

Mech 2781

Chapter 2781 - New Honor Guard

The fated day had come.

Prosperous Hill VI turned into a vortex of anticipation and excitement.

While the biotech industry dreaded what might happen during the first phase of the design duel, most Lifer civilians didn't think so much.

They had grown up in an environment where they had been constantly told that biotechnology was unquestionably superior to other forms of technology. This was why many of them were practically assured that Dr. Navarro would trounce the foreigner!

"I'm so envious of you! How did you manage to snag a ticket to the duel?"

"Hehe, I was just lucky. Unfortunately, my ticket is only valid for the second phase. That's a couple of days later."

"Why did the mech designers split their duel into multiple days?"

"Because it gives them time to fix up their dueling mechs."

The unusual format of the design duel did much to fan everyone's interest in the duel. Even though it was annoying that the entire event was stretched out over several days, it also added to the tension of the competition.

Would a mech designer who did badly in the first phase be able to make a comeback in the second phase?

Still, no matter what complications might occur, most Lifers believed that Dr. Navarro would prevail in the end. He enjoyed too much of a homeground advantage to lose to some arrogant foreigner!

As Ves woke up and prepared to face a momentous day, he activated a projection that tuned in to one of the local news broadcasts.

The projection exhibited a giant stadium that had been fully set up to host a very impactful design duel.

Early fans had already arrived at the entrance. They were all chanting slogans while wearing green clothing.

Security was in force as well. Ves already spotted around two-hundred aerial and landbound mechs on patrol. At least the local Planetary Guard was being diligent this time.

"Are you ready?" Gloriana asked as she approached his side.

"Miaow?" Clixie echoed as she was being held in her owner's arms.

"It's not as if I can say no." Ves depreciating said. "The Lifers will drag me out of my bed if I claim I'm sick."

"They'll probably have a cure for just about anything." Gloriana joked.

"I don't think they have cured aging. Not completely, at least."

"The LRA would be a lot more successful if it did. I heard that optimizing life prolonging treatment is one of the Supreme Sage's biggest obsessions."

"Well, he's already more than four centuries old. His lifespan is getting smaller and smaller. It shouldn't be a surprise that he is invested in improving life prolonging treatment. His life is literally on the line!"

As Ves stepped out while chatting with his wife, he was quickly surrounded by a squad of very different looking bodyguards.

With the help of Gloriana, his assistant mech designers and some other technical personnel, he managed to provide twelve hand-picked guards with Breyer alloy-fortified combat armor.

There wasn't any time to equip them with other fancy gear, but the improved combat armor alone should definitely make a difference!

The twelve soldiers formed the start of his new honor guard. While Ves hadn't really fleshed out their identity as of yet, the honored soldiers already carried the air of trusted elites.

Even Gloriana looked impressed. "They look much more formidable in their new gear."

"That's the point. The stronger they look, the stronger their deterrence. I really don't want my day to be ruined by someone who thinks they can get past my guards."

His honor guard was much more suited to cover him than the guards he had before. Ves drew a bit of inspiration from the Guard Master mechs and equipped his chosen soldiers with heavy deployable Breyer alloy shields.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be needed, but if that wasn't the case, then the guards could erect a protective wall around Ves.

The deployable shields might not be able to resist heavy or sustained attacks, but they would give Ves plenty of time to equip his Unending Regalia.

The group moved to a hangar bay where a special vehicle had been prepared. The Planetary Guard prepared a monstrous-looking organic passenger transport to bring Ves and his people to the arena.

The large vehicle did not look like any animal or beast that Ves was familiar with. It was a squarish lengthy transportation vessel that could easily carry hundreds of passengers as well as a bunch of heavy gear.

Thick organic plating that was just as good as mech plating clad the entire transport. The plating was colored in earthen brown as if the vehicle went out of its way to look as boring as possible.

No markings or any other distinctive features marked the transport.

Many of the seats were already occupied by other Larkinson guard infantry troops. Aside from that, a few other familiar faces were invited to accompany Ves to the arena.

Both Venerable Joshua and Venerable Orfan decided to attend. Their different force of wills caused many clansmen aboard the shuttle to feel their influence. Even if they didn't do anything but sit, it was difficult to dismiss their presence!

There were two reasons why the expert pilots took part.

First, they showed a lot of interest in the design duel.

He didn't forget about the time when he was part of a Brighter diplomatic delegation sent to broker peace with the Vesians.

Back then, the Vesian diplomats brought along Venerable Foster for the sole purpose of denying any enemies from using indiscriminate bombardment to kill everyone with a single massed attack!

The MTA tended to frown heavily if expert pilots were killed outside of the context of a mech battle!

Although Ves could have made do with just one expert pilot, he didn't mind if he brought two. Both Joshua and Orfan certainly looked like they looked forward to seeing his new mechs in action.

Aside from the pair, two additional Larkinsons wanted to attend the duel in person.

"Ves! Long time no see! How are you doing, pal?"

Raella Larkinson smacked her boyfriend in the face. "Hey! Have some respect! He's the patriarch now, and he has been for a while!"

"Ouch! Please don't do that. I'm a wounded warrior! Have some mercy, please!"

Ves distinctly lowered his gaze. Unlike everyone else, Vincent was stuck on a hover chair.

"When will the doctors fix his legs?"

"The first surgery starts within a week." Raella answered. "It's taking a bit longer to optimize the newly-cloned legs. Apparently, the new batch of doctors hired by our clan think they can do better."

"I'll soon become complete again!"

"Well, it looks like he's happy enough."

Raella smirked and patted her palm against the surface of the hover chair. "Vincent has been driving himself crazy. There isn't much a man can do if he's stuck in this contraption all the time."

As Ves sat down next to Raella, Lucky settled down on her l.a.p and began to beg for attention.

"Meow~"

"Oh, you cutie." She grinned as she began to stroke his plated back. "You're much tougher than Vincent, aren't you? At least you aren't liable to lose your limbs as easily as him. Look at how pathetic he looks. He isn't even permanently disabled but he already acts as if he's on his deathbed."

"Hey! I resent that! You should try and see what it's like to be in my position. I can't even use a normal toilet. Instead, my hover chair automatically takes care of that. Do you know how embarrassing that is? Thank heavens my lower body is covered up! At least the designers of this hover chair have at least some humanity left in their brains!"

Ves didn't bring the two along for their meaningless banter. Both of them were avid duelists and could be considered authorities in this field, if only tentatively.

While he didn't have many ways to affect the outcome of the individual matches, it was still nice to hear their analyses of the situation. This way, he could prepare his dueling mechs better for the second phase of the design duel.

The transport didn't even shake or vibrate in any way as it lifted into the air. Ves called up a projection that showed an exterior view.

Over a hundred aerial biomechs surrounded the passenger transport in a bubble. Their very frames formed an impressive physical barrier against incoming long-ranged attacks.

No other vehicles accompanied this procession. Ves had already shipped out the dueling mechs he prepared yesterday.

Most notably, no other clansmen traveled to the arena. They were forbidden from doing so for safety reasons.

As the transport went on its way, Gloriana ran her fingers through Clixie's luxurious fur while she smiled at her husband.

"How confident are you in winning?"

"I feel quite good, but that's all I can say." He replied. "I have added something extra to each of my five dueling mechs that will hopefully give them an edge in the arena."

"I have faith in you. Have you added any new innovations to your mechs?"

"Several, in fact." Ves grinned. "You'll see some of them in action during the matches, I'm sure."

"Oh? Just some of them? What about the others, if there are any?"

"They're only there as a contingency. To be honest, I really don't want to activate them, but if the situation calls for it, I want the option to be there."

"Are you willing to say anything more about it, Ves?"

"No. I don't want to say anything incriminating."

Gloriana looked deeply into his eyes, but Ves kept his mouth shut no matter how much pressure she exerted on him. He had plenty of secrets that he never wanted to share with his wife, so what was one more?

If all went well, Ves would never have to resort to any desperate measures. However, things rarely went well in past events, so he had become accustomed to making excessive preparations.

Bringing the Unending Regalia along was just one of his measures. Ves also brought Lucky's Misfortune Harness should he have needed to make someone's life very miserable.

He filled up an entire floating crate with weapons, gadgets, ordnance and other useful supplies. There was no way he was going out in the open without a miniature arsenal if he could help it. If the arena guards didn't allow him to bring his goodies, then tough luck.

As Ves went over his security preparations for the umpteenth time, Vincent tried to catch his attention.

"Hey! Boss! I wanted to speak to you for a while, but Raella always stopped me. Since you're here, can you listen to my request?"

"What is it, Mr. Ricklin?"

"You owe me a new mech! I selflessly sacrificed my Adonis Colossus, and now it's dead? Don't you think you should give the newest and most handsome expert candidate of the Larkinson Clan a new partner? If not, can you pass me one of those juicy-looking prime mechs? Just make it manlier. I don't want to pilot a mech that doesn't have anything between its legs."

Ves looked flatly at the hover chair-bound expert candidate.

"I am a very busy mech designer. I don't design mechs for any random person. The needs of the clan goes first. Right now, that means that I should be focusing my energy on developing expert mechs for our expert pilots. After that, there are a number of other mechs I need to design. As for you... your request sits at the bottom of my list of priorities."

"Oh, c'mon! Don't be so mean! Have some sympathy for a fellow Brighter and an old friend. What do I have to do to get you to design my new alpha machine?"

"You should defer to the rules of the Larkinson Clan. There is a provision that allows you to request a custom mech from me. Come back to me when you have earned a thousand Larkinson merits or something."

"What?! How can I possibly earn so many merits?!"

Chapter 2782 - Ruuzon Arena

Every major planet featured at least one grand arena.

It was a necessity. As long as more than a billion people lived on any given planet, the demand for exciting duels and competitive matches reached a critical threshold. Either the governing bodies gave in and acquiesced to constructing a large arena, or else the citizens would make sure to elevate someone else in power who satisfied their craving for the best and most exciting action between mechs!

Larger arenas provided numerous advantages over smaller ones. They could accommodate more people, for one. They also provided more space for mechs to maneuver and use any terrain features if the competition format included this variable.

Smaller arena spaces simply didn't offer enough flexibility for certain types of mechs. Ranged mechs were especially disadvantaged by the lack of the space, which also happens to be one of the main reasons why ranged mechs were much rarer in competitive matches. They only truly showed up in group matches and competition formats that excluded melee mechs.

In any case, Prosperous Hill VI was one of the most developed and populous planets in the region. Its grand arena reflected this in its large and unique architecture.

"It.. looks like a crown of trees." Vincent remarked as he looked at the projection of the distant arena. "Look at those odd trunks that are arcing out from the side."

"Those are the places where the seats are situated." Raella said. "Every spectator has an elevated view of the action. I even hear that the Lifers are able to grow or shrink the trees as needed, though it only happened a couple of times throughout the Ruuzon Arena's existence."

Ves frowned as he gazed at the Ruuzon Arena's overall design. It sure looked impressive and wonderfully showcased the possibilities of organic architecture. Yet its overall security setup left much to be d.e.s.i.r.ed.

Due to the fact that it was made of interconnected trees that arced out from the side, there were plenty of gaps in the structure. He could tell that the architects deliberately designed the Ruuzon Arena to be that way in order to make the entire structure appear open and welcoming.

Yet that was exactly something that Ves did not wish to see. He preferred more traditional arena structures. At least there the amount of angles that someone could choose to attack someone else was minimal.

Unfortunately, the problem was worse than it looked. In practice, any attack that was launched through one of these gaps would likely bump into the powerful energy shields and transparent walls erected around the fighting zone.

Since the Ruuzon Arena frequently hosted matches that pitted five second-class mechs against the same number of opposing machines, its defensive safeguards were very robust.

Additional safeguards shielded the spectators from any attacks that might have slipped through the initial layers of defense. Each spectator tree featured a separate and isolated defense system that could act independently.

There were probably a lot more safeguards than that, but it never got to that point in Ruuzon Arena's history. It hosted more than 10,000 matches without ever suffering a breach of its initial defense layers. The operators of the grand arena frequently checked its defensive measures to make sure they were in good shape.

In fact, this was something that biotechnology was inherently good at. Unlike normal constructions, biostructures possessed inherent self-repair functions. Ordinary wear and tear never afflicted them unless they reached an extreme age.

Of course, biostructures faced another set of problems. Not only did they require nutrients and energy to function, they also became susceptible to heavy toxins, specific bioengineered diseases and other threats that only living organisms worried about.

They also had a finite age, though tree structures were famed for their longevity.

All in all, biostructures offered greater conveniences but also introduced other problems. Ves didn't feel comfortable with them. As a mech designer, he possessed enough technical insight to know how regular structures were put together. He understood what allowed them to remain standing, how they were able to resist strong winds and how their electrical systems worked.

He lacked the same assurances when it came to biotechnology. Anything beneath the surface of biostructures was a mystery to him. Bioengineering was a well-established field and their applications have become so refined that they were comparable in complexity to other advanced constructs such as shield generators or computer processors!

Still, no matter how uncomfortable he felt about the arena, the Lifers insisted on using it as the venue of choice. It didn't matter if Ves and Dr. Navarro originally booked a smaller and more modest mech arena. With all of the attention directed towards their influential design duel, the higher ups simply decided to shift it to Ruuzon Arena and that was that.

It was yet another sign that his design duel had gone out of his control.

Ves hoped that the actual proceedings wouldn't be tampered with. He did not want to be a part of a scripted show. He did not wish to sully his integrity as a mech designer.

The heavily-escorted transport eventually slowed down and descended just before Ruuzon Arena. A secure entrance on the ground opened up, allowing the transport as well as a couple of guard mechs to pass through.

There were a lot of spaces below Ruuzon Arena. The logistics required to move mechs around and such required an elaborate tunnel network in order to run every match as smoothly as possible.

Ordinary spectators never entered these halls, so the place was largely devoid of decorations.

Only pure functionality remained. The walls were made of the same wood-like growth that was used in other organic structures, but they seemed sturdier and more metallic than before.

Once the transport touched down on the ground, a large number of soldiers and other specialists exited first. Ves and his little group exited only after the guards cleared the landing hall.

"Patriarch Larkinson. You have arrived on time. Good." An older woman wearing a business suit approached. A gaggle of assistants followed from behind. "I am Assistant Director Gisha Dumarte. I will be responsible for managing your stay at Ruuzon Arena. We have already received your dueling mechs. They are undergoing final inspections in order to verify that they conform to the rules. Would you like to see your machines?"

Ves nodded. "Please."

The mechs had left his sight for at least half a day. Now, several unknown inspectors were crawling all over them. While it was unlikely that one of them would violate their duties and subtly sabotage his mechs, he still felt compelled to verify them with his own eyes.

The group exited the landing hall and walked through a wide underground corridor that was large enough to accommodate mechs.

It was currently very empty right now, giving Ves and the others the illusion that they were walking through an ancient underground ruin.

"I don't need to remind you that trillions of people will be tuning in to the broadcast of this design duel." The director began. "As such, we must ensure that everything must appear proper. While interest in your upcoming duel is highest among our domestic audience, an outsized proportion of foreign viewers will also be watching the show. As such, we wish to make sure that our state is presented in a good light. Whether Dr. Navarro wins or loses, we hope that you will cooperate with us to make us appear as good hosts."

Ves responded with a mild smile. "I have no problem with describing the truth in front of the recorders. As long as you and your fellow Lifers treat us well, then I have no problem with making that known."

He was making his stance very clear. He was not going to lie if his hosts acted improperly.

Now, he wanted to see whether the assistant director accepted this response. If not, then a very considerable problem might ensue.

"As I have already stated, we are under intense scrutiny. It is more important than ever to ensure that your design duel proceeds as fairly as possible. From the selection of mech pilots to the conditions of the dueling ring, we are working harder than ever to control every possible variable."

That sounded reassuring to Ves. Director Dumarte basically said that the Lifers had no intention to unfairly stack the deck against him. They wouldn't have been able to get away with it anyway. He was sure that plenty of mech designers and other knowledgeable people would be watching the spectacle. Perhaps some of the viewers might even be Master Mech Designers!

The observation ability of the latter was so frighteningly high that not even the limitations of projection technology hindered them all that much.

This meant that any tampering, any signs of unfairness and any odd incidents would never escape their sight.

What if some foreign experts spotted a sign that the Lifers were unfairly providing Dr. Navarro with an advantage?

They would definitely use it as a weapon to damage the reputation of the Life Research Association!

As a state that depended heavily on trade to generate prosperity and pursue their noble mission of spreading biotechnology, the Lifers paid a lot of attention to their image.

This was why it became more important than ever to make sure that everything ran properly. As long as the Lifers handled everything correctly, they would be able to prove that they were both hospitable and magnanimous.

Ves was quite aware of the political implications of this show, so he did not adopt an overly suspicious posture.

Right now, both sides wanted everything to go as smoothly and properly as possible.

They eventually reached the prep area where his five dueling mechs were undergoing final inspections.

"How impressive." The director genuinely expressed her admiration of his mechs. "Despite their standardized appearances, it is astounding how much presence they exude. We have never seen anything like your products."

"I hope the characteristic glows of my mechs haven't given your staff undue problems."

"While it is a bit too much for our mech technicians to remain comfortable in close proximity, the Seniors that have agreed to cooperate with us can easily handle the pressure."

A number of older-looking men and women were buzzing around his mechs. They were perusing the data generated by power scanners while at the same time flying closer to any sections that caught their interest.

Ves could see that the Seniors weren't suspicious that his mechs contained anything improper. Any powerful scanning device would be able to pick that up sooner or later.

Instead, their faces betrayed genuine fascination. Ves guessed that they must be wondering which mech component was responsible for providing glows.

One of the Seniors noticed the new arrivals and distanced himself from the Bright Warrior mech he was inspecting before lowering himself to ground level.

"Professor Tawin, what are your conclusions?"

"Our verdict is the same as before." The brown-haired mech designer responded in a respectful tone. "Mr. Larkinson's mechs are all in order. They are all well-designed and well-engineered. Their quality and performance is considerably higher than what Journeyman are typically capable of delivering. I can tell they will not fold easily against Dr. Navarro's work."

"Have you found any irregularities?"

"No, director. Not physically at least. However, I cannot speak about the less tangible properties of the dueling mechs. They are obviously abnormal."

"In what way?" The director frowned a little.

Ves quickly coughed. "The rules of the design duel do not cover this aspect. The entire point of this event is to match different and unequal design philosophies against each other to see which one is stronger. As such, deviations in this area should be expected."

Director Dumarte did not look amused, but the professor nodded without hesitation.

"Mr. Larkinson is correct. Every design philosophy is different. It is because they are unique that design duels are necessary. Determining which mech or mech designer is better cannot be done by comparing spec sheets. We need to see the mechs in action, and in order for the duels to have validity, the products must showcase the ability of the mech designer to the best of their ability. While I am not well-versed in the design philosophy that has made these machines so remarkable, I feel they are within tolerance."

Chapter 2783 - Distinguished Gathering

A simple inspection was not enough to determine whether the dueling mechs were truly proper.

What if someone better than Ves fabricated these mechs?

What if an unknown Senior or Master secretly 'assisted' in the preparation of Ves' machines?

This was one of the many ways in which mech designers could cheat.

That was what the Seniors were for. Their connection with mechs and their sensitivity towards them granted them a good sense of judgement of whether others were involved.

While the mechs that Ves presented were all based on collaborative mech designs, this was nothing unusual. Many mech were designed in collaboration.

The point was that the mechs had to be representative of Ves. The mech designs had to conform to his design philosophy and no one stronger should have covertly or overtly improved any aspect.

Of course, there were still other ways to cheat. For example, a Master Mech Designer could point out several problematic aspects to one of the participants of the duel.

Ves could think of several other ways to gain an unfair advantage.

This was why it was important for someone like Professor Tawin to evaluate the dueling mechs in person and develop an overall judgement by relying on his feelings and judgement.

Since Ves hadn't actually done anything improper according to the letter and spirit of the rules, he never showed any concern. As an innocent mech designer, he knew his work would pass this test with flying colors.

Of course, he also didn't think it was wrong to take advantage of a very obvious loophole and substantially upgrade the spiritual design of his dueling mechs.

Ves temporarily said goodbye to them as the assistant director guided him, his wife and the rest of his entourage to a different underground area.

They eventually entered a large lift that took them upwards. It soon became clear from the winding path that they were ascending one of the winding tree structures that surrounded the main arena.

The lift stopped just as it almost reached the top of the giant tree structure. The director all led them to a fortified exit that was manned by lots of armed guards.

"Dr. Navarro and a gathering of distinguished guests are inside." She told Ves as everyone went through an extensive security check. "While your guards are allowed inside, they will have to remain in the back and under restriction."

Ves frowned. "Why?"

"The other dignitaries have all brought their own guards. The viewing platform will become too crowded if all of the guards are mingling with our honored guests. There is no need for concern. The security measures of this viewing platform are the highest and we have even upgraded it further in order to prepare for this occasion."

He had no choice but to consent to this measure. If the others in the viewing platform agreed to this measure, then Ves obviously wouldn't be able to secure an exemption.

He quickly turned to Nitaa. "Please remain alert."

His tall bodyguard silently nodded.

What reassured Ves quite a bit was that his pets were also allowed to accompany them. The security personnel also allowed them to keep any small arms and other gadgets as long as they weren't too destructive.

Evidently, the security personnel were very confident in their ability to control the situation. The entire viewing platform along with the rest of the artificial structure was completely under their control.

When the group finally stepped into the large balcony-like platform, a lot of guests immediately turned their attention to the new arrivals.

Gloriana hitched her breath. She not-so-subtly bumped her elbow against his side. "How many Masters are there?!"

"At least six." Ves replied. He could feel their powerful spiritual presence from this distance. "There's also a bunch of Seniors and other important-looking people in this place."

Over a hundred dignified-looking people had gathered on this platform. It was clear that they were all the most important VIPs who decided to witness the design duel.

Ves felt a bit worried at the concentration of so many important people. Then he relaxed as he realized why this was a clever move.

All of these important Masters and Seniors were indispensable treasures to the LRA. The state would never allow anything to happen to them. Ves even bet that each of the Masters and other officials belonged to different factions. By tying all of them to a single place, any provocateurs would think twice of attacking someone in their midst. Their attacks could easily kill the wrong person and piss off a bunch of new enemies!

Soon enough, Venerable Joshua and Venerable Orfan moved away. They became attracted to a gathering of Lifer expert pilots.

When Ves glanced in their direction, he could feel the tension between their clashing force of wills. No one would feel comfortable staying in their midst. Despite their smiles and polite conversation, it was clear to him that the expert pilots didn't mind a bout in order to prove their strength!

"Mr. Larkinson. I am glad to see you again." Dr. Navarro smiled as he and his young protégé approached. "Our duel has taken quite a different meaning since we have last met. I hope that the changes hasn't affected your battle spirit."

Ves kept his smile, though inwardly he felt quite upset at the other Journeyman.

"I am not an easily-distracted mech designer. Don't worry. I did my best to prepare my dueling mechs for our upcoming confrontation. I hope you have done the same."

"Have no fear. It has been some time since I have last put my products to the test against a competitor. I feel quite excited to do so again and in such a grand stage."

Clearly, Dr. Navarro did not seem discouraged at all. Ves only regarded him with even greater suspicion.

"I do not feel the same way, doctor. I did not ask for this publicity. The dynamics of this design duel has veered considerably from my expectations. I am especially upset at my inability to control the situation. Even the parameters of our duel are taken out of our hands."

"I apologize." Navarro bowed. "I didn't mean to distress you or complicate your life any further. The situation is out of my hands, unfortunately. I am in the same position as you. I suggest it is best to go with the flow and allow this duel to proceed as if nothing has changed."

"It's not as if we can choose any differently."

The two continued to chat a bit. Ves constantly tried to probe the biomech designer's true attitude, but Dr. Navarro was annoyingly good at presenting a simple front.

This was not the result that Ves wished to see. If the other Journeyman showed any guilt or circumspect behavior, then that was very telling behavior.

He briefly turned to Yelkin Zernzon. Perhaps Ves might have better luck with someone who exhibited much less self-control.

"Hello, Yelkin. Is this the first time you've attended a design duel?"

The teenager enthusiastically nodded. "I've watched many broadcasts of it before, but this is the first time I get to witness one in person!"

"What do you think about all of the fuss that other people have kicked up? I can't imagine that it is pleasant to see your teacher attract so much attention."

"I don't really understand all of the stuff that goes on above my head. I don't think that our state has to be afraid. Your mechs are quite good and might even put up a decent fight during the first phase, but I'm definitely sure my teacher's mechs will come out on top at the end of the second phase!"

Ves chuckled. "We'll see."

Yelkin's confidence wasn't unwarranted. Biomechs always enjoyed a repair advantage. The organic machines were capable of fixing smaller problems on their own while requiring much less time and effort to repair major damage.

Still, the difference was still tolerable to Ves. Some repair procedures were much less cumbersome when applied to classical mechs.

After exchanging a few more sentences, it became clear that he wouldn't get anything out of the young mech design student. Yelkin received enough training to know what he was and wasn't supposed to say. Even his excitable mind didn't give anything away that merited greater attention.

Ves still felt the situation was fishy though. His instincts told him that he should remain vigilant.

After he finished catching up with Dr. Navarro, he and his wife began to talk with some of the other guests.

The first distinguished guest that approached the pair was someone they had already met once before.

"When I heard that you were entangled in this design duel, I decided I had to be present." Professor Werther Cline said as he approached with a drink in hand. "I hope that you are not unduly troubled by the latest turn of events. Our state is normally a lot more boring. It is just that you have come at a slightly more s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e time than usual."

"I'm used to it." Ves curtly replied. "Can I ask whose side you are rooting for, professor?"

"As a mech designer, I only root for the better mechs. As a Lifer, I am always compelled to support my fellow citizens. I hope these different d.e.s.i.r.es do not conflict today."

In other words, the Master Mech Designer favored Dr. Navarro, but wouldn't mind if Ves won if his products proved to be better.

This was not a very revealing answer, though. Ves decided to be more direct.

"In the contest of your society, who do you favor?"

Professor Cline sent a knowing look at Ves. "I favor stability. It would be much better for all of us if Dr. Navarro is able to prove that biomechs are competitive in the eyes of the public. Mind you, he doesn't necessarily have to win. A close loss is also sufficient. The two of you are quite evenly matched despite the differences in age. Based on your mech catalogs, Dr. Navarro has the edge in refinement while yours are more innovative. However, the application of your products are much more useful in group battles as opposed to single duels."

That was true. Ves always designed his products towards real users of mechs. His commercial mechs were targeted to mercenary corps and security companies while his commissioned products were often adopted by state militaries.

None of those situations encompassed a situation where his mech designs had to be optimized for single combat. His entire design philosophy revolved so much around empowering mechs under actual battle circumstances that he was out of his element this time.

Still, Ves had no choice but to adapt as best as possible. Design duels were a part of every decent mech designer's life. Whether he wanted to or not, he had to justify the worth of his design philosophy in the most demanding test possible.

The mech industry did not welcome useless mech designers!

He asked a different question. "Will you be supervising the design duel?"

The distinguished biomech designer nodded. "Every Master attending this duel will oversee the proceedings. We come from a mix of different backgrounds in order to ensure that we can pay attention to different aspects of a mech. For example, I specialize in stimulating cell activity, so I will be paying close attention to Dr. Navarro's biomechs to ensure their organic tissue hasn't been tampered with. I can also pay close attention to specific aspects of your mech."

"I see. Thank you for your service. Shouldn't there be a foreign Master among you in order to ensure a greater diversity of opinion?"

"Ah, that is not possible, sadly. Masters from neighboring states aren't inclined to visit us. We can only make do with what we have."

"That's a shame."

Chapter 2784 - Vincent the Pundit

It was quite rare for Journeymen like Ves and Gloriana to be able to talk to a genuine Master Mech Designer. Even though this was not their first meeting with Professor Cline, the pair still wanted to take advantage of the moment.

"Do you believe that the biomech industry has fallen behind?" Gloriana asked.

This was a s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e question, but it wasn't enough to rile up a Master.

"Perhaps." The professor shrugged. "Does that change anything? Not necessarily. When you live to my age, you think less in the moment and more across longer stretches of time. In my perspective, trends come and go, certain mechs become fashionable while others are phased out for whatever reason. These are all momentary events that are all part of a greater tapestry that tells the stories of mechs. Too many people make the mistake of focusing on the part of the tapestry that is in front of them. That is a short-sighted approach. You can gain an entirely different understanding if you take a few steps back and view the tapestry as a whole."

"Not everyone gets to live as long as you, professor." Ves responded in a mild tone. "What might be a moment for someone who is more than three centuries old can be half a lifetime to an average mech pilot."

"That is an unfortunate reality. Every society is diverse. That is what makes it so rich and vibrant. While it is regretful that life prolonging treatment still hasn't become accessible to the wider population, I hope that will change one day. Our society will become very different if average citizens are able to reach my age."

Ves wasn't so sure if he wanted to welcome such a future. When people lived beyond their natural lifespans, they tended to get very weird. If human civilization became filled with geriatrics with mentalities that were warped by age, then who knew what might happen to the future of their race!

"You have a very optimistic view of humanity. I cannot bring myself to accept your viewpoint. The proportions of humans in the galaxy that can only look at what is right in front of them far outnumbered those who can view the entire tapestry. Even though the latter has a considerable say in how our civilization is run, it is the former who truly decides how we live."

"That is true. This is why education is important. Even if progress is slow, we must never fail in our endeavors to improve everyone's lives. I have hope that we will one day achieve a level of progress where everyone can live like a prince."

Yeah right! Ves had to resist the urge to snort. Instead, he offered a restrained answer.

"Many millennia have passed since humanity ascended to the stars. Even after going through the disaster that was the end of the Age of Conquest, the lives of many humans haven't fundamentally changed. Our tech has improved, but humans who are born today still have to struggle to make a living and get caught in the same senseless wars."

The Master Mech Designer looked tired. "That is because the dominant model of our current civilization is an extension of the same flawed model of the past. The future that I and many of my colleagues are working towards is one where the solutions of biotechnology solved many of the shortcomings of societies outside our state. You may think us odd for favoring a technology base that seems alien to you, but we believe in our cause."

"You've been working for this cause for several hundred years." Gloriana noted. "How much longer will it take to attain your goals?"

"No one can answer that question. We can only continue to soldier on and wait until the moment is right. It might take centuries. It might take millennia. However, a time will come where the existing model has run its course. That is when our alternate model based on tech that works on different principles will show its value."

Though the professor did not raise his voice, Ves could feel the older man's conviction. The strength of a Master Mech Designer's belief was very strong!

Still, Ves wasn't fooled. Just because someone lived several centuries old and just because someone had become extremely good at designing mechs didn't mean he was automatically right in everything else!

Even Masters could be wrong. Ves had to remind himself of this truth.

They continued to talk about other topics until the duel was finally slated to begin.

As was usual in glitzy occasions like these, an extensive introduction followed first. As the announcers started to address the crowds of spectators who were all sitting on different viewing platforms extending from different tree structures, Ves and Gloriana sat down next to Raella and Vincent.

"The Lifers are really pulling out all the stops." Vincent looked impressed as a famous celebrity from the LRA appeared on the center stage in order to sing an inspiring song.

Raella smirked. "They have to be. This is the biggest show that the LRA has held in a while. It's all a bit rushed, though. The Lifers could have organized a much better introduction if they had a few extra months to prepare in advance."

Ves found their remarks to be intriguing. "Are you saying that the organizers are going above and beyond to popularize the design duel?"

"Duh. A single design duel isn't all that special, to be honest. The only ones who really have a stake in the outcome are the two mech designers taking part along with the mech pilots that fight on their behalf. It's not an interesting spectator sport to be honest because the real competition is too technical and abstract to laymen."

She was right. Mech designers were able to understand much of the nuance of design duels. As for ordinary people, they much preferred to view ordinary mech duels where passionate fighters instead of bookish engineers were the protagonists.

While there was a sense that the LRA had to put out its best foot in the eyes of the public and foreign viewers, Ves still found it to be an odd decision to organize such an elaborate show.

As singers, performers and even biomechs began to dance and sway with the music, Ves felt as if the Lifers were doubling down.

For some reason, the higher ups, which was mostly made up of conservatives, were very confident in Dr. Navarro's victory. Even with all of the effort they had undertaken to level the playing field as much as possible, the leaders still acted as if their fellow Lifer would ultimately prevail!

What gave them the confidence? What caused them to act as if Dr. Navarro had already won?

Ves didn't know the answer. There was a humongous risk that all of this showmanship would blow up right in their faces if the foreigner won!

Once the festivities ran their course, the main arena finally cleared. The enthusiastic announcer dramatically began to introduce the first pair of mechs.

[Now, the moment that you have been waiting for has finally arrived! Please welcome the first mech to enter the field!]

No one clapped or shouted when a gold-coated mech passed through the entrance and entered the field.

[The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B is one of Mr. Larkinson's most recent mech designs that are exclusive to his clan. It is a modular mech platform that possesses multiple configurations and infinite versatility. This particular machine comes in the

swordsman mech configuration. Its main armament is a balanced sword, but that is not the only weapon. The Bright Warrior is a flight-capable mech that fights best in space but can handle other environments as well due to its flexible design.]

Ves was a bit upset that so many people got a good look at one of the mainstay mechs of the Larkinson Clan. It was not good if others were able to witness the Bright Warrior IB's performance and be able to analyze its strengths and weaknesses from the footage.

However, it was not as if his mechs would be able to remain obscure forever. Deploying them on regular patrols around his fleet already exposed their external appearances to any sensors pointed in their direction.

Any decent mech designer would be able to make a lot of estimates about the Bright Warrior model's performance from those long-ranged observations alone.

Yet estimates were quite different from solid data. With so many high-quality sensors and recorders documenting the upcoming match, his enemies would definitely know what to expect!

Fortunately, the Bright Warrior that had stepped onto the field was not an exact replica of the basic model. This modified version contained several deviations that should hopefully give it a better chance.

[Currently sitting in the c.o.c.kpit of the Bright Warrior is Captain Alazar Ipsich! A mercenary captain of the adventurous Dretton Shearers, Captain Ipsich has fought many battles and skirmishes inside and outside of our state. Due to his extensive foreign tours, our good mercenary captain has piloted plenty of classical mechs alongside his beloved biomechs. He is equally proficient in piloting them both and has expressed no difficulty in piloting this specially-prepared swordsman mech!]

The projected profile image of Captain Ipsich displayed a typical mercenary officer. As was customary among second-class mercenaries, the captain dressed well and took pride in his work. He was anything but the sloven cowards that Ves typically associated with third-class mercenaries.

He didn't know much about the man, though. The selection of mech pilots was out of his hands. He could only put his faith in the assurance that every selected mech pilot would be impartial in their evaluation of the mechs they utilized in the first and second phase of the design duel.

Since the winner and loser of the design duel rested in the hands of mech pilots like Captain Ipsich, Ves felt quite uncertain how much bias would play a role!

"He's been through a lot, that's for sure." Vincent commented from the side. "You can tell he's a real survivor, like me. He's been through rougher times than me, though. You

can see it in the eyes. Those are the eyes of a man who has dropped into hell and used his own two hands to crawl out of it. Experiences like that changes people. I can also tell that Captain Ipsich really needs a girlfriend, though."

Ves disregarded the last sentence but did not discount the rest. As idiotic as Vincent sounded sometimes, he was quite good with people.

"How will he fight in battle?"

"That depends." Vincent paused in thought. "Mech pilots like Captain Ipsich will fight with caution for the most part. It's baked in the DNA of a merc, but it's also due to his nature as a survivor. However, if he ever becomes cornered, you'll see a different side of him. Survivors can burst out a lot of strength if they feel their life is on the line."

Raella looked a bit skeptical at her boyfriend. "You're just talking out of your b.u.t.t, Vincent. Do I need to remind you that your b.u.t.t is currently fixed to your hover chair? There's no way your psychoanalysis is accurate!"

"That's because you're a woman, babe! Mark my words. That fellow will fight exactly how I've described. Only true men understand other true men, and Captain Ipsich is exactly one who has proven himself in battle. The only question is whether he'll ever unveil his desperate side. The dueling ring is incomparable to an actual battlefield. Fights never result in fatalities. There's a reason why veterans and most working mech pilots underperform in the mech arena. It takes the mindset of a true competitor in order to showcase your full might on the stage."

That was an interesting perspective. It sounded quite logical as well. As Ves thought about what Vincent said, the opposing biomech finally entered the dueling as well!

Chapter 2785 - Home Ground

The Bright Warrior in its swordsman mech configuration projected a distinct impression to the audience.

Those who watched the broadcast only caught a hint of it, but the people sitting on one of the many elevated viewing platforms were able to sense its presence a bit better.

Even though the audience was too far away to truly experience its glow, if they were any closer, they would have felt its welcoming embrace.

This was a product of the Bright Warrior's heavily-altered spiritual design.

For one, he made an agreement with Goldie to play nice with whoever piloted the mech. He also dug deep into the dueling mech's spiritual DNA to widen its target audience.

The Bright Warrior product line was never supposed to be piloted by non-Larkinsons. This was baked into its very identity and served as the root of its existence.

Ves envisioned the second iteration of the Bright Warrior concept as the basic and most fundamental protector of the Larkinson Clan. While his other mechs may be stronger or flashier, the Bright Warrior could always be counted upon to deliver reliable performance in many different situations!

As a modular mech platform that was designed with maximum compatibility in mind, the Bright Warrior was not a suitable dueling mech at all. There were many junctions where Ves and the other lead designers prioritized adaptability and universality over pure performance.

A mech that was fine-tuned to accommodate a specific mech pilot would always perform better than one that attempted to be a good mech to many different mech pilots!

Still, it was not as if Ves could have taken the opposite approach. The design duel format prevented the participants from learning about the mech pilots beforehand. This meant that Ves and Dr. Navarro were both forced to keep their mechs open-ended enough to accommodate different personalities and fighting styles.

Therefore, what was supposed to be a traditional weakness of the Bright Warrior actually came somewhat handy at this time. Its balanced specs, wide range of motion and great attention to its piloting experience were all capable of making any newcomer to the Bright Warrior feel at ease!

"Captain Ipsich has adjusted well to the Bright Warrior." Gloriana remarked as she analyzed the fluent movements of the modified mech. "As an experienced mech pilot, he should already be fairly good at adapting to different mechs, but I don't see much signs of discomfort so far. Whatever you did has worked."

The side projection that displayed a view of the c.o.c.kpit showed that Captain Ipsich was sitting comfortably in his piloting chair. His body was only moderately tense, but that was normal whenever a mech pilot was about to do battle.

"The captain should still be getting used to piloting a living mech." Ves murmured as he observed the mech with his spiritual senses. "A familiarizing period ensues anytime a mech pilot interfaces with one of my products for the first time. Just like two different people meeting for the first time, the captain and his mech are just strangers. Since they're meant to fight with each other, they need to familiarize themselves with their new partner and establish a solid relationship as soon as possible."

This was one of the complications associated with piloting his mechs. Ordinary machines did not possess any personality or capacity for independent thought. They

were just there. This meant that any mech pilot could hop into its c.o.c.kpit and pilot it straight away, only needing to worry about mastering its technical capabilities.

This was different. Captain Ipsich's slightly distracted expression signified that he was still exploring the surprising degree of responsiveness from his current machine.

What made the experience more wonderful than usual was that Ves had asked Goldie to enhance the modified Bright Warrior's spiritual foundation all the way to 75 Ves!

He hesitated a lot before Ves made this decision. 75 Ves was very close to the limit that ordinary mech pilots could bear. If Captain Ipsich's relationship with the Bright Warrior ever deteriorated, then his piloting experience would quickly worsen!

While that didn't necessarily mean that the mercenary officer would lose the ability to put up a fight, there was no way he'd be able to fight at his peak anymore.

"Hopefully, that doesn't happen." He muttered under his breath.

This was the double-sided nature of living mechs. Since they had gained the ability to love their mech pilots, they were also capable of doing the opposite. Ves really hoped that none of the selected mech pilots had a history of abusing their own machines.

"Good mech pilots don't mistreat their gear." Gloriana reassured him. "This is especially so for Lifer mech pilots I think. The biomechs they utilize are often treated as living partners. It is customary for the mech pilots of this state to treat their biomechs like pets or buddies."

"Miaow." Clixie senselessly agreed as she luxuriated on Gloriana's l.a.p.

"Meow."

Lucky hadn't been paying attention to the upcoming match at all. Instead, he kept sniffing his nose in different directions. His artificial green eyes gazed hungrily at the bodies of the various Masters and other dignitaries that were sitting together in small groups.

Each of them carried high-class gear that probably relied on high-quality exotics to deliver amazing performance!

Even Ves briefly imagined what it would be like to 'incapacitate' a Master and rifle through his or her belongings.

There was bound to be a lot of priceless gear on their bodies!

He quickly squashed this temptation. He even patted Lucky on his head.

"Meow!"

"Stop staring. Do you think you've been subtle? Each of these people can probably turn you into a rust bucket before you can blink your eyes!"

Biomech designers always augmented their bodies to some degree. Even if they didn't specialize in human augmentation, they surely knew someone who did. While the Masters of the LRA might not be as perverse as Dr. Jutland, their bodies should have definitely reached a superhuman level!

"Look, Ves!" Gloriana pointed at the other side of the arena. "Dr. Navarro's first mech is coming out!"

[Ladies and gentlemen, please give a round of applause to a biomech that is derived from one of Doctor Frederico Navarro's most successful works!]

The entire audience stood up from their seats and clapped even before the bipedal biomech had exited the tunnel!

Dr. Navarro's homeground advantage fully came into play at this time. Ves and his fellow Larkinsons all pressed their lips as the local spectators treated the opposing mech like a returning hero!

Ves had overlooked this aspect. In fact, the original design duel should have taken place in a smaller mech arena with only a handful invited guests bearing witness. He had never anticipated that a confrontation between two Journeymen would attract several hundred thousand spectators.

Even if there were a number of foreigners in the crowd, there were so many locals that the supporters of Ves had no chance of making their voices heard!

Realla shook her head. "This is bad. Home ground advantage is a real psychological factor that can swing the outcome of any match. Look at all of those distant people cheering and clapping. Their collective energy is quite massive. All of that support will feed into the mech pilot of the opposing mech."

Ves was able to sense this phenomenon on a faint level. While nothing much happened on a spiritual level, he still perceived a growing undercurrent. This was the power of a crowd!

The biomech that had entered the arena ground was an uncovered biomech that looked like it was made out of pure muscle.

Vincent immediately drooled! "Wow! Look at those abs! Look at the biceps! If not for the smooth lower side, I would have wanted to pilot this mech as well!"

"Looks are important, but they don't necessarily determine how well a mech performs." Ves hoped.

"That shouldn't be the case." Gloriana retorted. "Dr. Navarro hasn't made it this far by being vain. I can sense plenty of power in this biomech."

Once everyone formed an initial impression of the second mech, the announcer finally began to reveal its properties.

[The Epsilon Mosar this biomech is based upon is one of Dr. Navarro's proudest melee mech designs! Having sold over 20,000 units since its introduction to the market, the Epsilon Mosar has quickly won over its mech pilots for its offensive capabilities. The Epsilon Mosar trades protection for power and speed, allowing it to take the initiative and fight its opponents at its choosing. The base model is armed with a pair of biometal swords and a backup pistol, though it also contains a number of surprising options depending on the variant.]

Ves had to admit that the Epsilon Mosar made him worried. Its overall design truly possessed an aggressive air. No matter if the mech won or lost, its attacks were bound to pressure its opponents!

"Don't forget about Dr. Navarro's design philosophy." Gloriana quietly reminded him. "His products are famed for their morphing ability. While this usually takes hours which renders it impractical in combat, who knows whether he has added any short-term solutions to this modified dueling mech."

Ves added a lot of additional depth to his dueling mech, which meant that Dr. Navarro could easily do the same.

While the latter was more constrained by the rules, there were still plenty of changes he could make without straying too far from the original design!

The mech pilot of the modified Epsilon Mosar happened to be a woman.

[Sitting in the c.o.c.kpit of Dr. Navarro's dueling mech is Kelly Gidon. Her illustrious decades-long career is split up into periods. She spent the first half of her piloting career as a mech athlete of the Triton Blasters, winning numerous trophies along the way. Once her competitive career ended, she shifted over to working for a troubleshooter division under Coslin Protection, a renowned security company based in this very city! As a troubleshooter, Pilot Gidon has been dispatched to many problem areas and fought many different opponents. Her combat experience is quite abundant!]

"Damn!" Vincent cursed. "This woman is much more familiar with the arena!"

Raella grimaced as well. "Kelly Gidon is clearly an old hand at this. Perhaps she never fought on a stage as big and popular as this, but she clearly looks as if she is taking in

the moment. Together with the home ground advantage, I'm afraid her fighting spirit has already reached a peak!"

The projections showed that Kelly Gidon was grinning. She couldn't wait to bear the expectations of the crowd and beat down the opposing metal mech!

In this match, the Bright Warrior and its mech pilot had turned into the villains. There was no way the local audience wanted to root for them. Instead, they threw their entire weight behind the Epsilon Mosar and the Gidon, which caused this pairing to take on a heroic aura that appeared to be just as strong as one of Ves' glows!

This was all an illusion, of course, but psychology didn't care about that.

As the seconds went by, the noise from the crowd slowly faded.

Eventually, they fell silent.

The first duel of the first phase was about to start.

[Begin!]

The two mechs did not delay! The moment the announcer gave the signal, the opposing machines already moved!

"It's taking flight!"

The Bright Warrior instantly boosted into the air, causing it to ascend by at least a hundred meters in an instant!

The Epsilon Mosar moved in a different direction. It had unsheathed its biometal swords from its back while at the same time dashing forward!

Chapter 2786 - Different Characteristics

The initial moves made by the two mech pilots betrayed their inclinations.

Captain Alazar Ipsich was a cautious mercenary officer who had survived many sticky situations. Recklessness was not in his blood. As someone in charge, he had a responsibility to lead his subordinates well and avoid putting them in a position where their lives could easily be lost.

Therefore, Ipsich favored making the best use of his time. Since there was no rule that stated that he had to launch an attack immediately, he wanted to maintain distance from his opponent in order to assess the situation further.

To a grizzled veteran mech officer like Ipsich, acting without information was a quick way to end a mercenary mech pilot's career!

His opponent adopted a different mindset.

As a former mech athlete who fought plenty of competitive matches, Kelly Gidon knew that the usual rules of the battlefield did not necessarily apply to the dueling ring!

The rhythm of a mech duel was completely different!

Raella sighed. "Momentum matters more than careful planning. Too many mech pilots who have never learned how to fight in the dueling ring always make this mistake. They think too much. There is no way that they can come up with a killer strategy when there are so few variables in play. In this situation, the dumber mech pilot always comes out on top! Isn't that right, Vincent?"

"Huh? Why are you asking me?" The hover chair-bound expert candidate looked befuddled.

Ves believed in his cousin's words. He had witnessed several mech duels himself and was always impressed by those who exhibited more aggression. It was not a coincidence that those who pressed forward the most tended to be the most successful and celebrated mech athletes!

The Bright Warrior had taken flight, but the Epsilon Mosar that had sprinted forward quickly adjusted by flaring its organic flight system in order to continue its pursuit!

The flight speed exhibited by the Epsilon Mosar made it clear that the mech was no slouch when it came to aerial maneuvering!

"Damn." Ves cursed. "The Epsilon Mosar is designed for both landbound and aerial combat. It performs best on land, but it's aerial performance is not that much worse."

"What's more important is that the Epsilon Mosar isn't burdened by design choices that place additional burdens to it in order to allow the mech to operate in space." Gloriana noted. "You can't say the same for our Bright Warriors."

"I already took that into account." Ves responded. "I've removed several elements that are useless in planetary combat and put in something else in the capacity that has become available."

Still, there was only so much he could do. The Bright Warrior was designed as a spaceborn mech first and that could never be changed.

The difference it made wasn't too large, fortunately. Ves had enough time to make some targeted adjustments that increased its combat ability in the air.

"Their speeds aren't too far apart!"

The Bright Warrior kept its distance from its pursuer. Ves smiled at this sight. Ever since Juliet Stameris joined the design department, the flight systems and other mobility systems of his mech designs received a substantial bump in improvement.

Even if aerial combat was not the Bright Warrior's strong suit, it was enough for Captain Ipsich!

The mercenary officer currently looked quite troubled. He had lost the initiative from the moment the duel commenced. Mindlessly going into the fray was not his style, but his opponent clearly thought differently!

Due to the limited dimensions of the dueling ring, the two mechs began to circle around. Seeing that the Epsilon Mosar wasn't able to catch up in a short amount of time, Kelly Gidon decided to employ the secondary armament of her machine.

The fleshy biomech's mouth opened up and discharged a thin green laser beam!

The beam accurately struck the flight system of the Bright Warrior. While the attack was too weak to damage the protruding elements of the classical mech, the Epsilon Mosar already released a second laser beam!

This time, the Bright Warrior dodged an instant before the second release, causing most of the beam to splash harmlessly against the energy shield erected to contain the duel.

Captain Ipsich did not let his opponent attack his mech with impunity. The Bright Warrior pulled out a backup pistol and started to fire back at its pursuer!

Unlike ordinary flesh, the matter that made up much of the biomech's structure was based from exobeasts that had evolved to survive very hostile environments. The heat that struck the exotics-reinforced flesh only caused its outer surface to dry and blacken for a bit.

This was hardly enough to injure the biomech!

Raella sighed. "Something has to change. Pursuits always end up favoring the chasing side. Just look at the two circling around. While Kelly Gidon is able to fire at the Bright Warrior's flight system with impunity, Captain Ipsich is reduced to firing poorly-aimed snapshots at an awkward angle."

It was not that easy for humans to fire behind them. While mechs possessed more conveniences such as being able to rely on a rear sensor to observe its target without turning its head, it was still awkward for a humanoid mech to fire a weapon towards the rear.

Any laser beam that struck the undaunted Epsilon Mosar merely impacted its front, which ruled out the possibility of inflicting any crippling damage!

Though Captain Ipsich was cautious by nature, he wasn't stupid. Seeing that his current approach didn't work, he commanded his mech to holster its pistol and turn around.

He was no longer avoiding the clash!

A huge cheer of excitement came from the crowd as the Bright Warrior lifted its two-handed sword and closed in on its opposition!

CLANG!

The Epsilon Mosar's attempt to chop the Bright Warrior failed when the latter zipped to the side to avoid one blade while blocking the other that couldn't be avoided!

As the two mechs passed each other by, they quickly circled around in order to perform another exchange of blows!

CLANG!

The shorter and slimmer biometal blades held up well against the solid alloy sword of the Bright Warrior.

This time, the differences between the two mechs became more pronounced.

The mass of the two mechs was roughly even, but the Epsilon Mosar was able to exert more strength.

The Bright Warrior was a bit more rigid and solid. This served the mech fairly well when one of its opponent's swords slashed against its c.h.e.s.t plating!

The momentum behind the attack left a modest groove in the c.h.e.s.t armor of the Bright Warrior. Ves and every other Larkinson winced at the sight.

The opponent managed to land the first true blow!

"This is just the start." Ves said as if to console himself. "The Bright Warrior's c.h.e.s.t armor can still take a lot of hits."

As a Lifer mech pilot, Captain Ipsich was well aware that uncovered biomechs did not possess any thick exterior plating. This meant that it was a bit easier to inflict damage to them with lighter attacks.

In contrast, mechs with hard outer shells such as nearly every classical mech in existence possessed solid armor that was capable of bouncing off weaker attacks.

The short swords in the hands of the Epsilon Mosar would never be able to score such a powerful hit against the strongest section of the Bright Warrior if not for getting a head-start!

Therefore, the obvious conclusion was that it was better for Bright Warrior to push up right into the face of the Epsilon Mosar!

"If you want to brawl, then I'll satisfy your wish!"

Captain Ipsich finally showed some heat as his Bright Warrior no longer parted from the Epsilon Mosar. Instead, the two mechs stayed in close range and started to clash against each other with no hint of retreat!

"Kill the garbage can!"

"Chop off the arms of that classical mech!"

"Biomechs forever!"

In contrast, the Bright Warrior's single blade missed the mark more often than not. Captain Ipsich may be a competent mech pilot but his opponent was just as skilled.

Fortunately, the mech pilot of the Bright Warrior wasn't helpless. The mercenary captain no longer defended against certain weaker attacks in order to inflict a more powerful blow against the opposing biomech.

"Slick!"

Soon enough, the crowd all expressed their dismay as Ipsich managed to outmaneuver Kelly Gidon and inflict a deep slash on one of the Epsilon Mosar's shoulders!

A spurt of alien purple blood leaked out from the wound before automatically closing. The cut area even showed signs of merging back together!

Still, the initial attack had served its purpose. The left arm of the biomech had become slightly less powerful. The attacks from this limb had become less threatening, at least for the moment, allowing Captain Ipsich to gain the initiative.

Even though his Bright Warrior already showed several deep slash marks on its frontal surface, its operational efficiency still remained at a peak!

Although it seemed as if the Bright Warrior had gained an advantage due to the characteristics of its physical form, the balance was not as skewed as it seemed.

"All biomechs can heal." Gloriana stated. "While their healing ability isn't perfect, the damage suffered by the Epsilon Mosar can still be mitigated over time!"

Indeed, what she said had come to pass. The damaged limb of the Epsilon Mosar slowly recovered. While it did not restore itself to its peak, it had changed enough for Kelly Gidon to go on attack yet again!

More slash marks adorned the exterior of the Bright Warrior. Captain Ipsich did his best to block and avoid any incoming strike. When that wasn't possible, he tried to spread out the damage across the entire surface of the mech.

This was what the armor of a mech was for! As long as all of the destructive energy was wasted on some solid metal plates, then the vulnerable internals were spared from damage.

This was key in allowing the Bright Warrior to keep up the fight!

As the bout continued to persist like this, Ves began to analyze the battle from a spiritual perspective.

So far, the spiritual elements of his Bright Warrior didn't really seem to play a role. While Captain Ipsich had rapidly gained a lot of proficiency in piloting his current mech, his progress wouldn't have been much different if he piloted a lifeless mech.

In the heat of battle, it was hard for weak and subtle effects to exert any influence!

The glow of the Golden Cat seemingly played no role in this duel.

Ves could see this and so could his wife.

"The Bright Warrior isn't resonating with its current pilot." Gloriana stated. "The mech and its mech pilot are still separated by too many barriers. They have too little in common."

He could see that as well. All of the changes he made to prevent the Bright Warrior from rejecting a non-Larkinson mech pilot might have achieved its purpose, but they didn't do much to facilitate cooperation.

Fortunately, Ves still had options.

It seemed it was time for him to activate one of the measures he had implanted in the Bright Warrior's design.

Unknown to anyone else, Ves discreetly concentrated his mind and spiritually reached out to the Bright Warrior. He gently tweaked its spiritual design until it activated something that had lain dormant.

The fairly pleasant glow of the Bright Warrior suddenly switched. Goldie's presence no longer dominated the mech. Instead, her aura faded in order to make way for another, more aggressive glow!

The Bright Warrior suddenly seemed to have turned into a bigger, more ferocious predator! The hostility emanating from the previously-sunny mech was so abrupt that Kelly Gidon's momentum had suddenly flagged.

Captain Ipsich, who was influenced by the sudden change, acted exactly according to the new glow and began to unleash an aggressive set of moves that pushed the Epsilon Mosar back again and again!

"What just happened?!"

Gloriana widened her eyes while gripping Ves' hand. "Did you..?"

Ves smirked. "I did. Who says the Bright Warrior only has room for a single occupant?"

Zeigra had taken over from Goldie! Even though nothing physical about the Bright Warrior had changed, the contrast was so striking Kelly Gidon wasn't able to adjust!

Chapter 2787 - Unrelenting Aggression

If the modified Bright Warrior entered the dueling ring with Zeigra's glow to begin with, then Kelly Gidon would have been able to adjust her expectations beforehand.

However, the abrupt switch in the middle of an ongoing bout had caught both mech pilots by surprise!

The difference was that Captain Ipsich rolled with the change of glows. The new presence that seemed to have swept over the battle-scarred Bright Warrior was aggressive, but most of its ire was directed outwards.

Since the mercenary officer already directed its ire towards his opponent, he meshed pretty well with Zeigra.

It didn't matter if they were strangers to each other. Since both of them were united by a common purpose, they rapidly got along with each other. As long as Ipsich did everything possible to take down his opponent, Zeigra would have his back every step of the way!

"How come Captain Ipsich has gone crazy?"

"The mech has changed somehow!"

"Is this the special ability of the Bright Warrior? How fascinating."

The Master Mech Designers and other dignitaries weren't as ignorant as other people. They were able to reach closer to the truth. With their powerful spirits, they were easily able to sense the altered glow of Ves' mech.

Even though they quickly realized that the change hadn't actually changed the physical performance of the mech in any way, the effect it had on the mech pilot was quite profound!

Normally, Goldie exuded a bright and inspiring presence. Her distinct aura was not only useful in encouraging every clansmen to develop a common bond with each other, it was also helpful in keeping large amounts of Larkinson mech pilots in high spirits during battle.

However, its effectiveness in crowds did not translate to the current setting. Goldie still worked best when she was paired with a Larkinson mech pilot. Since this wasn't the case anymore, then what about letting another design spirit take her place?

It sounded simple, but it really wasn't. The Bright Warrior was never designed to accommodate other design spirits. Doing so rashly led to various compatibility problems. In the worst case, the spiritual foundation of the mech actively rejected the foreign design spirit!

In order to avoid this outcome, Ves had invested his own energy into modifying the spiritual foundation of his dueling mechs. He did something that he had never truly done before, and that was opening up his mechs.

He did not just open them up to mech pilots outside of their initial target audience.

This was why the Bright Warrior, which was a model that was only ever designed to represent Goldie, was unexpectedly able to accommodate Zeigra!

Of course, there were a number of problems. First, the fit between the Bright Warrior and its new design spirit was not good.

This was why Goldie was still present in the background. Her role had been relegated to keeping the mech placated. If she was removed from the picture, then the mech itself would have likely clashed against the foreign intrusion!

It didn't help that the mech had been enhanced to 75 Ves by feeding it with Goldie's spiritual energy. This not only made the living mech stronger, but also caused it to grow closer to the Golden Cat.

All of this meant that the Bright Warrior could have embodied Zeigra better if it was designed to accommodate the aggressive design spirit from the beginning. As it was, the hasty modifications that Ves had made barely allowed the mech, mech pilot and new design spirit to work towards a common end.

Defeating the enemy came first! This was something that they all agreed upon, and this was why the altered Bright Warrior had turned into an unrelenting attacker without showing any major inconsistencies!

The reaction from the crowd had changed along with the swing in momentum. The biometal swords wielded by the Epsilon Mosar were having a hard time blocking the fast and powerful strikes of its opponent!

Inside the c.o.c.kpit, Kelly Gidon began to show more and more frustration on her face. She gritted her teeth as she felt as if she was being pressured on multiple sides.

Physically, the aggressive Bright Warrior put the defensive capabilities of her biomech to the test. The exposed flesh of the Epsilon Mosar began to exhibit more and more wounds that were covered by drying purple blood.

Every so often, a sword would break through the Epsilon Mosar's guard and score another wound onto its upper body!

What was worse for Kelly Gidon was that Captain Ipsich did not show any signs of flagging!

The ability of a mech pilot to maintain an offensive was limited. Only one misstep or mistake could easily allow the opponent to break off or turn the tide.

Yet for some reason, Captain Ipsich turned into a beast. His d.e.s.i.r.e to chop the Epsilon Mosar in half was so great that he employed his full ability as if he was in a life-or-death match!

Soon enough, the unrelenting offensive finally achieved a critical result!

As the flying and spiralling mechs continued to press their weapons against each other, the Bright Warrior suddenly overloaded its flight system and boosters, causing it to push itself forward with much greater force than it displayed before!

The extra momentum it gained allowed the Bright Warrior's powerful blade to break past the Epsilon Mosar's hastily crossed swords and dig deep into the pectoral muscles!

A groan of pain and disappointment rang out from the crowd!

When the biomech maintained the upper hand, then the encouragement from the crowd had a wonderful effect on Kelly Gidon's confidence.

Yet now that she and her mech entered into dire straits, the encouragement from the crowd had stopped flowing. Instead, the spectators began to express all kinds of negative emotions. Anger, dismay, disappointment and unwillingness continued to flow from them all, causing the entire arena to take on a different atmosphere.

"I don't know how Captain Ipsich turned into such a maniac, but I like it." Realla grinned.

"He has finally stopped holding back and started to show everyone what a real man is capable of." Vincent echoed.

Gloriana looked amazed as well. She was one of the few people who understood the change.

She was amazed not only by how Ves managed to enable such a switch to take place, but also at how Captain Ipsich underwent such a drastic swing.

His combat effectiveness had practically jumped by 50 percent! This was while he was still piloting the same mech with the same physical properties as before!

Ves continued to smile at the sight. The events that took place vindicated his theories. The strength of a mech was merely one factor that decided its battle effectiveness. The fit between the mech and mech pilot was another factor that could make a major difference!

As long as mechs were piloted by humans, then it made sense to invest in the synergy between the two!

Gloriana eventually wasn't able to hold in her curiosity.

"How come Ipsich is able to sustain his assault for so long? Did you do anything extra?"

"Maybe." Ves mysteriously responded, mindful of the public setting he was in. "I just made some realizations about my design philosophy and how I have been letting my existing paradigms limit my options. It's been some time since I advanced to Journeyman, yet I have largely been working in the same narrow direction that I had previously set when I was an Apprentice."

He had no doubt that the Master Mech Designers sitting behind him possessed ears that were s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e enough to hear his whispers. This was why he didn't say anything more specific.

His wife still wasn't satisfied, though. She frowned. "I don't understand. Your specialty is good at affecting mech pilots, but this is something else. It's as if you've injected Ipsich with a stimulant!"

The new life that Ipsich showed had not faded at all. Instead, as the captain continued to maintain his offensive rhythm, his fit with his mech and its new design spirit continued to rise.

His moves became a little more fluent. He responded faster and was able to read his opponent more accurately. Even though some of the internal components of the Bright

Warrior was already showing signs of breakage after being subjected to continuous strain, the mech's momentum continued to rise at a steady pace!

Kelly Gidon attempted to break away from the unstoppable Bright Warrior many times. Her increasingly bloody mech kicked, dropped, boosted or turned around its relentless opponent.

Yet no matter what the Epsilon Mosar tried, the Bright Warrior always managed to stay close enough for the tip of its sword to hit the injured biomech.

"What is happening?!"

No one was able to answer her question right now. Just as the Epsilon Mosar managed to gain some distance, the Bright Warrior pushed forward and stabbed forth with its sword, heedless of how much it exposed its damaged frame!

At this point of the battle, the Bright Warrior incurred some internal damage. A couple of hits from the biometal swords managed to take advantage of the earlier wounds they inflicted and damaged some of the internal components that were right underneath.

Even though the Epsilon Mosar stabbed its swords into these openings right away, the longer reach of the Bright Warrior caused its blade to sink into the c.h.e.s.t of the biomech first!

The mech prepared by Dr. Navarro suffered a heavy injury!

Even though its thick and resilient muscles prevented the sword from running through its back, the Epsilon Mosar still suffered a heavy injury!

The counterattack launched by the biomech failed to affect the Bright Warrior to the same degree. One of the limbs went out of control, causing one of the swords to miss and slide off the surface of the opposing mech's exterior plating.

The other sword managed to sink in and damage some internal components, but the Bright Warrior hardly seemed to notice. Its redundancy and compartmentalization weren't particularly high, but they were still adequate enough to contain the blow!

"It's over!" Ipswich roared as the blade of the Bright Warrior retracted before chopping down right afterwards!

The sword missed only because the Epsilon Mosar lost altitude. With the injuries it suffered, Kelly Gidon thought it was better if she brought the fight to the surface!

"Oh no you don't!"

Captain Ipsich wasn't having it. The Bright Warrior dove down with greater speed as it still retained more of its power. With a powerful swing, its sword clanged against the crossed blades of the biomech once again.

This time, the performance of one of its limbs was too heavily affected to defend against the attack. The left arm lost its grip on the sword as the latter flung away!

Another spurt of purple blood sprayed from the Epsilon Mosar as it suffered a deep cut!

Due to the attack, the biomech lost control of its descent. It fell faster than before and crashed straight onto the surface with more force than was considered safe! It didn't even have time to correct its posture. Its flight system was crushed flat!

"Finish the biomech!" Vincent excitedly roared!

The Bright Warrior seemed to have reached the peak of its aggression! After adjusting its flight, it dove straight at the prone mech. Yet before the tip of its sword was able to drive home, a signal sounded out!

[The first match is over! Captain Alazar Ipsich has won!]

Safety measures instantly came under play. An energy shield formed over the prone biomech, preventing it from getting exposed to any further attacks. Powerful gravitic modules underneath the arena acted upon the diving Bright Warrior, pushing it upwards and causing its falling momentum to bleed away.

Though the mech looked as if it desperately wanted to finish off its opponent, the match was already over!

The crowd fell silent.

"How could this be?" Someone questioned. "How could one of our biomechs lose that easily?"

The audience was in disbelief. They couldn't believe that a well-regarded mech had lost in such a clear and obvious fashion. The match wasn't even close at the end!

"Don't lose hope! We still have four more matches to go, and this is just the first phase! There are 9 more matches for our biomechs to gain the upper hand! Now that we know what these trash cans can do, our mech pilots won't fall for the same trick twice!"

The mood among the spectators gradually stabilized. There were plenty of chances for Dr. Navarro and his mechs to compensate for this loss!

Chapter 2788 - Interesting Matchups

[Ves Larkinson has won the first match of the design duel!]

The first match ended in a clear victory for Ves. Captain Alazar Ipsich rode the emotions induced by his Bright Warrior and thrashed the Epsilon Mosar piloted by Kelly Gidon.

Even though the two mech pilots came from different backgrounds and pursued different careers, their skill in battle was roughly even.

The variables that decided the match came down to the qualities of the mechs and how well they cooperated with their pilots.

The strength of the mechs were roughly even. They had to be in order to make the match fair. What differed was where they focused their strengths, which in turn provided different possibilities to their mech pilots.

It was still a bit of a gamble to determine whether the mech pilots were able to utilize the strengths of their mechs to their best effect.

This was an area that Ves focused on a lot in his work. His ongoing partnership with Gloriana had steered him into becoming even more s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e towards increasing the fit between mech and mech pilot.

Yet the problem of doing so in this design duel was that both participants went in blind during the first phase of the design duel!

Neither of them knew exactly who would enter the c.o.c.kpit, so they had to keep their dueling mechs open to many different personalities and fighting styles. This entailed making lots of unpalatable compromises.

Yet Ves had an advantage in this aspect. The malleability of a mech's spiritual foundation granted him a unique advantage.

It was a realization that he had always been aware of before but never utilized to the greatest degree.

He was able to alter a mech while it was in the middle of a fight!

It sounded so obvious to him, but that was exactly why he overlooked its value!

Any other mech designer would have become green with envy if they learned what Ves was capable of doing. Other mech designers such as Dr. Navarro, Gloriana and Ketis had no choice but to sit around and do nothing while their products were put into action, whether on the battlefield or in the mech arena.

In fact, Ves didn't have to intervene in person just then. He could have programmed an automatic routine that would have released the right design spirit in the right situation. It was just that he lacked the time to set it up and wanted to exert more control of the process.

What many people didn't realize was that the Bright Warrior responsible for delivering Ves his first win had a lot more under the hood than everyone thought!

The Bright Warrior didn't just have two design spirits. It actually held five in total!

This was one of the new concepts that he had come up with. While it was not to allow multiple design spirits to inhabit a single mech design all the time, what if Ves set up a rotation?

This could be a game changer!

Of course, this did not work for every mech. The Valkyrie Redeemer for example was so female-centric that it would definitely reject a macho design spirit like Bravo. It might tolerate a female design spirit like Qilanxo, but only reluctantly.

This was where a relatively open mech design like the Bright Warrior came in. Due to its overall design direction, the mech was inclusive. This turned it into a universal platform that could play host to many different design spirits as long as they weren't too extreme.

This enabled him to implement his newly-invented carousel and spin it around whenever he judged the mech was better served with a different design spirit in a given situation!

Although the alternate design spirits weren't able to exert that much influence through a mech that was not designed to take advantage of their unique traits, the base effect of their glows was already enough to change the situation!

This was why Gloriana began to look at the Bright Warrior design in a new light. "This has a lot of potential. If we came up with a mech that is specifically designed to take advantage of this possibility, then..."

Her body shook with excitement. She ravenously turned to Ves and grabbed him by the arms!

"THIS IS PERFECT FOR VENERABLE JOSHUA! HE'S SUCH A VERSATILE MECH PILOT THAT HIS EXPERT MECH HAS TO BE VERSATILE IN ALL ASPECTS AS WELL! YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF THIS, WON'T YOU?!"

"Yes, yes, yes, whatever you say, honey!"

She was probably revising the outline and mech concept for Joshua's expert mech design!

Ves could only shake his head at her single-minded behavior.

Meanwhile, the public could barely process how the first match had ended.

The Bright Warrior that was slowly flying off the stage under its own power had already switched back to the Golden Cat. However, the memory of the mech displaying unrelenting aggression just a moment ago was still seared in everyone's mind!

"How can this be? The Epsilon Mosar model is way stronger than this! Its regeneration ability barely had time to show its value!"

"That's what made this loss so bad for us. Captain Ipsich is one of us, remember? He knows what biomechs are good at, especially uncovered ones like the Epsilon Mosar. Since he is piloting a metal mech, he can't adopt the same approach anymore. He needs to finish the match quickly before the match goes on for too long."

The first match illustrated the classic considerations of battles between classical mechs and biomechs.

The latter generally fared better in attrition battles. Depending on their properties and how they were used, biomechs could last for quite a long time. Their physical restoration capabilities were much more practical than the self-repair mechanisms of classical mechs.

Unfortunately, the first match proceeded way too intensely for Kelly Gidon to cope. Even though it was not a big deal when she held the initiative, the moment she lost it, her mech failed to stall out the assault or escape from it. If it was able to buy some time, the Epsilon Mosar could have gained a small reset which allowed it to resume the fight with renewed power!

Avid and experienced fans of competitive matches knew that the initial result was rarely indicative of the final outcome. The design duel had only progressed by 10 percent! Anything could happen in the remaining 90 percent!

"Just wait. We know what the foreigner's mechs are capable of now. If this is all his mechs can do, then we can definitely beat the next ones!"

The amateurs came up with all kinds of explanations, some of which were quite reasonable.

Yet Ves wasn't interested in their random opinions. Even though he was looking elsewhere, his ears were closely tuned to whatever sounds the six Masters of the LRA were saying.

Sadly, they just sat there sipping their tea or other favorite drinks. None of them spoke up. Either they were communicating through their implants, or they were simply being pretentious.

Ves currently favored the latter theory. Their expressions were all tranquil and calm as if they were sages who disdained to intervene in a trivial Journeyman-level design duel.

He felt someone's gaze on him. Ves turned his head to see Dr. Navarro nodding at him. The biomech designer acknowledged his loss.

"Good show." The challenger spoke. "Even though I do not agree with the premise of your design philosophy, its value is not in doubt. However, it takes a lot more than a single match win to prove that your mechs are truly alive."

Ves merely smiled back. "We shall see. I'm quite interested in what kind of mech pilots will show up next. The ones we have seen so far are certainly colorful, though I find it odd that only one of them has arena experience."

Dr. Navarro did not agree with him. "Miss Gidon's experience as a mech athlete did not avail her in the end. Besides, it doesn't matter too much if there are differences in strength. She will pilot your mech during the second phase."

That wasn't entirely fair, still. If Dr. Navarro always received the stronger mech pilot during the matches in the first phase, then his biomechs would incur less damage due to better performance! This in turn meant that it was a lot less cumbersome to repair the organic machines after the end of the first phase!

Ves didn't bother to quibble over this matter, though. If the bias was too obvious, then Ves wouldn't be the only person who understood the implications. The LRA would lose a lot of credibility if such a plot existed and became exposed!

Once the downed Epsilon Mosar was carted out of the arena, the second pair of mechs and mech pilots entered the stage.

[Our second match is a clash of warriors, literally this time! Two defensive mechs will be attempting to wear each other down. Which armored colossus will fall first?]

The two knight mechs that appeared in view might possess the same role, but functioned very differently!

[On the left, we have yet another Bright Warrior mech, but this time outfitted in its knight mech configuration. On the right, we have Dr. Navarro's impressive-looking Dragonscale Warrior. Both mechs are made to withstand immense punishment. This will be a real slugfest!]

"Ugh, I hate this boring matchup." Vincent complained. "Whose idea was it to pit one defensive mech against another defensive mech? These clashes last forever!"

However, the match quickly revealed something that introduced some much-needed excitement.

It turned out that both of them were young!

[Now this match is a breath of fresh air! The next match will be fought between two rising stars. The mech pilot of the second Bright Warrior is Trip Oxxon. He is the 17th ranked elite graduate of Greenstar Academy. The mech pilot of the Dragonscale Warrior is Zenon Dia Bavros, who is also an elite graduate, this time from the Dorman Piloting Institute. He is the 14th ranked mech cadet of his class!]

Ves frowned a bit when he heard that. He only relaxed when someone mentioned that Greenstar Academy was slightly better regarded than the Dorman Piloting Institute. Of course, the differences were minor and subjective. The two were pretty much even in many aspects, and so were the mech pilots.

"Why choose younger mech pilots this time?" He questioned.

"It could be to test whether your mechs are easy to pick up or not." Raella guessed. "It could also be a way for the LRA to showcase their comprehensive strength to the public. The Lifers must be quite confident in the performance of these rookies if they chose this pair to fight the second match."

Vincent did not think much of these so-called elite graduates. "These fellows have to work for it if they want to screw up in front of a crowd. Anyone can pilot a knight mech. They're easy to learn and easy to master. Even someone who has lost half a brain can still be useful with a knight mech!"

"Don't let Jannzi hear you saying that!"

While Vincent had a point, knight mechs were capable of performing in many different ways. Their mission might be simple, but a creative mech pilot could always find new ways to leverage a knight mech's capabilities!

Chapter 2789 - Dragonscale Warrior

Trip Oxxon and Zenon Dia Bavros possessed a lot more similarities than the last pairing.

They were both young.

They were both elite graduates.

They both specialized in piloting knight mechs.

They both minored in piloting classical mechs.

It was like pitting them against mirrors of each other. Of course, this was just the first impression. Ves was sure that he'd be able to witness their individual differences soon enough.

The arena operators did not delay too long. After providing the audience with a brief introduction of the mechs and mech pilots, the match soon commenced!

"They're colliding against each other!"

This time, both mech pilots had no intentions of stalling the fight. Both Oxxon and Bavros drove their mechs towards each other while pressing their entire frames against their enormous tower shields.

Boom!

Ves could practically feel the air ripple as a thunderous collision took place! The two mechs bounced back after suffering various degrees of damage from their reckless collision. He wasn't sure what the point of it was, but the two mechs immediately closed in on each other before hacking at each other's shields with their one-handed swords.

Sparks flew and sharp noises sounded out as the two knight mechs hacked their swords and bumped their shields against each other without any interruption.

Knowledgeable mech insiders and mech fanatics knew that this was just the start. When two defensive mechs were pitted against each other, it was virtually impossible for one of them to achieve a decisive victory in the first couple of minutes!

Instead, the mechs had to outlast their opposition. The way to do so was to steadily chip away at the defenses of the enemy while not wasting too much energy and other resources in the process.

"That Dragonscale Warrior mech looks quite different." Raella noted. "Its exterior is made out of lots of relatively small scales. I don't know what that means in terms of defense, but the biomech is definitely more agile and flexible than our Bright Warrior!"

This was true. The Dragonscale Warrior probably gained its name from the rippling scales that were able to resist and deflect the probing attacks that made it through its guard!

Gloriana shook her head in disapproval. "Classical mechs can adopt this armor scheme as well. It's just that it isn't worth it most of the time. The solidity of a single bigger plate is hard to match when you replace it with several smaller scales. The fact that they have

to be mounted in a particular way to allow for additional range of motion introduces weaknesses that make it easier to break through them. They also offer less defense against blunt force trauma since they are comparable to a tough hide rather than armor."

Ves agreed with her assessment as well, but he was sure that the Dragonscale Warrior had something special in store. Otherwise, it didn't make much sense to design it as a commercial mech.

Several minutes went by. The excitement level from the crowd had dimmed once they observed how slowly the mechs incurred damage.

Many sword strikes deflected off the curved shield or bounced off the armor of the mechs. The offensive power of the mechs was relatively low, especially when pitted against the defenses of another knight mech!

"Man, whose idea was it to pit two knight mechs against each other?"

"The first match was much more exciting."

"Can we refund our ticket?"

Some viewers even started to yawn! Despite the youth of the two mech pilots, neither of them attempted to pull off any flashy moves. It was as if their minds had just blanked out, regressing them into more primitive versions of themselves who only knew how to hack and slash!

Only the mech insiders knew better. Knight mechs weren't designed to pull off brilliant maneuvers in the first place. They were built to slug it out like this. Before either mech pilot could put their talents to use, they had to change the circumstances and do their best to expose a new weak point in the opposing mechs.

The differences between the two sides soon became evident.

"It's just as I expected. The Dragonscale Warrior is less durable." Gloriana concluded. "Just look at the gap in its arm. It only took two slashes to wear away a portion of the scales."

The Bright Warrior became more aggressive as a response. Pilot Oxxon began to exhibit some of the restlessness of his youth. The sword wielded by his mech attempted to attack this weak point many times!

Of course, Pilot Bavros was well aware of the danger. The Dragonscale Warrior positioned itself so that its shield blocked every attack directed against the exposed limb. Its bone surface gained more and more cracks and chips. Even if the Bright

Warrior was unable to break it in a couple of blows, continued attacks on the same sections steadily caused the bone shield to be dismantled!

While the Bright Warrior's metal tower shield incurred similar damage, Bavros was currently on the backfoot of this ongoing clash. The Dragonscale Warrior would definitely fold first at this rate!

Ves did not expect his mech to gain the upper hand so quickly. It was not that good of a knight mech considering that it was based off a modular mech platform. Yet its simple, beginner-friendly design characteristics allowed Trip Oxxon to learn the ins and outs of his mech remarkably quickly!

In contrast, the Dragonscale Warrior deviated substantially from other ordinary knight mechs. Its abnormal armor scheme and added flexibility increased its learning curve and forced Zenon Dia Bavros to spend more time on how to leverage these properties to the best effect!

While the mech pilot of the organic mech slowly began to pull off more extreme moves, it was still difficult to reverse the situation in a short amount of time!

Growing impatient with the lack of progress, Oxxon decided to take a risk. His Bright Warrior kicked out against the lower side of the Dragonscale Warrior's shield. This caused the solid bone object to tilt.

A sword instantly threaded through a gap in the defense and impacted the c.h.e.s.t of the Dragonscale Warrior!

Even though the scales were thicker and sturdier at this section, the stab still caused a few of them to scatter!

However, the wounded mech did not suffer this attack without hitting back. Rather than mounting a hasty and flawed defense, Bavros decided to take advantage of the Bright Warrior's exposed posture. The Dragonscale Warrior hacked at the arm of the classical mech with a biometal sword, causing its thinner arm plating to deform!

The two mechs quickly inflicted a couple more telling blows until Bavros finally managed to extricate himself out of the tricky situation. When the Dragonscale Warrior kicked its agile legs against the Bright Warrior's shield, it used the surface as a platform in order to gain some distance.

For a moment, the two mechs were separated.

"Both of them have taken a beating." Ves murmured.

The Bright Warrior received less injuries. While several sections of its thick and sturdy armor featured sword marks, its armor coverage was still intact.

The only worrisome aspect was that its tower shield was already starting to crumble. Its middle section had taken the brunt of the beating and was already showing signs of cracking in half.

The Dragonscale Warrior was in a similar situation. Its bone shield was a bit less massive than a solid metal shield, but its odd organic structure provided it with a bit more stability.

The mech itself displayed some concerning injuries. Its c.h.e.s.t and one of its limbs displayed traces of purple blood where the broken or torn scales failed to withstand the incoming attacks.

Yet something remarkable happened as the mechs separated. The flesh underneath the damaged or missing scales rippled. In just a couple of seconds, any scales that were still attached to the mech got absorbed into the flesh. In their place, new and pristine scales covered the exposed section!

"What!?" Ves leaned forward as he observed the projection that displayed a close-up of this phenomenon. "The Dragonscale Warrior can do that?!"

Now that the biomech restored its exterior protection, Bavros drove the rejuvenated mech forward with renewed confidence!

Even though both mechs fought against each other at the same intensity as before, Bavros began to show the true capabilities of his biomech.

He took advantage of the regeneration capabilities of the Dragonscale Warrior. By accepting a moderate blow, Bavros was able to hit back just as hard against his opponent!

Even though the solid metal armor of the Bright Warrior was not that easy to penetrate, every blow added up. While the Bright Warrior's c.h.e.s.t and limb armor slowly incurred more scars, the Dragonscale Warrior received more serious injuries due to the weaker protection ability of its scales.

Bavros didn't care! The Dragonscale Warrior slowly replenished its missing scales, drawing upon a vast reserve of energy and nutrients that were deposited in the center of the biomech.

As long as these resources lasted, the Dragonscale Warrior would always be able to regenerate its scales!

What was even more frustrating was that the underlying flesh of the mech was still tough enough to resist moderate blows. This made it very hard to take advantage of a momentary opening. Even if Oxxon managed to inflict a couple of hits on an exposed

section, the only result was that a lot of purple blood leaked out before the flesh quickly knitted back together.

"This mech is all about regeneration!" Gloriana concluded. "Unless the Bright Warrior is capable of inflicting a single overpowering blow, it has no choice but to enter an endurance race."

Ves sighed. "A defensive mech can't possibly inflict a powerful punch unless it is able to perform a charge, but Bavros is smart enough to prevent Oxxon from disengaging his mech."

The Bright Warrior attempted to draw back several times, but the Dragonscale Warrior turned into a leech. No matter where the former went, the latter always followed right behind!

The nature of the match had changed. Since there was no feasible way for the Bright Warrior to win by overpowering its opponent, its mech pilot decided to conserve its energy. The metallic mech no longer performed any wasteful moves and remained on the defensive a lot more than usual.

The Dragonscale Warrior was different!

Its active regeneration allowed it to maintain its peak condition longer, but that came at the expense of its total operation time! With every minute that passed, the mech expended more and more energy and nutrients. The regeneration process was so intensive that the mech even started to release steam due to the buildup of heat!

As the organic mech grew hotter, so did its fighting approach. The Dragonscale Warrior launched attack and attack with the fury of an offensive mech rather than a defensive mech! Its scales rippled in the light as its flexible limbs allowed the biomech to inflict damage from trickier and trickier angles.

The Bright Warrior was suffering serious damage! With repeated blows, its shield was slowly crumbling and its c.h.e.s.t armor exhibited more damage. Its limbs began to suffer some hits as well.

Unlike its opponent, the Bright Warrior wasn't able to regenerate its damage! Even though it would definitely be able to outlast its opponent if the fight went on, this didn't matter if the aggressive Dragonscale Warrior was able to cripple the opposing mech!

The Bright Warrior needed a hand, and Ves knew where to find it. He concentrated his mind and repeated the same steps as before.

The only difference was that he drew out a different design spirit. As Goldie receded yet again, a different presence came to the fore.

Qilanxo emerged from the shadows!

Trip Oxxon immediately became influenced by the different glow. He became a lot more defense-minded and began to waste less energy on launching attacks.

Since the Dragonscale Warrior was on a time limit, the only thing the Bright Warrior had to do was to resist the storm and wait for it to end!

However, just as the Bright Warrior settled in for the long haul, its diminished tower shield finally collapsed under all of the strain.

"My chance has come!" Bavros exulted.

The young mech pilot of the Dragonscale Warrior drove his biomachine forward, causing it to collide against the shieldless Bright Warrior!

The two mechs quickly stabbed against each other, though their armor managed to mitigate much of the damage.

While the Bright Warrior attempted to disengage, the Dragonscale Warrior opened its mouth and attempted to chomp onto its opponent!

Chapter 2790 - Shedding

When the Dragonscale Warrior opened its mouth, it revealed rows of sharp and jagged teeth. They certainly looked like bad news especially when the biomech possessed a jaw that looked strong enough to apply a lot of force!

However, before those teeth could actually sink in, an energy shield came into existence.

Trip Oxxon had not forgotten about this feature! While the Bright Warrior did not possess a particularly powerful shield generator, it was still strong enough to block the Dragonscale Warrior's surprise attack!

The energy shield disappeared shortly afterwards. Its capacity was limited and it was too wasteful to leave it up all of the time.

"Eat this!" Oxxon yelled!

The low-profile missile launchers mounted on the shoulders of his mech fired a bunch of missiles at point blank range shortly afterwards!

Even though these explosions weren't very strong due to the restrictions set by the design duel, all of the missiles happened to carry incendiary payloads, which meant that a lot of flames and flammable materials spread out from between the two mechs!

Flames began to burn on the frames of both machines! The Bright Warrior didn't suffer that much damage because its damaged c.h.e.s.t armor was still solid enough to prevent the flames from spreading inside its frame.

The Dragonscale Warrior fared a little worse! The process of healing and regenerating its scales didn't happen instantly, which meant that a considerable amount of flesh became exposed to the flames.

While the flesh of the biomech was too tough to burn so easily, it was not pleasant in the slightest to let the flames persist!

Both mechs put out the flames as soon as possible, drawing back as they did so. The stab wounds they inflicted on each other looked serious but hadn't sunk too deep, thereby limiting the impact on their performance.

Even so, the battle had definitely entered a new phase. The Dragonscale Warrior had exposed a third weapon in the form of its sharp teeth. While its range was absurdly short, they still looked deadly enough to cause serious damage.

The Dragonscale Warrior had accumulated even more heat, but that did not stop Bavros from continuing his assault. The biomech stormed towards the Bright Warrior and began to push the classical mech back!

At this point of the match, both mechs had lost their shields. This not only removed some obstacles in their way but also allowed them to wield their weapons with greater force.

Continuous clangs sounded as the two flying mechs crossed blades again and again!

At this time, the Bright Warrior had given up on launching attacks. Oxxon firmly tried to block or mitigate every incoming blow in the hopes of tiring out the opponent.

He was performing quite well in this capacity. Against a single opponent, the knight mech specialist was quite proficient in blocking and evading attacks. This frustrated Bavros as his Dragonscale Warrior had already expended a lot of resources on regenerating its wounds and was expending even more energy to maintain its current assault.

The Bright Warrior still put up a lot of resistance despite incurring some internal injuries. Its altered glow not only caused Oxxon to become more efficient at defending his mech, but also made Bavros feel as if none of his attacks had any effect!

The mech pilot of the biomech grimaced. "This is just an illusion!"

He was not unaware of the power of glows. It was just that experiencing it was considerably different than reading about it. There was just something about glows that caused him to look at LMC mechs in a different light.

Under other circumstances, Bavros preferred to admire a mech that could make him feel this way. This was not the time to listen to those impulses, though.

After making a few considerations, he decided to activate one of the Dragonscale Warrior's most desperate solutions.

"It's drawing back!"

The biomech uncharacteristically pulled back. It flew away from the Bright Warrior, causing Oxxon to become suspicious. Even though the move favored him because his intention was to stall the fight, he was not naive enough to assume his opponent would play along.

He listened to his instincts and reluctantly drove his mech forward.

The Dragonscale Warrior did not intend to stay away for long. It just needed to buy a few seconds of time to initiate one of its special features.

"Purge!" Bavros shouted!

The Dragonscale Warrior suddenly released a lot of steam!

Not only that, the mech actively shed all of its remaining scales! The bone-like material fell from the skies and clattered onto the ground like hail.

What was notable about the growing pile of scales was that they appeared hot. This was because the Dragonscale Warrior actively transferred a significant portion of excess heat to them before shedding them from its frame!

The results of this transformation were obvious. Not only did the biomech get rid of a lot of mass, it also vented much of its heat in rapid tempo! The exposed flesh of the Dragonscale Warrior had also shrunk as a consequence.

Of course, the downsides were also clear. The defensive properties of the Dragonscale Warrior were no longer as comparable as before. It also expended a lot of energy to enable the transformation, which meant that it shouldn't be too far from running out of juice!

Yet at this time, the scaleless biomech turned into a completely different machine.

It zipped forward but circled to the side before the Bright Warrior was halfway to turning around itself!

The shrunken and unburdened biomech wasn't fast enough to reach the rear of its opponent, but it was still able to dive forth and transfer its entire momentum in an attack that was about to inflict serious damage to the weapon arm of the Bright Warrior!

Fortunately, the classical mech activated its shield generator, causing the incoming attack to be stopped in exchange for exhausting the defensive option!

"Damn!" Ves cursed.

The Bright Warrior quickly passed its sword to its other arm, but the Dragonscale Warrior had already turned around to make another attack run!

This time, Oxxon managed to respond in time. Not only did the Bright Warrior move aside, it also lifted its sword to block.

Unfortunately, the incoming stab had so much force behind it that the Bright Warrior's guard was overpowered!

A serious blow struck the Bright Warrior. Its side armor failed to stop the remaining momentum of the Dragonscale Warrior and incurred a deep stab wound!

This time, the classical mech suffered a substantial problem in transferring power. The LMC mech's responsiveness decreased considerably, causing its defensive posture to fail.

Ves tightly gripped his hands. He had not lost hope completely as of yet. Even as the transformed Dragonscale Warrior inflicted major damage, its exhaustion was very much evident. The mech was definitely overexerting itself in order to sustain this performance!

Just as he thought that the Dragonscale Warrior was about to run out of steam, the mech practically contorted itself in order to reach around the Bright Warrior flagging guard and sink its sword into one of the stab wounds it had already made!

Since the attack struck at a different angle, the penetrating blade damaged a different set of components.

A few volatile elements within the Bright Warrior exploded, causing the mech to lose most of its functionality!

"It's over!" Ves g.r.o.a.n.e.d.

He knew exactly what kind of damage his mech had suffered. Since the Bright Warrior was not a true defensive mech, its redundancy and compartmentalization only stretched so far. His mech was no longer able to contain the damage.

Before the Dragonscale Warrior could finish off its immobilized opponent, large-scale energy shields came online and f.o.r.c.i.b.l.y separated the two mechs.

Antigrav modules came online to give the falling Bright Warrior a gentle landing.

[The second match has concluded! The Dragonscale Warrior prepared by Dr. Navarro has prevailed this time! Please give a round of applause to Zenon Dia Bavros for his excellent performance!]

This time, the crowd truly went wild! Even though Bavros would soon turn into an enemy three days later, right now he was the champion of the biomech industry. His excellent use of the capabilities of the Dragonscale Warrior not only delivered Dr. Navarro a convincing victory, but also showcased the advantages of biomechs in the process.

The second match splendidly negated the humiliation of the earlier defeat. At the very least, Dr. Navarro avoided a double loss, which would have depressed the morale of much of the audience.

Ves and the Larkinsons all saw the spectators sitting far away celebrating as if they had won the battle of the century.

Raella looked amused. "Water always tastes sweeter after a draught. The Lifers are desperately trying to overcompensate for their earlier defeat."

"It's working, though."

"Yes, it is, Ves. I'm afraid the third match will start under less than ideal circ.u.mstances."

As the damaged and downed mechs along with all of the debris was being moved away, Gloriana grew a bit suspicious.

"Your mech this time did not perform as well as the one that went before."

"There isn't much that it can do, Gloriana. Sometimes, a loss is a loss. The Dragonscale Warrior proved to be the better of the two mechs this time."

In fact, if Ves really wanted to, he could have tried to activate one of the trump cards he embedded into his mechs.

He just didn't see the need to do so. Victory in this design duel wasn't decided by winning or losing the matches. It was decided by the preferences of the mech pilots participating in the matches.

This meant that he could lose all of his remaining matches and still be in contention for victory as long as he won over enough mech pilots. Of course, an awful record and ugly

personal losses would definitely color the opinions of the mech pilots, so winning matches was still important.

It was just that Ves didn't think it was necessary in this case. Even though the Dragonscale Warrior showed some amazing capabilities, it demanded too much from its mech pilot in order to leverage all of its special capabilities.

While the Bright Warrior's defensive configuration was lacking in features, its solid performance and overall reliability must have left a good impression. Qilanxo's glow also helped with facilitating Oxxon's defensive mindset.

Hopefully, that was enough to give the young mech pilot a yearning for piloting LMC mechs once again.

"The regeneration ability of the Dragonscale Warrior is unusually high." Raella said. "Are biomechs always that hard to deal with or is this one just special?"

"It's the latter." Ves responded. "The Dragonscale Warrior is based around it so it doesn't actually do anything else. The resource consumption of regenerating its injuries and scales is so high that it's impossible for the mech to last long on the battlefield. This is a mech that is much more suited for duels and short engagements."

Dr. Navarro had been in business longer than Ves. That meant that the biomech designer had a larger mech catalog to draw upon.

The Dragonscale Warrior was clearly a mech designed to serve a specific purpose. Ves couldn't see how it could be commercially viable considering how much energy and nutrients it expended to allow it to restore itself in the field.

None of that mattered right now. Whether a mech model sold a hundred times or a million times was completely irrelevant. As long as it existed, it was a valid entry to this design duel.

Ves glanced in the direction of the Masters. Compared to before, he had the sense that their moods had shifted a bit. Even though their expressions remained virtually unchanged, their powerful minds betrayed a portion of their reactions.

Professor Werther Cline showed a hint of satisfaction for example. Even though this trace was small, it still revealed that he was rooting Dr. Navarro to win the design duel.

What was notable was that the other five Masters reacted in the opposite manner. In fact, the one who was sitting furthest away seemed a bit more upset than the others!