

Mech 2791

Chapter 2791 - Faerie Stinger

Two rapid forms soared in the air!

After pitting two sluggish defensive mechs against each other, the third duel presented viewers with a completely different experience.

Two different light skirmishers were zipping around the dueling ring. Even though they were forced to make frequent turns due to the limited dimensions of the fighting area, this gave center stage to the mobility of the dueling mechs!

Even minor differences in agility, acceleration, mass and so on became crucial. The mech that was able to move a little faster than the other would always be able to secure the initiative.

At least, that was what people were used to seeing from duels between two swift machines.

The reality was very different!

One form was lighter and possessed a greater thrust-to-weight ratio for that reason. Yet this light mech was doing everything possible to distance itself from the opposing mech!

The other mech was not as fast and nimble as the other mech, but it exuded so much threat that its opponent simply refused to clash upfront!

The audience sitting on the elevated viewing platforms extended from the crown of trees all fell silent.

Their enthusiasm quickly faded after the start of the third match. There was very little to cheer about once the two mechs exchanged their first blows.

Practically even before the biomech designed by Dr. Navarro closed in to perform an attack on its opponent, it was already attempting to escape!

The battle never turned around after that. Even though the two mechs were supposed to be in the same range, one mech acted like a scared rabbit while the other flew forward like a shark smelling blood!

"This is a disgrace!" Someone yelled!

"I thought the mech pilot of the Faerie Stinger was supposed to be a military mech pilot. Why isn't Katarina Volsemar turning around to fight the metal mech like a real soldier?"

"Light mech pilots are all cowards! They just differ by their degree of cowardness. We just had the bad luck of drawing the more frightened mech pilot this time!"

Stunned dismay soon transformed into pejorative remarks. The frustrated Lifers who expected to see a repeat of the second match's glorious victory instead witnessed a completely different show.

They all felt scammed!

They all thought that there was something wrong in Volsemar's head!

How could the design duel possibly attract such a flawed mech pilot?

The only reason why the audience hadn't let their tempers rise any further was the realization that she would become Ves' problem in the second phase.

Still, so long as Katarina Volsemar piloted a biomech, she was practically shaming the LRA's entire biomech industry in a live broadcast watched by an uncountable amount of people!

"These people don't understand!" The much-maligned mech pilot spoke through gritted teeth. "It's not as if I want to run away, but I have no choice. I can't maintain my battle effectiveness when I'm in the vicinity of that infernal metallic mech!"

She expected a very different fight. As an experienced special operations mech pilot, Volsemar went through plenty of tough situations. She had come on top in situations where she was outnumbered, where her unit performed a classified mission but got cut off and even fought against an expert pilot and managed to live to tell the tale!

Her mental fortitude was anything but feeble. In fact, the people who approached her with the offer to participate in the design duel explicitly told her that they were looking for someone who could endure a lot of mental pressure.

They even gave her a heads-up on the mech she was about to fight in the first match. While information on the second-class version of the Ferocious Piranha was fairly sparse, she was able to study the third-class version extensively.

She even had the opportunity to experience its glow in person, allowing her to get accustomed to it as much as possible before the match began!

Yet for all of her preparations, acclimatizing to the glow at rest was completely different from experiencing it during combat.

For one, the Ferocious Piranha's threat never centered around its glow alone. It was the combination that truly comprised the hurdle that she had to overcome.

Even if she was strong enough to maintain her wits at close range, she still had to exert significant mental effort in order to properly pilot her mech.

"Hahaha! I love this mech!" The mech pilot of the pursuing machine exulted. "Every light mech should be like this! Hardly anyone can match me in close-quarters combat as long as I'm piloting a Ferocious Piranha!"

Rez Killigan indeed realized his current advantage! As a military scout, he did not clash against hostile mechs very often, but learned to capitalize the opportunity when it presented itself!

He unabashedly drove his Ferocious Piranha forth, trying to keep up the pressure by sheathing one of the heated daggers of the mech in order to pull out a pistol and firing potshots at the biomech's colorful flight system.

The Faerie Stinger was supposed to be a challenging mech to overcome. Compared to the Ferocious Piranha, the uncovered biomech fared worse against attacks but possessed a very crucial speed advantage. Its exceptional nimbleness and flightiness turned it into a fantastic aerial duelist.

The biomech's offensive power was also fairly potent. It was armed with two fang-like daggers that were designed to sink into weak points in order to inject corrosive acid through the hollow tubes running through the length of the weapons.

The specially-formulated corrosive acid had the potential to seriously damage or degrade the internals of either biomechs or metallic mechs.

In fact, according to the information provided by the mech, the acid tanks of his Faerie Stinger currently carried a substance that was supposed to be especially potent against metallic components.

Yet all of this lethality didn't even have a chance to play out because Volsemar couldn't put up an adequate fight against the Ferocious Piranha.

She could forget about sinking one of her stingers in the opposing mech. Instead, she had to worry about her biomech getting stabbed instead!

Even though the heated daggers wielded by the Ferocious Piranha weren't anything special, the threat they posed to the Faerie Stinger was quite significant.

This was because the biomech did not feature a lot of protection!

While its flesh was relatively dense and resistant to damage, the Faerie Stinger was too skinny to possess much muscle mass. This meant that serious attacks could easily punch through the relatively thin flesh layer and damage the crucial internals!

Even though the Faerie Stinger avoided this fate by maintaining its distance from its pursuer, this was not a long-term solution.

The Ferocious Piranha's laser pistol constantly seared the backside of the biomech!

Even though the output of the laser pistol was not that impressive, the Faerie Stinger's rear was not able to cope that well against attacks. Its majestic rainbow-colored wings were especially exposed!

If not for the biomech trying its best to evade every incoming attack, its flight system would have been knocked out long ago. Volsemar was also thankful that the Ferocious Piranha wasn't optimized for ranged combat.

Still, plenty of hits still got through. Even if the laser beams didn't hit the flight system, they still impacted the back of the Faerie Stinger, causing the flesh to blacken and smoke. This not only degraded the range of movement of the mech, but also brought it closer to defeat.

To its credit, the Faerie Stinger was not without solutions of its own. It sheathed one of its daggers as well in order to pull out a biopistol.

Different from the weapon wielded by the Ferocious Piranha, the biopistol was capable of integrating into the palm of the Faerie Stinger. This increased integration brought numerous benefits, such as added stability and more efficient transfer of heat and energy.

Instead of firing energy beams or solid projectiles, the biopistol fired a different payload.

As the weapon fired, fleshy orbs accelerated forward at massive speeds and either impacted the pursuing mech or exploded around it if they missed the mark.

As the orbs ruptured, they released a small but potent quantity of corrosive acid. Lots of acid splattered onto the surface of the Ferocious Piranha if the orbs hit the mech, but even the ones that exploded in the vicinity managed to spray a few splatters onto the side of the chasing mech.

This caused the mech to slowly accumulate smoking pits onto its surface. Yet no matter how much acid stuck onto the Ferocious Piranha, the substance's ability to melt through its armor was notably slow!

The reason why the Ferocious Piranha was not as swift as the Faerie Stinger was because it boasted better protection. Its thin but well-regarded armor system provided it with enough of a buffer for Rez Killigan to completely ignore the threat of the biopistol!

A few successive laser strikes managed to impact one of the 'wings' of the Faerie Stinger. The biomech's flight destabilized a bit as it wasn't able to accelerate as well as before.

"You have no choice!" Killigan shouted!

Volsemar couldn't afford to keep running away. The arena was too tiny to allow the Faerie Stinger to utilize its speed advantage to shake off the Ferocious Piranha.

Seeing that the Faerie Stinger's biopistol required far too much time to penetrate the Ferocious Piranha's exterior, Volsemar finally gave in to the inevitable.

"I'm not running away anymore!"

Unfortunately for Volsemar, her determination to acquit herself well encountered some issues.

The damage inflicted on the rear of the Faerie Stinger slightly reduced its maneuverability. This caused the mech to become a little more clumsier up close.

Combined with the overpowering disorientation field projected by the Ferocious Piranha, Volsemar felt as if she was forced to fight with two hands bound behind her back!

Her responsiveness and ability to plan out her moves suffered badly the closer she got to the LMC mech.

Killigan clearly noticed the difference and fought more aggressively as a result. Even if he took some risks, his opponent wasn't capable of exploiting his openings!

"I'll finish you off before you can turn the tide!"

He took no chances and ruthlessly pressed his Ferocious Piranha close. With some clever moves, the metallic mech batted aside the stinger daggers and plunged into the c.h.e.s.t and lower abdomen of the Faerie Stinger!

Smoke sizzled from the wounds as the red-hot daggers pierced deeply and inflicted a lot of heat damage to boot!

Unlike wounds inflicted by regular blades, it was a lot harder for a biomech to heal flesh that had been burned or cauterized.

The initial stab already damaged or destroyed numerous biocomponents. This prevented the Faerie Stinger from mounting a defense before the Ferocious Piranha pulled out its weapons and stabbed a second time!

"Kill!"

A succession of stabs ensued as heated dagger after heated dagger turned the c.h.e.s.t of the biomech into an ugly rendition of a victim of a serious killer!

Upon the fourteenth stab, a massive energy shield f.o.r.c.i.b.l.y bounced the dagger aside.

[The third match has ended! Mr. Larkinson has achieved his second victory in the first phase. The score is now 2-1 in favor of our foreign visitor.]

The end of this match felt like a relief to all of the Lifers. The audience had long accepted the possibility of defeat. They could only hope that Dr. Navarro would be able to improve the Faerie Stinger before the next phase commenced.

"We only have two more chances left to gain the upper hand today. Please, don't drop the ball again."

Chapter 2792 - Frokyn

The fourth match featured one of Ves' most iconic mechs.

The Valkyrie Redeemer had captured the imagination of many people in the Komodo Star Sector. Even foreigners who paid attention to foreign affairs envied the Hexers for being able to make use of a mech with so many capabilities.

The mech had already played a starring role in the Komodo War. Many female Hexer mech pilots dreamed of piloting the spear-wielding machine in combat. Those that did always felt blessed as their minds directly came in touch with the presence of the Superior Mother.

Not a single unit that deployed Valkyrie Redeemers suffered from morale problems!

In fact, the commanders frequently had to rein in their subordinates because they had grown too enthused with charging their mechs forward.

The Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants always performed at their best when on the attack!

Aside from the Hex Army, the Golden Skull Alliance also adopted the same mech model.

Both the Glory Seekers and the Penitent Sisters used the Valkyrie mechs to good effect during the last battle. The Penitent Sisters together with Venerable Joshua even used this mech to pull off the most extraordinary feat of the Battle of Reckoning.

Now, the Valkyrie Redeemer made another appearance outside of the raging battlefields of the Komodo War.

The moment this mech showed in the dueling ring, many women became captivated by the feminine mech. The Valkyrie Redeemer exuded a sense of feminine strength that felt strangely empowering to those who identified with its gender.

Many female mech pilots felt the irrational urge to pilot it in battle!

"So this is the highly-regarded Valkyrie Redeemer." A visiting mech designer spoke. "I can see why it has managed to conquer the hearts of those bigoted women. A mech like this appeals to some of their greatest d.e.s.i.r.es and aspirations. Mr. Larkinson is an excellent marketer."

Indeed, a lot of people regretted that the LMC didn't sell the Valkyrie Redeemer to the public. Not even stealing or copying helped. Its anti-theft systems were so good that any non-Hexer would have a very hard time interfacing with a living mech that was unwilling!

Yet that was what made the current sight so odd to those who were familiar with the remarkable mech model.

For the first time, the Valkyrie Redeemer was being piloted by a mech pilot who wasn't a Hexer or a Larkinson.

Not only that, but the mech pilot in question was very obviously a man instead of woman!

"Hehehe. If you think that this little trick can fool me, then think again." Ves grinned.

The mech pilot selected to fight with the Valkyrie Redeemer was a Lifer mech pilot called Carter Day. Compared to the military mech pilots of the last two matches, Carter appeared to be a bit.. underwhelming.

He was just an average employee of a local security company. Since Prosperous Hill VI was so strictly regulated, the security companies based in Veoline didn't get to do much. Only a couple of mechs were allowed to escort or guard certain facilities at a time so there wasn't much work available.

The lack of mechs also meant that there were remarkably few mech-related incidents. Carter Day could count on one hand how many times he fought an actual battle throughout his 20 year career!

A male mech pilot who pursued a steady job and didn't have much actual battle experience should have been a poor fit with the Valkyrie Redeemer.

However, as the battle commenced, Carter had little difficulty with adjusting to the quirks of his new mech and quickly began to utilize it in a proficient manner!

His battle experience might be lacking, but his basic skills were highly-polished. He was still a second-class mech pilot, and that counted for something. By practicing and keeping up his skills over a long period of time, his fundamentals were pretty solid.

At the start of the battle, the Valkyrie Redeemer performed a little too rigidly. It was as if the mech was fighting while covered in rust. Yet as Carter began to ease into the peculiarities of the mech, he slowly became more fluid in controlling the famed mech.

He even learned how to utilize one of its distinctive features! When the third eye of the Valkyrie Redeemer came to life, it shone a beam of light straight onto the opposing biomech!

The moment the beam struck the mech designed by Dr. Navarro, its flight hitched for a moment.

The infamous glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer had reached out several hundred meters in order to pin the mech pilot of the opposing mech with an unsettling sensation of doom!

Even though this glow was not as debilitating as the glow of the Ferocious Piranha at close range, it definitely unbalanced the target!

This caused the current match to play out similarly to the last one.

There were differences, though.

Mobility-wise, the Frokyn was roughly just as fast and agile as the Valkyrie Redeemer. Its defenses may be a little worse due to its inherent organic properties.

This was why the mech was able to hit back hard even when it was trying to maintain its distance. Mireilla may not be a stellar mech pilot either, but she was a lot better at marksmanship than wielding axes.

As long as the Frokyn remained distant, the focused glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer couldn't do more than plague her with illusions!

"I won't fold!" She gritted her teeth.

Though she admirably maintained her courage despite constantly being subjected to the sensation of being stared at by a monstrous presence, her performance definitely suffered.

As the two mechs chaotically danced in the air, many of the Frokyn's shots went wide. While its positron rifle was capable of inflicting serious damage, it took a lot of time to achieve a result if only a handful of beams was able to strike the Valkyrie Redeemer for more than an instant!

In fact, the beams that did train on the Valkyrie Redeemer were usually blocked by its hexagonal shield.

Yet when the beam managed to score a hit, the Valkyrie Redeemer gained a serious-looking scar. Even though its armor was rated to withstand the rigors of all-out warfare, the rifle that Dr. Navarro added to the Frokyn design a quality weapon that was notable for hitting hard!

Even though the energy consumption of the positron rifle was just as impressive, that didn't matter too much in a duel environment!

"I'll burn through your shield eventually!" Mireilla Linschoten declared.

The Valkyrie Redeemer possessed comparably less firepower. It was armed with a relatively weak pulse submachine gun that was inaccurate at longer ranges. The mech fared best when it was fighting up close.

Even so, being able to fire at the flight system of the Frokyn was a massive advantage. If this went on, even a weaker weapon was able to knock out the flight capabilities of a powerful mech!

Linschoten obviously knew this. The last match already illustrated that mechs never seemed to run out of energy to maintain their glows. Outlasting them was unfeasible.

"Should I get close or should I maintain my distance?"

Many people could see her dilemma. They didn't know how much pressure it took to fight against the Valkyrie Redeemer up close, but it seemed that it wasn't easy to confront it at range either.

Gloriana looked confused from the moment the match began. She stared at the Valkyrie Redeemer that Ves had especially prepared for the design duel.

It was one thing for Venerable Joshua to be able to pilot the Valkyrie Redeemer. He was not only an expert pilot, but someone who possessed a great affinity with living mechs.

This was different. She was pretty sure that Pilot Day was a male mech pilot, and not an exceptional one at that. Yet this man didn't even have to exert a lot of effort to be able to pilot the Valkyrie Redeemer fluently!

"How did you do it?" She asked.

"It's complicated." Ves curtly replied. "My mechs aren't as inflexible as you think. Even the mechs I've designed for the Hexers can be open-minded if I wanted them to be. You overlooked the fact that my Hexers mechs are designed by us, not the Hexers."

What Ves believed was different from what the Hexers believed!

The Superior Mother who exerted a huge influence on the mechs was also different from a traditional Hexer!

It was therefore relatively easy to tweak some aspects of his Valkyrie Redeemer and alter its scope to welcome male mech pilots as long as they served a greater cause.

Since Carter Day was fighting on behalf of Ves in a significant design duel, why should the Superior Mother hinder his efforts?

She should be supporting the Lifer mech pilot instead, and that was exactly what she was doing!

It took a personal request from Ves to alter her treatment, but he could see the results. The Valkyrie Redeemer was flush with energy and seemed to have become alive!

One of the consequences of this was that the Valkyrie Redeemer was remarkably accurate in its fire. Its pulse submachine gun might not fire any powerful energy particles, but a lot of them managed to hit the flight system of the Frokyn.

The incessant hits wore away the protective layers surrounding the flight components. Even though the Frokyn's powerful positron beam attacks had almost worn away the Valkyrie Redeemer's shield, the Hexer mech itself was still in decent shape!

It was at this time that Mireilla Linschoten decided to alter the situation before the flight system of her mech incurred real damage.

After activating a special command, the Frokyn's fleshy body suddenly rippled. Thick hair follicles started to emerge from its entire frame!

The black hair grew so rapidly that the mech quickly went past the level of a gorilla and turned directly into some kind of bushy monster!

"What the hell is that?!" Ves sputtered in shock!

The inexplicable sight completely dumbfounded the Larkinsons. Even the Lifers looked a little confused, but they were less shocked by the sight than others.

Biomechs were often known for being able to activate strange abilities!

As soon as all of the hair had formed around the mech, It turned around and attempted to close into melee range!

Though Carter Day was a bit reluctant to confront a very bushy mech, he did not have any choice. His Valkyrie Redeemer kept firing its submachine gun but also drew out a spear in order to get ready to fight up close.

As the transformed Frokyn flew close, it chopped with its axe!

The Valkyrie Redeemer dodged the telegraphed blow and attempted to thrust its spear into the biomech, only for the hair to react and entangle the weapon!

"Let go!"

The hair stubbornly prevented the Valkyrie Redeemer from pulling back its weapon. Even though it couldn't hold onto the spear forever, the Frokyn gained enough of an opening to launch a counterattack!

Yet before its axe could strike a telling blow, the Valkyrie Redeemer ejected a Starburst grenade which exploded in their midst.

At the same time, the mech also unleashed its Shock and Awe Pulse that caused an intense enough reaction from the biomech to allow the Valkyrie Redeemer to disengage.

The two mechs separated for a bit, but the Frokyn did not remain deterred for long. As soon as Mireilla Linschoten recovered from the disorientation, she drove her hairy mech forward once again!

"Why are you running? Is my mech that scary? It's just a little bit of hair!"

For a moment, the match turned into an odd spectacle. The Valkyrie Redeemer, which was normally known for its aggressive charges, was trying its best to stay out of the range of a hairy mech!

Chapter 2793 - Beetles

"How can the Valkyrie Redeemer lose?!" Gloriana complained.

The mech she favored the most had put up a good fight. Carter Day even adopted a more aggressive approach and tried to pull off a few charges.

Yet the relatively small fighting area prevented the Valkyrie Redeemer from being able to perform at its best. The mech was much more suited to fight in open space where there was virtually an unlimited amount of space to work with. Without enough room, there was no way for the Valkyrie Redeemer to build up a sufficient charge!

"It's the hair." Ves muttered. "The Frokyn is very tricky to deal with. I don't know what it's made of, but it is exceptionally resilient against physical attacks."

The hairs moved like tentacles and entangled the Valkyrie Redeemer's spear whenever it came close. Not only that, but they functioned as a damage cushion that negated a lot of damage.

It was as if the mech was surrounded by a permanent energy shield!

The end result had become increasingly more clear. After the Valkyrie Redeemer exhausted its Starburst grenades, it was only able to rely on its death-based glow to induce a lot of discomfort towards Mireilla Linschoten.

Yet even if the Valkyrie Redeemer was able to accept the presence of a male, there was no way to forge synergy between the two. The Valkyrie Redeemer's performance was only adequate, which wasn't enough to overcome the disadvantages it faced.

"It's all because they put a male inside the c.o.c.kpit!" Gloriana complained. "This isn't fair! Now, the Valkyrie Redeemer has incurred a lot of blows from the axe that are difficult to repair!"

She was right to feel upset. The Valkyrie Redeemer got struck several times by a biometal axe. The powerful weapon damaged large portions of the mech's frontal armor before the female mech finally succ.u.mbed.

All of that battle damage would take a lot of time and effort to repair.

"It's okay." Ves said as he placed his hand on her palm in an attempt to calm her down. "The Valkyrie Redeemer will rise again. The damage looks bad but large portions of it can easily be replaced. I think the Frokyn doesn't look so good either. If there is one lesson that I have learned from witnessing the transformation abilities of biomechs, it's that they always pay a price for their power!"

Once the duel had ended, the Frokyn didn't outright collapse, but it didn't look healthy either. Its bushy hair all turned grey and shed from the mech within a minute. The biomech's flesh looked shrunken and drained as if it had sacrificed its own health to generate all of that animated hair.

While it probably didn't take much effort to restore the mech by feeding it with nutrients and allowing it to grow back to its peak, this was not an instant process.

Once the arena operators cleaned the battlefield, the fifth and final match of the day commenced.

This time, the mechs that emerged from the sides possessed no significant flight capabilities.

They were too heavy to be able to lift themselves under their own power under standard gravity conditions.

"The heavy mechs have come."

Even laymen were able to recognize the last pair of mechs as heavy machines. They were larger than anything that had entered the dueling ring. Compared to slimmer and lighter machines such as the Ferocious Piranha, the mechs about to fight the fifth match of the day were several times more massive!

The Transcendent Punisher exuded a holy presence as usual. Just like the mechs that came before, its usual constraints no longer applied anymore, allowing it to accommodate any mech pilot, even someone who wasn't an adherent of the Ylvainan Faith!

Even though Ves didn't expect the mech pilot to synergize well with the heavy artillery mech, he at least hoped it was enough to activate the mech's iconic ability.

It's mech pilot was a heavy artillery specialist called Gwineth Ulser. Her brief record did not reveal much. Aside from informing everyone that she was an active serviceman, her public profile only revealed that she was good at multitasking.

The mech pilot of the biomech was also a woman. Ilse Lieberman was also a heavy artillery specialist, but she belonged to a different mech division. Her profile noted that she achieved high marksmanship scores.

This was quite a frightening claim. Accuracy mattered a lot to artillery mechs. Even though the distance between the two mechs wasn't much, it was still useful if a mech pilot was able to target the weak points of an opposing mech.

In order to down a mech, it was already sufficient to destroy the internal components that were vital to allowing the mech to function. Trying to destroy the entire armor system of a mech was not that useful in itself.

The two heavy mechs possessed several similarities.

They were both hexapods. Six legs extended from the underside of their fat and broad torsos. The legs not only provided the mechs with exceptional stability, but also allowed the mech to move its prodigious mass without worrying about losing its balance like bipedal mechs.

The two artillery mechs also boasted similar performance parameters. Even though their shapes diverged, they were both slow, massive, weighed down by armor and carried several potent weapons.

Yet this was where their similarities ended.

The Transcendent Punisher was a familiar sight to the Larkinsons. Its main armament consisted of a pair of gauss cannons and a pair of positron cannons. Together, these

weapons were able to inflict heavy damage onto any immobile target, particularly other heavy mechs!

Yet the opposing mech didn't look like a vegetable either.

"It looks like a beetle." Vincent summed up. "A fat beetle."

Dr. Navarro gave his heavy artillery mech an imposing name. The so-called Swarm Monarch looked like a larger, more combat-oriented version of the utility beetles that usually perform the role of cleaning and maintenance bots in LRA society.

Unlike many of his other mechs, the Swarm Monarch was covered by a hard exoskeleton that offered solid protection from attacks that came from every direction, even below.

Four big nozzles extended from the back of the Swarm Monarch. Two of them were able to swivel directly forward but the other two were only able to maintain an upwards angle.

It seemed that the latter two cannons were capable of lobbing shells in order to bombard targets from above, thereby bypassing any terrain or other obstacles in the way.

This wasn't very relevant though. The dueling ring was completely flat so there was nothing standing in the way between the two mechs. Both of them possessed a clear line of sight against each other and they had already trained their weapons to fire as soon as the signal was given.

[Let the final match of the day commence!]

Both mechs instantly exploded into action!

Both six-legged mechs had already begun to move. They slowly moved in a circle. This not only allowed them to maintain their current distance towards each other, but also prevented the ground at their position from collapsing or becoming unstable due to excessive bombardment.

In the beginning, the Transcendent Punisher immediately unleashed a lot of direct firepower.

Gwineth Ulser did not hesitate in firing all of the Ylvainan mech's armaments!

Gauss cannon slugs slammed against the front of the beetle's exoskeleton plating. Positron beams struck the beetle's organic plating as well, causing significant sections of its surface to heat up or deform!

The Swarm Monarch did not let the classical mech beat it up without hitting back. Two of its organic muzzles immediately unleashed positron beams of their own!

Of course, the thick surface of the Transcendent Punisher easily withstood the initial strikes. One of the reasons why heavy artillery mechs possessed so much armor was because they were designed to take out enemy counterparts!

An artillery mech that boasted little armor usually didn't last very long on the battlefield!

A mech with high threat such as an artillery platform with lots of guns always needed a way to mitigate damage.

Since all of the heavy weapon systems weighed the artillery mechs down, it was not feasible for them to rely on mobility to evade incoming attacks.

The only solution left was to pile as much armor as was feasible and hope that the mech was able to last a little longer than the opposite mech!

Ves expected to witness a straightforward slugging match. It wasn't as if the mechs could do anything else such as closing in on each other in order to trample their opponents. They were too slow and unwieldy to perform those moves!

"Look! The beetle is firing its second set of guns!" Realla pointed out.

Ves immediately sensed something wrong. The arcing projectiles didn't seem like regular shells. They only soared for a short amount of time before descending on top of the Transcendent Punisher.

No explosions ensued. The projectiles didn't appear to be explosive at all. Instead, Ves and the other Larkinsons looked astonished as the 'shells' came to life!

"They're.. they're beetles!" Gloriana shrieked!

The small and squat beetles moved quickly and jerkily. They seemed to possess some rudimentary intelligence because they immediately moved to the relative weak points of the upper side of the Transcendent Punisher.

Once the pair of beetles found their positions, they began to bore through the relatively weak armor sections with a strange drill extended from their mouths!

Not only that, they also released acid that softened up the upper layers, allowing the drilling beetles to achieve faster progress.

"Damn!" Ves slammed his fist against the armrest. "The Transcendent Punisher can't shake those beetles off! We never thought to implement any countermeasures against insects of all weapons!"

Even Gloriana found the situation to be absurd. "Those beetles are too effective! How can they drill so fast when they're so small?!"

The answer soon became evident. The beetles slowly deflated as they continued their drilling. Eventually, they exhausted all of their reserves, causing them to fall over and die.

It didn't matter. The Swarm Monarch had already fired several volleys of additional drilling beetles during this time!

Soon enough, the Transcendent Punisher hosted a dozen drilling beetles. Ves figured that the Swarm Monarch could have lobbed additional beetles onto its target, but Ilse Lieberman was clever enough to realize that she would quickly exhaust the 'ammunition' reserves of her biomech.

The Swarm Monarch could only carry so many beetles! Launching too many of them at once would only cause a lot of surface damage to the Transcendent Punisher because the beetles weren't able to occupy the same position at once!

While the Swarm Monarch let its drilling beetles do the work, it continued to apply pressure by firing its positron beams at the legs of the Transcendent Punisher.

The legs weren't as resilient as the torso, so they were relatively easier to damage!

Targeting the lower half of the Transcendent Punisher also prevented the Swarm Monarch from killing its own beetles. Although they seemed resilient to both heat and physical damage, they didn't look like they could survive a direct hit.

It was too bad that none of the weapons carried by the Transcendent Punisher was able to aim its weapons along its own surface! They simply couldn't angle the cannon muzzles so low!

"I'll definitely fix this shortcoming." Ves vowed.

Even though the Transcendent Punisher looked as if it was getting stung to death, it was not the only mech that was suffering.

Its prodigious firepower was heavily savaging the Swarm Monarch! The constant, direct volleys savaged the front of the mech so much that it was forced to angle itself in order to avoid exposing its heavily-injured sections!

Not only that, but Gwineth Ulser finally achieved the right conditions to activate the signature ability of the Transcendent Punisher.

Its glow became more active as a different presence reluctantly lent its power to a non-believer!

"It's starting!"

Chapter 2794 - Gwineth Ulser

The final match was a visual spectacle beyond compare!

Unlike the previous matches where the opposing machines mostly fought up close, the current pair of mechs were beating each other up with overwhelming firepower!

The armor of both mechs were being sorely tested as they incurred damage after damage while at the same time trying to wear away their opponent as well. Both heavy mechs were growing further and further away from their original conditions due to all of the attacks they endured.

Everyone could tell that while the mechs were still hanging on, the end was drawing closer!

The insectile Swarm Monarch seemed to have exhausted much of its drilling beetles. More than a dozen of them were currently drilling into the weak points of the Transcendent Punisher, sacrificing their entire life potential in order to penetrate deep enough.

However, before one of the beetles could pierce through the final layers blocking them from tearing through the internals, the Transcendent Punisher did something surprising.

Gwineth Ulser had been thinking on how to solve the beetles crawling over the frame of her mech while directing all of its firepower towards her adversary.

The metallic mech had already lost a few minor sensors and other components due to the incessant drilling. It was only a matter of time before the drilling beetles breached a weapon compartment or something!

This was why Gwineth urgently had to find a way to remove or at least stall the beetles from succeeding in their objective.

As the Transcendent Punisher kept firing its weapons at full blast, she diverted a portion of her concentration to do something unusual.

She deliberately took over manual control over a few components and deliberately deactivated them. Since they belonged to the heat management system, the circulation and diversion of excess heat generated by the positron cannons suddenly had nowhere else to go. The heat rapidly began to pool up until it vented alongside certain portions close to the energy weapon mounts!

As a result, several sections of the exterior of the Transcendent Punisher turned into a sizzling hot surface! Even though the Transcendent Punisher was suffering all sorts of

minor internal damage due to the excess heat buildup, the beetles that were stuck on the surface were being cooked as well!

The acid they drooled out evaporated while their drills blackened and cracked. The only reason why the beetles hadn't fallen over was because they were designed to cope with excessive heat, but this property had its limits!

"Wow! Even I didn't think of that!" Ves looked pleased at the mech pilot's ingenuity.

"It's going to be troublesome to repair, though." Gloriana reminded him as she watched the battle with a more critical eye.

The Transcendent Punisher bought itself a bit of time with this self-damaging stunt. Still, its front limbs were already falling apart due to getting struck by constant positron beams. The mech almost collapsed as its remaining four limbs were being forced to bear the remaining weight!

While getting immobilized was not necessarily fatal to the metallic mech, it would definitely give the opponent a major advantage!

The Swarm Monarch didn't look so good either. The superior firepower of the Transcendent Punisher had inflicted a lot of damage across the beetle-shaped biomech's frontal surface.

Gauss cannon rounds, positron beams and even pulse particles struck the hardy exoskeleton with constant abandon. A medium mech would have long been torn apart after getting struck by so much firepower!

However, each time the Transcendent Punisher almost managed to breach through the exoskeleton, the Swarm Monarch simply turned around and presented its undamaged side towards its opponent.

The cannons mounted on the Swarm Monarch were largely omnidirectional, which meant it was still able to fire at the Transcendent Punisher even if it faced its rear towards the enemy!

This made it quite difficult to finish off the Swarm Monarch completely. Its ability to withstand attacks was at least ten times more if it was allowed to absorb damage across its entire frame!

The Transcendent Punisher was able to do this as well, but only to a certain extent. It was designed as a bunker mech and not a landbound artillery mech. While it could function at the latter, it wasn't optimized for the role.

Something had to change, and Gwineth Ulser was trying her best to find a solution. She knew what the Transcendent Punisher was capable of. The manual of the mech along with the data it provided hinted at something more.

Yet in order to activate this mysterious ability, she had to enter the right mindset.

Even though she hadn't piloted the Transcendent Punisher for long, her mind was constantly processing a lot of data and other experiences.

She always possessed an open and inquisitive mind. While she might not be as good at targeting precise components as her current opponent Ilse Lieberman, she had always been good at splitting up her focus to attend to multiple priorities at the same time.

This was why she was able to ensure that each of the Transcendent Punisher's weapon systems were being properly managed so that their firing rate remained as optimal as before. They also aimed in the direction at all times. Furthermore, she was still managing the deliberate accident she created in order to keep the surface of her mech as hostile to the drilling beetles as possible!

Throughout all of this, she continued to keep an eye on the state of her opponent, the environment and what lurked within her own mech!

"This mech is unlike anything that I have ever piloted before." She whispered.

Although her contact with her mech was fairly shallow at first, she became more and more absorbed with what she found inside.

There was a pure and all-encompassing presence inside that constantly drew her closer.

Her mind began to experience something different. She seemed to have passed a threshold where she felt as if she gained enlightenment!

Her performance started to slip as she opened some eyes to truths that she had never realized in her life up until now. The Life Research Association was a state that was based around science and viewing reality with a grounded perspective.

The mech she was interfacing with apparently saw reality in a different way!

It was strange, odd, fantastical yet fascinating all the same. A part inside Gwineth became excited for reasons that flew above her head.

For the first time in her life, she felt as if she was touching upon a greater cause and truth. The future of humanity was much more turbulent from an outsider's perspective and her place in the fabric of time could be much more significant if she escaped the confines of her current life!

She knew what to do. Most of her attention may have been scattered, but a portion of her had always kept an eye on the overall situation.

Gwineth could already foretell the end if no other variables changed. Her mech already lost much of its mobility and it wouldn't be long before the Swarm Monarch's persistent particle beam attacks would bore through a hole that had already been weakened by the drilling beetles.

"THIS IS NOT THE END I WANT!" She abruptly shouted!

With great will, she triggered the new option! Immediately, her Transcendent Punisher seemed to open up to that great source. Power poured in and began to affect the mech in some special way. Through the man-machine connection, much of that power flowed into her mind, whereupon she started to see reality in a different manner.

Her eyes narrowed. She began to act on the information she received. The cannons mounted on the Transcendent Punisher began to aim in slightly different directions.

Boom! Boom! Hiss! Hiss!

The artillery mech fired four shots in quick succession, each of them targeting a different portion of the mech!

A gauss round impacted a joint of one of the Swarm Monarch's legs at a precise angle. Ordinarily, a single attack shouldn't have been able to inflict serious damage to the limb, but due to the tricky angle, the powerful impact somehow caused a number of critical organic components to shift or crack.

The limb was knocked offline!

Since the beetle had tipped forward a bit due to the unanticipated attack, a portion of its upper surface became exposed.

A second gauss cannon round slammed onto an already-damaged portion of the upper exoskeleton.

A powerful crunching sound ensued as the round seemed to have knocked a portion of the damaged organic plate away, thereby creating a gap that exposed the internals!

Two precisely-aimed positron beams slipped into the gap and wreaked havoc inside!

Even though the beams only affected the upper portion of the Swarm Monarch's internals, many of them were closely-related to its weapon systems!

All four organic mounts sputtered and died down. Most crucially, the biomech's powerful positron cannons had fallen silent for some reason, causing the mech to lose much of its direct damage potential!

While the Swarm Monarch quickly righted itself up, the portion near the gap in the upper armor suddenly expanded as a second volley of gauss cannon rounds precisely impacted the sides, causing the opening to widen by 75 percent!

The Transcendent Punisher continued to pile up the damage. It even overloaded its weapons and incurred considerable overheating damage in order to crank up the firing rate as high as possible!

The Swarm Monarch couldn't endure all of the firepower. It never found the opportunity to hunker down and regenerate the damaged organs that could bring its main armament back online.

The moment the energy shields came to life in order to stop the hot and and raging Transcendent Punisher from continuing on, the result was clear.

[Gwineth Ulser and the Transcendent Punisher provided by Mr. Larkinson has won the fifth match. After achieving this victory, the first phase of the design duel has come to an end. The final score is 3-2 in favor of Mr. Larkinson. The second phase will commence in three days!]

The announcer hardly sounded enthused this time. He only perked up a bit when he said the last sentence.

The mood in the arena had grown quite weird. The final moments of the fifth match had progressed so suddenly that none of the spectators could process what had happened.

How was it possible for the Transcendent Punisher to defeat the Swarm Monarch in frontal combat? Prior to this odd turn of events, Ilse Lieberman had been using the entirety of the biomech's frame to good effect!

"We lost!"

"This is absurd! How can a random section of armor collapse so easily?"

"The Swarm Monarch's design is flawed! It's upper section is too weak! Once Dr. Navarro reinforces this section, the biomech will not be taken down so easily anymore!"

The crowd all sounded dismayed. This was not the result they wanted to see. Yet despite their complaints, the local spectators remained remarkably calm considering how much was at stake.

The second phase was where the match would truly be decided. Ves had five more matches in store, and even if he maintained his lead to the end, the verdict of the mech pilots might diverge!

"It could be better, but this is as good of a start as any." He said.

"You've proven yourself to be a serious contender." Gloriana smiled proudly at him. "The Lifers can't dismiss you as casually as before. You pose a serious threat to the reputation of their biomech industry."

"That's not necessarily a good outcome."

Ves could already feel the daggers staring at his back!

Chapter 2795 - Flattered

The local and regional news publications already began to spin a hundred different narratives after the end of the first phase of the design duel.

[Life Research Association is on its knees! Its biomech industry has fallen behind the times!]

[Clash between flesh and metal ended in a decisive victory for real technology!]

[Catastrophe! Foreign mechs succeeded in bullying our homegrown biomachines!]

[Doctor Frederico Navarro must resign! He is unfit to represent our biomech industry!]

[Beware the Devil Tongue! Doom follows in his wake! Not a single state survived his passage intact!]

All of these overblown headlines accompanied even wilder claims spoken by pundits and analysts of all stripes. The Lifers had become utterly obsessed over a single design duel that shouldn't have merited all of this attention.

All of the gossip and speculation significantly riled up the locals. The Prosperous Hill System became more turbulent as Lifers of all stripes expressed their anger, frustration and hopes all at once!

When the spectators began to leave their viewing platforms, Ves and his fellow Larkinsons gathered together. Even the two expert pilots had bid goodbye to their Lifer counterparts.

All of the initial excitement at Ves' favorable standing had passed.

"Let's not celebrate too soon." Ves warned his fellow clansmen. "I am only ahead by 1 win, and Dr. Navarro might be able to gain the upper hand in the second phase. Also, don't forget about the real win conditions. I need to win over enough mech pilots to win the design duel."

Venerable Orfan clicks her tongue. "The Lifers are only mildly upset right now, but they'll definitely become a lot uglier if we prevail in the end. We should start worrying about how we can depart from this planet if we manage to humiliate the Lifers for real."

That was a valid concern. Ves didn't think she was blowing the situation out of proportion. He wanted to win, but he didn't want to endanger himself and every Larkinson either!

A part of him wanted to lose so that he could go back into obscurity, but his pride, reputation and his integrity as a mech designer prevented him from doing so. He was willing to bend many principles, but some of them were too indispensable to his self-image.

A mech designer must be bold. A mech designer must stand up for his own work. A mech designer must have the courage to face a challenger!

If he acted in an opposite manner, then one of the strongest pillars that propped up his identity might collapse. This would be a disaster since this kind of collapse could easily cause the foundation of his design philosophy to crumble!

His spiritual domain centered around life and mechs. Each of his actions must align with these two attributes. The more he acted in accordance with his domain, the faster it grew. Ves even speculated that it might evolve after receiving enough nurturing!

So far, Ves noticed that his domain was very weak and imm.a.t.u.r.e in comparison to the domains of other mech designers. Dr. Navarro possessed a more solid and developed one while the Masters were in a league of their own in this regard!

He turned his attention back to his current concerns.

"Gloriana?"

"Yes, honey?"

"When you go back to Gentle Lotus Base, please tell General Verle and the rest to exercise more caution and prepare for a hasty departure."

"Why?" His wife frowned.

"I've lived through several situations where the situation got hairy, so I'm very s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e towards volatile situations. While I'm not certain if this star system will

blow in the near future, we should prepare for the worst and prepare some contingency plans just in case."

He began to pass on some simple instructions. He wanted the Larkinsons to either abort or accelerate some of their preparations. He wanted every non-essential Larkinson to leave Gentle Lotus Base and return to the expeditionary fleet as soon as possible.

"The latter is going to be a problem." She warned him. "Even if we book tickets right away, it will take days for thousands of Larkinsons to gain passage aboard one of the passenger transports of the PHTS. The service is way too overburdened."

"We should do our best regardless. Anyone we move back to the fleet is one less headache we need to solve if the situation on the ground turns chaotic."

He also issued a few other instructions. He wanted his Larkinsons to speed up recruitment. It didn't matter if they rushed through the vetting and testing procedures. As long as the new recruits gained Goldie's approval, then they shouldn't be a problem!

"Ah, and don't forget about the capital ship swap." Ves said. "Rush the exchange if possible, but don't hesitate to drop it if it takes too long to gain control over the new vessels."

Trading capital sh.i.p.s was different from trading cows. All kinds of steps needed to be taken in order to conduct transactions responsibly. Even if the new additions to the expeditionary fleet fell into their possession, the Larkinsons still needed to round up a couple of crews in order to activate the two vessels!

Gloriana and the rest took in the words and nodded. Even if they didn't share the same concerns as Ves, they had gone through several turbulent events themselves. They didn't think there was anything wrong with overpreparing.

"I hope the situation doesn't deteriorate, but if it does.. It's better if we're already prepared." Venerable Joshua concluded.

As the Larkinsons were about to depart, some of the people on the VIP platform approached Ves for a chat.

The first person to approach him was a familiar presence. Professor Werther Cline looked a bit more impressed at Ves than before.

"While I have thrown my support behind Dr. Navarro, I am impressed by your work."

"I'm sure you can design better mechs." Ves humbly replied.

"Oh, you don't need to belittle yourself. Your mechs have unique properties that we have never seen before. This is a good sign that you are pursuing the right innovation. While I cannot believe your mechs are alive, the fact that they are able to channel an effect that makes them exuberant is quite a novel sight to my fellow colleagues and I. You have opened up a new door for us. Perhaps there is merit in focusing more on the mech pilot and less on the mech itself."

As a Master, Professor Cline already realized his mech design. This made him a lot more open-minded towards other research directions.

Though Werther Cline exercised impeccable control over his body language, Ves could easily sense anticipation from the old fossil.

Ves experienced this kind of attention several times from Master Willix! He was long accustomed to people who expressed intense interest in the fruits of his labor.

"I still have a long way ahead of me before I am able to realize my design philosophy." He modestly spoke. "I've learned a lot from the first five matches. I thought my mechs were already fairly strong compared to the works of other mech designers, but Dr. Navarro has surprised me time and time again. His biomech designs are truly praiseworthy."

The professor casually waved his hand. "Dr. Navarro excels at transformation and related areas, but he isn't capable of designing mechs as varied as the Dragonscale Warrior and the Swarm Monarch without the support of the rest of our biomech industry. Each of these designs are collaborative works."

"That's only fair. My dueling mechs are derived from collaborative works as well. The only difference is that the influence of other mech designers isn't as obvious, at least for the moment."

Gloriana beamed at his words.

Master Cline did not come to lavish praises on Ves. He quickly brought up a more serious matter.

"I couldn't help but listen to your plans. You seem quite concerned about your safety."

"We are." Ves nodded. "I don't know whether I'll win the design duel, but if I do, I'll be surrounded by a lot of angry Lifers. Who knows whether one of them will be crazy enough to lash out. I originally planned to stay here longer in order to rebuild our fleet, but I think it is best if we cut our schedule short."

"I do not blame you, Mr. Larkinson. It is rather regretful that our state has been less than hospitable to you. While I am not in command of Prosperous Hill, I can still pull some strings to ease some of the restrictions you face."

Ves looked surprised. "You'd do that for us, sir?"

"I do not wish anything to befall a talented mech designer such as you." The old man said. "You have earned my respect. I can read the passion and drive you've invested in your mech designs. Witnessing five of your works in action has taught me that there are more directions that we can take our work. This lesson alone is worth the tiny amount of effort I need to take to aid your clan."

Even though it was rather unexpected, Ves truly needed all of the help he could get. "Thank you, sir. We appreciate the favor."

Master Cline nodded at Ves once again before he departed. Apparently, he didn't have any other plans in mind.

Another Master Mech Designer approached. Ves keenly remembered that this second powerful biomech designer didn't go along well with Master Cline.

"Mr. Larkinson, please don't listen too much to Master Cline. He means well, but he is a bit behind the times. He doesn't see nearly as much promise in your mechs as I. Let me state that I am impressed by your work. Your mechs truly have the capital to live."

Ves looked flattered. "Thank you. That means much from a Master."

Regardless of how suspicious this fellow seemed, he still possessed the wisdom and power of a genuine Master!

People at this level usually didn't bother to lie. Why should they? They sat near the top of their profession and every word they said would always be scrutinized. Each of them had a reputation to uphold, and as one of the best mech designers in existence, they were always sincere when it came to mechs!

"You need to stay sharp and make sure that you do not spend the next three days trying to restore your mechs to their old conditions. Dr. Navarro's mechs are famed for their malleability. Your dueling opponent can induce drastic changes in the span of a few days. The Dragonscale Warrior might not even be covered by scales in the next engagement, and the Swarm Monarch may even replace its beetle cannons with conventional guns. Do not expect any of his biomechs to fight your products in the same manner!"

This was quite an important reminder!

"Are you allowed to say that, sir?" Ves questioned.

"It's fine. My advice does not go as far as providing you with specific aid. You still need to develop your solutions yourself, or else the design duel will no longer have any meaning. When I was around your age, I dueled quite often against other biomech

designers. My ideas are different from my colleagues, so I constantly had to prove the merits of my design philosophy in front of my naysayers. Regardless of the outcome, every challenge polished my approach towards my work."

"I know, but I'm a working mech designer. I am already juggling a lot of priorities. I can't divert too much time on duels."

"Then make sure you make the most out of this experience."

The strange Master didn't stick around for long. After chatting a bit more, he began to leave.

"Wait, sir! Could you tell us your name?" Ves asked.

"I am Master Leehay Brixton. I am based in Prosperous Hill IV. I am known for my cyborg mechs."

That last part immediately caused Ves to jolt!

A cyborg mech designer! That was someone who not only utilized both organic and mechanical components, but fused them together into an integrated whole!

Chapter 2796 - Old Men

Master Leehay Brixton turned out to be a controversial mech designer.

Even though he was a Master who was rooted in the LRA's biomech industry, he rejected its orthodoxy.

With a career that spanned two centuries, Master Brixton developed his design philosophy step by step and endured lots of opposition towards his deviating ideas.

"The LRA's biomech industry is deeply flawed." He spoke to Ves. "That old geezer Cline was already old back when I was starting my career. He was just as opposed to innovation as before."

When one Master criticized another Master, Ves thought it was prudent to keep his mouth shut. If he really had to say something, then he had to do his best to stay neutral!

"I don't really understand the division within your biomech industry." Ves innocently said. "I'm just a visitor. I didn't even know that there were mech designers who preferred to design cyborg mechs such as you until recently."

"You know nothing!" Master Brixton said in a heated voice! "Our state is kept in constant stagnation due to all of the geriatric dodders who are currently in charge! You may know them as conservatives, but they are cowards who are afraid of taking risks and value

the status quo above all else. The mission to propagate the wonders of biotechnology to the greater galaxy is no longer on their minds. They don't care if their mechs are falling behind as long as they are able to lord over others in the LRA!"

Oh boy. Not again. What was it with old people and their rants?

Ves had a lot of practice with being on the receiving side of rants. Gloriana yelled in his face often enough for him to develop different strategies towards different kinds of rants.

Luckily, Master Brixton did not direct his ire at Ves. This made the situation much more tolerable. Besides, the Master Mech Designer was revealing a lot of insider information!

"Human civilization is built upon multiple forms of information. The mistake made by old fogeys like Master Cline is that they only think about incremental improvements. They just think that biomechs will eventually win everyone's hearts if they improve their performance step by step by building upon existing accomplishments. THEY'RE WRONG! These slowpokes are so bad at innovating that once they achieved a breakthrough, the conventional mech industry has already taken several steps forward! I thought that several centuries of failure would have made them realize that they're constantly falling behind, but they have done the opposite! They have dug in even deeper!"

From what Ves had learned about the biomech industry, he wasn't sure whether that was fair. One of the factors that complicated the matter was that the LRA's biomech industry did not exist in isolation. There were other enclaves throughout the galaxy that had chosen to adopt biomechs rather than classical mechs.

Even if the local biomech industry failed to make any significant breakthroughs, it could always leech from the success of other communities!

"The current leaders of our industry have all exhausted their usefulness! They may have contributed significantly to our sector when they were in their prime, but they have lost their drive to push their craft forward after achieving their greatest dreams! Becoming a Master is the end to many mech designers, but it is just the beginning to the truly ambitious!"

"And you happen to be among the latter?"

"That is a given!" Master Brixton proudly stated. His mind bloomed and loosened some of the restraint that kept it contained. Ves sensed a conviction that was so inviolably strong that it could probably endure a direct attack from a dark god! "Life-prolonging treatment is both a blessing and a curse. It can make the worthy live longer. It was originally meant to extend the lifespans of useful and productive people so that they can contribute even more to society. However, each century of life also removes an immense degree of urgency to the recipients. Those with feebler ambitions have

become too complacent after they have lived a couple of centuries. They are no longer willing to do whatever it takes to lead our state to greatness!"

What did this have to do with Ves? He was still in his thirties. The profound issues related to extending people's lives was so far above his head that he couldn't even imagine what he would be like if he was two centuries older!

Master Brixton suddenly adopted a calmer tone. "The younger generation deserves a chance to be in charge. They're closer to contemporary society and their thinking is not as outdated as those who have lived in a time when the Age of Conquest was still a short-term memory. Constant change is necessary to move our state forward. No matter how much conservatives such as Master Cline are willing to consider other solutions, they always default to the least drastic option. It's in their name!"

To be honest, while Ves agreed with Master Brixton's logic, he didn't think that the conservatives were doing anything wrong.

Sure, they hadn't come up with anything exciting for a very long time, but that just meant they were doing a good job in maintaining people's livelihood. Stability may not be as s.e.xy as radical innovation, but it also did not introduce any volatile changes that could easily worsen the lives of trillions of citizens!

The conservatives were good stewards of the state. Whatever their faults, the Lifers were happy and enjoyed a high standard of living.

Many other second-rate states were less well-off. The Garlen Empire was in a constant state of internal warfare while the center of the Komodo Star Sector turned into a slaughterhouse as millions if not billions of people died every day!

Of course, not everyone was satisfied with providing a good life to citizens. Some leaders wanted to achieve more, and they weren't afraid to risk the happiness of lots of people in order to accomplish a goal that many people might not even care about!

"Earlier, you questioned who I am. Well, let me introduce myself to you properly. I am Leehay Brixton, cyborg mech designer and co-founder of the combinants."

Ves already guessed that Master Brixton was related to the combinant faction. The amount of cyborg mech designers in the LRA was definitely small, so it should be a given that each of them banded together in order to pool their strength.

What he didn't expect was that the old man currently in front of him was one of the faction's leader figures!

In fact, he might even be their visionary considering his outspokenness!

Although Brixton mostly came across as a cranky old man to Ves, the man's ability to design cyborg mechs was unsurpassed. Anyone who could design mechs that could compete against the products of other Masters was still worthy of respect!

Ves awkwardly smiled. "As an innovator, I wish you luck in your goal. I need to go now. I only have three days to fix my broken mechs and I can't afford to linger too long here. Every second counts."

A strong grip clamped onto his arm. Master Brixton wasn't done with him yet!

"You must win." The older man hissed.

"Uhm, I already intend to win."

"You. Must. Win!" The Master emphasized. "I am being serious, here! Our faction has already given up trying to clear the fog from the minds of old fogeys such as Master Cline. These geriatrics are beyond redemption. What we can do is break the illusion that has captivated many of our citizens. Too many laymen who have no idea about the true state of our biomech industry think we are already strong enough to hold our ground. They're wrong!"

Were the combinants responsible for hijacking the design duel and turning it into a matter of national pride? That possibility caused Ves to become a lot more vigilant towards Master Brixton!

Even if Ves sympathized with fellow innovators, he never wished to get caught up in someone else's ambitions!

"I can't promise anything, sir. While I am confident in my own design philosophy, I am still younger and less experienced than Dr. Navarro. I can only promise that I will do my best. No matter what is going on around me, I am still a mech designer. I will exert myself to the best of my abilities and let my mechs do the work."

Master Brixton slowly let go of Ves' arm. He took a deep breath. "That is good to year, young man. Keep my advice in mind and do not base your decisions on faulty assumptions. Biomechs are highly adaptable and Dr. Navarro is better at changing the configurations of his mechs than other biomech designers. If you want the second phase to go smoothly, then you must adapt your mechs as well in order to avoid getting countered."

"I got it. I'll do my best, though there is only so much I can do in just three days."

The older man stared deeply into Ves' eyes. After a few seconds, the leader of the combinants finally departed.

Ves could feel the expectations put on his shoulder. The most galling part of this was that he never asked to carry the hopes of a faction he knew nothing about!

Just as he thought that he was rid of the cranky old man, Master Brixton abruptly stopped and turned around. He walked back and presented a pleasant smile towards Ves.

"I have studied your situation to an extent. You wish to venture into the Red Ocean, is that right?"

Ves nodded. This was no secret. "That's correct. We are only at the start of our journey, but we will definitely make it to the other side."

"That's great. The old galaxy is filled with entrenched rulers who are already content with their existing accomplishments. Only a new region of space will allow ambitious pioneers such as you to bloom. Have you already gathered the necessary amount of merits to obtain passage through the beyonder gate?"

"We are still working on it. We'll probably satisfy this requirement once we reach the gate."

"Well, let me offer you some aid. I happen to have a few million MTA merits to spare. I will grant you 5 million MTA merits if you are able to win this design duel. Is this an interesting offer to you, Mr. Larkinson?"

What?!

Even though Ves already earned a lot of merits, it was extremely difficult for him to earn more. The prospect of gaining 5 million MTA merits was a very attractive prospect!

However, nothing came for free. There was also another issue with this reward.

"Aren't MTA merits supposed to be non-transferable?"

"That's correct." Master Brixton replied. "While I cannot transfer any of my accumulated merits to your personal account, I can still put the aforementioned amount of merits at your disposal in another manner."

"How?"

"I can transfer one of my students to your Larkinson Clan. Once he is a part of your organization, you will effectively gain control over the merits he possesses!"

This was a viable way to transfer merits between people!

Technically, the merits belonged to the individual. Master Brixton's apprentice could easily refuse to contribute his merits, but Ves didn't really care about this problem.

He had plenty of ways to 'persuade' an unwilling person to act on his behalf!

Ves needed more information, though.

"What kind of person is your student?"

"He's a fairly accomplished Journeyman Mech Designer. He's a little older than you, but not as brilliant. He's similar to Frederico Navarro in that regard. To be frank, he's one of my more disappointing disciples. I am not sorry to let him go, and he has already expressed a d.e.s.i.r.e to leave and find his own way."

That.. didn't sound very glowing. Still, awful mech designer or not, Ves was not about to let 5 million MTA mreits slip from his grasp!

Ves smiled. "As long as your student is willing to be a part of my clan, then I will welcome him to the fold."

"I am certain he will be ecstatic to hear the news."

The two had formed an agreement at that moment.

Chapter 2797 - Advantages

Majestic Teal was rife with plots.

This was what everyone said about the star sector. Open warfare rarely broke out in this region, but that did not mean that everyone had lost their ambitions.

In fact, the people who lived in the second-rate states of Majestic Teal felt both content and restricted.

They were content because they lived in stable and well-run societies.

They were frustrated because the lack of chaos restricted their upward mobility. With all of the centenarians and older folk clinging onto their positions of power for centuries at a time, the younger generation could only climb so much before they hit an impassable wall!

The Supreme Sage was the most egregious case. Born before the advent of the Age of Mechs, he lived through multiple eras in the Life Research Association's history and remained unquestionably on top for an immense amount of time!

Since he monopolized a large amount of high-level resources for himself, the biotech researchers who were ranked just behind him had become increasingly more jealous at their leader's persistence.

While it was true that the Supreme Sage was a treasure to the LRA, his noteworthy successes came at the cost of strangling the growth of his possible heirs.

Plenty of renowned beast designers, biomech designers, geneticists and other brilliant figures wished to perform ground-breaking experiments in one of the much-lauded pinnacle labs, but the Supreme Sage was already putting these facilities to work for his own ends!

Ves actually sympathized with the Supreme Sage. He felt that this legendary scientist's position was similar to his own. The Life Research Association largely owed its leadership position in biotechnology to the big guy's accomplishment.

Without someone as brilliant as the Supreme Sage holding down the fort, the LRA would have been much worse off! The surrounding states wouldn't have been so restrained towards the state if their rulers didn't need the services of arguably the best native biotech expert in the star cl.u.s.ter!

The success of the Supreme Sage elevated the prosperity and privileges of everyone under his care. People like Master Werther Cline and Master Leehay Brixton only managed to climb up to their current positions by benefiting from the excellent growth conditions provided by their highly-accomplished superior.

Yet the Lifers were split on whether they should be grateful to the living legend of their state.

Conservatives such as Master Werther Cline remained humble and recognized that they would have never attained their current level of success without their current shelter.

Opponents such as Master Leehay Brixton didn't even bother to look back. Instead, they solely complained about how their futures were blocked by their original benefactor.

"Ungrateful bastards." Ves muttered as he stepped into the mech workshop underneath Ruuzon Arena.

As far as he was concerned, if the malcontents wanted to achieve a greater level of success, why not strike out on their own? The LRA clearly belonged to the Supreme Sage!

Yet Ves did not voice this opinion in front of Master Brixton. Not only was it unwise for him to talk back against a Master Mech Designer, but they also entered into a cooperative relationship.

"I just have to win."

Ves loved free deals like this. He already intended to win the design duel anyhow, but now that someone had taken the initiative to sweeten the pot, he would definitely make sure that 5 million MTA merits entered into his pocket!

Of course, that didn't mean he was blinded by the rich reward. No one randomly offered to give away 5 million MTA credits.

This was why Calabast visited the workshop right after the end of the first phase of the design duel.

The black-clad spymaster sauntered closer to Ves as he looked up at the five beaten-up machines.

"Can you fix them all up in time?" She casually asked as Lucky dove into her welcoming arms.

"Meow!" The gem cat cutely rubbed his head against her arms.

Ves ignored his pet's antics as usual.

"I'll manage. This challenge isn't about fixing everything. It's about testing how much battle effectiveness we can restore in a limited amount of time. Granted, biomechs have an advantage in this aspect, but I am not about to let my opponent roll me over from this advantage alone!"

He didn't have to do a perfect job. He just had to be good enough for his mechs to remain competitive.

As he scanned his eyes over his five dueling mechs, he was already cataloging which battle injuries he should address and which ones he should leave alone.

Ves had to achieve the maximum amount of results in the least amount of the time.

This meant that he had to forgo many easy repairs because they yielded marginal results.

Other repairs were drastically able to bring a mech closer to its peak condition, but took up too much time to complete!

Both cases were undesirable. Time was the most valuable resource right now so Ves had to ration it as efficiently as possible.

Fortunately, Ves was already accustomed to these kinds of situations. He didn't panic and he didn't overestimate his capabilities. The Lifers may have provided him with a pretty good workshop, but the tools and production equipment were not comparable to the ones in his personal workshop. He needed to take this into account as well.

"This deal I've made with Master Brixton sounds fishy, but it is too irresistible to me." He told her. "Under ordinary circumstances, I have to go above and beyond to earn 5 million MTA credits. I have never encountered a situation where I can just bend down and pick it up from the street!"

"You have to win the design duel, though." Calabast reminded him. "From what I can tell, that's anything but certain."

Ves briefly dropped his smile. "That's true. I don't know what's in store for the second phase, but Dr. Navarro is limited by what he can do as well. Anyway, I didn't call you here to talk about this. What I'd like you to do is dig into Master Brixton's background and find out which of his students he wants to dump on my l.a.p."

"Are you expecting any problems on that front?"

"No mech designer wants to get rid of a useful helper, Calabast. These kinds of people are worth their weight in high-grade exotics. They can provide so much assistance that it's an enormous waste to kick them out of orbit. There has to be a problem with this fellow. Master Brixton himself has already alluded that he isn't sad to let his student go. I'm definitely being scammed. I just want to know how I'm getting screwed."

Calabast frowned as she tickled Lucky's belly. "If you think this is such a bad deal, why entertain it at all?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I still think this is a win-win arrangement. I am happy to take on any delinquent as long as I get my 5 million MTA merits. I just think that I'll be winning less than Master Brixton. Someone who is capable of earning so many merits through his own efforts is definitely a talent, but if that comes paired with behavioral problems, then I need to know as soon as possible."

What he learned would largely determine his treatment of this unexpected addition to his clan. If he was confident he could manage a difficult personality, then Ves didn't mind giving Master Brixton's student an opportunity to develop himself.

If not, then Ves could just arrange an 'accident' right after his expeditionary fleet passed through the beyonder gate!

Even though it was likely that Master Brixton would become very incensed if this happened, Ves didn't care at all. There was no way that someone that was stuck in Majestic Teal could extend their power all the way to the Red Ocean!

"I will look into this as soon as possible." She promised. "Don't expect too much, though. My agents report that Prosperous Hill has become increasingly more volatile. A lot of visitors have arrived to watch the design duel or take part in the excitement. The locals all smell that something significant might be taking place and even the Xona Stalkers have received worrying signals from their family members."

"Do you have anything more specific than that?"

Calabast shook her head. "I'm as frustrated as you in this regard. We can only vaguely tell that major movements are taking place in the background. Do you want to know the reason why the Prosperous Hill Transportation Service recently became a lot more backlogged than usual? A number of very powerful organizations have claimed much of the transportation capacity that is usually allocated to visitors. They're shipping a lot of assets to and from the surface."

"And this started only recently?"

"A few days before this design duel, actually."

"That's definitely not a coincidence."

All of these signs pointed out that the local factions weren't sitting still. Turning the design duel into a spectacle was only one component in some greater plan. Ves wished that Master Brixton had been a little more forthcoming in what he and his people were up to. The combinants were definitely involved!

After Ves and Calabast finished their discussion, Lucky mournfully bid goodbye to the latter.

"Meeeeeoow."

"Be a good boy and stick to Ves." She said as she petted Lucky's head. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Meow!"

Despite all of the trouble in the air, Ves didn't want to give up on the possible gains he could make from this visit. He might have to curtail some of his plans, but he definitely did not wish to leave before he recruited enough personnel, particularly skilled and desirable biotech experts.

The Larkinson Clan also had to stick around long enough to finalize the exchange of the Auralis for the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den. It wasn't necessary to wait until their new crews had fully broken in the capital sh.i.p.s. They could learn on the job if they had to. The two vessels just needed to be space worthy enough to keep up with the rest of the fleet. Everything else could be worked out later.

"All of this will take a few more weeks to complete." He estimated. "We can't leave until then."

It was a pity that the Larkinsons wouldn't be able to replenish all of its mechs. The production of Bright Warrior IB's and other Larkinson-exclusive mechs was still limited, which meant that most of his mech pilots were still waiting to receive their new machines.

The Larkinson Clan might be forced to place a production order in one of their upcoming destinations, but Ves was not very happy with this solution. Making a third-party company responsible for producing the mainstay mechs of his clan was no different from leaking their entire designs!

Even if their glows and spiritual designs restricted unauthorized people from piloting them, their limitations and weak points would no longer be confidential!

"I guess I'll have to contract the Infinity Guards on a longer-term basis." He muttered.

The mercenaries hadn't been too useful lately but that was because they didn't have much room to exert their strength in Prosperous Hill. That would change once his grand expedition resumed.

"Well, I can worry about that later. I still have a lot of work on my plate."

He turned his attention back to his mechs. One of his Bright Warriors along with a Valkyrie Redeemer were in quite poor shape due to suffering defeat. However, the mechs that had managed to win were not that better off either.

"From what it looks like, I might have to lower the priority on the most badly-damaged mechs!"

This was a painful decision, but one that made the most sense on a strategic basis. He could achieve much better results if he spread his attention to just three damaged mechs instead of five!

Chapter 2798 - Hasty Repairs

Three days wasn't enough to fix every mech.

Even if he stopped going to bed and jacked himself up with stimulants, it was impossible for Ves to complete all of the tasks within 72 hours!

"In fact, I still won't be able to finish all of the repairs within a week!"

A lot of repair tasks were so extensive that the procedure was no different from fabricating a new mech from scratch!

"That's only in case I want to restore my dueling mechs to their peak condition."

If he lowered his standards, then he could do a serviceable job in just a fraction of the time. He just needed to make sure that his sloppy rush jobs didn't fall apart when put to the test.

This was still a great test for any mech designer. They had to employ great planning, judgement and other necessary skills. A mech designer would never be able to achieve success in the mech market if they weren't capable of working efficiently.

This happened to be one of the qualities that Ves thought he was good at. He had plenty of practice in rushing projects and he knew his way around a mech workshop.

"Of course, Dr. Navarro isn't a slouch in this aspect either."

Biomechs possessed an inherent advantage in this area. From what Ves had learned, it was a lot more complicated to repair major injuries such as amputated limbs, but it was very trivial to repair lots of minor damage!

"Dr. Navarro just has to chuck his biomechs into specially-prepared feeder pools and let the organic machines do the work themselves!"

The fact that this was possible placed a heavy burden on his shoulders. If Ves dueled against conventional mech designer, then he didn't have to try so hard to accelerate his progress at this stage.

"Well, I already knew this when I accepted the design duel. I can only live with this handicap." He muttered.

"Meow." Lucky disinterestedly replied as he curled up on a nearby table.

Ves no longer tarried. He had already spent enough time going over the battle damage and surface scan results to form a basic plan.

First, he decided to split his mechs into two groups.

The other group was made up of mechs that were not worth a lot of investment. While Ves intended to perform a few quick and impactful repairs, he had no illusions that they'd be able to fight anywhere close to their previous level in their upcoming matches!

"I still have a chance of winning, though. I just have to ensure that the piloting experience is still pleasant enough to woo the mech pilots." He consoled himself.

Choosing which ones he should put on a lower priority was painful to Ves. All five mechs possessed their own merits. Each of them had qualities that made it worth it for them to be employed in the defense of his clan.

Still. Not every machine was suitable to fight in a dueling environment. Ves turned his eyes towards the defense-oriented Bright Warrior and the Valkyrie Redeemer.

The former not only lost its tower shield, but also incurred heavy damage to its frame. It took at least several days to replace all of the damaged frontal armor plating, and that was just for a single mech!

"It's a waste of time to go through all of that effort." He muttered.

He could probably restore at least fifty percent of the knight mech configuration of the Bright Warrior by hastily slapping some standardized plates onto the frame. Even if they didn't fit all that well, they would still be able to do their jobs to a degree!

At least it wouldn't be as troublesome to fabricate a new tower shield. Ves just had to program a production machine and feed the necessary materials to it. As long as he simplified the design of the shield, he didn't need to supervise the process in turn.

He also had to replace the critical components that got cut when a sword stabbed deep into the internals of the knight mech. Even if Ves skipped every redundant broken part and only focused on restoring the most essential components, it would still take a few hours to complete this job at minimum!

"This will definitely be one of the ugliest rush jobs of my career." He helplessly shook his head.

He briefly glanced at the Valkyrie Redeemer which got savaged by the Frokyn after it suddenly produced a lot of hair. Ves still couldn't wrap his head around the odd transformation. What kind of mech designer would come up with such an absurd idea?

"Well, stupid or not, it worked. I guess that is enough of a justification to ignore how creepy it looks."

Ves didn't have much hope for the Valkyrie Redeemer in the next phase. It was a powerful mech when utilized in the context of a larger unit, but by itself it was not the best!

The damage to its frame was very extensive. The hair that grabbed and pressed onto the frame had led to a lot of dispersed damage to its armor system. It was like an egg-shell that was already cracked across its entire surface.

While Ves could still spend some time to fill up the cracks, this was merely a stopgap solution that would only allow the Valkyrie Redeemer to survive a few more minutes on the dueling ring.

"I also have to fix up the worst of all of the axe attacks."

The Frokyn not only chopped off one of the Valkyrie Redeemer's arms, but also tore apart large sections of the front!

"Well, the arm can be fixed, but with so little time at my disposal, it'll be ugly."

To call the limb that he had in mind an arm was a travesty. It would be nothing more than a fixed appendage that permanently held a shield. It was the best he could manage with so little time at his disposal.

"I'll work on the Valkyrie Redeemer last." Ves murmured. "If I have to spend more time to complete the other repairs on the agenda, then I would rather do that than invest too much time in this lost cause."

The only reason why he wanted to spend a few hours on this machine at all was because he didn't want to leave an ugly impression to the audience. He also hoped that its mech pilot might get swayed by its charm despite its awful condition.

After making this determination, Ves got to work.

He started with the mech that went into battle first. The Bright Warrior in its swordsman mech configuration acquitted itself well. Its ability to switch design spirits had come in very handy.

So handy in fact that its frame was still reasonably intact. The first match ended too quickly and too decisively for the Epsilon Mosar to inflict too much damage onto its frame.

The most troublesome aspect about this mech was that a lot of internal components became affected by the battle. Captain Alazar Ipsich put too much strain on the Bright Warrior's frame. The armor breaches to its front also destroyed a number of internal components that were situated close to its c.h.e.s.t.

Just like with the other mechs, it was impossible for Ves to fix them all, especially when he was by himself. While he had an army of bots at his disposal, they were only capable of performing basic functions such as hauling components back and forth and cleaning up debris.

Ves hastily fabricated or pulled basic premade parts off a shelf and put them into the damaged Bright Warrior. He skipped most tests and procedures and simply trusted that the newly-installed components would do their jobs.

"They don't need to last long. As long as they can hold it together in a single match, then I don't care if they fall apart a second later." He muttered.

He didn't have enough time to provide the same treatment to the smaller breaches and cut marks. He simply filled up the gaps with filler materials that were much weaker than proper armor but could still withstand at least some damage. In certain spots, Ves even patched up the holes with jury-rigged plates.

In the end, the sword-wielding Bright Warrior got back into shape. Its offensive power had mostly been restored, but Ves did not have too much confidence in its ability to withstand damage.

"It has to go on the attack. This mech will go down a lot faster if it is forced into a defensive posture!"

Ves couldn't do much about that.

He immediately moved on to the next and most optimistic-looking machines of the five. Out of all of his dueling mechs, his Ferocious Piranha performed the best by far.

Its game-changing glow was too difficult to deal with against any melee opponent. This happened to turn the Ferocious Piranha into a nightmare against other light skirmishers!

Still, even if it was his best mech, it had not come off its match unscathed. The Faerie Stinger had been able to inflict a decent amount of corrosive damage to the Ferocious Piranha.

Even though its armor was quite good, it was also thin. Ves quickly patched up the worst-affected sections of the exterior of his mech. Even though these ugly repairs would likely slow down the Ferocious Piranha, it was better than exposing its fragile internals right away.

Aside from that, he also performed more thorough repairs on the flight system. Mobility was one of the most important strengths of a light mech so Ves wanted to make sure the Faerie Stinger wouldn't be able to take out the wings!

Since the Ferocious Piranha possessed a smaller frame than other mechs, it didn't take long for Ves to perform the most essential repairs.

He moved on to the Transcendent Punisher last.

This mech had taken an extensive beating. While his artillery mech inflicted even worse damage onto the Swarm Monarch, Ves could not get around the fact that it took way too much time to address every deficiency.

Fortunately, much of the damage was contained to the surface. The drilling beetles and positron beams had inflicted extensive damage to the legs and the upper side of the heavy mech, but all of that armor had done its job.

It was fairly simple to repair the upper section. Ves fabricated very thick plates and simply fitted them over the parts that already looked ruined.

The new plates didn't entirely fit and they looked extremely out of place, but the Transcendent Punisher was strong enough to bear all of the extra plate.

Fixing the legs was more troublesome, but Ves was lucky that the Swarm Monarch only fired its particle weapons at the lower portion of the leg.

Once Ves completed all of this exhaustive work, he didn't forget about implementing a countermeasure against the drilling beetles.

Even though Ves had no guarantee that the Swarm Monarch would use the same mode of attack in the next round, Ves did not want his Transcendent Punisher to be forced to overheat its surface in order to get rid of its parasites!

He mounted some minor weapons across its hull. While they weren't strong enough to damage a mech, they were still capable enough to get rid of some beetles!

Aside from that, he also made some hasty modifications that allowed the Transcendent Punisher to overheat every section of its exterior without needing to rely on improvised solutions.

Any beetles that land on my artillery mech will have an awful time!"

Chapter 2799 - Competitive Spirit

Ves cut so many corners that Gloriana would probably faint and collapse if she saw his work.

He did not put quality in mind at all! His only priority was to put as many components back in working condition as possible. In order to accomplish this ambitious goal, Ves relied extensively on his jury-rigging ability to improvise faster but inferior solutions.

An ugly mech was still a mech. Even if its performance had dropped to 30 percent of its peak, it was still a serviceable war machine in most circumstances!

While Ves had to employ plenty of creative solutions to shave off minutes and even hours of his time, he reveled in the challenge.

The pressure of facing biomechs that were able to heal much of their minor damage by themselves constantly loomed behind his back. He knew his opponent would show up with more extensively healed mechs, and that drove him to employ as much haste as possible.

He didn't just fix up his mechs though. He did not forget about the warning he received. Biomechs were more malleable by nature. Dr. Navarro's design philosophy was highly geared towards transforming his products into a different configuration.

As long as he had a few hours, he could turn a melee biomech into a ranged biomech, a heavy biomech into a light biomech and so on. Of course, not all transformations worked out, and it was very difficult to ensure a biomech retained enough battle effectiveness after going through an extensive transformation.

This was why Ves didn't expect Dr. Navarro to pull any unexpected rabbits out of his hat. With all of the constraints he faced, it was much more reasonable to assume he would only make targeted transformations.

This was already difficult enough to deal with, though. The uncertainty of the situation daunted him the most. The fact that Ves wasn't able to predict what surprises his opponent might add to his damaged biomechs meant that he had to take thousands of possibilities into account.

What if he prepared his mech to face a melee mech only to encounter a ranged mech that employed kiting tactics?

What if Dr. Navarro transformed his Swarm Monarch mech from a heavy artillery mech to a melee mech?

Although it sounded absurd, biomechs offered enough versatility to enable such a transformation!

Even if the resulting melee biomech wasn't comparable in performance to a proper melee mech, it could still thrash the Transcendent Punisher if it survived long enough to get close!

"It would be great if I got a sneak peak of his work." He idly muttered.

A few seconds later, he froze.

Was it possible for him to obtain advanced notice of the modifications that Dr. Navarro applied to his biomechs?

If Ves was able to obtain even a single image of the biomechs as they were being worked on, he could derive a lot of useful information out of what was visible!

In fact, it would be even better if he could obtain detailed scanning data and Dr. Navarro's own documentation. The more information, the better!

Normally, Ves would treat this desire as an idle daydream. Dr. Navarro was fixing up his mechs somewhere else and it wasn't as if they could pay a visit to each other's workshops.

Yet what if he could circumvent these restrictions? What if he could obtain the information he needed?

He actually thought of at least three different methods to gain the intelligence he desired.

James may be dead, but Ylvaine was still alive. The religious design spirit actually fared a bit better these days as the Ylvainan contingent of the clan had managed to recruit several hundred new worshippers.

This was not bad considering the background of the new recruits. It was much harder to persuade second-raters to abandon their old convictions and embrace new ones.

Even so, Ylvaine was still a pauper. Ves didn't think it was a good idea for him to tax the design spirit's energy unless it was a life-and-death situation.

The other option he thought about was trying to utilize his Spirituality to take a peek.

He had already developed several ways to extend his perception beyond his visual sight by forming specialized spiritual projections and constructs.

The problem was that he was never good at extending them beyond a modest range. The underground complex below Ruuzon Arena covered a lot of distance. Dr. Navarro's workshop might be situated at least a kilometer away from his current position!

Ves stretched his arms and pretended to need a break from his work. He slowly sauntered over to the table where Lucky was blissfully dozing off. The lazy gem cat treated this period like a nice vacation.

Yet before he came close enough to put his cat to work, Ves stopped in his tracks.

Was this the right course of action?

That was an important question.

Using Lucky to sneak into Dr. Navarro's workshop in order to gather very pertinent intelligence was not within the scope of the design duel.

It was cheating.

Ves wasn't supposed to gain advance notice of what his mechs would have to deal with in the second phase. The same applied to Dr. Navarro. Both of them were supposed to be working blind and depend on their own judgement to prepare their mechs for the subsequent matches.

If Ves managed to gain a peek at Dr. Navarro's biomechs while denying his opponent the same opportunity, then the sanctity of the design duel came into question!

No matter how Ves rationalized it, it was undeniable that he cheated. His ability to spy and gather information was not related to his capacity as a mech designer.

While Ves didn't mind cheating and taking advantage of a situation in order to advance his cause, the problem right now was that this would have the opposite effect.

"I can lie to others, but I can't lie to myself." He reminded himself.

Even if Ves pulled it off without getting caught, he would always know in his heart that he had acted improperly. While he was currently under a lot of pressure, his design philosophy thrived off the situation. Abiding by the rules put a lot of restrictions on him which forced him to utilize his mech design abilities to the utmost.

Cheating would put an end to this process! If he wouldn't feel as pressured anymore, then he wouldn't be able to make as much progress as he expected.

In fact, his design philosophy might stagnate and regress because of his actions!

By betraying the core principles of a mech designer and acting against the competitive spirit of his profession, Ves feared that he might consider himself unworthy to go further.

This was a complicated matter that Ves could not adequately put into words. He just knew in the depth of his heart that there were some lines that he should never cross if he wanted to become a great mech designer.

Yet just before his professionalism asserted itself, he briefly recalled what was at stake.

Leaving aside intangible gains such as advancing his reputation and generating lots of publicity for the LMC, Ves could also look forward to receiving 5 million MTA merits.

This was a very attractive reward in itself. It was almost worth cheating for this alone!

Yet... it wasn't enough in the end. If gaining 5 million MTA merits came at the cost of ruining his future prospects as a mech designer, then Ves could not bring himself to accept this solution!

A contrarian thought emerged from his heart.

"There is no need for me to resort to this option! If I am confident in my own abilities, then I should depend on myself in order to prevail in this design duel!"

This was how a true competitor behaved! Ves was not weak when it came to designing mechs, so he definitely had a chance of winning if he just played by the rules.

"I will grasp victory with my own hands." He gripped his fist in front of his face.

His drive and competitive spirit became more stoked than ever before! While he already wanted to win in order to earn a lot of extra merits, this time he wanted to win in order to prove to himself that he was stronger than his peers!

Ves began to apply various different modifications to his dueling mechs. All five of them received some special attention that tweaked and altered them to varying degrees.

This was necessary because he knew that his opponent would definitely learn from the first phase and configure his biomechs to counter what he had seen.

Unlike Dr. Navarro, Ves was much more limited in this regard. His mech was made out of lots of metal and composite materials. Changing large swathes of them was clearly out of the question!

"Some mechs can't be changed at all." He sighed.

His Transcendent Punisher was a good example of that. It couldn't be employed as anything other than a heavy artillery mech. At most, he might be able to tweak its armor system or its weapon settings.

He had a bit more flexibility with his other mechs. He could outfit them with different weapons or alter their flight characteristics.

In the end, Ves only applied a modest amount of changes. He didn't change the fundamental nature of his mechs because he believed their designs should have already been adequate enough to handle various different challenges.

He only applied a couple of specific solutions such as allowing his Swarm Monarch to wipe out parasites and providing his Valkyrie Redeemer with a specific solution against biomechs that suddenly grew out a lot of hair.

"I don't have the time to implement more changes anyway." He let out an exhausted breath at the end of his preparation time.

Three days had passed by the time he put down his last tool. His dueling mechs looked a lot more formidable now that he had patched them up to an extent. Even though they still looked shabby in some ways, Ves did not doubt their fighting ability!

Once Ves transmitted a signal that indicated that he was done, Ves decided he needed a good rest.

Arena personnel soon arrived to take stock of his mechs. Since they probably observed his actions throughout the entire period, they did not have any doubts that Ves had perverted his work or slipped something in that was against the rules.

Gloriana hadn't come. She knew better than that. She detested design duels because the mechs that generally tended to come on stage were all abominations in her eyes.

Even Ves felt a little ashamed when he looked at how many compromises he made in order to save time!

Someone else greeted him instead.

Captain Reina Ember, formerly of the Xona Stalker, walked up to him with a grim expression.

"A lot has changed while you remained in isolation for the past three days."

"Oh? Where's Calabast?"

"She is taking care of another matter. She assigned me to fill you in on what has changed."

"Tell me." Ves tried to shake off his exhaustion. "What did I miss?"

The recently-joined member of the Black Cats handed over a secure data chip. Ves pressed his thumb against its surface, allowing him to interface with it through his cranial implant.

Hundreds of images, documents and recordings poured into his implant. It was too much for him to process in a short amount of time, but Ves was still able to skim the material.

His eyes widened as he learned that the Prosperous Hill System had become a lot more turbulent!

"While the outcome of your design duel is still in the air, a lot of Lifers have become concerned." Captain Ember summarized the findings. "Protests have broken out. Incidents have become more frequent. The locals are angry. While they can't do much, who knows what they will stir up if Dr. Navarro loses."

"Are there any acute threats?"

"No. Our security situation is still good, but we are still suffering from other consequences. Recruitment has stalled due to all of the controversy surrounding our clan. We risk failing our targets at this rate."

"Damn!"

These Lifers had too much time on their hands!

Chapter 2800 - Bottled Up

The atmosphere in the Prosperous Hill System changed considerably over the last three days!

While Ves had been isolating himself in the workshop in order to prepare his mechs for the next phase of matches, the citizens of the Life Research Association vented their feelings in public.

The state's proud biomech industry, and by extension its entire biotech sector, was under attack!

"How can a foreign mech designer who is younger and less experienced than Frederico Navarro gain the upper hand? It's impossible!"

"Don't worry just yet. Biomechs are a lot better at picking themselves up. I bet that Navarro's biomechs will be completely healed by the time they step into the arena! That Larkinson fellow will weep at the sight!"

"What if we lose? The reputation of our strongest industry will tank! No one will think highly of our products anymore!"

"It's all the fault of the radicals! Whoever publicized this dumb design duel should be fired! No, they should be shot!"

Tongues wagged both at the grassroots level and the higher levels. While the design duel was less acute in other star systems, Prosperous Hill was at the heart of the vortex. No matter how much the locals tried to ignore the issue, they simply couldn't get around the discussion of what might happen in the future.

In truth, many people weren't as deluded and caught up in upbeat delusions as everyone thought. There were plenty of folk who observed various shortcomings and deficiencies in how the LRA was run.

Despite investing massively in biomechs, they failed to gain ground in the rest of the star sector.

The rest of the biotech industry fared a lot better. The exobeast industry, beast design industry, pharmaceutical industry, augmentation industry and so on all achieved good results. They were not only progressing further ahead than the industries of other states, but also brought in a lot of revenue!

In contrast, the biomech industry failed to become a comparable expert activity. The only foreigners who bought biomechs to begin with were either diehard fans or curious customers. Too few mech buyers were persuaded on the merits of biomechs over classical mechs.

"The tally is 3-2 in the favor of the foreigner. How can this be? Even if the score is tied, we would still lose out in the end because that just shows our biomechs aren't worth the trouble! Why are our biomech designers so useless!"

"Maybe the radicals have a point. We've been muddling along for several centuries in the same direction and it hasn't worked out. If we want to turn Majestic Teal into a paradise for biomechs, we need to go on the attack!"

While it sounded ridiculous to use the results of a single random design duel to gauge the strength of the LRA's biomech industry, many people didn't know any better!

They weren't scientists nor statisticians. They didn't understand the fallacy of making bold conclusions out of a single sample. They just looked at a single instance where a classical mech designer squared off against a biomech designer and instantly concluded the entire biomech industry was doomed!

With unknown powers manipulating public opinion in various different directions, the Lifers had become more divisive over the issue!

Some wanted to do anything the Supreme Sage told them to. They possessed a slavish devotion to the greater Lifer in their midst.

Others bought into the narrative of the radicals and other deviant factions who advocated for change.

There were more groups of people who developed all kinds of thoughts. Whether they were correct or not, the heated tone of the debate caused everyone's attitudes to harden!

For example, the recruiting hall that the Larkinson Clan had rented downtown had suddenly turned into the site of a rapidly-growing protest!

"LARKINSONS GO HOME!" Someone yelled while projecting a virtual banner that stated the exact same words. "WE DON'T WANT YOUR TRASH CAN MECHS!"

"Expel the foreigners! Don't let anyone who doesn't use biomechs!"

"You better not win or there will be hell to pay!"

The protesters were fairly harmless. No one carried any weapons and even if they did, the security measures were robust enough to withstand any attack that didn't involve mechs.

Regardless, the demonstration had become far too disruptive. A lot of prospective recruits decided to turn around as soon as they noticed the angry crowd parked in front of the recruiting hall.

The Larkinson Clan was forced to abandon the original recruitment hall and rent a more inaccessible site that was situated higher up the tree buildings. With the relatively strict traffic rules, it was impossible for protestors to approach a building from mid-air and linger for a long period of time. It was simply too hazardous to let them mill around at an altitude.

Still, the relocation and deteriorating public opinion disrupted a lot of arrangements. The Larkinson Clan succeeded in recruiting tens of thousands of eager recruits in the past few weeks, but it still suffered a shortfall in many different positions.

Many other transactions experienced disruptions as well due to the spreading discontent in Prosperous Hill.

Even though the planet depended heavily on acting as a nexus of foreign trade, the locals became increasingly more hostile towards foreigners who were responsible for injecting lots of wealth into their economy!

The people were restless. Traffic had lessened but there were significantly more people on the streets. More mechs were visible as the demand for armed escorts increased. Although no one had crossed the line and opened fire on someone, that was only because the planet was too well-regulated.

Yet the authorities were very reluctant to tighten the rules even further. They were keenly aware that humans could only tolerate so much control over their lives.

Besides, there were plenty of factions who wanted to give ordinary people the room to voice their discontent.

"It's all building up to something." Ves whispered his guess. "No one riles up so many people for nothing. The radicals and combinants don't seem like the types who make so many moves in order to achieve a minor shift. There's a greater goal in mind."

"Are you suggesting that the opposition is seeking to depose the conservatives from power?" Captain Reina Ember looked increasingly more concerned.

"You're the Lifer here. What do you think?"

"We've been out of touch for several decades." The Xona Stalker depreciating said. "My fellow comrades and I all tried to cling onto our identity as Lifers, but now that we have returned to our original home, we suddenly feel out of place. Life here is too mundane. The amount of people I've met who come across as spoiled and entitled beggars belief. These w.h.i.n.ers won't last a single day in the Nyxian Gap!"

Ves understood the former pirate's sentiment. He spent enough time in lawless space to know that the veneer of civilization was a lot thinner than everyone thought. The LRA may have been peaceful for a long period of time, but that meant that various grievances and causes never had a chance to vent.

Instead, all of these underlying issues continued to bottle up until the pressure reached a point where the entire container might be on the verge of exploding!

"Calabast promised to investigate the details surrounding Master Leehay Brixton. Have you gathered any useful news?"

"Ah, we've gathered plenty of material. The notes should be in the data packet that you have just received."

Ves manipulated his implant until he found the relevant documents. Every Master Mech Designer generated lots of news, and Master Brixton was no different.

In fact, his actions came under a greater spotlight due to his contrarian opinions! As a prominent cyborg mech designer who had clashed against the conservative faction throughout his long and storied career, a lot of people kept an eye on his movements.

Master Brixton turned out to be an avid researcher and more interested in pushing the boundaries of cyborg mechs rather than maximizing his sales.

Cyborg mechs were niche products in the LRA so they weren't as popular as traditional biomechs.

Still, a Master was still an excellent mech designer, and the mechs designed by Master Brixton still sold at fantastic prices.

Although his career was long and eventful, Ves didn't notice anything that stood out from the Master's record.

The older man's teaching record was a bit more interesting. The man adopted six personal disciples, of which one had died.

The youngest personal disciple immediately caught Ves' attention. The newest mech designer who received Master Brixton's inheritance was a 45 year old Journeyman who also worked with cyborg mechs.

Master Brixton's latest pupil advanced to his current position when he was 37 years old, which was not an exceptional result but still sufficient enough to enjoy a bright future.

Yet there were a few details that put this cyborg mech designer in a different light.

"Doctor Leonardo Brixton is Master Leehay Brixton's great-grandson." Ves stated.

"That's correct. While the relationship between the two isn't described in public, our sources have gathered several rumors that suggest it isn't as cordial as it seems in public."

"Great."

Ves had a hunch that Leonardo was in fact the person that Master Brixton intended to dump onto Ves' l.a.p. It made too much sense. If Leonardo wasn't the Master's relative, then it would have been easy enough to kick the disciple onto the streets. Yet because of their familial relationship, it was important to project harmony to the public. No one wanted to air their dirty laundry in public.

In this regard, passing a problematic descendant onto the Larkinson Clan was a good way to get rid of someone troublesome!

The Red Ocean held a lot of attraction to ambitious young people, so it would be easy to excuse Leonardo's departure as a willingness to seek the unknown and work towards his own future.

This way, the reputation of everyone involved would remain intact even if both sides hated each other's guts!

Ves let out a sigh in relief. Lack of information always discomfited him. Now that he became aware of Leonardo's existence and potential entry into the Larkinson Clan, he could plan ahead.

"Good work, but I need more information. Please dig into Doctor Leonardo Brixton's details and try to find what is going on behind the scenes. Since he is a relative of a

Master, there should definitely be something concerning about him if he wasn't welcome anymore."

"We are already in the process of doing so, sir, but we are dealing with limited access. There is only so much information that we can gather from public records and asking our relatives."

"Well, get used to it, because you'll encounter these situations plenty of times."

Ves studied Dr. Leonardo Brixton's record one last time. Even though the information surrounding him was rather sparse on details, the man was still an accomplished Journeyman!

In fact, Leonardo was probably stronger than Dr. Navarro due to his age!

That gave Ves some headaches as well. If Leonardo ever joined the Larkinsons, then the Design Department would likely welcome an older and more experienced mech designer.

Unless Ves resorted to harsher methods, it wouldn't be easy to earn the possible addition's respect!

Leonardo's work also didn't fit in with the rest of the clan. Biomechs demanded an entirely different infrastructure to grow. This infrastructure would definitely be lacking in the Larkinson Clan!

"Then again.. The Dragon's Den might solve this issue to an extent."

The bioresearch vessel that the Larkinsons were looking to acquire also featured enough growth facilities to produce biomechs!