who have personal experience with living mechs are still in your camp, but the masses who are less informed about this matter are strongly swayed by the authoritative words of a RA Master Mech Designer. People are much more inclined to take her words as fact, and that is problematic to you because you are younger and not a proper member of the Association."

Vector Loban added his own opinion. "Master Castor is a challenging opponent, but not an insurmountable one. I believe that Ves can overcome a disadvantage in stature by relying on his superior charisma. What is truly problematic is the meaning of her words. Her arguments are too well-

constructed to defeat out of hand. She has raised numerous legitimate points, and we do not possess enough information about true mechs to question her description or identify any loopholes that she may have left out of her lecture."

Ves frowned as he struggled to think how he should respond to this latest turn of events.

"I cannot allow Master Castor's arguments to stand. She has not only attacked the value proposition of my living mechs, but also questioned the *raison d'être* of my design philosophy. Both are devastating moves that have put me on the defensive. I feel obliged to stand up for my design philosophy and win back the ground that I have lost. If I do not do so..."

"Your design philosophy will suffer a setback, perhaps a permanent one." Jovy finished the sentence.

This was a serious consequence that could delay or even stall Ves' progression as a mech designer!

Anyone with the same profession eventually faced this kind test before they had an opportunity to advance to Master Mech Designer.

People like Ves had developed their design philosophies without too many serious challenges so far. The lack of major setbacks may have brought them a lot of immediate success, but it also caused their approach to mechs to remain untested for too long.

It was still unclear whether Ves' design philosophy was robust enough to withstand external challenges and shocks.

If his design philosophy looked great on the surface but was actually brittle on the inside, then it did not deserve to be realized!

Ves, Jovy and Vector all knew that the only design philosophies that were worthy enough to become a permanent fixture in the mech industry were those that had endured sufficient tempering.

As such, there was no way for Ves to avoid the current challenges. He had to meet them head-on, because to do anything else would be a silent admission that he did not have enough faith in his own design philosophy!

He could lie to other people, but he could never lie to himself.

Ves could say goodbye to rapid progress if he recognized that his design philosophy was flawed but was unable to figure out a way to correct it. This was why he had precious little time to figure out a systematic response and redeem his living mechs in the eyes of the public as well as his own perception!

"At least there is an upside to this course of events. As long as you are able to overcome this challenge, you have one less test to worry about in your quest to become a Master Mech designer." Jovy said in a more light-hearted tone.

Ves responded with a false smile. "That is certainly true. While I do prefer to realize my design philosophy sooner rather than later, the stakes are much higher than normal. I doubt that other mech designers are asked to face a challenge to their core ethos in full view of red humanity. This public inquiry has vastly exceeded the expected viewership numbers."

Even the people who hated mechs and wanted nothing to do with them had tuned into the popular broadcast due to all of the surprise revelations.

First it was cultivation.

Now it was true mechs.

For whatever reason, the opposition thought that the public inquiry was a good moment to drop a couple of bombshells.

Ves really hoped that this wouldn't become an established pattern. The masses already received enough information to chew upon. There was no need to overwhelm them with other crazy announcements.

"By the way, have you heard anything further about true mechs and complete neural interfaces? If I want to offer a proper response towards them, I need a lot more details than what I have obtained from Master Cantor's shallow explanation."

Neither Jovy nor Vector looked like they could oblige his request.

"I am sorry, Ves. I have tried to contact my superiors about this, but any information about true mechs cannot easily be divulged. You are only allowed to know as much as the rest of the public for the time being."

"Damn."

That was inconvenient. There was an unfair element to this contest as Master Castor attacked Ves' design philosophy by relying on an argument that was based on restricted knowledge.

This meant that his opponent possessed a much greater grasp on the tech that was fundamentally incompatible with living mechs, or at least that was what she claimed.

Ves couldn't even question her claims and assumptions because he did not have any relevant proof or knowledge!

How was he supposed to debate against her when he just found out about the existence of true mechs a short time ago? Not addressing this issue was unacceptable as it was clear that much of the public might get swayed by this argument alone.

"Relax, Ves." Vector Loban said. "You are letting Master Castor get to your head. Her logic may be strong, but that does not necessarily mean they are true. Every argument is based on assumptions and suppositions."

Ves raised his eyebrow at his Transhumanist advisor. "So what do you suggest I do? Should I spill the beans about Carmine mechs?"

"No! Absolutely not! You may be able to obtain a cheap victory by pulling out this card, but you will disrupt many plans and risk botching the introduction of this society-changing technology. I advise you not to be too rash. Even if you end up suffering a loss by the time the public inquiry has come to an end, public demand for your products will surely skyrocket again when it is finally time to announce the invention of your Carmine System. I would not be surprised if all sanctions on your work will disappear overnight as the temptation for norms to pilot mechs is just too strong."

That gave Ves a bit of consolation, but it was not enough to mitigate all of the damage he would incur if he lost this critical debate.

"I can't allow my design philosophy to suffer a heavy setback at this time. I need to survive this test well enough that I can continue to design my living mechs with confidence. Do you have any suggestions on how I can respond to her challenges?"

His companions all fell in thought for a while.

Vector Loban eventually came up with a possible approach. "She claims that your living mechs are not suitable for use in human society because they represent a convergence between man and machine. While it is true that the fundamental model of mechs is centered around a strong divergence between man and machine, it is not an infallible theory. It is pointless of you to abandon your long-cherished stance. Instead of running away from your own self-developed theory, you should double-down on it and strongly advocate for its validity. As long as you can argue that living mechs that resemble their human partners increasingly more are powerful in their own way, you may be able to convince the public that your work presents an alternate pathway towards power."

That was actually a good suggestion. Ves looked gratefully at the Transhumanist that had recently been assigned to assist in some of his research projects.

"You're right. I needed to hear that. I think I know where I should take this approach. It feels much better now that I have formed a solid plan to defend my design philosophy."

His advisors came up with a bunch of other useful suggestions. Each of them revived his appreciation of his design philosophy and renewed his faith in his own works.

By the time the second recess had come to an end, Ves swam back inside the grand hall with an uplifting mood.

He did not look like a mech designer who had lost his confidence in his own work!

Once people who needed to visit the bathroom or wanted to buy a few snacks to fill up their stomachs had returned, the moderator stood in front of the clamshell throne and bade everyone to silence.

"This is the third and final block of this speaking session. Both sides may present a single speaker each to make their case and counter any arguments that have previously been made. Professor Ves Larkinson, I invite you to move to the center of the speaking pit once again. You have the word."

Ves nodded respectfully at the planetary governor before he swam over to the center of the enormous submerged chamber.

"Hello again." He said with a tone that already hinted at his combative intention. "You have previously listened to Master Alice Castor bring up a number of arguments that are targeted towards my living mechs. By doing so, she has made a number of assumptions that I think are wrong, short-sighted or simply biased. Before I address the specific issues that she has raised, I first wish to defend my alternative approach towards mechs."

He took a deep breath. The special energy shield surrounding his body made sure that he did not get a mouthful of water in the process.

"Let me be honest with you. I strongly object to her claim that convergence between man and machine is a detrimental development. How dare she make this claim without possessing a full understanding of living mechs? It is clear that her mentality is as old as her age. Her view on mechs is stuck in the past. It is so difficult for her to imagine that mechs can be different from the ones she is familiar with that she does not consider the alternatives to be valid additions to the mech industry. The tens of millions of living mechs that have been sold to a large number of satisfied customers contradicts this argument. If my living mechs are not as helpful to the mech pilots and the humans that they are supposed to serve, then why are so many of my Fey Fiannas and Ultimatums saving the lives of many people with each and every combat participation?"

The popularity of his living mechs was solid proof that they were not as useless as Master Cantor tried to paint them as. All of those mech commanders that had chosen to adopt his products were not stupid. They did not dare to make any mistakes as the lives of their mech pilots and the future of their careers were at stake.

Plenty of people realized this as well. Once they recalled the huge hype and popularity of living mechs, they remembered that Ves' products were actually quite strong compared to their direct competition!

"Living mechs are not tools. They are partners." Ves stated. "Who says that humanity can only effectively wage war by relying on lifeless tools? In ancient times, many human armies have won magnificent victories by riding horses into battle. Cavalry can be considered as the predecessor of armored vehicles. They perform many of the same roles, but the biggest difference is that their battle steeds are alive. While our race has eventually eliminated our reliance on living animals as combat assets, that is because tanks and other vehicles are superior."

Progress was the eternal ethos of the human race and many other races for that matter. Their technologies never stagnated. Ves wanted to remind the public of this truth.

"Now what if this pendulum has swung the other way around again? What if living combat assets have regained the upper hand again? Should we dismiss their value just because they happen to be different from what you are previously accustomed to? No! My works are demonstratively powerful. They are strong in spite of their living properties! Far from what Master Castor wants you to believe, a convergence between man and machine is beneficial for everyone involved. Let me explain why I believe this to be the case."

Chapter 5764 Task Force Solus

5764 Task Force Solus

Just before the public inquiry on living mechs taking place on Ector V commenced, a modest task force of second-class warships quietly made its way to the orbit of a lush, green and blue globe.

The untamed planet below the recently arrived starships looked unusually vibrant.

It was filled with such an abundance of life that the crew members looking outside of the portholes could see a few regions that were dotted with huge organic growths!

The appearance of the planet had changed significantly since the survey ships last scouted the star system.

The deviations were so great that the Dragon's Den employed her specialized scanners to conduct a detailed and exhaustive survey.

The Larkinsons who arrived in orbit of the planet known as Reticula Corein V needed to gain a much more current overview of its complex surface in order to plan their subsequent moves.

Deep within the hull of the Wild Torch, the flagship of the Task Force Solus, the commander in charge called for a meeting to discuss the preliminary findings.

Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson had jumped at the opportunity to separate from the expeditionary fleet and lead her own unit.

As much as she had to allocate most of her time on designing mechs and keeping up her swordsmanship practice, she yearned to do more in her life than move between the design lab and the exercise chamber all of the time.

Leadership had become increasingly more important to her as more and more people looked up to her. As the protege of their legendary patriarch and an excellent warrior beyond comparison, Ketis had no trouble with accumulating the pull required to take charge of this operation.

As she sat at the head of the conference table, the only element that spoiled her stern and authoritative demeanor was the little girl sitting in her lap.

"Hihihi! Stop tickling me, mommy"

The red-haired girl with a tan complexion greatly resembled her mother. Mayra Larkinson held a plushy sword in her hand and ineffectually whacked it around in order to fend off the powerful fingers that caused her to giggle.

Ketis showered her youngest child with love before she gently lifted the little girl off her lap.

"Alright now, that is enough. You have classes to catch up to. Be good and pay attention, alright? If you want to become as smart as me some day, you will have to learn your numbers."

"Okay, mommy~"

Once a nanny came to bring Ketis' daughter to class, the air in the conference room grew serious as a projection of Reticular Corein V appeared in the center.

"We all know why we are here." Ketis straightforwardly began as she channeled a minute amount of Sharpie's steely will. "Our patriarch has directed us to travel to this untamed planet for the purpose of extracting a unique gas that is not present in any other star system that we know of. I am unclear why Ves wants to secure a supply of Solus Gas, but it is not up to us to question his motives. Our job is to act on his instructions and allow our clan to extract this resource from this planet on a reliable basis."

She stared at the mech commanders who led their respective detachments of their mech legions for this mission.

Given the powerful exobeasts and mutated beasts that probably turned the untamed planet into their monster paradise, the Swordmaidens insisted on coming along.

They had brought over plenty of Monster Slayers and other swordsman mechs that all hungered to hunt down the bountiful number of dangerous creatures that had been reproducing on the surface of Reticula Corein V for many months after the start of the Age of Dawn.

Backing up the main force were elements of the Flagrant Vandals and the Eye of Ylvaine. Each of them excelled in different roles that the Swordmaidens were unable or unwilling to fulfill themselves.

Aside from that, Task Force Solus had also brought along a handful of champions for good measure. Ketis threw an expectant look towards the small gathering of expert pilots and expert candidates at the opposite side of the conference table.

Finally, the vice directors of the Larkinson Biotech Institute and T Institute both attended the meeting. Since many of the senior leaders of the various institutions of the Larkinson Clan had chosen to undergo years-long EdNet training, the people who stepped up were merely considered stand-ins.

That did not mean that the substitute leaders were incompetent. The vice directors both possessed more than enough qualifications to conduct research and keep all of the overeager scientists in line.

"I do not need to tell you that trying to extract a resource from a planet that is filled with exobeasts that has remained undisturbed since the start of the Age of Dawn is an exceedingly dangerous endeavor." Ketis spoke as everyone tried to glean details from the projected globe. "Ever since exotic radiation has been giving superpowers to random beasts, planets without any form of civilization or population control have turned into incredibly hostile territories. The Hunting Association has never culled the most dangerous elements of the local fauna, which means that the surface is not only rife with powerful mutated beasts, but is most definitely home to calamity beasts."

Everyone's expressions darkened at the mention of those fearsome beasts that vastly exceeded the strength of second-class mechs.

Calamity beasts were at least an order of magnitude stronger than typical mutated beasts. They not only leveraged vastly greater amounts of E energy, but also developed more sophisticated abilities to harness all of this power more effectively.

On top of that, calamity beasts were also significantly more intelligent and aware!

Information about their existence used to be an open secret during the first year of the Age of Dawn, but when an increasing number of harmless critters on terraformed planets turned incredibly dangerous all of a sudden, the Hunting Association had put a lot more effort into publicizing the dangers of rampant beast evolution.

"Vice Director Abselon, please report your preliminary findings on the geology and ecosystem of this planet."

"With pleasure, ma'am."

A woman who looked fairly young but was actually over 50 years old stood up. Maria Abselon was a recent recruit that brought an abundance of competence into the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

As a former Terran citizen, the first-rater received a vastly superior education than any former citizen of the Life Research Association. Maria Abselon had also worked for a number of Terran biotech companies, though she never excelled in any of her jobs.

One of her notable specializations was the study in the genetics of exobeasts, with a focus on developing hyper aggressive bioweapons.

She had apparently run afoul of a couple of laws that caused her to get fired and banished from the biotech industry.

This was what caused her to apply to the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

The clan was more than willing to overlook her past transgressions as long as she did her job and behaved when she became a Larkinson.

As the recently appointed vice director stood up, she transmitted a file that caused the central projection to display hundreds of different information panels above the surface of the globe.

"My research teams and I have spent the previous two hours on interpreting the rough scan data from high orbit. We have updated the rough topography, tracked down large population groups and detected dozens of abnormal sites that may be hosting the presence of an absolute apex predator. Aside from that, we have also discovered plentiful regions whose surface is engulfed with large quantities of relatively stagnant Solus Gas. Please take a look at the map and note the patterns."

The annotated map was a lot more detailed than the Larkinsons were expecting. They hadn't even conducted any thorough surveys yet, but the combination of historical survey data and recent scan data revealed plenty of changes and discrepancies that took place over one-and-a-half years.

Mech Major Randall Larkinson of the Flagrant Vandals spoke up first. His background as a scout mech pilot gave him the training to spot important patterns faster than others.

"There are numerous suspected locations of powerful exobeasts in general areas such as forests and lakes. However, none of them have been found in any of the 27 plant-less regions engulfed in Solus Gas. It may be that there is no life to be found around these large deposits, but since their

surroundings are devoid of large exobeasts, I think it is more likely that these critical areas have turned into the territories of apex predators."

The vice director gazed at the trueblood Larkinson with respect. "That is a good observation. Our own analysis has produced a similar conclusion. While Solus Gas is at least mildly toxic to organisms that have never come into contact with this substance before, it is almost certain that the local fauna that have evolved in proximity to these gas deposits have become compatible with this exotic. Since we know that Solus Gas has properties that interfere with most if not all means of detection and communication, exobeasts that have integrated Solus Gas into their physiques are most likely adept at hiding their presence. Orbital scans will not be able to detect them. We can only know for certain what is hiding in these gas-rich regions by sending scouting parties."

Everyone's expressions dropped. It was never ideal to venture into uncharted territory without knowing anything about the threats lurking deep inside.

Nonetheless, if the Larkinsons wanted to do anything serious on this planet, then they had to map out all of the possible threats. If they did not do so, then they risked getting

Ambushed by a bunch of apex predators that the local garrisons were not equipped to handle!

"There are too many major and minor Solus Gas deposits to survey them all in a short amount of time." Ketis frowned. "Can we send in unmanned drones?"

"No, ma'am." Vice Director Abselon shook her head. "The drones will lose control due to the interference produced by Solus Gas."

"Perhaps we will have better luck if we send in our Fey instead. The Flagrant Vandals should have brought enough Fey Fiannas if I am correct."

"We have, Swordmaster." Major Randall Larkinson replied. "We have loaded a large variety of utility fey models, many of which have earned high rankings in the recent contest. Our scout fey are relatively fragile but discreet. They should be able to operate independently and return from their scouting trips without suffering excessive attrition. That said, I cannot account for the reaction of the exobeasts that lurk inside these gas-filled areas."

Ketis simply shrugged at that. "The scout fey are cheap and expendable. Do not hesitate to use them up. Our support ships have limited production capacity, so they can fabricate replacements in droves, especially if we manage to expand our mining operations on this planet to harvest other materials. If necessary, I can modify the design of the scout fey to incorporate Solus Gas in order to reduce their detection rate."

"That won't be necessary, Swordmaster. We have brought enough low-ranking mech designers that can make the necessary changes."

"Suit yourselves." Ketis shrugged. "Tell me about the local conditions of this planet, Abselon."

"Reticula Corein V is not a pleasant planet to live for humans. 45 percent of the surface is made up of landmass. The atmosphere is filled with oxygen as well as notable concentrations of toxic gasses that are lethal to humans when inhaled for an extended period of time. Everyone must wear fully covered suits at all times. The gravity measures at 1.3 g, which means that every person and every mech's mobility will be slightly impaired. In terms of life, there are exoplants in abundance. Exobeasts are also plentiful in number outside of Solus Gas deposits. There are numerous notable

pockets where we have detected significantly less life signs than normal. They are likely claimed by apex predators, but we will have to conduct more detailed surveys for confirmation."

Ketis narrowed her eyes as she looked at these suspicious pockets.

"Have you confirmed the presence of any calamity beasts on this planet?"

"We have identified at least one ultra-large organism that denotes the presence of a calamity beast." Vice Director Abselon stated and highlighted a location on the globe. "These dark surface growths are undoubtedly recent and artificial. Since they are large enough for us to see them from orbit, the exobeasts who created these features must be either powerful or numerous."

Chapter 5765 Initial Reactions

5765 Initial Reactions

Anyone who looked at the orbital scan of the mysterious dark drill-shaped hives would feel intimidated by their sight.

They were not only tall and wide, but clearly alien and savage in origin. Their appearance suggested that they were made by a large number of exobeasts who excreted a huge amount of black materials from their mouths or other orifices in an organized fashion.

There were just enough inconsistencies and imprecisions to suggest that these enormous structures were made by a hive of unknown organisms.

However, the fact that these large constructs all looked like fat drills scaled up to enormous proportions showed that the species responsible for making them was quite organized!

"What are we looking at, exactly?"

"We are looking at what may very well be the most dangerous native threat on this planet." The Vice Director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute said in a grave voice. "To be able to dominate this much territory, the species that inhabit this location must be extremely powerful. What is more troubling is that while we can see the hives with optical sensors easily enough, our more in-depth scans have failed to uncover more details. Despite the lack of Solus Gas in the environment, we suspect that the substance has been integrated in the materials used to construct the drill-shaped hives."

"That must have taken a lot of Solus Gas to build, but there are no deposits in the vicinity."

"We speculate that the dark hives have been built on top of the Solus Gas deposit. Whatever exobeast species managed to occupy this area, they have completely monopolized the output and clearly know how to use it to their advantage. This is most certainly an outcome of a deliberate, targeted and intelligent drive to claim this territory."

All of this speculation raised the threat level of this location even further!

Whoever or whatever managed to build all of these hives was most likely a calamity beast!

Not only that, but the creature likely commanded an entire hive of lesser exobeasts!

Ketis suddenly grew concerned about a possibility. "Do these hives pose a threat against us in orbit?"

"This is not apparent with the information that we have gathered so far." The former Terran geneticist answered. "It is best not to let down our guard. There are so many gaps in our understanding of Reticular Corein V that we cannot rule out this possibility. While the hives are visible to us because they have captured all of the Solus Gas that is released from the deposit on site, the same conditions also enable the organisms that inhabit the hive to detect us and maybe even target us with exotic attacks. I highly recommend our fleet to remain in geosynchronous orbit on the opposite side of the globe to be certain. In fact, it may be better to have our fleet distance itself from the planet even further. More powerful calamity beasts may be hiding in the areas covered by Solus Gas."

It was not unheard of for calamity beasts to escape the gravity well of a planet and destroy entire fleets and space stations in orbit!

Although these incidents were rare, the Hunting Association made sure to warn red humanity about the possible dangers of leaving local exobeasts alone for too long.

Naturally, the members of the Hunting Association were more than willing to set up shop and hunt down these persistent threats, but only if they could earn a profit from their activities.

Ketis made a decision.

"Your first suggestion is acceptable, but the second one is not. We should avoid the dark hives until we have scouted the location more thoroughly, but we cannot bring our fleet away from the planet. Any shipments and transfer to and from orbit will be enormously delayed if we do so. Our fleet is more than capable of defending itself against moderate threats. No matter whether we are beset by native alien warships or creatures from the surface, our recently upgraded Transcendent Punishers should be able to destroy them without suspense."

That did not sit well with Taon Melin, the former legion commander of the Eye of Ylvaine.

"I would not count on our bunker mechs for every possible threat." He said. "The general understanding of calamity beasts is that the weakest variety are at least as powerful as a second-class mid-grade expert mech. More concerning than that is that their abilities may enable them to circumvent our defensive layout. I highly recommend we keep at least one expert pilot on standby in our fleet."

Ketis nodded after she contemplated the suggestion for a few seconds.

"Good idea, Taon. That will leave less expert mechs for the surface, though. We need at least one to protect our main base and gas extraction site, and we need another one to lead possible attacks against calamity beasts that must be removed."

While it was still possible to defeat calamity beasts by relying on quantity as opposed to quality, the risk of excessive casualties was too high.

There was no way to tell how powerful the calamity beasts had become after they dominated their territories after a long time.

Even if the growth of calamity beasts rapidly slowed down due to lack of resources, continuous absorption of E energy radiation ensured they still grew stronger with each passing day!

Fortunately, Task Force Solus had brought along three high-

tier expert pilots. Even if their expert mechs had fallen behind the times, they had already been hyper mechs long before hyper technology became a phenomenon in the Red Ocean.

"Dise, you shall be the sword that cuts down the greatest threats to our gas harvesting operations."

Venerable Dise looked excited at the prospect. "My Decapitator hungers for the taste of calamity beast blood."

"If possible, keep the carcass as intact as possible." Maria Abselon requested. "As much as we are eager to examine these powerful beings, we do not have the facilities to contain living calamity beasts, so do not try to be merciful on our account."

The female expert pilot silently nodded in acknowledgement.

Ketis turned to her husband next. "Joshua, your affinity with life is exceptional. So long as Dise holds down the fort, I want you to accompany our recon team and observe the native exobeasts. If you have discovered any useful observations, please be sure to share them with us all. The more we know about the native organisms, the better."

The high-tier expert pilot confidently smiled. "I can probably talk to them if they are not super aggressive."

"That would be useful. We do not have the numbers or firepower to control the entire planet. If we want to maintain a stable gas harvesting operation over the span of several years, then it is more preferable to coexist with the exobeasts in the region than to continually slaughter them in order to contain their populations."

Few people had any hopes that they would be able to establish any peace, though. Wild exobeasts that had developed enough sapience were not necessarily civilized. Their savage instincts and rough lives all turned them into even more dangerous monstrosities! It was too difficult to convince these savage exobeasts to any agreement unless they had no choice, such as when they were taken captive.

"Isobel, you will have to remain up in space for the time being." Ketis told the other female expert pilot assigned to this mission. "Much of the land surface of Reticula Corein V is covered in forests. Not only do all of the trees block your line of sight, your Promethea may also be too prone to producing wildfires."

"I can control them." Venerable Isobel retorted in a calm tone. "No flame of mine will go rampant as long as my companion spirit and I are paying attention."

"You have the best capacity for mass destruction among us, so we will call you in if we need to wipe out entire populations of dangerous exobeasts. For now, you should remain in orbit and intercept any dangerous calamity beasts that dare to attack our fleet."

"Very well."

Ketis continued to issue a range of orders. They needed to establish an initial foothold on the surface and begin examining the surrounding areas in depth. All of this required a lot of movement and activity that was sure to keep the mech forces busy for a few weeks.

Once everyone knew what they needed to do, the meeting broke up as everyone split up to perform their respective duties.

Ketis and Joshua enjoyed a bit of free time.

There was no need for the Everchanger to accompany a fleet of scout drones that would be sent to the surface first.

The leader of the task force had already issued the necessary orders. She trusted the other Larkinson commanders to handle any issues that emerged in the following days.

That left the married couple free to return to their stateroom in the bowels of the Wild Torch.

Kirian and Mayra were still attending the school that was located in another section of the second-class fleet carrier, so the living space was fairly calm and quiet.

"The public inquiry on living mechs has already started according to the schedule." Joshua noted.

"I know. The first day is only dedicated to exploring the nature of living mechs. I am sure we did not miss anything important. Ves likely gave the public an introductory lecture of his works. We haven't missed anything important if that is the case."

The two sat down and began to view the broadcast together.

Just as expected, Ves tried to teach the public about the basic properties of living mechs in an attempt to demystify them. Though he did not do a good job in every aspect, he most definitely generated more interest in his works.

Then, the opposition dropped a few bombshells!

First, Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson exposed cultivation to the masses!

As shocking as this revelation may be to ordinary people, the Larkinsons had less reasons to be surprised.

"Is the patriarch's mother really that powerful?" Joshua wondered.

"She should be. She is the Superior Mother. You should be able to tell how much she has grown over the years." Ketis responded.

"There is definitely a connection between Ves and the Superior Mother, but I have a hard time imagining that the latter is his actual mother."

"There are probably cultivation shenanigans involved. It is up to Ves to share his stories to us. He never explained any of this secret past to our clan, and it is not necessary as far as I am concerned. I am more concerned about what will happen to our society once everyone starts to practice cultivation techniques."

"I think that extraordinary swordsmanship will explode in popularity." Joshua guessed. "Didn't you tell me that the mechers previously suppressed it because they didn't want too many people to wield extraordinary powers? I think it is safe to say that this has become moot after today. A lot of extraordinary sword styles demand discipline and control, so they are unlikely to produce madmen. Their strong willpower also makes them more resistant against these cultivators that the fleeters are warning about."

Ketis agreed with her husband's points. Enforcement was a major problem. Short of squashing power-hungry madmen with mechs, it was better to employ swordsmasters as enforcers. Not only were they highly resistant against any unusual abilities that other cultivators might employ, they

were smaller and much less prone to producing massive amounts of collateral damage when they fought.

There was finally a legitimate reason for swordmasters to exist.

The happy mother continued to think about how she should step up her organization's effort to train more traditional swordsmen.

However, the next major revelation forced her to pay attention to the broadcast again.

"What?!" Ketis reacted with a lot more shock than before! "What are true mechs?! Why did the mechers hide the fact that neural interfaces were incomplete all this time?!"

Ketis the mech designer felt that the Association had deceived her and every other professional in the mech industry!

She took offense to the apparent fact that the mechers kept this secret tech under wraps for such a long time, and she was not the only mech designer who felt this way!

"How dare the mechers keep this from us all?! What is so dangerous about true mechs that people like us do not deserve to work with them? Why can't the mechers give us the choice on how to handle this tech? This is outrageous!"

Chapter 5766 Indignant Mech Designer

5766 Indignant Mech Designer

The double revelations had taken the entire mech community and other communities by storm!

The exposure of cultivation did not produce an excessive impact on society because of how little people knew. Astrid Jameson and the other speakers shared so little about cultivation that most people had little idea what this was all supposed to mean.

The reaction towards the revelation of true mechs was considerably stronger!

Mech designers across human-occupied space reacted to Master Alice Cantor's disclosure on true mechs and incomplete neural interfaces with surprise and dismay!

Rather than celebrate the revelation that mechs were capable of doing more than they thought, mech designers instead felt as if the Association had held back an important piece of technology.

The labels employed by the mechers did not help.

The use of the term 'complete neural interface' suggested that the mech community had been working with deliberately weakened and less effective ones all of this time.

The term 'true mech' was worse. It conveyed the connotation that every mech designed, built and used by the community at large were never authentic enough from the perspective of the MTA and RA.

Had mech designers and mech pilots been lied to all of this time?

How much did they miss out when the mechers kept these crucial technologies under wraps all of this time?

All of these questions and more plagued the mech designers who had just learned about the existence of this hidden branch of mechs.

Joshua looked concerned at his wife. His reaction was not as exaggerated as that of Ketis.

"Why are you so angry, Ketis? Don't the mechers hold back proprietary technologies all of the time?"

"This is different!" Ketis growled in fury. "It is the principle that counts! The mechers have held on to this tech for at least four centuries. Maybe they are correct that true mechs were not necessary anymore during the Age of Mechs, but they have made this decision themselves. It is one thing to invent a new tech but withhold it from the public like Ves has done many times. It is another thing to take existing tech that has plenty of time to reach maturity, but take it away and degrade our tech base!"

Joshua still did not understand. He may have become a powerful ace pilot candidate, but he still had little clue about the design side of mechs.

"Even if that is the case, aren't you overreacting to the withdrawal of specialized tech? According to that woman, true mechs are only useful against unconventional threats, which aren't all that common for a long time."

Ketis shook her head in disappointment. "Just because a specific threat has receded is no excuse to take away its counter! What is especially egregious is that depriving complete neural interfaces from the wider mech community has inhibited its development. Master Cantor mentioned many possible problems relating to their use, from making true mechs more difficult to pilot to increasing the probability of brain damage. However, no flaw is permanent. Every problem can be fixed as long as there are enough people working on it. This is the foundation of our mech industry. There are many neural interface specialists among us who could have improved upon many aspects of complete neural interfaces. Maybe they would have reduced the dangers of using them so that they become almost indistinguishable from incomplete neural interfaces. It is the fact that the arrogant mechers never gave us the chance to do so that has done us all a disservice!"

Though Joshua still found it difficult to comprehend why his wife was so outraged about this, he trusted that she was right.

"I wonder what it is like to pilot a true mech." The expert pilot wondered. "Maybe you can upgrade my Everchanger by replacing its old neural interface with one of these new complete versions."

"Don't think about, Joshua. The Red Association may have decided to disclose this secret tech, but it is not in a hurry to share it with the greater community. The mechers clearly want to stay in control. They are clearly afraid that 'cultivators' may become powerful enough one day to overthrow the rule of the Red Two. This is why they intend to drastically increase the amount of true mechs in their mech rosters. When their production and use of these new machines has exceeded a certain scale, it becomes exponentially more difficult to hide their existence. The mechers have little choice but to disclose the existence of true mechs on their terms, or else the inevitable leaks will make them look even worse."

"Yet they still haven't given us a timeline on how they intend to roll out this new tech."

Ketis crossed her arms. "I won't get my hopes up if I were you. True mechs are a weapon that is as valuable and strategic as warships and weapons of mass destruction. Depending on how they work, they may not be all that useful for high-ranking mech pilots such as you, but they can still be useful for countless ordinary soldiers. The fact that the mechers are so selfish that they will likely restrict

the tech for a long time is still galling. If a new threat ever explodes that true mechs can effectively deal with, then most of us will not be able to gain that protection in time because the mechers only have so many true mechs in their possession."

Ketis vastly preferred to design her own solutions to emerging threats. It galled her to be reduced to a bystander while the Red Association held all of the cards.

"Don't you have a good relationship with the Mech Supremacist Faction, Ketis? Maybe you can ask your buddies over there for a favor."

"My relationship with them is not that good." Ketis shook her head. "Besides, if Ves does not fare well in this public inquiry, I wouldn't be surprised if the mechers will deny him access to complete neural interfaces. I will likely face the same restriction since I am working for Ves."

That did not sound good. Joshua grew more concerned about Ves' performance in the public inquiry. He hoped that the patriarch would be able to redeem his work.

"How do you think these complete neural interfaces work, Ketis?" He asked as he continued to wonder how the different tech would affect the piloting experience.

"I have never studied neural interfaces in-depth, so I cannot say anything solid about them." The woman replied. "If I have to make a lot of educated guesses, then I think they are neural interfaces that have raised the upper limits so high that you can form a much deeper connection with your mech than before. I think that the processors and the programming of the true mech have also been modified to account for these differences. Since the goal is to turn cold hard machine logic into a barrier against metaphysical attacks, then the burden of forming a deep connection with such a lifeless existence may be heavy enough to strain most mech pilots. I suspect that factors such as genetic aptitude and specialized cranial implants can make it easier to pilot true mechs."

There was too little information to know for certain. What Ketis really wanted to know was whether true mechs were only confined to first-class. It would greatly disappoint her if that was the case.

Joshua meanwhile thought about the description given by his wife and equated it to other machines.

"You know, these true mechs sound rather similar to the Nullifier mechs fielded by the Battle Criers. They don't make use of complete neural interfaces, but they carry Lufa's glow instead. From what I have seen and heard, Lufa is good at neutralizing all kinds of metaphysical stuff. He also makes the mech pilots of the Nullifiers feel numb and less emotional while they are interfacing with their mechs."

"Now that you mention it, you have raised a good point. Maybe you are right in that they are similar to each other. The Pacifier and the Sanctuary models also produce similar effects. The difference is that Ves is the only mech designer who can design these living mechs. True mechs can be designed by anyone who has access to complete neural interfaces. This makes the latter more universal and therefore more desirable to the mech community. Besides, I do not think the Association approves of any tech that relies on an external entity to function."

That still meant that the Larkinsons already possessed their own equivalent of true mechs.

"Are you saying that we do not need true mechs in the first place?"

"I cannot make that claim with further information." Ketis shrugged. "The Red Association hasn't published enough hard data on true mechs to make a proper comparison. If I have to make a guess, I

can believe that they are much more effective at neutralizing negative effects on the mech pilot than the Nullifier model, but also come with greater side effects. The consequences of giving more ground to the logic engine of a mech in the man-machine connection means that it may make the mech pilot less emotional in combat. The pilots of true mechs will find it more difficult to break through."

That was a huge downside if it turned out to be true. Ketis had no way of knowing whether this was the case. She could only speculate based on her own shallow understanding in this field.

Joshua did not consider that to be a big problem, though.

"True mechs can be assigned to older veterans who have begun to lose their edge. Their chances of breaking through are so low that they may as well pilot these true mechs instead. They are also more suited for veterans since these true mechs are more difficult to pilot."

"It depends on what a complete neural interface actually does. I am still frustrated at the fact that I do not entirely know what is missing from the neural interfaces that I have used in my mechs. I am not as obsessive about this as Gloriana, but I am really irritated at the thought that my mechs are less than they could have been."

Perhaps Ketis was simply overreacting. As she herself had stated earlier, much of her ire came from the condescending terms utilized by the Red Association.

As the pair continued to watch the broadcast, Ketis began to receive messages from many different clansmen.

They all wanted to ask her opinion on this developing situation. A few people thought that she knew what Ves had in mind, which she didn't. Her former mentor never asked her to assist in his defense.

"How is the clan doing, Ketis?"

"People are concerned, but not too much." She answered. "Many of us have witnessed how resourceful Ves can be. I don't know whether he is able to fulfill all of his goals in this public inquiry. All of this unexpected news has thrown him off-guard and forced him to react to new information without enough preparation. I am actually growing more concerned for him. Did you just listen to what Master Castor has said? She is questioning the reason why living mechs should even exist."

"What?! That is an absurd question! Of course living mechs have reasons to exist! Any mech pilot who has handled them knows this truth!"

"She is not trying to convince diehard fans such as you. What she is actually doing is casting doubt on all of the other people who don't know living mechs as well. Aside from that, she is also trying to suggest that Ves has strayed from the original purpose of mechs. This is a much more concerning attack because she is not actually wrong on this front. Ves has taken his works much further away from other mechs than is normal. The question now is whether he has gone too far with this. Mechs aren't originally supposed to be self-aware and able to move by themselves, but now third order living mechs have gained this capability. It is up to the public to decide whether this is right or wrong."

"I hope that they make the right choice." Joshua said with evident concern in his voice.

Chapter 5767 Attack on Divergence

5767 Attack on Divergence

People throughout the Red Ocean reacted to the public inquiry in different ways.

There were many mech designers who shared similar feelings as Ketis.

Just as the swordmaster predicted, Gloriana did not take the latest announcement too well.

"THE MECHERS LIED! THEY DELIBERATELY CRIPPLED OUR MECHS! WHY ARE WE NOT ALLOWED TO DESIGN TRUE MECHS? WHY AM I NOT ALLOWED TO PUT COMPLETE NEURAL INTERFACES IN MY MECHS? I AM NOT A CHILD THAT NEEDS TO BE CODDLED! WHY ARE THE MECHERS REFUSING TO GIVE US THIS TECHNOLOGY THAT THEY HAVE HELD BACK ALL OF THIS TIME!?"

"Big sister, why is mama so angry?"

"Mama is angry because a group of bad guys refused to give her a toy."

"Oh. That makes sense."

Other mech designers showed a little more understanding.

"Complete neural interfaces." Tristan furrowed his brows as he watched the broadcast from his office in the headquarters of his mech company. "Ordinary neural interfaces are already dangerous by themselves. I can't imagine how much more risky it is for mech pilots to make use of enhanced versions of this tech. There are probably good reasons why the mechers kept it out of their hands."

Then there were mech designers who scoffed at this revelation.

"You do not need true mechs." Master Benedict Cortez told the projections of Patriarch Reginald Cross and General Ark Larkinson. "From what I can surmise based on the limited information released up to this point, true mechs give ordinary mech pilots more resistance when fighting against exotic enemies. They may possess other strengths as well that the mechers have yet to mention, but fundamentally speaking these true mechs exist to solve a problem that their intended users cannot solve by themselves. Both of you possess extraordinarily strong willpower. If you are strong enough to maintain your fighting spirit when entering the God Kingdom of a god pilot, then complete neural interfaces are redundant for your mechs."

"I see. So complete neural interfaces are more suitable for mass production models if that is the case."

"Whether true mechs are desirable enough for most general mech pilots remains to be seen. Master Cantor deliberately mentioned a number of possible issues. A woman of her stature does not say anything trivial. She is inoculating us to prevent us from developing too many expectations for this new category of mechs. In spite of the possible issues, the mechers still value true mechs to the point where they insist on keeping these machines for themselves at first."

"Will we ever be able to gain access to these true mechs, Benedict?"

The Master Mech Designer's expression grew complicated. "Not in the short term, given how the Red Association has always maintained tight control over this technology. Even if public pressure forces the mechers to share it to the public, they will do so in the most restrained fashion possible. Think about the Red Fleet's Warship Quota Program, but for true mechs. Only the most favored parties will be able to field limited quantities of true mechs to protect them against a rising threat."

Many people among the public grew concerned about the threat posed by these 'cultivators'. They had little idea what that even meant, but that did not stop them from entertaining all kinds of doom scenarios.

The Red Association was one of the most authoritative groups in human space. If the mechers warned the public about a threat they were concerned about, then the public blindly believed that the wise and righteous mechers were right to feel this way!

This was one of the effects that Ves had to overcome when he returned from his second recess.

As he stood in the center of the speaking pit, he slowly built up his momentum as he defended his living mechs with increasing fervor and passion.

Master Cantor sought to besmirch his living mechs and render them undesirable by announcing the existence of true mechs which theoretically conflicted with the purpose of living mechs.

Ves did not hold too much personal animosity towards Alice Cantor. As much as she resorted to rather drastic measures to shock the public into dropping their adoration for his living mechs, she did so because she genuinely believed in the original ideal for mechs.

Master Cantor was just the spokesperson for a much larger group of skeptics within the mech industry and beyond. Ves did not disregard the fact that living mechs had been making a lot of people uncomfortable at an increasing rate, especially when third order living mechs started to pop up like mushrooms.

That did not deflate his fervor in any way. Despite respecting Master Cantor for strongly advocating for what she believed in, Ves could not accept the fact that she went as far as to torch his design philosophy and argue that living mechs had no reason to exist!

If Ves wanted to remain a true mech designer after this day, then he had to win this argument in the most convincing fashion possible!

With only a single speaking turn left in this exhaustive session, Ves needed to use the limited time available to him to sway people back to valuing his living mechs over other products.

Any other result was unacceptable as far as he was concerned!

Fortunately, he knew exactly how he could mitigate the damage and win back the favor of the masses.

He inwardly smirked as he knew that his upcoming argument would definitely Master Cantor speechless.

This was because he intended to use her own weapons against her and the rest of the opposition.

Ves held his back straight as he turned around the speaking pit and gazed up at all of the attendees who had become fully engaged in his narrative.

Whether it was his confident demeanor, his increasingly more passionate delivery or the odd glow that he was radiating across the grand hall, Ves managed to command the total attention of anyone who was even remotely invested in this controversial subject.

"Let me address a belief, no, a philosophy espoused by one of the speakers from the opposition." He spoke with obvious restraint in his voice. "Master Cantor over there would have you believe that mechs can only align with a single theoretical framework. She uses the word 'divergence' over and

over again as if it is a magic wand that automatically justifies her crusade against my living mechs. Still, is it truly correct to form a conclusion solely based on what works in the past? Why don't we stick to using warships then? Just because stuff has worked in the past does not mean that there is no room for improvement! The mech industry thrives on innovation. If you want to continue to make use of mechs that get significantly better with each generation, then you must be open-minded enough to accept inventions that break the established mold!"

Mechs had progressed much faster than warships during the Age of Mechs because of a much more enterprising spirit surrounding the newfangled machines.

The Mech Trade Association made obvious moves to restrict research into dangerous directions, but mech designers were otherwise free to pursue any direction of research, even if it did not make any sense at first.

Without continuous innovation, mechs would stagnate and lose their competitive advantage over other combat platforms.

In that context, it seemed rather excessive for Master Cantor and the other opponents from the Red Association to fixate on him and his work all of a sudden. The mechers escalated this conflict far too quickly and practically initiated a witch hunt by organizing this 'public inquiry'.

If it could happen to Ves, it could happen to any other mech designer one day. Not even his existing good relations and his high galactic citizenship tier saved him from enduring all of these accusations.

Ves did not intend to be merciful for that reason.

"Let us talk about what divergence actually means." He spoke as he began his own assault on one of the most important principles of the mech industry. "The usual understanding about mechs is that they function best if they are distinctly different from the humans they are designed to serve. There is nothing wrong with this attitude towards our products. The logic is sound and it has worked well enough for our civilization for at least four centuries. What I cannot accept is that this is the only acceptable interpretation of mechs, and that there is no way that there can be a better alternative."

Many people grew more curious about what Ves was about to say. He sounded so compelling that the audience began to feel sympathy towards him. They all wanted him to beat back the perceived injustice of the mechers.

Ves smirked when he gazed across the underwater environment. "I think that Master Cantor and her fellow detractors of my work are wrong. There is a better model out there, and I will explain why I think that this is the case."

He activated a projection that showed a simplified image of a typical human body. The man possessed a generic appearance and wore a simple shirt.

"This is a human. This is the subject whose needs have to be addressed. In this case, he is about to enter into combat, but lacks the protection to survive when coming into contact with the enemy."

He created another projected image that depicted a generic suit of combat armor.

"This is a suit of armor like the ones that enforcers and soldiers typically wear. This suit is a product that exists to fulfill the demands of its user. In this case, the suit offers excellent protection against

typical small arms fire. The problem is that without a human wearer, the empty suit doesn't really do anything with its powerful properties."

Ves proceeded to merge the two images together, thereby neatly stuffing the human inside the suit of combat armor.

"This is the intended combination between the two elements. The needs of the human are met in a way that ensures he remains in control of the situations. The combat armor serves its essential purpose and can leverage its full potential now that it is controlled by a trained and intelligent soldier. Sounds nice, right? Humanity as well as many other races have been waging infantry combat for many millennia with this combination. Something similar takes place with mechs as well."

Ves suddenly dropped his smile. "Yet this fundamental model is not perfect. Let me mention the most relevant objections that I have with this scheme."

He waved his hand, causing the suit of armor to be separated from its wearer.

"Strip the armor from the human, and the human regresses into his weak old self. Pretty much all of the amazing strength that he previously had at its disposal has disappeared entirely. Perhaps he may be able to regain his prior combat effectiveness by getting back his combat armor or obtaining a replacement, but that does not change the fact that the human still retains all of the weaknesses as before. The funny part about this is that this flaw remains valid for many other comparable situations."

He began to drive home his point by replacing the suit of combat armor with a much larger and stronger mech.

"When you put a mech pilot into the cockpit of a mech, the combination between the two can beat up a lot of enemies. Yet when you take the mech pilot out again, he regresses into a weak and vulnerable human."

Ves replaced the projection of a generic mech with a much fancier and more expensive version.

"Let's pretend that this new machine is a true mech. I do not know whether true mechs appear differently from normal ones, but let's just assume that this is one of the Red Association's secret weapons that they have held back from us for the entirety of the Age of Mechs."

He manipulated the projections so that the human entered the cockpit of the true mech and came back out again.

"Almost the exact same story happens in this case. The human mech pilot is weak and vulnerable against material attacks as well as metaphysical attacks. When the pilot interfaces with a true mech, he can presumably withstand both kinds of attacks with a high degree of effectiveness. Yet when you pull him out again, he becomes just as vulnerable as before. If true mechs work the way I think it does, then they are just as flawed as ordinary mechs. Their complete neural interfaces won't be able to make this situation any better. Do you recognize the fundamental flaw with the divergence model?"

The more intelligent people among the audience already started to get an inkling where Ves was going with this story.

Ves smirked again as he made one of the important statements on this subject.

"The most fatal flaw of pursuing divergence in mechs is that it doesn't do nearly enough to develop the mech pilot! In fact, the mech only coddles the human that it is meant to serve! The mech becomes a crutch that humans solely rely upon to compensate for their weaknesses! While that might sound nice in the short term, it is not progress from my perspective. Do you know why first-class mech pilots break through at a noticeably reduced rate compared to lesser pilots? This is exactly why! Their mechs do too much of the work, leaving their human pilots with little room for growth and development! The divergence model that so many close-

minded people insist upon has become a poison that keeps humans perpetually weak and underdeveloped. This is not progress in my opinion. This is stagnation, plain and simple! Now that I am able to present a better alternative, the stupidest choice you can make is to stick to an outdated solution that does nothing but keep you stuck in perpetual weakness!"

Chapter 5768 The Case for Convergence

5768 The Case for Convergence

Ves actually started to feel grateful towards the opposition for putting him on the spot.

Ever since he formed his design philosophy, he never allocated too much time and attention on why he bothered to design living mechs in the first place. It was only when his critics started to challenge him in a way that forced him to offer a response that he fleshed out the aspects of his rationale that he had previously neglected.

The divergence model mentioned by Master Cantor happened to serve as the perfect target dummy for Ves. He could beat it up in any way he liked in order to make his point.

The simple visuals he used to illustrate his point only hammered home his message. Pretty much all of the people who listened to his counterargument began to view the divergence model in a less flattering light than before.

Ves gestured towards Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson, who was sitting further apart than the rest of the speakers.

The woman did not retreat from the session entirely after she had been prohibited from speaking for the rest of the day. She had already made her point. She wanted to witness how well her revelation managed to undermine Ves' arguments.

Unfortunately for her, the information she shared to the public had become one of the best weapons for Ves to launch his counterattack!

"In order to further recognize how the divergence model has been coddling us for over four centuries, let us consider the information disclosed by the speaker from the Fifth Enforcement Fleet. Her initial revelations are correct. Cultivators exist, and they are able to wield great and unusual powers. However, I have already explained to you all that all high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers are cultivators by definition. We are simply more advanced and modernized than the more ancient and flawed varieties. Let us combine these facts with the one of the stated purposes of the mechers, which is to develop better technologies to stimulate personal human development. They liked to contrast their goal with that of the fleeters, who want humans to change as little as possible and rely entirely on technology to do all of the heavy lifting. Doesn't that sound familiar?"

There was no need for Ves to mention the obvious similarities. The ironic smile on his face already made it clear that he thought that the divergence model aligned far more with the Red Fleet than it should.

"The main point I want to make by mentioning all of this is that the Red Association is an organization that is mainly centered around cultivators. It may not be obvious on the surface, but if you study the MTA and RA's rules, history, notable leaders and more, you will realize that the mechers have done everything they could to promote the emergence of as many god pilots as possible. There is nothing wrong with this goal in my opinion. God pilots are the strongest individual combatants to ever exist. Their ironclad principles and their strong willpower makes them virtually incorruptible. They are living proof that cultivators, or at least the limited selection of approved variations, are beneficial to human civilization."

There was practically no one outside of the Red Fleet who dared to oppose the existence of god pilots. Operation Night Jazz had further cemented the crucial role that god pilots played in holding back the powerful leaders of the Red Cabal!

Ves gestured his arm towards the familiar projection that showed a mech being piloted by a human.

"Now let us think how this ties to the divergence model. The goal of the Red Association has never been to wrap human mech pilots with the strongest possible technologies imaginable. That makes the organization no different from the Red Fleet. The real purpose has always been to promote the development and evolution of the mech pilot."

The projected mech began to explode in power as it simulated the apotheosis of the mech pilot.

"Once the soldier becomes an expert pilot, he has transcended his mortal limitations and taken his first true step into cultivation. The journey to ace pilot and eventually god pilot is long, dangerous and challenging, so much so that the vast majority of pilots never make it to the end. Yet as long as a handful of people can cross the ultimate barrier and ascend to godhood as a pilot of a powerful machine, it is all worth it in the end."

This was the dream of almost every mech pilot. That did not necessarily mean that these soldiers and warriors had the guts, courage, discipline and conviction to throw themselves into this exceedingly difficult trajectory, but it was rightly celebrated as the most celebrated aspiration of their profession!

Ves turned away from the guests and faced the opposition.

"Master Cantor. Earlier, I gave you the courtesy of answering your questions. I expect you to do the same, even if the subject is related to true mechs."

The old Mech Supremacist maintained a neutral expression as she attracted a lot of attention once again.

"You may ask, but you are not guaranteed to receive an answer. I have an obligation to remain silent if you demand any answer that relates to information that I am not permitted to divulge."

Ves already expected such a response so he quickly moved forward.

"Alright. Let me ask you this. Are pilot breakthroughs desirable to the Red Association?"

"They are." Master Cantor had no problem with this question. "Our principles have always been to leverage human technology to facilitate human development in a controlled manner. The fact that the Mech Trade Association has been able to produce over a hundred god pilots is proof of our success."

"Okay. Do true mechs promote or inhibit this goal?"

This time, the old woman did not offer a reply. She simply remained silent, making it clear that the question had touched into forbidden territory.

Ves began to smirk. She had fallen for his trap. A silent opponent was a defenseless opponent. He could think of several ways to exploit her current behavior!

"Let me give you my guess if you are unwilling to offer clarification. It is well-known that mech pilots are much more likely to trigger breakthroughs when they are emotionally stimulated. The stronger their emotions, the greater the probability that they can exceed their limits. They must be completely invested in the battle. They must experience the pressure of death, the fear of loss, the hope of victory and the love for their fellow comrades. Any experienced mech pilots will attest to this. Given how emotions play such an immense role for the evolutionary development of mech pilots, why do you insist on stuffing them into these so-called 'true mechs' that are explicitly designed to leverage their emotionless logic engines as a source of strength?"

"..."

"I may be wrong on this, but my educated guess is that true mechs contradict one of the central principles of your own organization. Rather than strengthen their mech pilots, they freeze their development instead. It becomes exponentially more difficult for humans to break through while their emotions are deliberately muted, blocked, dampened or interfered with by their own true mechs. Perhaps it is worthwhile for mech pilots to sacrifice their long-term development in exchange for instant protection against looming threats of a different nature, but is this truly what the mech industry aspires to make?"

"..."

"Let's face it. A true mech is just a fancier suit of combat armor. It can protect people from a greater variety of threats, but it does nothing to promote the development of mech pilots. While there are situations where the availability of true mechs can contain the threat posed by cultivators, it is not a true solution. It is not as if you can permanently keep mech pilots within the cockpits of their true mechs. Once these individuals shut down their machines and hop outside, they revert to their normal human selves, and become just as vulnerable to metaphysical attacks as before. Don't you agree, Master Cantor?"

"..."

Ves smirked wider. "Ordinary mechs are hardly better. While it is true that mech pilots are able to break through when piloting the mechs that we have used during the Age of Mechs, in my opinion these breakthroughs took place in spite of the divergence model, not because of it. The deliberate effort to keep mechs and humans as far apart from each other as possible is decent if there is no better alternative, but that is not the case anymore."

He turned away from his silent opponent and began to replace the previous projected images with one that depicted a mech pilot and a Fey Fianna.

The Fey Fianna was his strongest bestseller at the moment. Its value proposition was amazing and its utility had expanded a lot after the release of a lot of useful fey.

Many Fey Fiannas had also evolved into third order living mechs as of late, so it was the machine that the public recognized the most as the subject of the public inquiry.

"Let me explain to you all why my convergence model is better. First, the mech is alive, which means that it can grow in a similar fashion to a cultivator like its own mech pilot. That means when the two different elements work together, they derive the same degree of growth from their experiences. The mech will be able to keep up with the growth of the mech pilot, thereby making it less likely that the former will hold back the latter. While there are no obvious statistics that living mechs have produced a greater proportion of breakthroughs when compared to normal mechs, I believe that this is because not enough time has passed for third order living mechs to show their actual worth. You should wait a few years. I strongly believe that the pilots of third order living mechs will be able to break through at a distinctly higher rate!"

If this claim was true, then living mechs would definitely be able to beat true mechs in popularity!

"I object!" Master Cantor could not remain silent at this time.

Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus nodded towards the speaker of the opposition. Even the moderator thought that Ves had gone too far.

"You may offer a brief rebuttal."

"Thank you, governor. I would like to inform the public that Professor Larkinson's latest statement is an unsubstantiated claim that has no proof or strong theories behind it. Neither theory nor empirical data can add substance to his spurious claim. The public must remain vigilant of claims made without sufficient backing. Science is based on facts, not guesses. The inventor of living mechs may be right, or he may be wrong, but in the absence of any solid arguments, it would be wise to disregard his latest statements and maintain a skeptical mindset."

Ves snorted at her rebuttal. "That's rich coming from you. The Red Association claims to uphold the principle that technology must promote human development, yet you cling to an inferior theory like the divergence model as if it is the center of your religion. My convergence model may be a lot newer and not quite tested, but it has at least been able to maintain parity. You are also wrong about one of your claims, Master Cantor. I do have a solid theory that explains why living mechs are much more capable of promoting the development of their mech pilots. It is just not a theory that can be found in any contemporary science textbook."

This must be good. Everyone who paid attention to the public broadcast deeply wanted to know about this mysterious new theory.

"My mother, yes the one that was once a part of a group of really powerful individuals who ruled from the shadows, once taught me about cultivation. To be more specific, she taught me about how people can cultivate by deeply bonding and using a powerful object. This is called artifact cultivation, though I am sure that there are other terms for it as well. The point is that people can grow stronger in mysterious ways if they leverage the strength of their bonded artifact as a source of growth."

None of this was new anymore to Ves, but his casual revelation excited and intrigued a lot of ignorant people!

"Now I am sure you can predict where I am going with this. The convergence model is based on the rules and mechanisms of artifact cultivation. While a normal mech pilot will not be able to derive much growth from a mech that remains weak and stagnant all of the time, one of my customers will always be able to make faster progress when piloting a living mech that also grows over time! This is why I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that once the pilots of my third order living mechs have fought for a while, they will break through at significantly higher rates! That is because they are practicing artifact cultivation much more effectively than the pilots of other mechs!"

The moderator gave Ves a stern stare for repeating the same spurious claim, but it didn't matter.

Even if Ves was unable to deliver any hard proof, his narrative and logic was so strong that people were more than willing to embrace this theory, if only to satisfy their long-cherished hope of breaking through one day!

Chapter 5769 Room for Improvement

Ves felt confident that his speech had successfully countered his opponent's previous argument.

This was because he cleverly exploited a flaw in his target audience's psychology.

Did mech pilots want to wrap themselves in the strongest layer of armor, energy shielding and more exotic forms of protection?

No!

At least that was not their ultimate ambition.

What mech pilots truly wanted was to exceed their mortal limitations, undergo apotheosis and dominate the battlefield as expert pilots or greater!

If Ves asked any ordinary mech pilot if they wanted to break through, they would say yes more than 99 percent of the time!

No serious self-respecting mech pilot would ever refuse the opportunity of a lifetime!

Though only a fraction of all of the mech pilots in existence had managed to overcome this hurdle in the end, that did not stop the remainder from keeping this dream alive.

It was because of this common aspiration that a lot of mech pilots who were tuning into the broadcast deeply wanted Ves to be correct about his theories!

His arguments wouldn't have received strong support if he presented it in front of proper scientists, engineers and mech designers. They all understood the scientific process pretty well, and they could recognize when one of their own was being sloppy.

Mech pilots were different. They were not as critical or skeptical as scientists. They were trained to pretty much believe in whatever mech designers told them within reason. They did not necessarily understand the rigor required for claims to hold up to scientific scrutiny. This was why Ves was confident that his latest argument successfully stimulated the desires of his true target audience!

"In short, the convergence model that I have made available to my customers by releasing living mechs offers a more promising alternative to the mech community." Ves began to close his argument. "It may be correct that my living mechs are fundamentally unable to become true mechs

due to conflicting mechanics. However, we shouldn't rely too much on machines that inhibit the growth of mech pilots anyway."

He clasped his hands as he faced the majority of his audience and made his final point.

"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. This ancient proverb has remained relevant throughout human history because it can be applied in so many different situations. This is no exception. You just need to swap out a few words. True strength does not come from the equipment that we use as a crutch. It comes from the partners that actively help us grow strong enough to defend against powerful threats by ourselves. I used to think that the mechers agree that the latter is more preferable, but Master Cantor's insistence on the divergence model suggests to me that this is not entirely the case anymore. I thought that the Red Association is all about promoting the evolution of humans, not inhibiting it by sticking to a suboptimal solution."

At this time, Ves had thoroughly won back all of the people who previously lost their faith in living mechs!

Even if the criticism towards him was justified, people could not help but hope that he was right.

Between Ves and Master Cantor, a lot of people were more naturally willing to believe the former over the latter for a variety of reasons!

Ves started out from the bottom while Master Cantor was as elite as a mecher could get. At least the scrappy young Senior used to be an average citizen like the rest of the masses. He understood their plight far better than all of the poncy first-

raters who liked to look down on the space peasants from their ivory towers.

What also played a helpful role was that Ves had built up a reputation among mech pilots. He was not an ordinary mech designer. He was also a pioneer and a trailblazer who willingly accompanied his soldiers into battlefields and subjected himself to many of the same risks as his own troops!

A hero who was known to lead his own mech army from the front as a manner of speaking would naturally earn more sympathy than a mecher who had likely stayed deep inside the most stable and well-defended star systems.

Age also played a crucial factor in this popularity contest. Master Cantor may be old enough to project a lot of wisdom, but her cold demeanor, her lack of empathy and her complete lack of brand awareness from the general public all painted her as an arrogant mecher who had grown severely out of touch with the current reality that mech pilots had to face!

The result was that a lot of mech pilots were much more willing to trust that Ves knew what was right for them as opposed to an old mecher who looked as if she had never shown any care towards the plight of the masses in her entire life!

Ves personally thought that the Fifth Enforcement Fleet had made a better choice than the opposition among the Mech Supremacist Faction.

The fleeters presented a young and attractive woman as their speaker. What she lacked in experience and wisdom, she more than made up for her shortcomings in energy and passion!

Humans were inherently emotional individuals. They were never purely driven by their rationality. All of the aforementioned factors that were not actually related to the validity of arguments could actually play a massive role in swaying the opinions of the crowd!

Ves did not need to access any polls or other data to know that he had won the support of the majority of the public again.

He could feel his fortunes had changed.

"Wake up, people!" Ves shouted at his captured audience! "We have left the Age of Mechs behind! The Age of Dawn is more than a simple calendar switch. It denotes a new era of red humanity where our entire society undergoes many changes due to the persistent influence of E energy radiation! Instead of trying to cling to methods and approaches that were developed in the previous age, we should embrace any change that can grant us access to greater advantages than before! Our circumstances have changed, and so should we! My products are not bound by so many vestiges of the past. I dared to question the established conventions, and I had no qualms about ripping apart any rules that no longer make any sense in the new age!"

"Do you want to know one of the truths behind my work? An important reason why my living mechs must gain a semblance of autonomy and control over themselves is because they can cultivate by themselves! No other mechs can match this capability! The products that lack my adaptations will only passively be able to grow stronger by getting irradiated by E energy. Compared to passive cultivation, active cultivation is much more effective because it is a targeted and deliberate action! In summary, living mechs grow faster, which means that their mech pilots shall also grow faster! This is the essence of Mutual Growth!"

The moderator finally cut Ves off at this point before he could make any further unsubstantiated claims.

"That is more than enough, Professor Larkinson. We can explore more specific topics in tomorrow's session. For now, I shall give the final word to the opposition. Keep your rebuttal brief, and try not to introduce too much new information."

Although Master Cantor had schooled her expression so that she did not expose any of her true feelings, her approach only made her less sympathetic and more stuck-up in front of her audience.

Ves would have thought that the mechers should have been smart enough to realize they needed to put a lot more effort into winning over the crowd, but they apparently had different thoughts in mind.

"I shall repeat this once more." She said. "The divergence model is a tried-and-tested approach towards mechs that has withstood the test of time. It offers certain, proven results that can be relied upon no matter the age. It enables mech pilots to grow and develop their strength not by relying on handouts from their mechs, but by forcing them into combat scenarios where they can only rely on themselves to break past their predicaments. Strong-willed expert pilots are all products of extreme self-reliance. They emerge and develop as long as they can only win their battles by severing their dependency on external help."

Master Cantor activated a projection that depicted an early version of the Mars during the moment when Patriarch Reginald Cross broke through.

"One of the high-profile clients of your works can attest to my substantiated claims. When handed over to a living high-

tier expert mech, Patriarch Reginald opted to terminate the living properties of your work and successfully advanced to the rank of ace pilot by relying on himself. He is a true product of explosively strong willpower. His confidence in his own power is justified because he has earned most of his gains through his own hard work and effort. This is how mech pilots ought to prove they are worthy to wield greater power. Your living mechs may make it easier for mech pilots to break through in the short term, but the increasing dependency your work breeds will ultimately ruin their long-term ability to advance to ace pilot or god pilot!"

Ves coughed at that. "Who is the one that is flinging unsubstantiated claims, here? You have no data that supports or invalidates your latest argument!"

BANG!

The entire underwater environment transmitted a long collision noise.

It turned out that Planetary Governor Mergan-Castelaus had pulled out a hammer and banged it on the armrest of his pearl throne!

The noise was so sharp and loud that it immediately forced everyone into silence.

"That is enough debate for this session. The public has heard enough for the time being. We can resume the public inquiry tomorrow when many more people have spent enough hours contemplating the information that you have shared with them. One of the principal goals of this public inquiry is to enlighten the population of red humanity of the facts and allow them to form their own judgment on living mechs. Let us keep this in mind. This session has come to an end!"

Though the moderator ended this session a bit sooner than Ves preferred, he understood the necessity of this move. The revelations and other explanations dumped so much new information on people's laps that they could hardly absorb any further input on this day!

The audience would become a lot more receptive towards any follow-up arguments after they processed what they had recently learned.

"That is the Devil Tongue I know." Jovy praised as the man in question had moved out of the speaking pit. "You did a good job, Ves. Your logic and arguments are not entirely flawless, but you resolved the immediate crisis of confidence in your living mechs. If you can maintain this pattern for two more days, then the justification to impose any significant restrictions on your living mechs will drop. Third order living mechs may actually become so popular among your target audience that they will collectively rise up in protest if any large state or organization dares to restrict their availability."

Ves smiled back. "I think it is safe to say that Master Cantor won't pose a threat to me anymore. Unless she messes up the board by introducing other explosive pieces of information, her line of argumentation simply will not be able to overpower my own. If the opposition wants to regain the upper hand, then a different speaker must take the word."

"Hmm. You are correct. There are still other valid reasons to doubt the wisdom of employing living mechs. Master Alice Cantor did not address them because they are not her primary focus. You can

expect the representatives of the other groups will make up that. Be ready to answer doubts concerning the possibility of rebellion from your living mechs tomorrow."

Chapter 5770 The Web Mistress

5770 The Web Mistress

The first day of the public inquiry had come and gone.

So much had happened that Ves and his team had been busy all night. They squeezed their networks for all of the information they could get. They also reviewed the arguments made during the first sessions and considered whether they should address additional issues during the second session.

Ves had spent a lot of time strategizing, but he also made sure to take a few hours off in order to rest his mind and return to peak condition for the important day ahead.

"What is the public sentiment like?" He asked his latest recruit.

Kelsey Ampatoch had a good understanding and feel of the mech community due to previously working for Isthmus Manufacturing. He certainly possessed a lot more insight in the sentiments of customers than Jovy and Vector.

"It's a storm out there, sir." The former Rubarthan replied. "There is a lot of confusion, misinformation, grifting and tribalism taking place throughout human space. The good news is that your existing customer base is firmly behind you. In fact, each time you held a speech, you not only made up for lost ground, but significantly strengthened the loyalty and dedication of existing users of your products. They are highly sympathetic towards your cause and they have faith that you are going above and beyond to defend their interests."

Ves smiled at that. "All of the time and effort I spend on building up a good reputation and releasing mechs that people can fall in love with have paid off. I am sure that Master Alice Cantor is a good mech designer who has made many contributions to the mech industry, but the difference between me and her is that I am a well-known personality among the public. Master Cantor on the other hand has probably never made a name for herself outside of the most elite circles of society. I don't know what the Mech Supremacists were thinking by putting her forward as a speaker."

"Well, she has greater authorization and seniority than others in her faction." Jovy noted. "She is also a strong advocate of the necessity of serving mech pilots and the preservation of the divergence model. This is not the first time that a mech designer attempted to present an alternative to the officially accepted philosophy towards the relationship between mechs and mech pilots. The Mech Supremacists are extremely sensitive towards any deviations from the standard definition of mechs. They have a habit of behaving as the police of the mech industry."

"So they are busybodies who run around and tell other people what they cannot do with their mechs, is that right?" Ves frowned.

"Sort of. For example, they have fended off many attempts by other ambitious mech designers who sought to gain acceptance towards all kinds of extreme deviations such as demimechs, multi-pilot mechs, juggernauts, permanent mechs, alien mechs, starship mechs."

"Wait. I have heard about and even designed some of the former, but what are the latter?"

Both Jovy and Vector chuckled at the same time.

"It is not a surprise that you have never heard about them." Vector Loban spoke. "They are deemed too controversial, so our Association has always expended effort to suppress any discussion related to them. Their labels should already give you a clue on what they mean. Permanent mechs is a radical approach that attempts to establish a permanent interface between a mech and a mech pilot."

"What?!" Ves reacted with surprise! "Even I am not crazy enough to design such an absurd mech. How can pilots ever live a normal life among humans if his body is permanently caged in the cockpit of a machine?"

"You would be surprised how useful this may be to certain people. Permanent mechs are an idea that Transhumanists such as myself have entertained many times for reasons that you should already know. If a mech pilot permanently interfaces with a biomech to the point where separation no longer becomes possible, then the distinction between the two effectively becomes meaningless. The biomech has effectively become the pilot's new body. It is a pity that the Mech Supremacists are so protective of the original definition of mechs that they refuse to tolerate the existence of permanent mechs. Since they have managed to rally popular support, designing permanent mechs has become prohibited."

"I see. I don't mean to offend you, but I think the Mech Supremacists were right to discourage their development." Ves said as he showed clear signs of discomfort towards this idea. "What are alien mechs and starship mechs?"

"They are exactly as their names suggest. Alien mechs refer to the effort of developing mechs that can be piloted by non-

human races. There are plenty of scientific reasons why the invention and study of such mechs can enrich our understanding of mechs. However, the fear of giving away a highly effective war weapon to our alien adversaries has prevented many researchers from embarking on such projects. The Mech Supremacists are so adamant that mechs must retain an exclusive advantage to humans that they eventually persuaded the rest of the Association to ban this subject outright."

Ves actually found himself agreeing with the stance of the Mech Supremacists once again. "I would have done the same if I were in their place."

"Starship mechs are attempts to develop starships or warships that can be controlled by one or multiple potentates in order to establish superior control. It essentially requires mech designers to design a starship as if it is a juggernaut. Suffice to say, this idea only briefly got floated around before both the MTA and the CFA swiftly joined together to squash it down. Neither of the two wants to blur the line between starships and mechs."

The idea was plausible. Even Ves was able to come up with a rough plan on how to design a large starship that partially functioned like a mech. It was not technology that limited the development of starship mechs, but politics.

"Okay." He said. "I get why the Mech Supremacists have tried to suppress weird stuff like juggernauts and permanent mechs. What I cannot accept is that they think that living mechs deserve to be on this list. There is no way my works are as bad as the other ones!"

Jovy, Vector and Kelsey all exchanged knowing glances at each other.

"Uhm, Ves, that is your bias speaking." Jovy gently said. "You are hardly the most neutral and objective person to make this judgment. From the perspective of the Mech Supremacists, there are

plenty of reasons to prohibit or at least restrict your products. They have a number of outrageous traits and they clearly subvert the divergence model that has defined mechs for multiple centuries."

"Are the majority of Mech Supremacists truly opposed to my living mechs?" Ves frowned. "I can't believe that all of them want to ban my products outright just because they do stuff a little differently from normal mechs."

"About that, Master Goldstein and others have investigated the opposition from this faction. We have finally managed to obtain more information about what the Mech Supremacists actually think and what they hope to accomplish during this public inquiry."

Ves and the others looked curiously at Jovy.

"Well. Get on with it. Tell me what is happening in this faction."

"First, you have to understand that many Mech Supremacists do not hold a strong animosity towards you and your works. They oppose living mechs out of principle, not necessarily because they consider them to be an acute threat or anything. Highly passionate opposers such as Master Alice Cantor are among the minority. What is highly relevant to you is that the people at the top are not neutral towards this subject matter. Even if they have not officially spoken out in favor or in opposition against your works, their opinions carry an enormous amount of weight."

Ves immediately grew concerned. "The Mech Supremacists are led by two Star Designers, right?"

"Correct. They do not have a god pilot among them, but that is not necessary. The unquestionable leader of this faction is the Lord of Thermodynamics. He is older than the Age of Mechs. He has experienced the final years of the Age of Conquest, so his beliefs and principles are strongly shaped by the prevailing events and ideologies of this chaotic period in history. He is a man who prizes stability over upheaval. He is much of the reason why the Mech Supremacists are still so protective over maintaining a narrow definition of mechs. Frankly, you should feel fortunate that tier 1 galactic citizens have agreed to refrain from directly interfering in this affair. Your living mechs have gained so much prominence that you have attracted a number of very powerful supporters and detractors."

The revelation that the oldest and arguably most powerful Star Designer of the Red Association did not have a good impression of living mechs provoked a multitude of reactions from Ves.

The Lord of Thermodynamics was a big deal!

His prestige was the greatest among the Star Designers in the Red Ocean. His contributions were countless and he was probably in touch with more secrets than anyone else in the Association.

There was no way that Ves could resist a directive from such a powerful figure.

Ves previously held a high regard for the Lord of Thermodynamics for making a huge number of contributions towards the power systems of mechs. The man was one of the principal figures responsible for allowing mechs to wield so much power in combat.

However, Ves also grew disappointed at the Star Designer's overly conservative stance towards mechs. The man was an old fossil who clung to his increasingly more outdated principles and beliefs as if this was the only way to prevent a repeat of the excesses of the Age of Conquest.

"What about the other leader of the Mech Supremacists? Where does the Web Mistress stand on this matter?"

The Web Mistress was not as influential as the Lord of Thermodynamics, but that did not mean she was a lightweight.

She was known as the Mother of Support Link Technology. She did not invent everything related to support link technology, but she definitely improved and perfected it to the point where it became a lot stronger and more practical!

Her inventions were so incredibly useful that they not only revolutionized the mech doctrines of first-class mechs, but also got adopted by the Common Fleet Alliance!

The ability to transfer energy from one machine to another was so damn useful that even the fleeters had no real choice but to embrace the signature innovations of a mecher!

"The Web Mistress was born during the Age of Mechs, so she is not as opposed to innovation as her older peer." Jovy explained. "She can be described as a moderate. She is not strongly opposed or supportive of living mechs. If she was in charge, then it is likely that she would have given your living mechs a chance, but only when you have put additional safeguards in place."

That was barely better, but still not ideal. Ves wanted to preserve his rights as much as possible. Any restrictions imposed by the Red Association would only shackle him and slow him down.

Ves scratched his head as he tried to figure out what this all meant for him and his works.

"So what is the ultimate purpose of the Mech Supremacists? What are they hoping to accomplish during this public inquiry?"

"Well..."

"If you have any relevant information, then please share it, Jovy."

The Reality Trickster hesitated for a few seconds before he decided to respond. "This is only a rumor, Ves. This is third-

hand or fourth-hand information, so take this information with a grain of salt. According to what Master Goldstein has heard from one of his old friends of this faction, some of the opposition towards your living mechs is not entirely about principles. Disputes about convergence and divergence are only a means to an end to this group, which may or may not include the Web Mistress. What they truly desire is control. They want to impose regulations on the proliferation of living mechs and more specifically their third order variety. What this means is that they want to control which living mechs have earned the right to evolve to third order. This effectively allows the Red Association to gain dominion over your works."

Ves' expression immediately turned ugly. "That... is so typical of you mechers."