

The Mech 5771

Chapter 5771 The Second Session

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Hearing that the Lord of Thermodynamics was such an old-fashioned geezer that he could not accept the existence of living mechs was already bad enough.

Hearing that the Web Mistress wanted the Red Association to regulate living mechs by imposing restrictions on which living mechs were allowed to evolve into third order living mechs was not much better!

The two Star Designers and their support base might have different reasons and motivations to go after living mechs, but they all amounted to different forms of meddling.

Why couldn't the mechers leave his living mechs alone? Why did they feel the need to impose regulations of different severity onto products that were doing just fine?

Ves had been publishing living mech designs for plenty of years now. They were not exactly new anymore. They had rarely if ever produced any incidents that resulted in deliberate harm to their mech pilots.

The behavior of the Mech Supremacists was akin to turning a harmless issue into a significant problem, just so that they could solve it themselves!

Both Jovy and Vector looked apologetic towards Ves. They might not be part of the offending faction, but they were still members of the Red Association.

Once the Mech Supremacists managed to get their way, every other mecher had no choice but to follow the new regulations no matter their personal beliefs.

"You do not stand alone against the Mech Supremacists." Jovy said as he stepped forward and placed his hand on Ves' back. "Many Survivalists as well as Transhumanists are in favor of your work. Sure, many of them may still be in favor of regulating your living mechs, but they will not be as strict about it. You have to understand that our Association exists precisely in order to maintain order in our industry. The mech market would have become a lot more chaotic and dangerous without our active intervention. We are the shield that has protected the public as well as the producers from scams, unsafe products and outright criminal activity."

Ves did not disagree with that. He understood quite well that the mech industry would not have prospered to this degree without the guiding hand of the MTA and the RA.

Yet now that he and his works had become the latest focus of the mechers, Ves felt much less pleased about their habit of swooping in hand and taking control over the situation.

Letting the mechers regulate his works represented a crucial change.

Giving them control over the evolution of living mechs effectively granted them greater power over the mech community. People would be much less inclined to oppose them if doing so reduced their ability to gain approval for a living mech upgrade application.

"This is wrong." Ves shook his head in disapproval. "Living mechs have a universal and unrestricted right to grow as far as I am concerned. I am principally opposed to restricting their

ability to improve and evolve past their limitations in any way. It is like telling children that they cannot age into adults unless they have received approval from an official agency that shouldn't have this power in the first place."

Kelsey Ampatoch snorted and crossed his arms. "Welcome to the true face of the mechers, Ves. From what I have been able to gather in the short time I have accompanied you, your works and your potential has earned you special treatment from one of our current overlords. You have spent much of your time interacting with the 'good side' of the Association. It is only now that you have come into contact with its true face. This kind of behavior from the mechers is not rare within Terran and Rubarthan space. Do not be deceived by their positive image and their high-minded ideals. Their ultimate goal is to remain in control and keep the rest of us in their thrall."

Though Jovy and Vector clearly objected to Kelsey's description of 'their' Association, they wisely kept their mouths shut. This was not the time to have an argument about this acrimonious topic.

"I don't think that Master Cantor will have many chances to speak going forward." Ves eventually said. "She has already made her stance clear. There are other speakers that have yet to share their views to the public."

"That does not mean you can disregard the Mech Supremacists, Ves." Jovy carefully said. "If the public inquiry ends with a consensus that results in imposing regulations on your living mechs, then the Mech Supremacists will have the greatest influence over how this will be done. This is their domain, much as human evolution falls under the purview of the Transhumanists. While you have your fair share of supporters within the Association, many of them actually do not have a problem with giving them at least a measure of control over the growth of living mechs."

"Great."

It was times like these that reminded Ves that the Red Association did not have his interests at heart.

The mechers always prioritized their own interests over that of everyone else. This was actually quite normal behavior, so Ves did not even blame them for trying to strengthen their control over red humanity.

Ves checked the time. "We should wrap this up. The second session will start in two hours."

They curtailed their discussions and moved across the city of Charvey once again.

The exotic first-class city continued to charm Ves with the bountiful amount of aquatic-themed structures that were encased in their own bubbles of water.

Though a part of Ves wondered why the colonists of Ector V did not establish their capital city underneath the ocean of this planet, the exotic if somewhat wasteful architecture served as a nice distraction for what he was about to undergo later today.

Once he and his entourage arrived at the Dragon King's Palace, they waited for a moment before they entered a familiar grand hall that was dominated by high ceilings, colorful fish swimming in every direction and enormous masterwork statues of majestic dragons.

Floating before the clamshell throne was the planetary governor. The man exuded a lot of gravitas as he maintained a stern demeanor, especially since he wore a more subdued and less shiny version of his previous scaled suit. Nobody felt inclined to test his limits as he had already shown he was not afraid to exercise his authority when he deemed it necessary.

Once all of the 100,000 spectators had taken their seats, the moderator proceeded to open the second session.

"Welcome to the second day of the public inquiry on living mechs. Previously, we explored the purpose, the properties and the future outlook of living mechs. Each of us have learned more about this subject and others than any of us have anticipated. While I am of the opinion that greater disclosure and educating the public will ultimately benefit our civilization, I have been asked to act more promptly in case any of the speakers divulge confidential information that they are not properly permitted to share in this venue. I implore every participant to exercise greater control over their speech."

Both sides got the message.

Now that he got this out of the way, Mergan-Castelaus eased his expression and sat down on his pearl throne.

"Other than that, I hope that we can witness another productive debate during this session. The second session is mainly dedicated to questioning whether living mechs deserve to have a place in our society. I am aware that this topic has already been touched upon in the previous session, but this is the time to explore this question in greater debt. The opposition may begin this time."

Neither Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson nor Master Alice Cantor stepped forward at this time.

The opposition instead allowed Professor Kacuk Chabran to proceed to the center of the speaking pit before addressing the huge number of people who tuned into the broadcast.

"Greetings, red humans. I am Professor Kacuk of the Chabran Ancient Clan of the Terran Alliance. Members of the academic community may recognize me from my many studies and writings on how humans must organize their society and how our fundamental relationship with technology shapes us as a race, for both good and ill. I am one of the watchers and protectors of our civilization. Thinkers such as myself are needed because the inventors of radical technologies such as Professor Larkinson all too often neglect the greater and often less pleasant repercussions of their own work. Today, I want to share with you my well-founded concerns about making our mech pilots dependent on a rising variation of mechs that can already pilot themselves."

Unlike Master Cantor, Professor Kacuk clearly understood much better on how to present himself to a general audience.

The Terran sociologist and philosopher proceeded to present the same spiel that he had given to Ves in private before.

The only difference was that he adjusted his delivery to sound nicer and more personable. It was rather impressive how Professor Kacuk Chabran had removed much of his harsh edge and stuffed away his Terran arrogance.

"...Ever since the state of computer science has progressed to the point where humans are able to construct reasonably intelligent and responsive artificial intelligence, we have been unable to resist the allure of letting automation perform progressively more difficult tasks. The benefits of doing so are obvious as there is a large amount of tedious and monotonous work processes that do not necessarily require human effort anymore."

The professor was an experienced teacher, so he made sure to project various images that emphasized his point.

"Yet the wisdom of passing on more work to AIs has proven to be questionable as difficult tasks often equate to more important tasks. When we start to outsource work to non-

human intelligences that have no inherent sympathy or attachment to the human race, we naively entrust our most fundamental security to a potential enemy. It is no different from surrendering our sovereignty to aliens as they harbor just as much care towards our race."

The latest projection showed two different images.

One of them showed humans whose lives were completely taken care of as they resided in a fully automated home.

The household AIs controlled practically everything in this abode.

They turned on the lights when evening fell.

They filled a bath with water shortly before one of the residents visited the bathroom.

The automated kitchen prepared expansive and varied meals based on the taste preferences and dietary requirements of each individual resident.

All of this seemed nice, until a hacker managed to subvert the household AIs and turned the entire home into a horror house!

By the time the last resident expired, blood had spread into every room of this infamous home!

The second image showed a group of furry mammalian aliens that belonged to a race that had gone extinct during the Age of Mechs.

This specific incident occurred during the Age of Stars, and had been used as one of many inciting factors behind humanity's uprising against the cosmopolitans.

A lot of people's blood boiled at the sight of aliens stuffing a group of captured humans into their version of a zoo!

The humans had been deprived of their dignity by stripping them of most of their clothes, limiting their movement space, forcing them to perform specific actions for the amusement of the alien audience and more.

The utter lack of empathy and care from the aliens had taught humanity a cruel lesson about their place in the Milky Way.

"Autonomous intelligences, no matter whether they are sentient or not, should never be trusted as a rule." Professor Kacuk Chabran emphasized to his audience. "The simple fact that they are different from humans is enough of a reason to adhere to this time-tested rule. It does not matter whether we program AIs to be absolutely loyal to our race. Any programming can be undermined. No safeguard is foolproof. From the moment we are unable to maintain strong control over autonomous machines, it is inevitable that they will rise up against us. Many wonderful inventions that have promised to help our race have ended in tragedy because of this inescapable reality. Living mechs are just the latest manifestation of this phenomenon."

Chapter 5772 Alienation of Living Mechs

5772 Alienation of Living Mechs

As Professor Kacuk Chabran held a lecture on the perils of developing a reliance against autonomous machines, a lot of people became increasingly more swayed by his narrative.

The Terran academic had history on his side. Humanity had mastered the technology to develop and employ artificial intelligences in many different instances.

Different from more rudimentary programming or control systems, artificial intelligences were typically designed to solve problems beyond the obvious ones that people could already foresee.

In order to make AIs flexible and adaptable enough to solve new problems that no one had ever accounted for in the past, the artificial intelligences had to possess the capacity to learn and iterate.

This was much of the reason that made them dangerous. Artificial intelligences could 'learn' all kinds of crazy and inhuman solutions that did not align with human common sense in the slightest!

For example, Ves had personally witnessed a case where a cleaning bot tasked with removing blood from the streets had literally tried to devour the legs and the rest of the body of a living human!

In the crazy but 'correct' logic of the cleaning bot, removing the source of blood was the most effective way to prevent the floor from getting dirty.

Of course, a lot more crazy stuff happened during this incident that happened very early in Ves' career, but the memory of this iconic sight has still been seared into his mind.

Ves did not actually disagree with everything Professor Kacuk said. There was definitely a legitimate need for red humanity to remain vigilant against the temptation of relying too much on automation to solve all of its problems.

Of course, where the two diverged was their stance on whether living mechs deserved the same harsh treatment!

Professor Chabran employed two clever arguments to sway the public into supporting a crackdown on living mechs.

First, he painted living mechs with the same brush as more traditional examples of artificial intelligence.

Even if the two worked completely differently, the Terran sociologist made a strong case for treating living mechs in the same way.

"...Extensive studies have shown that the programming code of the products released by the Living Mech Corporation does not contain anything that resembles modern AIs." The older man conceded. "That does not mean they are exempt from our concern. The technological principles behind the functioning of living mechs are more esoteric due to the fact that Professor Larkinson relies on an esoteric application of E-technology, but the end result is the same as if these products are controlled by more conventional AIs."

The academic employed a classic proverb to convey his point.

"If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. Do not believe in the claims that intelligent living mechs are so 'different' from modern AIs that they are not subject to the problems of the latter. The two are sufficiently identical to each other that they deserve the same treatment."

The Terran professor spread his arms as he concluded this important argument.

"AIs have the potential to become dangerous, so their capacity to learn must be limited for our own safety. Living mechs also have the potential to become dangerous, so their capacity to grow must be limited for our own safety."

Ves grew angry when Professor Kacuk spoke these words!

It was not fair to establish such a strong equivalence between his living mechs and other AIs!

While Ves was eager to refute Kacuk's attempts to tie two different phenomena together, he refrained from making an outburst.

He needed to remain in control. It was better to let the Terran scholar finish his spiel before Ves offered a thorough and more measured response.

The professor's second major argument against living mechs honed in on a vulnerability that Ves and his advisors had not properly considered.

"Third order living mechs have gained powerful metaphysical qualities that not only exhibit all of the characteristics of AIs, but also display even further traits that border on resembling intelligent organic races such as humans and aliens! Such possibilities are cause for alarm, because living mechs violate another fundamental rule. The technology that humans rely upon must never exceed our comprehension. We rightfully discourage and restrict widespread use of alien technologies because the alien principles they are based upon are difficult for humans to understand. If we do not understand the tech we use, we become vulnerable to hidden and unanticipated functions that we have not guarded against."

The professor proceeded to show numerous famous and well-

documented cases where blind reliance on alien technologies had screwed humans over.

One particularly iconic case was an instance during the late Age of Stars where the flagship of an early human fleet replaced her inferior human-developed FTL drive with a much more superior alien version taken from a defeated alien capital ship.

Since human FTL drive technology was initially reverse engineered from alien devices, there was a lot of compatibility between the human warship and the alien FTL drive.

It did not take too much effort to mount the new FTL drive to the proud flagship whose mobility had become further enhanced.

Yet when the fleet received orders to move to a human stronghold, the fleet eventually arrived at its destination without the most important ship!

It later turned out that the powerful alien FTL drive's incredibly obtuse and obscure programming and hidden modules had forcibly altered the coordinates of the vessel.

The upgraded flagship still traveled in the same direction, but only altered her heading by a few degrees.

This was enough of a deviation in FTL travel to doom the vessel in a journey across the higher dimensions with no fixed location at the end!

Suffice to say, the flagship never made it out intact. FTL drive technology was a lot less sophisticated back then. Even the more advanced alien FTL drive was hopelessly primitive compared to the modern versions employed by red humanity!

Safety was one of the major shortcomings of those early FTL drives. If a starship ever 'missed' its destination and went on a wild and uncontrollable journey, forcibly shutting down the FTL drive resulted in a much more violent ejection back into the material realm!

The vast majority of cases produced nothing but extremely long trails of debris that stretched on for several light-minutes or light-hours!

The story behind this particular incident went on to become an iconic cautionary tale about the perils of relying on alien technology.

The only acceptable technologies were those that humanity had fully broken down, reverse engineered and explored in depth.

The general rule that humans followed nowadays was that they were only supposed to utilize technologies if people fully understood their full working principles.

It was a good rule to follow, but Ves hadn't exactly been diligent about following it. Luminar crystal technology still remained nebulous to him due to his inability to understand the alien circuitry employed by a long-dead race.

"...In conclusion, power does not automatically equate to safety. If we do not sufficiently understand or control the power we wield, it can easily explode in our faces. As much as many people from the mech community have fallen in love with the obvious power and potential demonstrated by popular products such as the Fey Fianna and the Ultimatum, they are all overlooking the obvious danger they represent to their owners. Each living mech you add to your mech roster is another potential time bomb that can explode in the worst of times."

No matter whether Professor Chabran's warning was credible enough, his words still frightened a lot of customers!

When they purchased and used their living mechs, they only paid attention to all of the strengths and benefits of their new possessions.

This was the first time they began to see their living mechs as potential liabilities!

It was such a powerful shift in mentality that it reduced a lot of enthusiasm towards Ves' products!

"Each living mech is based on a form of E-technology that is novel but also horribly disorganized and underdeveloped. Reputable experts that have studied the more obtuse properties of living mechs have informed me that living mechs have no existing basis in established science. They are based on completely different principles that trace their origin to ancient cultivation practices. While I cannot go in depth on this controversial subject, I can tell you that blindly relying on dubious methods from an old group of war criminals who almost engineered the extinction of the human race is not a wise course of action!"

Ves pressed his lips but otherwise tried his best to maintain his cool.

While he could attempt to interject and interrupt the momentum of the opposing speaker, he needed to think more carefully on how he should counter this response.

He needed to win this debate by relying on both logic and passion. It was not enough for him to rely on just one of them. The stakes were too high and his adversaries were sure to pound on any weakness.

Professor Kacuk Chabran continued to expand on his latest point. He spent a lot of effort equating living mechs to dangerous and inscrutable alien technology.

Once the moderator finally signaled an end to Professor Chabran's exhaustive lecture, Ves finally received his turn to speak to the audience.

When Ves stood in the center of the speaking pit, he began to offer a calm rebuttal to the Terran academic's arguments.

He first needed to disassociate his living mechs from AIs.

"Professor Chabran has made a common mistake that many other people have made. I do not blame them, for they do not understand my products as well as myself. What is important to know is that living mechs are not AIs for a simple reason. The former are alive, while the latter are devoid of life. This is an important distinction because living entities are not vulnerable to the same exploits that make artificial intelligences so dangerous to rely upon. Instead of viewing my products as killer robots in the making, you should treat them as symbiotic life forms that can assist us in incredible ways as long as we treat them with the respect that they deserve."

Ves projected historical images of ancient horsebound cavalry to illustrate his point.

"During the primitive ages of our history, we leveraged the power of horses to excellent effect. Effective use of animals that are not human but trustworthy enough to employ in battle has resulted in the rise and fall of many early human cultures. Our entire history as a civilization has taken many dramatic turns due to the outcome of battles where the symbiosis between man and horse has resulted in decisive victories."

Ves waved his hand, replacing the images of horsebound cavalry with much more modern depictions of living mechs such as the Fey Fianna.

"Meet warhorses 2.0. Compared to old-fashioned horses from Old Earth, living mechs are much larger, much more powerful, much more customizable and much easier to maintain and repair. Other than that, they can serve their human riders just as well as real warhorses, if not better. No words can fully encapsulate the wonder of a well-established partnership between a living mech and a mech pilot. There is no single entity in charge here. Both of them are capable of demonstrating excellent teamwork that enables them to fight harder, respond quicker and survive longer on the battlefield compared to mechs that are only controlled by single mech pilots!"

By utilizing the analogy of cavalry, Ves tried his best to reduce the alienation between living mechs and humans as much as possible.

Since humanity already had a history of establishing a successful partnership with warhorses in the past, they could establish a similar relationship with living mechs.

"Do not be afraid of living mechs." Ves told his audience. "As strange and different as they appear on the surface, each of them are actually quite gentle and friendly towards humans. Every newly

fabricated living mech starts off as a blank slate that easily imprints on their first human users. Once they have grown to what I call a third order living mech, they should have retrieved so much training from their mech pilots that they are the most loyal and reliable allies of their human partners! In short, as long as you can overcome your initial hesitation towards employing a living entity in combat, you will find that fighting with a mech that can think and help you on its own initiative is a far more useful ally than a mech that is completely devoid of life!"

Chapter 5773 Devil Proofing

5773 Devil Proofing

The second session proceeded in a much less astonishing fashion than the day before.

Neither side pulled off any crazy or unexpected moves. Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus had already issued a warning to both sides to refrain from spilling any secrets, and everyone took it seriously.

Ves believed that he managed to gain an advantage during the first session, so he had no objection to adopting a more measured and risk averse approach on the second day.

He wondered whether he had made a strategic misstep.

Professor Kacuk of the Chabran Ancient Clan was a disturbingly competent speaker. As an old sociologist and philosopher, he had an abundant amount of experience in giving speeches to wildly different audiences.

He spent years honing his speaking and presentation skills in venues as diverse as academic conferences, lecture halls and public speaking squares.

More importantly than that, the Terran possessed the crucial ability to shed his first-class high-born arrogance and appear personable to the lesser space peasants whose opinions mattered a lot in this public inquiry.

Despite or because of his formidable intellect, the scholar's strategy for his series of speeches during the second session turned out to be quite simple.

He sought to alienate the public against the new but admittedly weird existence of living mechs.

12:09

The man repeatedly amplified and exaggerated every aspect of Ves' works that did not fit with the established mold of human technology.

It was not that difficult for him to make a persuasive case for his stance. Living mechs were incredibly lacking in transparency. Any engineer who broke down a living mech could find no visible component or programming code that hinted at anything that could be responsible for giving the machine its characteristic traits.

While it was easy for Ves to explain that living mechs were based on specialized applications of E-technology, what did that actually mean?

Red humanity's introduction to E-technology was way too brief at this time. Only one-and-a-half year had passed since the start of the Age of Dawn, and most people in the mech industry still struggled to come to grips with hyper technology.

E-technology was a completely different beast that most people simply did not have the qualifications to work with. Ordinary humans completely lacked the ability to perceive E energy, let alone manipulate it in a deliberate manner.

Absent any lab machines that could finally allow humans to measure and manipulate E technology like they could already do with molecules and atoms, E-technology was destined to remain an extremely obscure and niche application of science.

It did not help that the few known instances of E-technology all resembled witchcraft and sorcery more than proper science!

That was because the few people who succeeded in developing useful applications of E-technology clearly copied the methods of ancient cultivation scriptures.

The ultimate result of all of this was that Professor Kacuk did not actually have to work too hard to build up a convincing case that living mechs should not be trusted.

"The technologies 'invented' by Professor Larkinson are not strictly defined as alien in origin, but they may as well be. These mysterious 'cultivators' of the past who treated ordinary humans as cattle are so alien in their behavior and their atypical methods that they were essentially aliens in human skins. As the parties who were ultimately responsible for driving humanity to the brink of extinction during the doomsday years of the Age of Conquest, any legacies they have left behind is suspicious at best, and a trap at worst! Given this context, how is it acceptable for us to allow derivative products such as living mechs free reign in the mech market when they can hide all manner of time bombs?"

The man could not stop talking about the dangers of relying on 'unknown technology'.

"The mere fact that no one in the entire scientific community has yet to understand any of the essential mechanisms of how living mechs work is proof that they are filled with unknowns. How much of them does their creator actually comprehend? What if he has made a mistake that will lead to catastrophe down the line? The best case scenario is that accidents resulting from his negligence will produce minor glitches. The worst case scenario is that his works will go rogue, which is very much possible as they already possess far too much leeway for machines gifted with extensive autonomy."

Faced with this attack, Ves spent much of his time trying to undo the damage wrought by the opposing speaker.

His warhorse analogy was a clever and intuitive means to get people to warm up to the idea of relying on a living object as opposed to a lifeless tool.

"Living mechs can think and feel for themselves, so it is true that they bring additional demands to their users." Ves frankly admitted. "Yet I consider this to be a boon, not a demerit. There are many mech pilots who invest years of their service into piloting a single machine. They train with their assigned mechs for thousands of hours and try to master every single nuance to give them an additional advantage when they finally have to put their lives on the line. However, the cost-benefit ratio of this investment clearly plateaus after a certain point. Spending additional hours on training will not yield any measurable improvement anymore. They have already exhausted the potential of their static machines. Subsequently, their own growth drastically slows down as they are not engaging in effective exercises anymore."

His message was particularly tailored towards mech pilots who harbored ambitions to become greater. This was his most friendly audience and one that he needed to win over the most.

"Unlike static mechs, living mechs are not strictly subject to these limitations. While their material parts and components cannot magically grow stronger to a drastic degree, nothing is impossible in the Age of Dawn. Modern hyper mechs have made my products a lot more relevant due to the fact that hyper technology and E-technology are closely related to each other. All pilots who utilize living mechs can expect their new battle partner to grow and adapt to their thinking processes, their piloting styles, their combat preferences, their combined experiences on the battlefield and more. There are so many different factors that can fuel the growth of living mechs that they gain new possibilities every day. As long as mech pilots have the discipline and the motivation to grow stronger, they will find that they can always gain the support they need from their living machines."

Though Ves was not able to refute every concern mentioned by Professor Kacuk Chabran, he believed he did a good job of strengthening the trust and faith that mech pilots held towards living mechs.

Ancient cavalry soldiers did not need to understand how the biology of warhorses worked in order to make effective use of these majestic steeds.

In the same vein, mech pilots had no need to comprehend all of the different science behind living mechs to fight with them on the battlefield.

Mech pilots never really had the patience to listen to a long and relatively abstract university lecture to begin with. They were people who preferred action over talking. Though second-class and first-class mech pilots still had to study a lot of science in order to pilot more advanced mechs, their ability to understand basic scientific theories rarely equated into passion.

The ultimate result of this extensive verbal sparring session was that Ves and Professor Chabran won over two distinctly different audiences.

While Ves could count on the backing of mech pilots and especially those who already had experience with living mechs, the Terran sociologist had skillfully swayed large populations of norms who never had any personal experience with any kind of mech.

It was a clever approach. Perhaps the opposition already recognized that Ves possessed too strong of an advantage among soldiers and warriors. This was why Professor Chabran deliberately engaged in scaremongering in order to frighten people who didn't know any better!

An important factor why a lot of civilians became more easily swayed by the Terran academics was because they enjoyed none of the benefits, but many of the possible downsides.

Ves chafed at the restriction that prevented him from announcing the existence of his experimental Carmine System.

As immature as this tech may be, much of the testing so far had already proved that it was safe for the time being!

Though Ves previously felt it would be too hasty to release any Carmine mechs in the short term due to lack of knowledge on how these machines affected their pilots in the long term, he frankly did not care about this anymore.

Dangerous or not, just the possibility of fulfilling the cherished dreams of many norms was enough to willingly tempt a lot of people into embracing Carmine mechs!

Alas, Ves could not afford to strain his relationship with the Red Association any further. It was instances like these where good relations showed their value. The opposition wouldn't have needed to make their case in public if the Survivalists and Transhumanists did not go out of their way to cover his back.

The last thing Ves wanted to do was act ungrateful by ruining whatever plans the Transhumanist Faction had in mind for his Carmine mechs and other useful inventions.

Vector Loban at least had enough awareness to say sorry on behalf of his faction's obstinacy.

This left Ves unable to employ a killer solution that was guaranteed to earn instant approval from all of the civilians!

Instead, Ves was unable to appeal to them due to the simple fact that most of the benefits of living mechs had nothing to do with the lives of ordinary people.

The only relevant aspects about living mechs that could directly affect civilians were negative!

As much as Ves tried to refute the exaggerated claims that living mechs might go rogue and go on killing sprees, he could not lie and say that it was impossible for this to happen.

Third order living mechs had the right to live their own lives. That meant giving them enough leeway to be able to do stuff that they actually shouldn't do. It was completely realistic to expect that they might eventually engage in controversial actions that would earn a lot of condemnation from the public.

Stuff like starting a destructive fight inside a starship or in the middle of an urban settlement were all plausible scenarios. Ves had lived through numerous violent incidents where a lot of innocent bystanders got killed due to the natural consequence of enormous mechs fighting in close proximity!

Professor Chabran was not the only speaker that Ves had difficulty with. Other speakers occasionally pushed forth similar arguments that were distinctly formulated in ways that Ves could not directly refute.

It was as if they took his moniker of Devil Tongue so seriously that they deliberately went out of their way to minimize the possibility of direct conflicts!

Their attempts to devil proof their arguments clearly yielded the desired results.

Ves did not have the chance to sound righteous and passionate if he did not have a convenient punching bag to direct his ire!

He glowered when opponents such as Lieutenant-

Commander Astrid Jameson took their turns to torch living mechs from different angles.

"Experimental new technologies fundamentally come with great risks." She explained. "Early FTL drives developed by the human race were so rudimentary that there was a 25 percent chance that no one would ever see the crews and passengers of test vessels again. Living mechs may be completely different from first generation FTL drives, but the principles remain the same."

Living mechs had nothing in common with FTL drives!

"It is standard practice in the R&D sector to thoroughly test new inventions before ever thinking about making a new technology available to the public. As far as we have been able to ascertain, Professor Larkinson has often ignored this essential step. By releasing new and untested innovations directly to the market, he is effectively turning all of his customers into his unwitting guinea pigs. Does this sound ethical to you? I think not. If you care even the slightest about the health and safety of your family, friends or colleagues who have fallen into his trap, then do what is right and demand greater oversight over the professor's unsafe products."

Chapter 5774 Different Strategy

5774 Different Strategy

"You lost ground today." Jovy said once they all returned to their temporary lodging.

Ves grimaced at that. His ability to make a case for himself could only bring him so far during the second session.

"It dawns on me that I may have been playing into the hands of my opponents." He said. "Perhaps the selection of Lieutenant-

Commander Astrid Jameson and Master Alice Cantor goes a lot deeper than I initially thought. What if the opposition deliberately put forth their more provocative and less competent speakers on the first day in order to gain my measure? Not only did I expose a lot about myself, I also unleashed my firepower too soon. The opposition has been able to regain control of the rhythm by making targeted adjustments based on what they learned in the first session. The most obvious sign of why that may be the case is that Professor Kacuk Chabran did not repeat any of the mistakes that Master Alice Cantor had made."

His advisors all looked serious when he threw out this theory.

"You may be ascribing more competence to the opposition than they actually possess." Kelsey Ampatoch remarked. "The coalition against your living mechs are divided and not completely in alignment to each other. There is no single leader among them that can impose a unified strategy. The more likely possibility is that they are working alongside each other, but not necessarily with each other. It is mainly Professor Kacuk Chabran that you must be vigilant against. The other speakers have polished up their presentation, but they are still relatively manageable."

Jovy shook his head. "No offense, Mr. Ampatoch, but I believe your inherent bias against Terrans is clouding your judgment. The scholar from the Chabran Ancient Clan is in his element, but that does not mean it is wise to disregard the threat posed by the other speakers. The most important opponent is Master Cantor. It is not her ability that matters, but who she speaks for. The Mech Supremacist Faction holds the greatest jurisdiction over this matter. The policies and ideologies instituted by the Lord of Thermodynamics and the Web Mistress demand that the Red Association take at least some action against living mechs."

Vector nodded in agreement. "My fellow mecher is correct. If the third session proceeds along the same line as the second one, then I see no way of avoiding a reality where living mechs can remain as free and unrestricted as now. You may not like it, but it is fully within the Association's jurisdiction to impose reasonable restraints on the unbridled growth and proliferation of your living

mechs. If you were a neutral bystander, you would agree with this stance, but since this issue is closely tied to your design philosophy, you cannot stomach the idea of compromise."

"Of course not! Living mechs were doing just fine all of these years! You mechers never saw fit to intervene even when early models such as the Valkyrie Redeemer and Ferocious Piranha went on to get sold by the millions. Why must you guys act now, and do so in such an adversarial fashion? This public inquiry is making a lot of uninformed people unnecessarily scared of my products!"

"The public has a right and a need for transparency, Ves." Jovy gently said. "Our Association can keep many secrets, and can tolerate others doing the same. However, a confrontation became inevitable when your living mechs started to behave much more like actual humans, and not infrequently either. Did you really think you can get away with unleashing such frightening possibilities onto the masses and expect them to accept it without question like they have done for your other innovations? I am afraid you have overestimated an average person's ability to embrace novelties that stray too far from the range of normality."

"Ugh." Ves let out a frustrated noise. "So I just have to sit back and take it, Jovy?"

"I am not telling you to admit defeat. I just want to inform you that the prevailing trend is slightly against your favor. You need to be prepared to make compromises tomorrow."

Kelsey Ampatoch tried to reassure his new employer.

"I think you did the best you could under the circumstances, sir. You are an excellent salesman. Your presentations have always succeeded in converting potential customers into paying customers. Your background, your personal journey and your professional experiences has made you good at captivating mech pilots. It is other audiences that you are currently struggling with. You cannot sell your attractive mechs to norms like you can do with mech pilots. Ordinary people with little to no connections to mechs are not attracted to the advantages of your products. Instead of speaking to the general folk as if you are a salesman, you should speak to them as if you are a politician."

The others nodded in agreement.

"That is a good observation and recommendation, Mr. Ampatoch." Jovy said. "If you want to pressure your opponents into softening their demands, then you must gain broad public support. You cannot do that by trying to sell them products that they cannot possibly use. To sway them to your cause, you have to adopt the approach of a politician and win their support as if you are trying to obtain their votes."

That was a good way to look at this situation. In hindsight, Ves recognized that Professor Kacuk Chabran had done exactly that. Even his scaremongering strategy was right out of the playbook of a sleazy politician!

Ves started to think about how he should correct his course.

"Tomorrow is the decisive day. The gains and losses of the first two sessions are important, but the last one is the most crucial by far, because that is when the outcome will be decided. I have one more chance to make my case to the public. The same goes for the opposition. I really don't know how they will tackle living mechs in the final session."

"I think it is unlikely that the opposition will spring any new arguments tomorrow." Jovy said.

"They have already mentioned every relevant stance that they could reasonably employ against your

works. It would be surprising if they introduced a completely new reason why red humanity should not embrace living mechs. There wouldn't be enough time for people and professionals to investigate and verify the new information."

Vector concurred with his fellow mecher. "In debates like these, it is not about trying to overpower your adversaries with facts and logic. The best way to win is by swaying the feelings and emotions of the masses."

"I remember that you guys told me before the start of the public inquiry that this public inquiry should be won by relying on logic and stuff. Now you tell me I have to set that all aside and appeal to the baser emotions of the general population instead."

"We... were wrong. What is important is that you adapt to the strategy of your opponent and correct your course accordingly."

"That is clear enough to me, but what course should I chart, exactly? I need a concrete direction, not a vague description."

That put everyone into thought for a moment.

"You know what?" Ves said. "I just had an idea. I think that red humanity's relationship with automation is not beneficial anymore. People have become so adamant about keeping humans involved in everything that they have become very tolerant at accepting inefficiencies resulting from their paranoia towards AIs."

"There are good reasons why this paranoia exists, Ves." Vector said. "Relying too much on vulnerable, exploitable machines that command greater power is never a wise solution. Even if it produces fantastic results in the short term, it will always backfire in the long term."

"Hahahaha! That's funny! Do you know why? Our race and civilization might not have the luxury to take the long term into consideration! Hasn't the Red War pushed us in a desperate situation? Considering how many alien enemies are gunning after us, I believe we should loosen our restraints and make use of more powerful solutions despite their heightened risks! Whatever harm we suffer from this reckless move is nowhere near as severe as total extinction!"

Everyone got a bit taken aback by Ves' unexpected outburst.

"You sound like an Unbounder, Ves." Jovy said with obvious disapproval. "As tempting as your proposal may sound, anarchy is not the solution."

Kelsey Ampatoch nodded in agreement. "In these uncertain times, people crave structure and stability more than ever. Unless the aliens have literally arrived in orbit of the planet they reside upon, most people do not want to open up the possibility of falling victim to rogue or hacked AIs."

"Stupid! These people are too selfish and short-sighted!" Ves said in obvious disgust. "Mech pilots and other soldiers are dying in droves in the frontlines just so that other people can live and work on their colonized planets in peace. Denying those brave and righteous soldiers with the most effective solutions that we can bestow them will ultimately lead to severe consequences. The aliens will cause many of these people to regret their hesitation when orbital strikes finally pummel their settlements flat."

Jovy reached out and placed his hand on Ves' shoulder.

"Calm down, Ves. Do not let your frustrations cloud your judgment. I am glad that you feel passionate about the necessity to increase the sense of urgency among the civilization population of the Red Ocean, but I do not think it is a good idea to admonish the people you wish to win over. If you want to regain the upper hand in the next session, then you will need to radiate positivity as opposed to negativity."

"Why do I have to do that? The opposition is doing just fine with turning my living mechs into boogeymen."

"That is because their job is to impede your works. Obstruction is inherently negative. It is also easier to produce results with this stance. You on the other hand must promote relatively unfamiliar products and concepts to a large population of humans who are not naturally inclined to favor your living mechs."

In other words, this was an unfair struggle.

Fortunately, Ves was not out of options.

"I need help. I can't do this alone." He said. "I already requested the assistance of a friendly ally. Let me check whether he is finally available."

Ves briefly corresponded with the individual in question through his cranial implant.

He finally started to smile again.

"Good news. Captain Zonrad Reze of the Seventh Light Fleet has almost reached Ector V. He will likely arrive in time for him to speak during the session."

The sudden mention of bringing in a supposed ally from the Red Fleet disrupted the mood of the other three mech designers.

Jovy and Vector looked especially uncomfortable with this situation!

"Ves... I am aware that you have recently spoken with a starship captain from the Red Fleet, but... do you understand the optics of relying on the word of a fleeter to promote your living mechs?"

"Don't worry. Captain Reze and I have formed a pretty good understanding with each other. Not everyone in the CFA is as dogmatic as their colleagues from the Fifth Enforcement Fleet. This isn't entirely about mechs alone. This debate is also about politics. I think it would help a lot if I can present a fleeter who is willing to vouch for a mech designer. I can even turn his testimony into a component of a more elaborate strategy."

Though the mechers were not enthused with the idea of relying on a fleeter of all people to help Ves' cause, they needed any help that they could get. A lot of mechers would probably disapprove of this move, but the most important constituents right now was the general public.

Ves needed to show that the Red Fleet was not united on this subject.

He also wanted to prove that he had his fair share of backers from this powerful organization as well.

Chapter 5775 The Third Day

5775 The Third Day

Anything could happen on the third and final day.

The public inquiry on living mechs had already done far more than anyone expected during the first two days.

The organizers had already fulfilled the goal of informing the broad public of what was going on with living mechs.

Nowadays, there were hardly any first-raters, second-raters or third-raters who still remained unaware of the existence and the meaning of living mechs!

The multi-day event had advertised Ves' brand as well as his iconic works to the greatest possible audience yet. Far more first-raters became introduced to living mechs than during the initial craze for the Ultimatum model!

The public inquiry had become so influential that it had become a mandatory topic of discussion in many communities.

From individual households to the executive suites, people frequently voiced their personal views on living mechs.

Not even the residents and visitors of Ector V were exempt from this phenomenon.

Hours before the third and most important session was about to start, a growing crowd of supporters and protestors had gathered in front of the enormous water bubble that surrounded the Dragon King's Pace.

Many of these people had become inflamed by the arguments made during the previous sessions and felt the need to take action!

The projected protest signs clearly indicated the reasons why they felt it was important for them to take action in person.

[LIVING MECHS = KILLER BOTS.]

[SAY NO TO TERMINATION BY MACHINE!]

[ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS ENGINEERED STUPIDITY.]

[WAKE UP SHEEPLE! MECH PILOTS WERE TEST SUBJECTS ALL ALONG!]

Combined with all of the shouting, it became clear that a lot of protestors feared that living mechs would go out of control and turn against humanity.

There were also people who expressed a lot of concern towards the health and safety of the mech pilots who entrusted their lives to these dangerous machines, but they were distinctly smaller in proportion.

Though the group of protestors were bigger, there was still a sizable group of supporters who found enough reasons to speak in support of Ves and his works.

[THE POWER OF MAN PALES IN COMPARISON TO THE POWER OF GOD!]

[ONLY LIVING MECHS CAN DRAG RED HUMANITY FROM THE ABYSS.]

[PROFESSOR LARKINSON IS THE DESTINED SAVIOR OF HUMANITY! REJECT HIM AT YOUR PERIL!]

[DON'T MIND ME. I LIKE CATS.]

While many of the gathered people channeled a lot of passion into their respective causes, Charvey's security services deftly handled the arrivals.

Mechs, security officers and energy barriers made sure to keep the two opposing groups apart from each other.

Each and every individual became subjected to intense monitoring. The moment they acted suspiciously, they either got flagged or teleported out entirely.

Still, these incidents took place few and far between. The folk who gathered outside of the water bubble made sure to remain peaceful and in control over their actions. The vast majority of them were first-raters who were smart and rational enough to know that they would achieve nothing if they reported to extremes.

Security was so high that there was no way that any agitator could disrupt the upcoming proceedings!

Of course, Ector V was not the only planet where supporters and protesters showed up. Many other planets featured varying groups of people who congregated at public squares on many planets spread across human-occupied space!

This was the clearest sign that the public inquiry had produced the desired effect. The fact that so many people became passionate about the promise and the danger of living mechs showed the discussion had very much political in nature.

When Ves finally entered the Dragon King's Palace and waited for the final session to begin, he clearly felt that a lot was riding on him today.

Ves studied the opinion polls and other news articles that described the overall sentiment among the people.

The patterns did not defy his expectations. A lot of mech pilots had become attracted to the unique benefits of living mechs, while much of the public thought that his products needed to be shackled before they could initiate a tragedy.

What surprised him was that a large proportion of both first-class and third-class pilots voiced their support of living mechs.

Even if the LMC did not actively market its products to these segments at the moment, that might change in the future.

These potential customers did not want other people to ruin their chances of piloting mechs that had earned rave reviews from second-raters.

"I truly am a good salesman." He murmured to himself.

Ves felt a little regretful that the public inquiry took place too soon. Much of society was still stuck in the past.

The New Elites Program had yet to produce enough results to shift human cultures and institutions where warlords and proven soldiers had more say than a bunch of defenseless civilians.

If Ves had to make his case a decade later, he was certain that he would have no issue with earning broad support!

As time passed by, the chamber where Ves and his entourage made their final preparations suddenly welcomed a new guest.

"Captain Reze! You have finally returned!"

"I came back to Ector V as soon as I could." The fleeter in uniform responded as his human form glided through the water.

"So how did the admiral or fleet admiral react to the latest proposal?"

"We can discuss this matter later when we are able to speak in private." The hidden sentient AI spoke. "Our response is not set in stone. It is partially dependent on the outcome of this public inquiry. The more the results are in favor of your living mechs, the more we can do business with each other. I can assure you that the admirals, at least the ones who are open-

mind enough to warm up to the idea of cooperating with a mech designer, are willing to take risks as long as the expected rewards are high enough."

That was good news!

It showed that the admirals in question were magnanimous enough to set aside their tribalism and pursue a promising mutually beneficial agreement with Ves.

As long as Ves was able to get his foot in the door, he was confident he could win over these fleeters!

Of course, the mechers might not like what Ves had in mind with this potential cooperative venture, but it was clear that the Survivalist Faction and Transhumanist Faction were not strong enough to safeguard his interests.

He needed every ally he could get, and if that meant helping the fleeters improve the effectiveness of their warships, then so be it. He did not care if warships became more popular as a result. Mechs could definitely use the competition if people thought that sticking to old and outdated solutions was still an acceptable strategy.

As Captain Zonrad Reze settled in, it became clear that he was completely out of place among mech designers and other folk.

The fleeters were a lot more isolated from the rest of human society as a rule. That alongside their reputation for being strict and arrogant did not help matters either.

While their reputation was most definitely justified, Captain Reze was not an ordinary fleeter.

"I have followed the debate throughout my journey, so I understand that you are not doing so well at the moment."

"That's right, captain. The mechers have done a good job at trying to alienate my living mechs. This is not something that I can reverse so easily. I am not fighting against the rhetoric of my opponents, but the deep-rooted fears and paranoia towards automated machines. I would have to force an immense cultural change in order to convince the public to give living mechs a chance to develop without intervention from above."

Zonrad crossed his arms when he heard that. "If I am being honest, I do not have confidence in your ability to do so. Humans have regarded AIs and advanced automation in a negative light for multiple millenia. It has already taken an immense amount of effort within the Red Fleet to upgrade

our old evaluation system into ARCHIE. The good news is that once our personnel started to grow accustomed to our new system, many fleeters have become more open-minded towards other uses of AIs."

That was an interesting observation. "That is useful to hear."

They chatted a bit more before they moved on to deciding their approach to the final session.

Ves explained his overall plan and thoughts. As a highly analytical individual, Captain Reze or rather Sigrund could provide a lot of insights that no one had thought about.

Humans and non-humans thought in completely different ways. They saw situations from entirely different angles, enabling them to provide novel input.

As Sigrund took in all of the information he received, he rapidly analyzed the variables and made his own prediction.

"It is likely that you are still underestimating the shrewdness of your opposition. You correctly speculated whether your opponents may have deliberately exposed flaws in an attempt to gain your measure and neutralize your tricks on the next day. However, both you and your opponents recognize that the third day is decisive. You cannot expect your adversaries to hold back this time. The tactic of blindsiding you by introducing completely new information has already proven its worth. Your opponents are bound to repeat it, though I cannot guess what they are holding back this time."

Ves deeply wished that he could eavesdrop on the conversation of the speakers of the opposition.

It would be so useful if Lucky could sneak over there and record all of the talks.

However, Ves had no confidence that his cat could circumvent the intense RA monitoring systems.

This was why Ves had left Lucky behind. It was best if his cat did not have too much contact with the mechers.

"I am not sure whether your prediction is correct, captain." Ves said. "However, I need to prepare for the chance that it may come true. It is difficult to figure out a response to stuff we don't know the details of. We need to present a more general and universal initiative that can work in multiple different situations. I think that a broad push towards the liberalization of AIs can help our case."

Captain Reze stared intensely at Ves. "As much as I approve of your idea, I still do not think you have a realistic chance to accomplish anything solid with this approach. Your living mechs have already generated plenty of controversy on their own. You cannot afford to attach yourself to an even greater controversy. Wait until you have become a Star Designer before you attempt to change our entire society."

Sigrund made a good point. Ves was being way too ambitious and unrealistic about his ability to trigger a massive cultural change/

Now that he became a lot more grounded again, Ves began to contemplate more realistic ideas.

It was too bad that most of them probably weren't strong enough to help his case.

They continued to strategize for a time, to little avail.

The only improvement was that Captain Reze presented his planned pitch and tweaked it according to the feedback he received.

"How much of the Red Fleet is actually inclined to support your stance, captain?" Ves curiously asked.

"The spacers who are stationed on warships that are struggling to contain the alien menace will be far more willing to give you a chance." The fleeter officer responded. "That should at least include the Second Main Fleet and the Seventh Light Fleet. We understand the strengths of our alien foes better than many others, so we grasp the need for greater power very well. What we have seen in alien space and encountered on the battlefield is concerning to us. We cannot see an immediate pathway towards victory unless we take more drastic measures to break the status quo."

"I understand. You are looking for a magic bullet."

"Not quite, but close enough, professor."

Chapter 5776 Ominous Premonitions

5776 Ominous Premonitions

Ves felt as if the water pressure inside the grand hall of the Dragon King's Palace had increased.

The entire environment seemed to press onto his specialized energy barrier a little harder than before.

He also suspected that additional particles had been added to the water mixture. It increased the mystique of the enormous chamber and caused stuff in the distance to look hazy and gain a bit of mystique.

As Ves stared up at the enormous masterwork statue of a dragon king, he had the illusion that the ultimate sovereign of this palace had descended from the heavens in order to pass judgment on his living mechs.

"What is the matter?" Jovy asked as Ves unconsciously slowed down.

"I have an unsettling feeling, no, premonition about what is about to happen. I don't have any concrete clues that justify a higher state of alertness, but... I feel worried regardless."

Captain Zonrad Reze looked slightly puzzled. "It is normal for people to feel nervous. This is akin to a final exam that will decide whether you have earned the qualifications you need to graduate."

"It's not like that, captain." Ves shook his head. "I can handle ordinary stress situations. This is more. I can feel it in my gut, and before you say anything about it, my gut feelings have rarely led me astray."

"You suspect that the opposition may have prepared a killer blow for this third and final session." Jovy stated. "Now that you mention it, I can sense a hint of it as well. Your destiny has always been unreadable to me, but it seems that everything around you has become considerably less stable than before."

That was enough for Ves to make a decision. "Give me a moment. I need to consult a source."

Though Ves looked as if he had blanked out while floating in the water, he was actually consulting a resource that he had refrained from using until this point.

There had been no pressing need to resort to this measure, but the ominous premonition that crept up to him gave him sufficient cause to take this impending threat extremely seriously.

It took around two minutes for Ves to gain a response. His expression worsened.

"What is the matter?"

"The Great Prophet can't foresee anything about what is about to happen. That indicates that whatever is about to happen is either an enormous turning point or involves one or more extremely powerful entities. It could even be both. Whatever the case, this is pretty much confirmation that the opposition will not be as tame as yesterday!"

His advisors did not look so surprised at this revelation.

"This fits with the pattern of a deliberate debate strategy." Vector Loban thoughtfully said. "It appears that the opposition is a lot more united and coordinated than we initially gave them credit for. Perhaps they have shaped their entire multi-

day strategy around the coup-de-grace that they have planned to reveal on the final day."

Jovy agreed with this assessment. "If that is the case, then the topics they addressed in the first two days are merely a setup for their decisive argument. You need to be careful, Ves. The opposition is determined to either reign in or outright ban your living mechs. Given how your premonition is making you feel so defensive, then you probably won't like what you are about to hear from them. Whatever they do, do not let your impulses override your rationality. The ratings of this broadcast have already exceeded the highest level of the previous days. Practically every red human has set aside their usual duties as much as possible in order to witness this historic session. This will amplify every mistake you make."

Ves waved his hand in an exasperated manner. "Who do you think I am? I am perfectly capable of maintaining my cool. I know better than to let my emotions get the better of me when I am presenting myself into this enormous stage."

The Survivalist was right about mistakes. Ves literally could not afford to ruin his reputation because far too much was riding on him right now. A lot of Larkinsons and other dependents were relying on his success.

Personally, he wouldn't feel too bad if he suffered a setback today. He knew that it would only be temporary. Ves had learned long ago that every problem could be solved as long as he designed a good enough mech.

Whether it was Carmine mechs or another killer solution, Ves was confident enough in his design ability to earn back the good graces of the public.

There was no way that red humanity could afford to turn its back on obviously superior solutions just because their maker didn't follow all of the rules.

However, a lot of people who depended on selling his products for a living would probably lose their livelihoods.

Perhaps they might be able to recover by shifting their business away from LMC products, but a setback would still inflict untold damage to his extensive business network.

In short, Ves could not afford to suffer a total loss today. He would probably be able to make do with a partial victory, but a severe loss would be hugely damaging to his interests!

This was why he grew more fearful of what the opposition had in store for today.

Unfortunately, without any additional sources of information, Ves could not come up with any countermeasures beforehand.

He could only psychologically prepare himself for a heavy blow. and hope that he would have enough time to figure out an effective response.

Once he and his group had reached their usual positions beyond the edge of the speaking pit, they all stared at the speakers of the opposing side.

The usual suspects had returned while wearing their best suits or uniforms.

Though the speakers all made sure to school their expressions to avoid giving away any clues, the fact that they were being so serious about it was a tell in itself.

Ves grew a lot more alarmed when he felt that his adversaries definitely intended to launch their killer move during the upcoming session!

As both sides waited for the guests to arrive and swim over to their seats, the opposition made a surprising move.

Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson actually launched from her position and swam over to the opposite side of the speaking pit!

Everyone around Ves raised their guard as the young but already infamous 'whistleblower' came close enough.

The fleeter stopped before Sigrund's human form and threw up a proper salute. "Captain."

"Lieutenant-commander."

"With all due respect, you shouldn't be here, sir."

"I am not a part of your chain of command." Captain Reze calmly replied. "It is not your place to comment on my actions. I am acting on the orders issued by my own superiors. You could learn a thing or two about following the rules."

The young fleeter narrowed her eyes. Though her stunt on the first day had catapulted her name into the public sphere, she also cemented her reputation as a maverick.

That probably wouldn't be a problem for her as long as she remained under the umbrella of Admiral Amelie Jameson.

However, the repercussions of her actions became a lot more noticeable if she tried to interact with the other branches of the Red Fleet!

Despite all of this trouble, the female officer did not even pretend to contribute. Her poker face broke when she couldn't help but exude a greater sense of confidence and victory.

"I do not know what your game plan is, but you are betting on the wrong horse this time. The Seventh Light Fleet that you are part of is tasked with scouting our external enemies. Leave internal affairs to the Fifth Enforcement Fleet."

Captain Reze shook his head in obvious rejection. "Separating responsibilities among different fleets is an outdated policy. We cannot act as silos anymore. If we want to sustain our current momentum in the Red War, then we need to reach out to each other as well as outside parties. Cooperation is key to breaking the current game."

The two fleeters clearly did not see eye-to-eye on this issue.

Astrid did not bother to argue any further with Captain Reze. She instead turned her body until she faced Ves directly.

"I bear no personal animosity towards you, professor. I respect your intelligence, ingenuity and salesmanship. I only regret that you have channeled your abundant talent and opportunities in the wrong directions. We cannot remain blind to your living mechs anymore. As much as we are reluctant to act against a prominent contributor to human development, I am obliged to do my duty and employ whatever measures are necessary to prevent you from causing any further harm."

Ves gave her a flat stare. "I think we both disagree about what exactly constitutes harm. I appreciate your message, though. You are only fulfilling your own mission. As long as we remember that we are both humans, I think we can still get along with each other."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Professor Larkinson. Enforcing taboos has never been conducive to building friendships. The Fifth Enforcement Fleet does not ask for your understanding. It only asks for your compliance. Whatever the verdict may be at the end of the session, I hope that you will abide by the terms."

Ves paused for a few seconds before slowly nodding.

"Fine. I can do that, but I expect the Fifth Fleet to do the same if the outcome does not fall in line with your expectations."

"That is a given. Our organization is the embodiment of order. We will not violate our own rules in order to fulfill our short-

term goals. The common folk must know that we are both fair and rule-abiding."

Ves could comment on how Astrid did not show these traits when she flagrantly spilled the secret on cultivation during the first session, but he let this impulse pass.

"It looks like we are about to begin. You better go back to your own compatriots before people develop the wrong impression about your movements."

"That is so. Good luck, Professor Larkinson."

As the young fletcher officer swam back to her own camp, Ves exchanged highly concerning glances with his advisors.

"Be ready to throw out our entire game plan the moment it becomes clear that it is no longer applicable to the situation." Jovy sagely advised.

Once everyone had taken their places, Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus appeared before his clamshell throne once again.

This time, he wore a more stately outfit that was predominantly made out of obsidian scales.

"Good morning, citizens of the Red Ocean. After two days of exhaustive exploration of living mechs, we have arrived at the third session. The public inquiry will end on this day, but that does not mean that the debate on the merits and potential risks of living mechs shall come to an end. I fully expect that this subject will remain a point of contention for many years."

That was for certain.

The governor spent a few more minutes on nice-sounding platitudes before he made a surprise announcement.

"Before I announce the start of this session, I must inform you all that the opposition to living mechs have approached me for permission to disclose information of such magnitude that it threatens to distract us from the main subject at hand."

What?

Ves and the others from his group grew a lot more concerned about this sudden turn of events.

The governor continued with his explanation.

"The information used to be highly confidential, but certain parties within the Red Two have recently agreed to declassify the relevant records and make them available for public consumption for reasons that you shall find out. I have already perused these records beforehand, and while I hesitated whether I should allow the opposition to reveal them to you in this venue, I have decided to permit them to do so because they are already publicly available. The newly declassified records are sufficiently credible and tangibly related to living mechs to form a meaningful contribution to this inquiry."

The moderator turned towards Ves with a clear apologetic expression. "I only ask the defenders of living mechs for patience and understanding. In order to preserve your rights, I have insisted that the opposition present their new information at the beginning of this session. The speaking order is therefore reversed. The opposition shall have the first word."

This did not make Ves feel any better about this situation!

The sense of doom and gloom grew even stronger as Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson maintained a grave expression as she slowly moved towards the center of the speaking pit.

Chapter 5777 Astrid's Tale

Astrid Jameson exhibited none of the respect and understanding that she showed a moment earlier.

This was all business from the moment Mergan-Castelaus announced the start of the final session.

The RF officer no longer spoke for herself, but became a vessel for the Fifth Enforcement Fleet.

Many people spread across human-occupied space paid extremely close attention to her at the moment. The obvious cybernetic enhancements that enhanced her vision, voice and countless other properties gave her a more menacing air.

Few people cared about her age when her appearance and her uniform elevated her far above the common people.

This was a fleeter who clearly had something important to share!

"Good morning, people of the Red Ocean. I am here because the Fifth Enforcement Fleet has invested me with the responsibility of sharing a tale to you all. Be warned that this is not an ordinary tale, but a true story, for better or worse. In order to be as faithful to our sources as possible, I must share details that are not suitable to be heard by the faint of heart. It is highly advised that children under the age of fifteen be disallowed from listening any further. Their parents or caretakers can decide how many details they wish to share."

Any message that warranted such a disclaimer was bound to be bad for Ves and his cause!

"Now that I have issued my warning, let me begin this historic tale." The woman spoke as she allowed her vocal modulator to turn her into a better narrator. "It begins during the twilight years of the Age of Conquest. This period may already be ancient history to you, but both the Red Association and the Red Fleet still have revered heroes among us who have lived through these years. More importantly than that, what took place during this time has directly shaped our society as we know it today."

Why did the lieutenant-commander go so far back in history? Had the Fifth Fleet decided to open the book on the Big Two's rebellion against the Five Scrolls Compact?

"This is the time where the secret organization that has ruled humanity from the shadows has reached the peak of its power. The cultivators in charge of it have reaped enormous benefits from humanity's rise, causing their pride and egos to inflate beyond all reasonable boundaries. They could do no wrong. Their most powerful leaders literally see themselves as gods who possess an absolute right to toy with the lives of ordinary humans as they see fit."

Ves started to frown as he listened to Astrid's tale. If all of this setup amounted to a crash course of the Five Scrolls Compact, then that was not enough of a reason for him to feel so concerned.

"I can spend weeks, months or even years on describing the organization, divisions, cultures and the many excesses of this secret organization. I shall refrain from doing so as this is not relevant to the subject at hand. Instead, I shall highlight a particular member of this hidden cabal. She is an upper-ranking member who simultaneously wields great personal power but also holds extensive authority over many subordinates."

Astrid waved her hand, summoning a projection of an incredibly old, tall and majestic wooden structure.

A powerful feeling surged within Ves' mind. There was something about this sight that made him feel a lot more apprehensive!

"This is the Wood Shrine. It is one of the five principal divisions of the aforementioned secret organization. An innumerable number of cultivators and slaves answered to the Wood Shrine when it was at its height. One of the more prominent sub-organizations that operated under this 'holy shrine' is the Apex Predator Cult."

The projection changed to depict an intimidating emblem. It showed a pale white beast skull surrounded by a green forest.

"The Wood Shrine is so large and has existed for so many years that many of its members have founded their own cults. These cults are highly exclusive, highly devoted to their ideologies and

highly competitive towards their rival organizations. The Apex Predator Cult stands out among the rest for being exceptionally cruel but powerful."

Astrid's expression grew serious as she shared a few details about this mysterious cult.

"Initiation into the Apex Predator Cult is by force, not by choice. No cultivator can reject an invitation into this nefarious organization, because power trumps every other consideration. The reason why many of its initiates would rather not become a part of the Apex Predators is because their death rates are exceptionally high. Their cult has a well-

deserved reputation for having the strongest but least numerous cultivators under the Wood Shrine."

Ves was not stupid. By now, he began to make a frightening realization of what the opposition had planned for today.

"The reason why this is the case is because of the ideology of this cult. It is completely based on a warped and murderous interpretation of the concepts of natural selection, survival of the fittest and human evolution. Infighting and backstabbing is rife within the cult. Brothers and sisters are more than willing to tear each other apart in the hopes of promoting their ranks. No one is safe from getting eliminated. Only strength and cunning can allow the desperate cultists to prevail over their enemies."

"Survival of the fittest is a daily challenge to the members." Astrid calmly continued. "Each survivor who manages to live through their ordeals is shaped by them. The older they become, the less empathy they possess. Their humanity crumbles with every crime and injustice they commit. By the time they have reached the upper half of the hierarchy, they have become monsters in human skin. Even among cultivators, the practices of the Apex Predator Cult have generated a great amount of notoriety within this secret community."

A mix of expressions appeared on Ves' face. He could not imagine how cruel it would be to become a part of this cruel cult.

"This tale is not centered around the Apex Predator Cult. Rather, it is oriented around its last and most infamous leader. The cult has existed long enough for multiple so-called cultmasters to preside over its affairs. Each of them have survived the most arduous of tests, the most challenging of duels and the most convoluted of plots. None of the cultmasters are incompetent for that reason. We even suspect that the entire purpose of the cult is to train the ultimate apex predator among its hapless members. Every other life is dispensable aside from the cultmaster. Before you develop the wrong impression, the rest of the broad secret organization is hardly any better. The only difference is that the Apex Predator Cult is less tolerant towards the weak and the failures."

The way Astrid described the Apex Predator Cult made it clear that no one would willingly become a part of such a crazy organization.

Its ideals contradicted every value and principle that Ves held dear. The cult sounded like the polar opposite of the Larkinson Clan!

The fleetier officer switched the projected image to portray a loose sketch of a woman.

The woman wore disturbing familiar robes.

Instead of being shaded in a welcoming pattern of green and white, the projected figure wore a chilling robe that was predominantly pale green and black!

The odd combination along with the frigid air exuded by the figure gave off the impression that the woman had completely drained herself of any semblance of humanity.

Ves noted that the sketch deliberately did not draw out the details of the woman's face. Instead, it remained obscured in shadow, causing her to look even more intimidating!

Once Astrid gave the public a moment to 'appreciate' this image, she finally introduced her to the Red Ocean.

"Our records do not contain any mention of the final cultmaster's real name. It is ultimately irrelevant because the cultivators of the secret organization are much better known by the titles they accrue over their eventful lives. This woman has earned several of them as she has killed, deceived and plotted her way up the ranks over many years."

The projection changed to show the shadowy figure stretching out her hand in front of a crowd of kneeling people.

Trails of blood and energy erupted from their bodies and flowed to the merciless woman that was literally draining them of their lives!

"She was known as the Lifestealer for honing and perfecting the art of devouring the lives of other beings to fuel her own growth."

The projection shifted to depict the same woman tending the plants and trees of a dark and abnormal forest.

Every growth only superficially looked normal. What betrayed their true nature was the multitude of human bones that littered the ground!

"She was known as the Lady of the Cold Forest for cultivating plants that complimented her nefarious methods."

Several more sketches appeared that depicted the faceless cultmaster engaging in multiple acts of cruelty.

One of them showed the woman torturing a man by planting flowers into his eyes.

Another showed the woman unleashing her Cold Forest onto an entire city!

Suffice to say, none of these sketches showed the woman in a redeeming light. Anyone who saw them would naturally conclude that this was not a cultivator that was capable of expressing any value towards human life!

"However, upon her ascension to the highest seat of the Apex Predator Cult, she assumed the title of Original Sin. Ostensibly, she earned this moniker for displaying greater cruelty, heartlessness and cunning than all of the preceding cultmasters. In any other environment, a mass murderer as evil as her would have been hunted down and executed long before she has reached this height. In the hypercompetitive community of cultivators, the reverse is true. Her exceptional notoriety has not only earned her the admiration of the rank-

and-file members of this secret organization, but also earned her the appreciation of some of the highest leaders!"

Wow. This woman had certainly done a good job in building her career.

Astrid briefly paused in order to allow her message to sink into the minds of her ignorant audience. None of them had ever heard of the Five Scrolls Compact. Their modern sensibilities caused them to develop an immediate and escalating degree of fear and disgust towards the practices of this mysterious organization!

"Cultmaster Original Sin is known for committing many deeds at the time, but what you may not know is that she holds another name. If you have already managed to deduce the truth, then congratulations for possessing a sharp mind. To the rest of you, let me inform you that multiple centuries later, this powerful cultivator has birthed a son called Ves Larkinson, otherwise known as the Devil Tongue!"

Audible shock erupted from the hundred-thousand spectators within the grand hall.

Few people had managed to connect the dots, so the surprise was nearly universal among the folks who never expected to be confronted by yet another shocking revelation!

Ves completely froze as he finally learned about the origin and the history of his mother.

To think he would hear this tale from a fleeter rather than his actual mother!

Why had Cynthia never answered his questions about her past?

Why did she insist on keeping so many of her secrets close to her chest?

What sort of cultivator did she used to be back when she was a member of the Five Scrolls Compact?

Ves initially assumed that his mother had been born after the downfall of the Five Scrolls Compact, but that was obviously false according to the Red Fleet.

When was she born?

How many years did it take for her to fight and kill her way to the top of the Apex Predator Cult?

How much of her original personality did she manage to retain to this day?

All of these questions and more swirled in his mind.

Ves belatedly realized that he never truly understood his mother from the beginning!

The side of herself that she especially reserved for her family was only a fraction of her true self!

Chapter 5778 Distorted Retelling

5778 Distorted Retelling

Ves quietly groaned and palmed his face.

He could visibly feel the shift in how people looked at him. The more Astrid revealed the hidden history of his mother, the more his public image became tarnished!

As the devious fleeter continued to narrate an unofficial biography of the woman known as Cultmaster Original Sin, it had become very clear now what the opposition sought to accomplish.

Not only was Astrid able to give a rich illustration of why red humanity needed to guard against cultivators, she also sought to pass on all of the cultmaster's dirty water onto her son!

This was an exceptionally cruel and outrageous strategy towards its intended target!

The only reason why Ves had yet to feel angry was because he was too damn shocked at what he learned!

Though Veronica had been living alongside Cynthia for many months, the latter had never really shared any information about her mysterious past!

It was as if Cynthia went out of her way to bury her history as deeply as possible!

As Ves tried to process the complicated feelings that surged in his mind and spirit, the water around him visibly shook, indicating that he was having a lot of trouble maintaining his composure!

Meanwhile, all of the people in the grand hall continued to have a dimmer view of Ves.

They no longer strictly regarded him as a rising prodigy and a genius at designing mechs.

It was as if his life-saving products and his massive contributions to human civilization had been rendered meaningless in the face of his tainted origin!

Perhaps many of these people would come to their senses and realize that the son, who was born many centuries after his mother committed all of these alleged misdeeds, was not culpable for all of those crimes.

The only problem was that Ves had gained the unfortunate title of Devil Tongue.

Even though no one really called him that unless he held another passionate speech, the inconvenient title could easily be misinterpreted by people who were unfamiliar with his history!

He earned this title for being dastardly good at winning over his audience with his words, not for being a literally evil cultivator who killed people like cutting grass!

As Ves continued to wallow in his abject misery, the officer from the Fifth Enforcement Fleet continued to describe the known history of the woman who used to live a very different life.

"The records related to Cultmaster Original Sin are sparse and incomplete, but we know what she had done during the most pivotal event that has led to the end of the Age of Conquest. During a devastating uprising against this secret organization, the founders and supporters of the Common Fleet Alliance and the Mech Trade Association launched a surprise attack on a location that was known as the Great Temple."

The cybernetic woman adopted a reverent expression as her story reached this point. "Many brave and selfless fleters and mechers rose up against the many murders and injustices committed by the power-hungry cultivators. The latter have always behaved without respect for life and laws, but their behavior near the end was especially unacceptable because they were strangling the future of our collective race! Due to the rapidly deteriorating circumstances, my predecessors along with the early mechers initiated the Great Rescue. We dispatched a combined strike force that cut through every obstacle and forcibly invaded the heart of our collective enemy."

Ves jerked a bit. While he might not have a clue who his mother used to be, he possessed a bit more information about how the Great Betrayal unfolded.

Granted, he only had access to the perspective of the cultists, but he was certain that the mechers and the fleters launched their surprise attack from the inside!

It would have been absurd for the early Big Two to start from the outside and smash through all of the defensive lines that the Five Scrolls Compact built around a location as crucial as the Great Temple.

It became clear to Ves that Astrid was deliberately obscuring the connection between the Five Scrolls Compact and the Big Two. Anyone who did not bother to think any deeper would form the mistaken impression that the latter had little relation to the former!

Of course, this was not a foolproof distortion of the truth, but it was sufficient to paint the Big Two in a more heroic light.

Ves could not help but narrow his eyes in suspicion yet again.

If Astrid or rather the Fifth Enforcement Fleet stooped as low as to distort the MTA and CFA's intimate ties with the Five Scrolls Compact, then what else about the tale had been exaggerated?

Was his mother truly as evil and murderous as the story painted her as, or was the actual truth a lot more nuanced?

There was a possibility that the Red Two had misidentified his mother. Astrid could be talking about a completely different person!

His favorite theory at the moment was that 'Cultmaster Original Sin' may have been his grandmother or a more distant ancestor.

That would have been a much more reasonable explanation of his heritage.

His need to obtain an answer to this matter was so great that he wanted to obtain confirmation from a second source.

He shifted his focus all the way to the old galaxy. He impatiently waited for Veronica to arrive in front of Cynthia's meditation room.

The hatch slid open. The Oblivion Empress had sensed the cyborg cat's arrival.

When Veronica caught sight of Cynthia, the mother looked warm and loving as usual. While she usually maintained a stern expression whenever she interacted with her other subordinates, she always made sure to show her gentle side to her precious children.

"Mother." Veronica began as she floated in front of the True God. "Are you aware of what is happening in the new frontier?"

Cynthia looked severe as she nodded. "I am. The Superior Mother is usually too busy to keep track of you, but every Hexer is paying close attention to the broadcast of this 'public inquiry'. It is impossible for me to miss its significance. My incarnation has refrained from extending her presence in close proximity towards your human self. Her arrival will be noticed, and may cause undue alarm. This will not help your case."

"I understand." Veronica replied. "Mother..."

"Ask."

"Are you... were you..."

The Lady of the Night let out a sigh. "Stop grasping at straws, my child. While I would like to dispute specific details of that woman's retelling, this is not a case of mistaken identity. I used to be

a different woman in a past life. I am not... proud for embracing the mantle of Original Sin, but there was a period in my past life where I reveled in my power. I... suffered from the same character flaws that afflicted the rest of the leadership of the Five Scrolls Compact. I was not aware of this at the time, but it seems obvious in hindsight."

Veronica became stunned.

She never imagined that his mother had not only lived long enough to experience the heyday of the Five Scrolls Compact, but also played an active role in the rapid degeneration of human civilization during the twilight years of the Age of Conquest!

"Wait, why are you putting so much emphasis on the phrase 'past life'? You talk as if you have nothing to do with the woman who you used to be. Are you using this as an excuse to shirk your responsibility for all of your past misdeeds?"

"It is not like that." Cynthia elegantly shook her head. "When I succumbed to my old injuries and 'died', I shed much of my power, my memories, my techniques, my secrets and my karma. Death is supposed to be a new beginning."

Veronica's purple cybernetic eyes glared at the True God. "You don't sound like a woman who has lost everything upon death."

"That is because I cheated death, in a way." The Oblivion Empress impishly smirked. "I employed a secret technique to preserve a sliver of my soul, which I have eventually restored with your help. Still, I have only retained a fraction of my comprehensive power at the time. While I have the ability to reconstruct many of the missing pieces, I am not able to recover everything. I do not know what I have permanently shed upon death, but if I was as capable as I think I was, I may have used by demise to discard the most undesirable portions of myself."

"So you took advantage of your own death to throw away all of the really evil and awful stuff."

"That is a crude but apt description of my likely approach. I may have done more, but I do not recall this pivotal moment. There are still gaps in my memory."

A moment of silence ensued as Veronica processed this news. She took comfort in the revelation that the Cynthia of today was not equivalent to the cultmaster of the Apex Predator Cult.

"So... what exactly did you do during the Great Betrayal, mother?"

"I cannot tell you, my child. Perhaps the young lady may be able to give you a brief summary."

Again, his mother refused to offer any clarification!

Trying to pull information out of Cynthia was as difficult as convincing Gloriana to be more frugal in her spending!

"Myaow! I am sick and tired of your constant attempts at hiding crucial information from me! If you told me about your dark past sooner, I wouldn't have been blindsided like this today!"

Cynthia didn't even bother to look apologetic towards Veronica.

She looked as if she did not care at all that Ves was suffering from the sins of one of his parents at the moment!

"Listen to the young lady first. She is just about to reach the most exciting part of her tale."

Back in the Red Ocean, Astrid briefly explained a highly incomplete and simplistic layout of the Great Rescue before she addressed the cultmaster's actions during this historic turning point.

"The Great Temple had become engulfed in the flames of war." Astrid said as her words conveyed the madness at the time. "Many warships, mechs and individual cultivators unleashed violence against each other and the surrounding environment. Both mundane and empowered blood spilled across the enormous space where the five shrines reside. The defenses of many old structures that had been built millenia ago crumbled in a matter of seconds or minutes, causing them to crumble and inflict enormous human and material losses."

The fleeter shook her head in disappointment. "The survivors of the Great Rescue shouldered so many crucial responsibilities that they could not afford to get distracted. Despite Original Sin's prominent position, our predecessors were not able to track all of her movements, especially on an exceptionally chaotic battlefield."

The projection of the Wood Shrine appeared yet again.

"We do know that the cultmaster had been assigned to defend the main structure of the Wood Shrine. As one of the most powerful cultivators among the so-called Wood Keepers, her mission was to defend this crucial holy shrine and preserve the evil reign of this secret organization as much as possible."

Astrid began to grin. "This became an increasingly less enviable assignment, for the forces dispatched by the CFA and MTA were steadily gaining ground. The cultivators not only proved to be incapable of holding back our troops, but they were also far too disorganized to form a coherent defensive strategy."

It was rather hard to organize all of the cultists when a part of their members had turned against the Compact all of a sudden!

"According to our deductions, we believe that the cultmaster knew which way the wind was blowing. As the strongholds of the cultivators continued to crumble, we suspect that the mother of the Devil Tongue ultimately concluded that the secret cabal was a lost cause."

The projection changed to show what happened to the Wood Shrine after a bit of time had passed.

It did not survive the Great Betrayal! Nothing was left intact!

"While we do not have conclusive proof, we have probable cause to believe that Cultmaster Original Sin betrayed her fellow Wood Keepers at the last moment, looted whatever valuables she could acquire in a short amount of time, triggered the total destruction of the Wood Shrine before beating a desperate escape from the special space that hosted the Great Temple."

Though Astrid at least made it clear that the fleeters were not entirely certain what his mother had done, Ves was still inclined to believe that much of it was true!

The only point of uncertainty was how his mother managed to grab a fragment of the Metal Scroll during this incredibly messy battle.

Perhaps she picked it up from another survivor after the Great Betrayal, but... he had a feeling his mother may have done a lot more than running away.

It would be just like her to betray all of her oaths and take advantage of the demise of her previous organization.

Ves felt incredibly ambivalent about her shameless and greedy behavior! A part of him could hardly believe she was his mother! They were nothing alike!

Chapter 5779 Astrid the Propagandist

5779 Astrid the Propagandist

"...Original Sin lived up to her notorious title. By betraying her allegiance, her colleagues and whatever friends she had, she absconded into the galaxy with the precious spoils she managed to acquire during this final moment. This is not the end of her tale, as her treachery and her many crimes has turned her into a fugitive. The newly ascendant CFA and MTA sought to capture her along with other dangerous cultivators that have gotten loose. The remnants of the mostly fallen secret organization hunted her down as well, either to punish her for her treachery or retrieve the valuables she had stolen from her former compatriots. Make no mistake. Do not sympathize with their plight. She fully deserved the retribution that she had brought upon herself."

The entirety of red humanity fell into shock as they listened to the descendant of Admiral Amelie Jameson 'expose' all the lurid misdeeds of a powerful cultivator.

Though the talespinner did her due diligence by mentioning that the woman who used to bore the title of Original Sin had been a product of an exceptionally cruel environment, that did not soften the blow all that much!

The more the lieutenant-commander shared what information she possessed about the ruthless cultmaster, the more people associated the word 'cultivator' with cruelty, murder, selfishness, treachery and other negative connotations!

Astrid Jameson could have easily painted a more positive first impression for her audience by highlighting the life of a more benign cultivator.

For example, Ves was pretty sure that the Red Two still retained a lot of records or even first-hand testimony of the Progenitors of Mechs.

Thirteen of them existed, so the mechers and the fleeters should at least have a fairly complete biography on at least one of these eminent heroes!

Yet instead of introducing one of these exemplars to red humanity in order to show what good cultivation could do, Astrid instead opted to highlight one of the most evil and undesirable cultivators imaginable!

Ves felt shocked and ashamed that the fleeters would dare to pull such a dirty move. Though he did not exactly have the best impression of his mother, this was clearly a step too far!

He silently turned his gaze towards Captain Zonrad Reze.

The hidden AI was just as surprised as everyone else. Ves reached out and took hold of the RF captain's wrist in order to communicate in private.

[How much of the Red Fleet is behind this plot?!] Ves electronically transmitted his message to the AI.

[Admiral Jameson and The Fifth Fleet are the only drivers pushing this initiative forward, but they are not alone in this. There are many doubters and sympathizers among the other fleets that also support a hardline stance against cultivation. You need to understand that the Red Fleet is the least open-

minded towards metaphysical power. It is rooted in their very ideology. What I can say is that Admiral Jameson couldn't have done this alone. She had other supporters from high places.]

[Do you mean the Red Association?]

The captain subtly nodded. [Declassifying those records is a highly irregular move. Given their sensitivity as well as their context, it requires the permission of multiple tier 1 galactic citizens to unveil even a small portion of the secret history of red humanity. My source cannot tell you who exactly was behind this move, but it is a given that at least a handful of the leaders of the Association were involved as well.]

Ves' expression darkened at that. The prime suspects were the Lord of Thermodynamics and the Web Mistress. One of them wanted to ban living mechs while the other wanted the Red Association to bind them with regulations.

Their motives may not entirely be aligned with Admiral Jameson, but they had all found common cause in wanting to stop Ves' momentum!

[Who is on my side? Why haven't they been able to stop this from happening?]

[I can personally assure you that Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile and Admiral Chelsea Mieli oppose this outrageous action. However, trying to protect the privacy of a mech designer is not a popular stance in the Red Fleet. As for the Red Association, your mecher friends should know more. My analysis of this situation leads me to conclude that your backers are not entirely reliable.]

Ves directed a flat stare towards Sigrund's human form. [Duh. I could have made that conclusion myself.]

[You do not understand my meaning. I am sure that you can still count on your allies to value you, but that does not necessarily mean that they will always act in your best interest. There are many possible motives why this may be the case. For one, they must pick their battles. They may not find it worthwhile to squander their political capital to cover your backside all of the time. They may also want to curb your arrogance and deliberately let you suffer a setback in order to teach you a lesson. I have another theory that most likely applies to this situation.]

[Tell me.] Ves demanded.

[It is very clear to us now that Admiral Amelie Jameson is the principal mastermind behind the opposition's strategy. She considers cultivation to be a menace and wants to stop it at all costs. Since you are so strongly associated with this phenomenon, you have become one of its most famous and high-profile spokespersons. Her life-long mission compels her to stop you at all cost, and what we know of her actions has made it clear that she is not above overstepping her boundaries to achieve her objectives.]

[Where are you going with this, captain?]

[I am just getting to that. While my superiors haven't given me a direct explanation, my analysis indicates that Admiral Jameson may have threatened to break the rules and leak the records on your

powerful mother to the public if she did not get her way. Since the many alleged crimes committed by your mother will be released regardless of what the top has decided, the other leaders may have decided to acquiescence and approve of her motion in the interest of maintaining order at the top. The offending admiral may have tried to make amends by offering concessions to the other parties. That should be enough to placate the neutral leaders who held the deciding votes.]

Ves grew even angrier when he received this message!

Admiral Jameson managed to get her way by threatening and bribing the other human leaders!

Far too many bigwigs chose to play along with the head of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet because they did not want to rock the boat and likely profited from his misfortune!

It was that last part that truly highlighted the depravity of this situation!

It indicated that the leaders of red humanity were willing to overlook obvious misdeeds as long as they managed to advance their own selfish interests.

Sigrunt clearly knew that his friend was becoming more incensed by the situation.

[Don't give in to your anger, Ves. Listen to your advisors. You will only be playing in the hands of the opposition if you lose control. Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson is trying to hit multiple birds with a single stone at the moment. First, she seeks to paint cultivators as violent, emotional and unacceptably dangerous individuals. Second, she seeks to tarnish your reputation by trying your mother's infamous deeds to your name as much as possible. Breaking the rules of this public inquiry will advance both of your adversary's goals. You will 'prove' that cultivators such as yourself are tyrants who are far too easily swayed by your emotions, and you will also show that the apple has not fallen far from the tree. Do not fall into their trap!]

Ves silently gritted his teeth. He understood Sigrunt's logic. The opposition had definitely proven its capability of weaving multilayered plots and reading several moves ahead.

He was not exactly known for his restraint in public settings like these. Any opponent who conducted serious research in his past public appearances would definitely know that he had a penchant for winning over the audience with his passionate speakers.

Ves could not allow himself to play in the hands of the opposition, but it was so difficult for him to maintain his cool!

It was in his nature to be proactive. A passive stance may be the most rational decision for him to make, but it went against his increasing desire to stand up and defend himself against the unfair insinuations made by the Fifth Enforcement Fleet!

All of the politics, all of the scheming and all of the letdowns by his backers stoked his anger.

He was being unfairly maligned and belittled, and the worst part about that was that he was not allowed to contradict the stupid fleetier woman right away!

"...Though the former cult master's trail has ended just when it had led to the galactic rim, the occasional massacres, missing person cases and outbursts of violence suggests that she has not lost her tyrannical disregard towards human life during her flight. Granted, many of the casualties that she has directly or indirectly inflicted usually amounted to collateral damage in battles where her pursuers caught up to her, but there are other incidents that did not warrant a violent response. This

is the nature of cultivators. Their selfishness combined with their extreme propensity towards violence has made them fundamentally incompatible with modern human societies."

Ves shook his head in disagreement. Astrid tried her best to associate cultivation with all of those negative traits. This was clearly a deceptive practice because cultivation was neither good nor evil. It was what people did with this power that determined the consequences.

If Ves was able to speak, he could have mentioned the example of mech pilots and mech designers as cultivation done right, but it was not his turn to speak at the moment!

"Cultmaster Original Sin perfectly embodied these ideals during her lifetime. Her son who stands before me today is on the cusp of reviving them during his own lifetime. Do not let him succeed! His living mechs may seem innocuous on the surface, but they are the equivalent of a gateway drug to cultivation and other horrors. The moment the Devil Tongue has managed to seduce his unwitting customers into embracing cultivation through his inscrutable living mechs, our civilization's ideal relationship with technology will become ruined. Instead of putting our trust in reliable, dependable and understandable human technology, we will instead degenerate into savages who worship alien gods and develop a reliance on magic gibberish to sustain our lives!"

The lieutenant-commander ranted about the perils of cultivation and everything related to it for several more minutes. She made sure to weave Ves' mother and living mechs in her arguments to bind them all together into the collective mind of the public.

By the end of her speech, hardly anyone would be able to separate slaughter, depravity, cultivation, Original Sin and living mechs from each other!

It was a crude but effective means of engaging in propaganda.

Even if this verbal strategy was not ethical due to establishing associations that did not actually exist, it worked because humans were far too prone to believing in sensational falsehoods as opposed to boring facts!

"...And that concluded my tale. I hope that you will learn from the mistakes in the past. You can readily access more detailed records on the life and history of Cultmaster Original Sin by visiting the Red Fleet's public portal. Heed our warning and do not allow our society to degenerate into a jungle where the survival of the fittest becomes the order of the day. Above all else, do not trust living mechs and any other weird inventions made by Professor Larkinson. No one knows how they work. Each of them may be potential carriers of intangible viruses that may distort your personality and brainwash you into pursuing power without any regard for other people's lives. Be vigilant. Be skeptical. Be human."

With that, the cybernetic woman formally ended her incredibly manipulative speech, having made a lasting and unforgettable impression onto red humanity.

Chapter 5780 Patience and Forbearance

5780 Patience and Forbearance

"I really like living mechs, but I don't know whether I should buy them if they are based on dangerous technology."

"Professor Larkinson played us all for fools. For years, he pretended to be a mech designer, when he was actually so much more. His mother taught him well. Not only did she teach him her magic, but

she also passed on her ability to infiltrate a community, only to betray it and make off with all of the spoils!"

"The more I heard about cultivation, the more I think it is evil. There are people who claim that cultivation is not all that bad, but to me it is little different from giving everyone a weapon of mass destruction. It doesn't matter if 99 out of 100 people possess enough restraint and sanity to keep their superweapons under lock and key. It only takes a single madman with no care to destroy an entire city or planet!"

Talk like this erupted all across human-occupied space. Many people from many different zones grew concerned or even alarmed at the prospect of welcoming cultivation to human society once again!

They had no idea what this stuff entailed. This caused them to latch on to the first concrete example described by Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson!

Few people outside Terran and Rubarthan space questioned her credibility. The woman may look young, but she was an elite among her generation. Her expensive cybernetic implants and her impeccable fletcher pedigree increased her credibility and made it easier for the public to trust her narrative.

Most people generally did not have that good of an impression of the CFA and RF, but they could not deny that the fleters held themselves to extremely high standards. Their competence had never been questioned by people other than Terrans and Rubarthans.

While the citizens of the former human empires had much less good to say about the fleters, even their bias did not stop them from acknowledging that the hegemony of the Age of Mechs had earned their way to the top.

Whatever the case, the amount of people who still held a highly favorable opinion of Ves and his works had dropped by an enormous proportion.

Few people feared or hated Ves outright. They at least held enough sensibilities to not pass on the sins of the parent to a child.

Ves had also been born centuries after the fall of the Great Temple, so he was largely disassociated from the Five Scrolls Compact.

Nonetheless, who knew what his mother had taught to her son before she 'disappeared'.

It was safe to say that the ploy concocted by the Fifth Enforcement Fleet worked. Not only did they damage one of Ves' greatest weapons, his stellar reputation, they also painted cultivation in such an awful light that it would be a lot easier to push through other initiatives designed to suppress cultivation in human society!

Ves felt frustrated, angry and above all dismayed.

Intellectually, he knew that his backers probably did the best they could, but they were too few in number to stop the opposition from ramming through their master plan.

Emotionally, he felt disappointed that the people who promised to cover his back had failed him once again.

The latter was clearly an unfair assessment of the situation, but Ves could not help but doubt whether the Survivalists and Transhumanists could have done more to prevent the Fifth Enforcement Fleet from exposing his mother's ugly alleged exploits!

As Ves stewed over the unfairness of it all, Jovy approached and held his arm.

"Stay calm." The Survivalist partially echoed Sigrund's advice. "Master Goldstein has already contacted me in order to discuss countermeasures. We need to go back to our private chamber and formulate a new strategy to neutralize the opposition's latest gambit. As long as you deftly manage to resolve this challenge, you will prove that you have the ability and the competence to maintain adequate control over your living mechs. It will be much easier to avoid heavy concessions."

While his words sounded logical, Ves did not think that Master Goldstein or other people could reverse the tide of public opinion.

The damage had already been done.

Astrid Jameson had set the tone for this session by speaking first. Ves had little choice but to abide by her rhythm and work to mitigate the damage from behind.

This was hardly an ideal debate strategy. It did not focus on winning at all. Instead, it was an approach that implied that Ves had already lost, and that the most he could do was to limit the concessions he needed to make at the end.

None of that sit well with him. He was accustomed to winning and getting his way, so getting trounced this badly all of a sudden upset him way more than it should!

Once the lieutenant-commander vacated the speaking pit, Planetary Governor Rod Mergan-Castelaus rose from his pearl throne and easily managed to attract everyone's attention.

"The opposition has sought to strengthen their case by giving you a vivid example of what cultivation had wrought in the past. In the interest of fairness, I would like to remind you all that the Red Two may have verified that Professor Ves Larkinson is the biological son of the powerful cultivator known as Original Sin, she did not raise him past his early childhood. She either perished or left her family, thereby heavily limiting how much she was able to pass on to her offspring."

That was a nice message, but Ves hardly thought it mattered. Humans were far too flawed to fully embrace this logic. The bias that Astrid Jameson tried so hard to instill in the minds of ordinary people could not be dislodged so easily!

The moderator did not spend any more time and effort on addressing the many issues related to Astrid's speech.

"As I have announced beforehand, I will declare a recess so that the supporters of living mechs gain the time they need to study the declassified information and prepare a proper response. In fact, the severity of the opposition's arguments is so high that I will double the recess at the expense of taking away a speaking turn from the opposition. This will give Professor Larkinson and his allies more time to craft a thoughtful response."

What?

Ves already dreaded the break, but he never expected that the moderator would double the downtime!

This was bad!

The more people got to sink their teeth into Astrid's story and all of the other dirt that the fleters threw onto the galactic net, the more they would fall into the Fifth Enforcement Fleet's trap!

Every hour, every minute and every second these ignorant folk spent with the Fifth Fleet's distorted narrative in their minds was another setback for Ves and his cause!

It would become a lot harder for Ves to dislodge all of the lies, misrepresentations and distortions made by the fleters if those stories remained unopposed for such a long time!

Ves couldn't take it any longer. He ripped his arm from Jovy's grasp and deliberately took a step inside the speaking pit.

His action initially attracted little attention as people had already started to turn away.

"Moderator! Let me speak! I do not require an extended recess to formulate my answer. I already have one on my lips!"

"What are you doing, Ves?! Whatever you have in mind, don't do it! Don't fall into their trap!" Jovy urged with notable concern.

The other advisors looked concerned as well. They understood the dilemma that Ves was in at the moment, but they did not think that acting on impulse was the right decision to make in this situation!

The dark-suited planetary governor paused his retreat, but did not turn around. "You should follow the advice of your friends. You are not in the best state of mind to counter the opposition's arguments. The public demands clarity, not a show. Conduct more research. Find more allies. Refine your speech. You can still make a convincing case for your products if you make the best use of your time. I deny your request, not because I want to stymie you, but because it is for your own good. Leave, and do not return until you have cooled your temper."

Ves sneered. He could not hold in his contempt towards this entire farce and the man who presided over it anymore.

"Shut up, you corrupt bastard! You don't get to tell me what is best for me! I did not think much of you at first, but now it has become clear that you are anything but impartial!"

Many people became shocked yet again as Ves finally exhibited one of his famous outbursts once again!

However, it was questionable whether this worked in Ves' favor. He clearly sounded as if he was having a temper tantrum at this moment!

Ves didn't care. His anger and frustration had boiled over to the point where he was no longer willing to accept a passive and restrained approach.

Screw strategy!

Screw patience!

Screw forbearance!

The moderator frowned, but displayed enough control to avoid arguing against a speaker who clearly wasn't on his right mind at the moment.

"My professionalism is not in doubt, professor. Both the Red Association and the Red Fleet have agreed to my appointment as moderator. If you are in any way dissatisfied with my performance, we can continue this discussion in private."

Ves immediately shook his head at this stupid offer.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily! Why are you so insistent on hindering my attempt to defend myself?! What do the fleeters have over you that makes you so pliant to their schemes?"

The planetary governor visibly grew impatient. "Please refrain from voicing baseless accusations. If you do not immediately stop your self-destructive behavior, I will deprive you of the ability to make your voice heard in this chamber for the next several hours."

Ves completely ignored the moderator's warning!

Instead, he took another step forward and pointed an accusing finger towards the man who floated in front of the clamshell throne.

"Hahaha! I figured it out! I should have thought about it before. You are the man who is responsible for running Ector V, a regional shipbuilding center with over 98 first-class orbital shipyards! There is no way that you are able to do anything without the implicit or explicit support of the Red Fleet! I bet this is why you have subtly issued verdicts that subtly advanced the interests of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet at the expense of my own! You're either a fletcher or so deep into the Red Fleet's pocket that the distinction is meaningless!"

Instead of trying to argue with Ves further, Mergan-Castelaus plainly did as he previously warned about and activated a command that forcibly muffled all of the sound waves that escaped from Ves' throat.

For a few seconds, Ves looked frustrated as the advanced technologies of the Dragon King's Palace perfectly neutralized all of the audible sounds he made.

Rod dismissively waved his hand towards the voiceless speaker. "Please escort the muted speaker back to his private chamber. He obviously requires a time-out."

Everyone thought that would be the end of this ugly incident.

Ves could have let this be and follow everyone's advice.

He didn't. He refused to admit defeat at this junction!

The problem was that no one was willing to indulge in his desire. Now that the moderator had muted his speech, they all thought that the show was already over.

"LISTEN TO ME, GODDAMMIT!"

An eruption of noise ensued as a gigantic form suddenly appeared in the center of the speaking pit!

The sudden expansion of a human body and the powerful displacement of a lot of water had pushed everyone else in the vicinity further away!

The moderator along with everyone else became utterly shocked at what had happened!

A giant, nanosuiting form of Ves had appeared in front of their eyes!

The immense size, presence and weight of what appeared to be a human phase lord completely astonished the spectators!

The sight of a human who suddenly became as tall as a mech was so new and unheard of that Ves successfully managed to capture people's attention!