

Mech 2801

Chapter 2801 - Cesspool

Doctor Leonardo Brixton was not the ideal recruit to Ves. He was older and more set in his ways. This meant that Goldie wouldn't be able to inspire as much loyalty and devotion to the Larkinson Clan.

Cyborg mechs sounded interesting but Ves wasn't convinced that it was worth the trouble to bother with fully or semi-organic mechs at all. All of the fleshy bits reminded Ves too much of Dr. Jutland's shenanigans!

Yet the value of recruiting a cyborg mech designer whose expertise straddled both classical mechs and biomechs was unquestionably high!

There was no way that Master Brixton withheld too many of his core trade secrets when instructing his blood descendant. Ves may not have reached this level as of yet, but even he had no intentions of passing any of his closest secrets to anyone aside from worthy offspring!

Others simply didn't deserve to know! Not even his wife was privy to all of his secrets!

The only people he truly trusted were those who he was able to shape himself. The more he was able to manipulate them, the more he was willing to pull them into his inner circle.

So far, a handful of people such as General Verle, Venerable Joshua and Dr. Ranya was starting to earn his appreciation. They were much less stubborn and high-minded than his own wife and were much more pliable as a result.

It also helped that they didn't seem to pursue any great agendas. With Gloriana, Ves always had to keep her advocacy in mind. She did not see any contradiction between helping the Larkinsons and helping the Hexers. Ves thought differently, and that was the cause of most of their disputes.

He still loved her, though. Even though it wasn't entirely logical for him to feel this way, his heart never made sense in the first place. He just wanted to maintain a certain degree of separation from her on business matters.

As Ves thought about implications, he finally took a brief rest and woke up just before the start of the second phase.

Ruuzon Arena attracted a lot more attention these days. The amount of spectators had increased as many Lifers wanted to witness Dr. Navarro's impending victory for themselves!

Expectations were still high even though the current record wasn't optimistic. It was impossible for many fans to drop their confidence after suffering a modest setback.

"Dr. Navarro shall prevail! He will prove to the entire star sector that our biomechs are competitive!"

"LRA! LRA! LRA!"

"We should kick every metal mech out of our state!"

Groups of people wearing green clothing and banners all passed through the entry gates and moved up to their respective viewing platforms. The crown of trees surrounding the main dueling ring became more and more populated as many of them wanted to witness a turning point in the LRA's history.

A lot of Lifers came in order to obtain the answer to a simple question.

Were their biomechs competitive enough?

Today, the Lifers deeply wanted Dr. Navarro to succeed. His biomechs not only had to make up for his disappointing score, but also win the hearts of the mech pilots who participated in the duel.

The latter part had become a lot more contentious than before!

"If they know what is good for them, then the mech pilots won't betray their own states!"

"They're trained in piloting biomechs. Why should they ever prefer to pilot dead machines when they can pilot living mechs instead? Our offerings are far superior!"

The partiality of the ten mech pilots who would be issuing their verdict at the end of the second phase was crucial. The locals all wanted the mech pilots to favor their own state while many foreign observers watched carefully in order to see whether the Lifers were about to cheat!

Ves wasn't too worried about that.

Even if his hosts couldn't resist the temptation to cheat, both Ves and Dr. Navarro knew the actual score. There was no way to lie about the results when both of them were mech designers.

That said, the Larkinsons were fully prepared for trouble this time.

The clan didn't even bother to open their new recruitment hall this time. Plenty of Larkinsons had already left the surface and those who remained behind were fortified inside Gentle Lotus Base.

The Infinity Guards had become more active as well. They not only put their available mechs on high alert, but also prepared several evacuation routes!

Though a part of Ves didn't want to show up at all, another part of him felt more alive. Old instincts and habits were starting to wake up. The complacency and lethargy that had settled over his mind started to shake off from all of the excitement running through his veins.

His blood was pumping faster. His attention became sharper. His competitive streak rose.

He wanted to win!

More precisely, he wanted to defy the Lifers for hoping that he would lose! As a proud mech designer, how could he tolerate any doubt in his own ability? While Dr. Navarro was a formidable opponent and a capable mech designer in his own right, his life experiences were much duller!

Out of safety concerns, fewer people accompanied Ves this time. More bodyguards accompanied him this time, though all of them had to stay outside the entrance of the VIP platform.

Only a couple of people kept him company this time. Aside from Lucky, he only brought a single expert pilot and 'consultant'.

"Damn, the stakes are higher than ever, Ves! Do you think they'll get mad if they lose?" Vincent cheerfully asked as his hover chair floated forward.

Venerable Jannzi slapped the side of the floating device. "Watch your words! Do you even realize what you are saying? You'll make a lot of people upset towards us if they hear your words. Show some care!"

"She's right, Vincent. I didn't bring you here to brag on my behalf. As pathetic as it sounds, I still find your insights useful."

He enjoyed the commentary he received during the first phase of the design duel.

He cared about Raella, though, so he decided to leave her behind.

Vincent was a different matter. Ves didn't care at all whether the bastard lived or died. It didn't matter whether the wounded Larkinson was an expert candidate.

In fact, if Vincent happened to meet an unfortunate accident today, then Ves would have one less future expert mech design to worry about!

Not that he actually expected something to happen. Ves only had to look around to spot hundreds of biomechs in the air and on the ground. Each of them were marked in the colors of the Planetary Guard and other government institutions.

A lot more security guards on foot appeared as well. The authorities must have shipped in an entire security division to Ruuzon Arena on short notice because there were guards posted around every group of fans!

Their odd combat armor was organic in nature and so were their rifles. It made them look like infested humans, but strangely enough their monstrous appearance didn't inspire any fear or revulsion from the locals.

"I heard you made a deal with Master Brixton."

The old Master went straight to the point.

"I did." So what? "He offered me a reward for doing something that I already plan to accomplish. I see no reason to refuse a free deal?"

"You should have refused his offer. The two of you share a connection now. No matter how benign it seems, you cannot deny that you are a bystander now."

"I was never a bystander to begin with." Ves pushed back, heedless of the fact that he was talking to an esteemed Master. "I didn't ask to get involved, but since someone pushed me into this cesspit, I might as well go for a swim."

Master Cline looked exasperated. "I had hoped you would show more prudence, but I did not sufficiently account for your youth."

"It is rare to hear a Master admitting a fault."

"We are still human, Mr. Larkinson. We may stand at a greater height than you, but we are still plagued by the same flaws that afflict any individual. In fact, some theorists claim that our faults are magnified."

Ves definitely believed in that theory. No mech designer achieved success by going through the motions! Being abnormal was practically a necessity!

"Can you tell me what's in store for me once I advance to Senior?"

"Heh." Master Cline smirked as a hint of amusement shoved aside his irritation. "You must have asked this question to many high-ranking mech designers, correct?"

"It's worth a try."

"Well, I will give you the same answer that my other colleagues have told you. Don't worry about it. Becoming a Senior is a major threshold. While it is not considered to be a significant transformation, your approach to mech design will undergo a major transition. You will have to look beyond your immediate mech designs and start to consider the bigger picture."

"I see." Ves looked disappointed. "I'll look forward to that then. Do biomech designers have a harder time advancing than classical mech designers?"

"This is not a simple question to answer. The threshold to become a biomech designer is higher because there is much more knowledge involved. While this means that our numbers are not as great, each of us are more brilliant on average. This is not a boast, but a fact that is backed up by plenty of studies."

"I believe you. The logic holds up. Even I'm a bit intimidated by having to learn so many biotechnology-related subjects. It's a different discipline." Ves replied.

"Correct. It's a different discipline, though there are many ignorant critics who think differently. The fact of the matter is that mech design and biotechnology require different skill sets and aptitudes to excel at. While there is a lot of overlap between the two fields, it still takes a genuine talent to marry the two together."

"What about cyborg mechs?" Ves curiously asked. "From my shallow understanding, Master Brixton is a very renowned mech designer in this state. What makes his kind of products so special?"

"You should ask this question to someone else. As much as I oppose his stances, I still respect his work."

Master Cline didn't stick around for long. After he gained whatever he sought from Ves, he quickly bid goodbye and returned to his seat.

Just like before, six Master Mech Designers had showed up. Perhaps a few of the faces had changed, but Master Cline and Master Brixton were both suddenly on the opposite ends of the row of plushy seats.

Master Brixton even turned around and nodded at Ves. It seemed that the leader of the combinants was quite optimistic about Ves' chances.

Why?

Did Master Brixton get a sneak peek at the mechs prepared by both sides?

That shouldn't be the case. Their dueling mechs were under strict guard. Masters weren't even allowed to get close because there were a million different ways they could strengthen or weaken any given mech!

At this time, a familiar bombastic voice boomed over everyone's heads.

[Welcome everybody to the second phase of the design duel between Ves Larkinson and Doctor Frederico Navarro! After pitting five pairs of mechs and mech pilots against each other, we will be performing the matches again! This time, the mech pilots have swapped their seats. Each of them are now expected to do their best to achieve victory for the mech they previously fought against !]

The second phase was a lot more strategic than the one that came before. Both the mech designers and mech pilots knew what they were up against now. This not only allowed them to plan in advance, but also leverage the information they gathered to their own advantage!

The next set of matches would surely be a lot more dynamic than before!

Chapter 2802 - Feeling the Difference

The second phase of the design duel wasn't accompanied by song and dance this time. The atmosphere in Prosperous Hill VI was too tense for any festivities to have any effect.

The Lifers simply wanted the matches to start as soon as possible in order to know once and for all whether biomechs were strong enough to compete against classical mechs!

In fact, an increasing number of Lifers already admitted in their hearts that biomechs weren't superior anymore. At best, they stood on equal grounds against regular mechs.

What they didn't want to see was biomechs getting beat up left and right! Such an outcome would induce major doubt in the minds of both Lifers and foreigners who were tuning in to the broadcast.

"Will Dr. Navarro's biomechs prevail? Or will Mr. Larkinson prove that the most ordinary mechs are actually stronger?"

The original point of the design duel had almost been drowned by all of these questions! Hardly anyone recalled that its original purpose was to prove which mechs were more worthy to be called alive.

This was why the judgement of the mech pilots was crucial to this design duel. Only those who piloted the mechs in battle were the most qualified to determine which form of living mech was better!

After a brief introduction, the announcers quickly moved on to the first match.

[Captain Alazar Ipsich and Kelly Gidon will be squaring off against each other yet again! This time, they are sitting in the seats their opponents previously occupied. Having gained much experience in piloting the mech that they must overcome this time, these mech pilots will surely put their knowledge to good use!]

Two mechs stepped into the dueling ring. Jeers immediately rang out from the audience.

"Hahaha! Look at that shabby mech! Trash can indeed! The mech doesn't even boast any proper armor coverage anymore! Even my twelve-year old son can repair a mech by slapping some random plates across some holes!"

"There is no contest in this match! Just look at the difference. This metal mech is covered with scars while our fine biomech looks completely healed!"

Ves glowered a bit. These laymen didn't possess an inkling of understanding of the complex engineering challenges he faced with repairing his sword-wielding Bright Warrior. What gave them the qualifications to criticize his repair job!?"

While the mech looked as if it had healed from all of its injuries in the last three days, Ves wasn't fooled.

One of its limbs was abnormally weak. Its frontal flesh was too new and weak. Its entire flight system looked shaky. The mech suffered from a lack of balance due to the unevenness of the mech.

In short, it was impossible for the Epsilon Mosar to exhibit the same degree of battle effectiveness as before!

This was mostly the fault of Captain Ipsich. Back when he piloted the sword-wielding Bright Warrior, he did his best to thrash the Epsilon Mosar and thereby achieve the first victory in the design duel.

Now, he was forced to pilot the consequences of his own actions. The Epsilon Mosar may look fine on the surface, but piloting it was a vastly different experience than before.

As the sensors of his injured biomech trained on the Bright Warrior, feelings of envy and d.e.s.i.r.e bubbled up inside him. He would much rather pilot the mech he managed to achieve victory with again.

The experience of piloting it and interacting with it had kept haunting his dreams every night. He often wondered what it would be like to pilot the Bright Warrior on a regular basis instead of just a single time.

"I'm sorry." He softly spoke.

He knew he was doing a disservice to the Epsilon Mosar. Objectively speaking, it was quite a well-designed biomech. If Captain Ipsich overlooked its injuries, then it was a fine swordsman mech that was highly maneuverable in the air.

Yet Captain Ipsich still yearned to pilot the Bright Warrior instead. He didn't mind its boring design at all. The mech was much more exciting when he interfaced it. He truly felt the difference of what truly constituted a living mech now that he was forced to pilot the Epsilon Mosar.

Despite its organic nature, Captain Ipsich did not sense any dynamic responses from his current mech. The mech was as robotic and formulaic as any mech he piloted. The Epsilon Mosar was strictly programmed not to show any initiative.

It was too controlled.

Ipswich missed the relationship he developed with the mech that currently stood on the other side of the dueling ring. Even though he had to put some effort into growing this relationship, it was completely worth it in his eyes.

Now, he had been denied this chance. Piloting a biomech that was no different from a bacterium in terms of responsiveness was such a big letdown to Captain Ipsich that he suddenly lost all of his eagerness to fight this match!

"What's the point?" He whispered to himself.

He thought he was better than this. He was a consummate professional and a mercenary who always abided by his contract. He had been hired to do a job, and that was to pilot both mechs to the best of his ability and issue a fair judgement about which one he liked the most at the end.

Yet Captain Ipsich felt as if they could skip all of the remaining steps right away!

He kept trying to search for something greater in the Epsilon Mosar. Yet the qualities that caused him to fall in love with the Bright Warrior was completely absent in his current steed!

"I can't do this, though." He slightly shook his head. "I still need to complete the job no matter how much I wish to turn away."

It wasn't just his professionalism asserting himself. While he had been prohibited from following the news, the Epsilon Mosar still registered the loud chants from the viewing platforms high up in the air.

Too many eyes were pointed in his direction right now. How could he possibly continue to hold his head high if he breached his contract and issued his surrender straight

away? How would he ever be able to call himself a Lifer if he purposely sabotaged the chances of Dr. Navarro?

"I need to put up a good fight."

Captain Ipsich tried to focus on the upcoming fight. He roughly knew what the Epsilon Mosar was capable of already. Its changes were a bit interesting as well.

[Commence the match!]

The sixth match started off with a bang!

Both mechs jumped into the air and quickly gained altitude!

Even though it was much simpler to fight in the air, both mechs were much more adept in the air. In fact, Captain Ipsich already knew that the Bright Warrior was even better in space!

"I really want to know what it's like to pilot it in orbit." He sighed as he quickly withdrew the new main armament of his biomech.

In the last match, the Epsilon Mosar wielded a pair of biometal swords. They were quite fast and were also quite useful in blocking enemy attacks by crossing them. Yet now that one of the biomech's limbs hadn't been restored yet, wielding a second weapon was not advisable.

The biomech now wielded a long dagger.

As soon as the Epsilon Mosar flew towards its opponent, it exhibited less speed than in the previous match. Its flight system incurred heavy damage when the mech collapsed onto its back three days ago, so Captain Ipsich had to be careful not to exert too much strain on its wings.

The Bright Warrior was obviously in better condition. Its acceleration profile already showed that it held an edge in mobility. There was no way the Epsilon Mosar could outrun its opponent!

"At least this will be quick!" Ipswich roared!

Just before the two mechs closed in on each other, the Epsilon Mosar's legs suddenly split up into several different tentacles!

The flesh and bone that used to comprise its lower limbs had rapidly split off from each other in order to form strange fleshy wh.i.p.s that immediately stretched out in an attempt to entangle the Bright Warrior!

"What?!" Ves uttered in shock.

He never imagined that Dr. Navarro was capable of changing the legs of his biomech into ominous-looking tendrils!

Right now, it looked as if the two mechs were mounting each other in mid air! The sight looked comical, but it invigorated a lot of Lifers!

"Whooooooo! You go mech!" Vincent enthusiastically yelled!

At point-blank range, a dagger was much more useful than a sword!

While the Bright Warrior struggled to pull itself away from the tentacles and slash its sword against the mech that had mounted its lower torso, the Epsilon Mosar rapidly started to stab its dagger into the obvious weak points of the opposing mech.

The filler material used to hastily plug the gaps across the frame of the Bright Warrior served as excellent targets!

With precise strikes, Captain Ipsich managed to chip through one of them. However, just before he stuck the weapon through the exposed gap, the Bright Warrior finally launched an effective counterattack.

Its miniature shoulder-mounted missile launchers fired all of their payloads all at once!

Kelly Gidon deliberately disabled the proximity safeguards of the miniature missiles that surged from the entangled mech. They flew around the target right in front, circled around and struck the Epsilon Mosar straight into its rear!

Several explosions rumbled against the biomech's rear! Not just its rear armor, but also its fragile flight system incurred moderate damage straight away!

The crowd became shocked!

"What a despicable move!"

"Attack it from the front if you dare!"

"Missiles are cheating!"

The Epsilon Mosar sputtered from the rear impacts! While flight systems for mechs were designed to resist damage, there was only so much they could take, especially when they were still not restored to their peak!

The mech suddenly had to exert more effort into keeping it aloft. Its maneuverability had suffered and the distraction also caused Captain Ipsich to ease up on his assault.

This was all Kelly Gidon needed to turn the tide. The Bright Warrior dropped its sword, allowing it to fall and clank into the ground below.

Instead, it utilized the strength of its own limbs along with activating nearly every booster at full power to tear at the tentacles!

The Bright Warrior even managed to unsheathe its backup knife which it subsequently used to cut at the tentacles!

Due to the Epsilon Mosar's deteriorating maneuverability, the Bright Warrior gained enough distance to pull up its leg and place their soles against the abdomen of the Epsilon Mosar.

The classical mech suddenly pushed its legs, forcing the tendrils to endure much more force!

"They can't hold!"

The tentacle legs were either cut or failed to maintain their grip on the Bright Warrior's frame. Eventually, the Epsilon Mosar lost its prey!

"Nooo!"

The biomech looked in awful shape now that it lost its prey. Its tentacles were covered with a copious amount of purple blood. Some of them didn't even show any responses anymore.

With just a single dagger, the Epsilon Mosar looked like an alien monstrosity that was already on the verge of defeat!

The Bright Warrior pulled out a pistol and began to fire at the Epsilon Mosar. At the same time, it dove in an attempt to retrieve its dropped sword.

"Oh no you don't!"

The Epsilon Mosar attempted to intercept the Bright Warrior. If the latter was allowed to regain its main weapon, then Captain Ipsich would have a much harder time.

He still needed to put up a good fight. It wouldn't do to lose so quickly, even if he felt in his heart that his defeat was already assured!

Chapter 2803 - Uneven Matches

The Epsilon Mosar's tentacle trap failed!

After the biomech suffered a defeat during the first phase, it was in bad condition. Even accounting for the automatic healing process by dumping it into a feeder pool, major restorations still required a lot of attention and effort.

It was too impractical to restore a biomech to full strength in so little time!

Even badly-injured human bodies required meticulous care to get back to health. While biomechs were much simpler in some aspects, their huge size along with numerous complicated systems meant that even an extremely skilled biomech designer had to invest a lot of work to fix everything!

This was why the second bout between the swordsman mech configuration of the Bright Warrior and the Epsilon Mosar was so unequal from the beginning. The latter had to overcome much more hurdles in order to climb back to strength!

In addition, just like Ves, Dr. Navarro had to ration his time carefully. Perhaps he already judged that his Epsilon Mosar was already a lost cause and only performed a single major modification by turning its legs into tentacles.

If the attempt to entangle the Bright Warrior with its tentacle legs succeeded, then the Epsilon Mosar might be able to achieve an upset despite the long odds!

It was a pity that this didn't happen.

Instead, the Bright Warrior succeeded freeing itself from this surprising trap! Now that Kelly Gidon had become aware of the threat, she never allowed her mech to be caught in such a compromising position again!

The rest of the match actually took several minutes longer to finish due to the caution she exhibited.

As someone who piloted the Epsilon Mosar before, she was quite familiar with its strengths and weaknesses. With a good mech like the Bright Warrior at her disposal, she expertly dismantled the damaged and bleeding biomech without giving her opponent any chance to make a comeback!

"This mech is quite good!" She exulted.

The Bright Warrior did not exhibit the aggressive glow it showed before, but it didn't need to. Kelly Gidon was already doing fine by herself.

The Golden Cat's welcoming influence was warm and gentle without being too overbearing. It was the perfect glow for both strangers and Larkinsons alike since it helped with acclimatizing them to both their mechs and the Larkinson Clan.

Even a Lifer like Gidon felt a yearning to become a Larkinson!

"If I get to pilot mechs like these all day, then sign me up!"

She quickly shoved aside this impulse, though. Although a part of her truly wanted to join the Larkinson and pilot a completely different style of mechs, she was too rooted in her current state. She would have to abandon her family, her friends, her familiar environment and everything she valued.

It wasn't worth it to leave everything behind.

That did not mean she resented the Larkinson Clan, though.

"This mech is definitely better than any biomech I've piloted so far." She whispered to herself.

She piloted numerous biomechs as both a mech athlete and a member of a security company, but none of them possessed the fantastic experience that she was experiencing at the moment.

She even wanted to prolong the fight in order to bask in her mech a little longer!

Still, she had a duty to uphold. Any form of sandbagging would reflect poorly on her. With so many eyes upon her, Gidon could not afford to ruin her reputation!

This was not an unexpected result. The battle had constantly been going downhill for the biomech.

Yet his constantly unfolding disaster pressed a heavy weight on the hearts of the Lifer.

"The Epsilon Mosar had no chance..."

"How come so little of it has been healed?"

"Dr. Navarro is incompetent! Instead of wasting time on turning its legs into a gimmick, he should have reinforced its flight system instead!"

Discontent quickly rose up as the Lifers processed the ugly defeat! Even though the deck was stacked against the Epsilon Mosar from the beginning, the overly optimistic spectators still hoped for a miracle!

Even Dr. Navarro himself shook his head. This was one of the negative consequences for holding a design duel in public, especially one that adopted unusual rules.

"Sometimes, the public isn't your friend. Remember that, Yelkin."

The teenage student nodded. "Got it. Is this what you had to deal with all your life?"

"It's more nuanced than that." Frederico Navarro said. "Public opinion can be both a boon and a weapon. It all depends on the circumstances. Mr. Larkinson has much more experience with generating publicity, so we should be asking him for tips."

The six Masters who attended the second phase of the design duel in person did not say anything as usual. If they communicated at all, then they wouldn't let anyone else eavesdrop on their conversation. The concepts and theories they exchanged with each other were probably so profound that any lesser mech designer would probably be led astray!

As the second match was being prepared, Ves took the time to check the local security condition.

The spectators may look rowdy, but the armed and armored guards in their midst ensured their behavior remained firmly within the limits!

The aerial biomechs of the Planetary Guards continued to sweep the surroundings for any heavy threats. Their presence continued to act as a powerful deterrence. Nothing less than a full-blown invasion would be able to shake so many mechs on guard!

So far, the situation looked fine, but Ves did not dare to base his conclusions on mere observations.

He turned to Venerable Jannzi, who had kept quiet throughout this period.

"Do you feel safe here?"

"Not really." She gruffly answered as she crossed her arms. "I feel antsy. While I haven't spotted anything fishy, there are too many unknowns around us. Those Masters over there are all strong in their own way. I wouldn't provoke them if I were you. We're also surrounded by lots of biotechnology. Who knows what they can do. My judgement is considerably more limited in this kind of place."

That was a bummer. Ves originally brought Venerable Jannzi along because he wanted to use her as an early warning system.

"What do your instincts tell you?" Ves carefully asked.

She steadily looked into his eyes. "I don't feel safe in your company. Does that answer your question?"

"..."

"You have to admit that you're kind of a trouble magnet." Vincent said as he stuffed his face with a snack that a flying beetle had delivered to him. "All of this stuff wouldn't have happened if you didn't visit this star system."

Ves snorted. "I didn't ask for this."

"A real man doesn't complain!"

What did that have to do with the situation?

Fortunately, the next match was already about to start.

[Please welcome back Trip Oxxon and Zenon Dia Bavros for their second duel! The two elite graduates will be piloting substantially-altered knight mechs that they faced off against before.]

The Dragonscale Warrior was in a much better shape. Strangely enough, its thinner flesh and skinnier frame caused it to look as if it was on a diet. The drain the biomech experienced in the previous match wasn't so easy to restore, apparently.

Yet despite its diminished appearance, the partially-restored biomech still boasted a complete cover of reptilian scales!

"It doesn't look as if the Dragonscale Warrior can regenerate its spent scales anymore." Ves quietly guessed. "Even so, its protection is still good enough to resist most blows!"

His Bright Warrior looked much worse off in comparison. Ves affixed many ugly and uneven plates in the areas where its armor was breached. This led to a patchwork appearance that made many people regard it as a junkyard mech!

"So ugly! I bet it smells!"

"Beat this trash can mech up!"

"Wash away the shame of the first defeat!"

Both mech pilots could hear the words of the audience clearly through their mechs. Zenon Dia Bavros knew he had a hard time ahead of him. He should know, since he defeated the Bright Warrior just three days ago!

"I don't have a lot of tricks at my disposal, but the strength of my mech should still be intact. The Dragonscale Warrior looks depleted, though. I can use this. My enemy probably has the edge in speed, but knight mechs never rely on it in the first place!"

One of the reassurances he possessed was that the Bright Warrior gained another tower shield. This was an essential defense tool that would definitely be able to blunt a lot of attacks!

As Bavros tried to formulate a strategy, the match finally began in earnest

[Begin the fight!]

Just like before, the two mechs quickly closed in on each other! Though both mechs flew slower than before due to the damage they sustained in the previous match, they still possessed enough mobility to collide against each other with their shields!

BANG!

The reactions of the two mechs illustrated their conditions!

The Bright Warrior bounced back roughly as if it was a billiard ball. Bavros had to expend a bit more effort into stabilizing its flight.

The Dragonscale Warrior fared a lot better. Its flight characteristics were still working fine. Even though it bounced back further due to its decreased mass, its flight system was much more assertive!

"That's not good." Ves frowned. "The Dragonscale Warrior's components are all working fine while the Bright Warrior is still dealing with damaged and incomplete internals."

Now that Trip Oxxon knew how strong his biomech was relative to the Bright Warrior, he knew what to do! As much as he felt sorry about the Bright Warrior he previously piloted, he had to take it down!

"Let's make this quick!"

The Dragonscale Warrior burst forward and utilized its advantage of speed and acceleration to good effect!

The biomech constantly circled around the Bright Warrior and struck its sword at the weaker sections that hadn't adequately been fixed.

Many times, Bavros utilized the tower shield of the Bright Warrior to block the Dragonscale Warrior's attacks, but this obstacle steadily fell apart from all of the blows it endured.

Bavros knew he had to go on the attack!

"I can't let Oxxon beat up my mech without retaliating. I'll just lose if this continues!"

Yet every time the Bright Warrior attempted to make a move, the Dragonscale Warrior either dashed backwards or easily blocked the incoming attack.

In desperation, the Bright Warrior threw out its battered shield, causing it to collide against the Dragonscale Warrior and unbalancing the biomech for a moment.

"Take this!"

Freed from carrying a hefty shield, the Bright Warrior quickly burst forth and utilized its much lighter burden to slash at the Dragonscale Warrior's side!

More than a dozen biomechs scales tore or cut apart as the Dragonscale Warrior suffered a wound!

Oxxon grew annoyed. "Do you think you're fast? I'm faster!"

The Dragonscale Warrior decided to abandon its shield as well. Once it began to wield its sword with two hands, its mobility rose by an even greater proportion!

Both knight mechs seemed to have turned into swordsman mechs as both of them engaged in a rough and violent sword duel!

Wounds started to appear on their frames as their swords frequently managed to land good hits.

While the Dragonscale Armor was losing a steady amount of scales, the other mech fared substantially worse!

The gaps in the armor weren't adequately protected and it took less effort to pry away the hastily-affixed armor plating. In fact, the Dragonscale Armor even managed to pierce right through them as their defensive capabilities weren't good enough!

Chapter 2804 - Predicted Solution

The second Bright Warrior put up a stiffer fight than the first one. Having discarded its cumbersome shield, the defensive mech was able to maneuver more freely, allowing it to evade many attacks while launching more sophisticated counterattacks in return!

Yet all was not well with the metallic mech. The scaled biomech that pushed it back was faster and retained more of its original performance!

While it didn't display any drastic tricks like turning its legs into creepy tentacles, the Dragonscale Warrior's base performance was already good enough to suppress the Bright Warrior!

The performance disparity was too great. Even when Ves switched the Bright Warrior's design spirit from Goldie to Qilanxo, there was only so much Bavros could do to keep his mech together!

Venerable Jannzi reacted with surprise at this change.

"Can you do this with every mech?"

"Yes, but it's not as easy as it looks." Ves quietly answered. "And as you can see, a change in glow isn't a panacea."

There was no suspense to this battle in his eyes. The only way the Dragonscale Warrior would lose was if Trip Oxxon made a very big mistake or if Bavros suddenly became twice as good!

That latter part made Ves think for a bit.

Theoretically, he might be able to turn this outlandish claim into reality.

Yet Ves quickly discarded the notion. Performing Ancestral Possession in front of so many eyes would surely cause a lot of powerful people to grow suspicious at Bavros' suddenly jump in piloting skill!

This wasn't a controlled lab situation either. There was no other Bright Warrior nearby that was piloted by a suitable expert candidate who could donate his or her skills while the match proceeded!

Besides, one of the preconditions for activating this special ability was that both the source and the recipient were connected to the Larkinson Network.

Therefore, when the Bright Warrior finally fell after the Dragonscale Warrior simply opened up all of its old wounds, Ves did not express any dismay.

"We won!"

"Huzzah!"

"Biomechs aren't useless after all! The Epsilon Mosar was simply too awful. The other biomechs should be better!"

The swing in public opinion was drastic. The crowd seemingly forgot their discontent and avidly cheered the fact that Dr. Navarro finally achieved a victory in the second stage!

[The Dragonscale Warrior piloted by Trip Oxxon has won! So far, the score is 4-3 in favor of Mr. Larkinson! With only three matches left, Dr. Navarro has fewer chances left to end the second phase on a positive balance. Will his mechs succeed in reversing their previous outcome, or will they fall just like they did in the first phase?]

This question loomed over many people's shoulders. Only two matches had taken place, but a pattern already became apparent.

Both winning mechs had also achieved victory in the previous phase. Regardless of their unique qualities, the conditions they were in when they participated in their second fights were quite terrible!

The format of the design duel made it difficult for either mech designer to deliver a pristine mech. If they had two weeks time to fix up the mechs that had been savaged during the first phase, then the mechs that stepped into the dueling ring would have looked much better!

"It's kind of funny." Ves briefly chuckled. "This rule was originally meant to benefit Dr. Navarro. After all, biomechs are known for their regeneration ability. The problem is that three days is too short of an interval. Our mechs would probably look drastically different if we had six days to fix them up. Passive regeneration is a lot more effective if it has time to work its magic."

This was how biomechs were supposed to be used. Any force that deployed organic machines required less crew to operate and maintain them. If they incurred any damage, then the maintenance crews could simply submerge them into feeder pools and come back a month later.

The biomechs would likely be back in tip top shape as long as they weren't missing any limbs or something!

The third match started pretty soon. The happy crowd quickly lost their cheer when one of the most dreaded mechs of the design duel stepped into the field.

The Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B made an appearance once again. The second-class version of the infamous mech line had achieved an overwhelming victory the last time.

Its disorientation aura was so hard to deal with that even a mentally strong mech pilot like Katarina Volsemar wasn't able to maintain her concentration when subjected to its influence!

Now that she was piloting the mech herself, she reveled in what she could do with her former boogeyman.

The corrosive damage it previously suffered had only been partially fixed, but that didn't matter too much since the Ferocious Piranha still presented an extreme threat at close range!

"Now it's my turn to terrorize you!" She exclaimed!

In contrast, Rez Killigan did not look forward to this match at all. The Faerie Stinger may have received lots of attention from Dr. Navarro, but his impression of the previous match was still too strong!

Up above, Ves became a lot more attentive. He glanced frequently at Dr. Navarro.

"There is no way the Faerie Stinger is the same as before. Its original incarnation is woefully inadequate." He guessed.

Vincent nodded. "I wouldn't want to fight the Ferocious Piranha up close at all. I'd rather keep my distance and take potshots at it. There's no other way to defeat it in my opinion!"

As soon as the match started, it became clear that Dr. Navarro had the same thought.

The Faerie Stinger did not pull out any daggers. In fact, it didn't carry any melee weapons at all in order to reduce its mass.

Instead of resorting to blades, the mech wielded a slim carbine that was able to fire laser beams!

The biomech was already flying away from the dreaded Ferocious Piranha. Its carbine was slim enough to be fired with a single hand, which the organic light skirmisher took advantage of by rotating its weapon arm to an unnatural degree until it pointed straight backwards!

Laser beam after laser beam began to strike Ferocious Piranha's surface in quick succession. While the relatively light beams weren't capable of punching through the light mech's armor straight away, that would eventually change if this pattern continued.

"The Faerie Stinger should have been wielding a ranged weapon to begin with!"

"C'mon, Faerie Stinger! Keep your distance. Don't let that flimsy metal mech trap you into a corner!"

Ves noted that the Faerie Stinger featured a substantially more powerful flight system. Dr. Navarro not only invested a lot of effort to restore it, but also expanded upon it so that his biomech was able to exert considerably more thrust than before!

The difference became evident as the Faerie Stinger constantly outpaced the Ferocious Piranha.

Yet the current conditions didn't allow her to do so. Her mech was incurring more and more damage as laser beams continued to rain on her mech. All the while, the Faerie Stinger always remained a step ahead!

Even though Volsemar attempted to cut her opponent off by passing through the center of the dueling ring, Killigan wasn't stupid.

As soon as she took this route, Killigan halted his mech and changed his direction.

Since he personally channeled the Ferocious Piranha's power in the previous phase, he developed a healthy respect for its capabilities. He paid extra attention to the Faerie Stinger's positioning in order to avoid any possibility of getting close.

The only way the Ferocious Piranha was able to retaliate at all was by firing its pistol, but the weapon was so weak that the Faerie Stinger could easily hold on for a while!

Ves frowned as he observed the proceedings. He could tell that Dr. Navarro optimized the Faerie Stinger for short-duration fights. Its energy expenditure was quite high right now, and that was evident from the rising heat levels of the biomech.

Perhaps the biomech might run out of juice ten minutes later, but that was enough time for its laser carbine to finish off another light skirmisher!

Would this be the match where Dr. Navarro's work managed to overturn its previous result?

"Not necessarily."

The Ferocious Piranha was not without its own means. If the public could guess that the Faerie Stinger would opt to use a kiting tactic to avoid getting caught in the LMC mech's absurd glow, then so could Ves!

He had always known that the Ferocious Piranha model was susceptible to ranged attacks.

Normally, light mechs were able to utilize their superior mobility to evade most attacks. Yet this was not viable in the current situation.

First, the range between the two mechs was too short!

Second, the Ferocious Piranha was forced to fly in a direction that brought it closer to its target. Performing any form of evasive maneuvers merely extended the distance between the two! This was counterproductive and removed most chances of victory!

Therefore, playing the waiting game was not viable. It would have been a different story if the Ferocious Piranha was a knight mech, but since it was a mobility-oriented mech, the solution had to come from this direction as well.

Katarina Volsemar knew this as well. She knew that the Ferocious Piranha came with an extra option that she had been reluctant to utilize up until now.

"I can only activate it once." She grimly reminded herself.

There was only so much Ves could do to augment the Ferocious Piranha. If he had more time, he could have implemented a more reasonable solution, but since he only

had a few hours to modify his light skirmisher, he resorted to a slapdash solution instead!

The new option was so extreme that it befitted its designer's nature. Ves rarely held back when it came to matters like these. Since the Ferocious Piranha would definitely lose if it encountered a ranged mech like the reworked Faerie Stinger, it was worth it to implement an extreme solution!

After hesitating a few more seconds, Volsemar winced as a laser beam struck a s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e place on her mech.

She couldn't afford to hesitate any longer!

"Let's do this, then!"

She mentally pulled the trigger. Almost immediately, the flight system of the Ferocious Piranha blazed into life!

The light and energy it emanated suddenly rose by 70 percent! Such an abrupt boost of thrust put an immense strain on its flight system!

In fact, the more vulnerable parts already started to melt or fall apart due to the extreme stresses it endured!

Yet the abrupt increase in thrust also provided the Ferocious Piranha with a powerful boost forward!

"It's gaining on the Faerie Stinger! No, it's already catching up!" Someone alarmingly exclaimed!

Killigan panicked. He quickly instructed his Faerie Stinger to dive in order to delay the interception, but the Ferocious Piranha raced after it with much greater speed even as its flight system finally exploded, causing the LMC mech to lose its main form of aerial propulsion!

Yet even as the mech suffered this disaster, it came close enough to hug and entangle the Faerie Stinger with its limbs!

"Hahaha! I've caught you!" Volsemar laughed. "Take this!"

The Ferocious Piranha's glow slowed down Killigan's response, but that was of little consequence because the fragile Faerie Stinger had no defense against the daggers that stabbed into its flesh!

Before the pair of entangled mechs impacted the ground, emergency shield generators and heavy-duty antigrav modules quickly cushioned their fall and separated them from each other.

The eight match ended in yet another victory for Ves!

Chapter 2805 - Disgusting Weapons

"Nooo!"

"You had a chance!"

"Why didn't you dodge the Ferocious Piranha?!"

"Are we really losing?"

"Someone please kick this dummy Navarro out of our state! He's a disgrace to our biomech industry!"

The Lifers reacted especially vehemently this time.

The process and outcome of the eight match was much more agonizing than the sixth match!

The Epsilon Mosar was at an obvious disadvantage shortly after the beginning. The mech was in such a poor condition that everyone could see that it was only a matter of time before it lost.

This was different. The second bout between the Ferocious Piranha and the Faerie Stinger proceeded much more optimistically at first.

With the modifications that Dr. Navarro made it to the biomech, the Ferocious Piranha was constantly forced to trail behind. The difference in mobility was too significant to allow the slightly heavier LMC mech to overtake its target.

Yet all of that changed in an instant when the Ferocious Piranha overloaded its flight system to such an extent that it exploded less than a dozen seconds later!

The Lifers watched on in disbelief as the Ferocious Piranha suddenly turned into a supermech due to its extreme acceleration. From the moment it collided against the Faerie Stinger and began to stab its dagger into the fleshy frame with wild abandon, much of the onlookers still hadn't processed the rapid turn of events.

Only when the entangled mechs started losing altitude while lots of blood sprayed out from the Faerie Stinger did the locals finally realize what had happened.

Dr. Navarro lost again! Even though Rez Killigan piloted the Faerie Stinger exactly how it was supposed to be utilized, a single modification in the Ferocious Piranha precisely countered the new mode of combat in a single, devastating move.

Since the transition from winning to utter defeat happened so quickly and without warning, the Lifers were truly angry this time!

"The score is 5-3 now! We lost five times! There's no way for us to win more matches now. We can only go even at our best!"

"This design duel is crap! Why are the rules so slanted in favor of the foreigner? Dr. Navarro is forced to fight with one hand tied behind his back!"

"We're embarrassing ourselves in front of the rest of the star sector. Majestic Teal must be laughing at us and our pathetic biomechs right now!"

Just when Ves thought the anger couldn't get any worse, Ves briefly saw a plume of smoke rising from the distance.

"What is that?"

Ves noticed that the Master Mech Designers sitting not too far away no longer held a casual posture.

All six of them had adopted a serious demeanor. Master Werther Cline looked especially concerned. Master Leehay Brixton sent a challenging glance towards the conservative mech designer. The other Masters each held ambiguous expressions.

Venerable Jannzi activated her comm and quickly accessed the news.

"A small ammunition depot in the outskirts of Veoline blew up. The details are scarce, but it's likely that someone deliberately triggered it. No lives have been lost, thankfully."

Unfortunately, this was not the only incident that occurred after the eighth match. The news portals rapidly reported numerous different incidents. From mobs of angry Lifers wrecking everything nearby to trying to intrude in places where they weren't supposed to be, the locals were very upset with this situation right now!

Fortunately, the instability was largely confined to Prosperous Hill VI. The local Planetary Guard had already brought in reinforcements beforehand. Emergency response mechs quickly flew out and quickly suppressed the rampaging groups of people by firing sticky webs that f.o.r.c.i.b.l.y stuck them into place!

The ninth match had to be delayed because of the outbreak of incidents. An official even stepped forward in an attempt to calm the Lifers.

[We know you care about the outcome of this design duel, but please calm down. All of Majestic Teal is watching us right now. We must present ourselves in a good light, and while we understand your passion, please do not lose control. For centuries, the Life Research Association has been a beacon of peace and knowledge! Let us continue to project ourselves according to our values. We are thinkers, not brawlers!]

"Meow!" Lucky responded with a disgusted expression.

"Yeah, I don't want to get webbed by this substance either."

Law enforcement units deliberately utilized disgusting substances to quell fights. Just the threat of getting covered in stinky slime or awful webs was enough to convince many people to behave!

Once spectators in the arena calmed down, the preparations for the ninth match finally resumed.

Two familiar mechs stepped into the field. The Valkyrie Redeemer and the Frokyn met each other yet again.

Ves paid close attention to the Frokyn. The marauder mech genuinely took him by surprise last time. Who could have guessed that the mech was able to grow a lot of hair and utilized it as a shield and grappling tool?

The Valkyrie Redeemer lost unjustly in his opinion!

Now that his mech had a second chance of facing off against the mech that humiliated it, Ves hoped that his changes would have the d.e.s.i.r.ed effect.

[Commence the match!]

This time, the Hexer mech did not wield a pulse submachine gun. While it was moderately effective against lightly-armored targets, it was woefully inadequate against any form of strong protection!

In the last match, the pulsed particles fired by the Valkyrie Redeemer turned out to be incredibly useless. The Frokyn's hair blocked every attack before any of it reached the flesh layer.

If the Valkyrie Redeemer ever encountered this situation again, Ves thought of two potential solutions.

The first one was to arm his mech with a weapon that could punch through the Frokyn's hair cover. A gauss rifle would do, but that weapon was too c.u.mbersome for a mobility-oriented machine like the Valkyrie Redeemer.

Ves opted to go for a laser rifle instead. He beefed it up a bit, but it was still relatively weak compared to a positron rifle.

Its requirements were lower, though, so he was easily able to pair it up with his mech.

Right now, Mireilla Linschoten didn't even wait for the Frokyn to grow out its hair. Having piloted the biomech to great effect in her previous match, she knew how insane it could be. She did not want to be on the receiving end of all of that hair!

"Burn! Burn! Burn!"

The Valkyrie Redeemer quickly began to shine a beam of light from its third eye onto the opposing mech. Carter Day soon felt trapped and uneasy, but he gritted his teeth and continued to pilot his mech forward.

It was not because Carter Day wanted to hold it back. The problem was that the Frokyn wasn't able to grow out any hair anymore!

While a biomech designer could easily design a mech that was able to grow out hair follicles, it was useless most of the time.

Normal hair was too fragile to be utilized in combat!

In order for the Frokyn to generate hair that was tough enough to withstand the rigors of combat, it had to grow them out through an intensive, energy-draining process that weakened the rest of the frame.

While this was a major contributor to the Frokyn's decisive victory in its previous match, the mech wasn't able to repeat this trick!

Ves and many onlookers quickly realized this fact. As the Valkyrie Redeemer employed a kiting tactic to pelt the Frokyn with damaging laser beams, the biomech did not form any special countermeasure to block the attacks.

"What is it up to?" Ves wondered.

The Valkyrie Redeemer wasn't able to outpace the Frokyn for long. The LMC mech had incurred substantial damage in the previous match so its performance wasn't even close to its peak.

When the Frokyn drew near, the mech finally showed what it was capable of. All this time, it held an unusual rifle that had not opened from the start. It was only when it drew close enough that Carter Day finally pulled the trigger!

"What?!"

The net was apparently made from the same substance of the hair that the Frokyn previously grew. The only difference was that the hair was not under the mech pilot's control.

The hair net acted under its programmed instructions and tightened around the Valkyrie Redeemer. Even though the LMC mech was already succeeding in breaking or cutting through the strands of hair, it was still incapacitated by the time the Frokyn drew close.

The blade of a biometal axe slammed into the head of the Valkyrie Redeemer!

The stricken mech's third eye along with the rest of its head had split apart! Linschoten was briefly disoriented as she was forced to switch to another set of visual sensors to observe her surroundings.

Before the axe managed to strike the Valkyrie Redeemer a second time, the trapped mech quickly dropped altitude.

At the same time, the mech activated its Shock and Awe Pulse while at the same time detonating a Starburst grenade!

"Ah!"

The sharp and deadly axe that was aimed straight at the c.h.e.s.t of the Valkyrie Redeemer missed!

It turned out that Mireilla Linschoten had also deactivated the flight system for a moment, causing the Valkyrie Redeemer to drop altitude just enough to evade the attack!

"Break!"

The Valkyrie Redeemer stretched, allowing it to finally break out of the strange net!

Yet just as it had freed itself, the Frokyn pointed its projector weapon at its target and fired another hair net!

"Oh no you don't!"

The Valkyrie Redeemer managed to dodge just enough to spare most of its body from the creepy net. Only its left leg got entangled, but the mech managed to cut away the net easily enough this time.

The Frokyn dropped its projector. Apparently, it had already exhausted its charges. The biomech only clung onto its biometal axe this time.

Seeing that the Valkyrie Redeemer didn't have to worry about getting netted yet again, Linschoten ordered her mech to put away its laser rifle. The mech instead readied its spear and shield.

The feminine mech could have looked quite valiant if not for its ruined head. As it was, the Valkyrie Redeemer did not stay still for long.

It charged!

Even if the mech lost its third eye, its glow and other spiritual properties were not affected. Carter Day still experienced a significant amount of pressure as his Frokyn began to exchange blows against the Valkyrie Redeemer.

The two mechs were even for the moment! The Valkyrie Redeemer technically performed, but its Marked for Death ability ensured that the enemy mech pilot wasn't able to fight at full strength.

"Why isn't the Frokyn winning?"

"It's being piloted just as bad as the last match!"

"C'mon! Finish that woman mech already!"

The crowd grew frustrated again. According to the results of the previous phase, the Frokyn should have beaten the Valkyrie Redeemer handedly. Instead, it just fired a few strange nets before confronting the spear-wielding mech head-on with a simple axe!

Even Ves looked a bit perplexed. Had the Frokyn expended too many resources previously? Why didn't it pull out another rabbit out of his hat?

"Could it be.. there isn't anything special about it anymore?"

Chapter 2806 - Helpful

The match between the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Frokyn was close!

Both mechs circled around in the air and clashed against each other, attempting to slam their weapons into each other's frames.

Each time they closed in, the audience clenched their fists and gritted their teeth. They cheered whenever the Valkyrie Redeemer incurred a serious blow. They g.r.o.a.n.e.d or shouted their dismay any time the Frokyn received a serious wound.

Overall, the energy of the crowd see-sawed so frequently that it was as if they were all affected by the Ferocious Piranha's glow!

Even Ves felt a bit nervous about the outcome of this battle. The Valkyrie Redeemer was one of his great successes and the mech that best represented his mother. It lost a bit unjustly in the first phase, so he hoped it would be able to make a comeback in the second phase.

"It's close." Vincent commented as he became engaged at how the mechs were fighting each other. "I don't know too much about the mechs, but I can tell the mech pilots are treating this like a high-stakes match. They don't want to lose, so they don't dare to pull off any daring moves. They just want to grind each other down. It won't end until one of the mechs falters."

This was an approach that removed many variables from play. Instead of using their wits and the special capabilities of their mechs to outmaneuver each other, Mireilla Linschoten and Carter Day both chose to fight each other in one of the simplest and most straightforward methods.

The only variables that mattered was their skill along with the resilience of their mechs!

Their skill was roughly even. Both of them were experienced mercenary mech pilots. While neither Mireilla nor Carter received any elite training, they invested decades into polishing their fundamental skills, allowing them to perform quite well even if they piloted relatively unfamiliar mechs.

That left the mechs. This was where the real differences lay.

The Valkyrie Redeemer lost badly the last time and still suffered the consequences for it. Its reduced performance and patched armor left it in a relatively dire state. Mireilla constantly had to employ caution in order to prevent a single strike from damaging a critical component!

Yet the mech was still putting up a good fight regardless. Its spear granted the mech a longer reach than its opponent, thereby granting the metallic mech an inherent advantage in performing its attack runs.

Second, Mireilla constantly became more in tune with her mech.

Unlike Carter Day who only formed a shallow relationship with the Valkyrie Redeemer, Mireilla became increasingly more in tune with the mech.

She was not a Hexer. Far from it. She was loyal to the Life Research Association and had no intentions of changing that. Yet that did not prevent her from getting charmed by the mech she piloted.

"No mech has made me feel as strong as this one!"

Even in a damaged condition, the Valkyrie Redeemer could still beat the mechs she utilized before!

She never piloted a mech this good outside simulations. The power she wielded and the additional systems at her disposal caused her to become more and more enamoured with piloting the Valkyrie Redeemer.

What was even more fascinating to her was how the mech responded so well to her. The Valkyrie Redeemer seemed to possess a mind of its own. In fact, she felt as if there were two minds. One of them allowed her to forge a closer connection to her mech while the other one was vastly more profound than anything she had felt before.

When she tentatively deepened her bond with the latter, she became more and more in awe. The more she reached out, the more she came in touch with. There was an endless depth to this indescribable bond that completely fascinated her but miraculously did not distract her from the battle.

"Is this what it is like to be a Hexer?" She asked herself.

She felt as if she was caught up by an enormous wave of Hexer-ness for a lack of a better description. Whenever she reached out with her mind, she felt as if she became more inured with values associated with strong and assertive women.

"Women are better."

"Women must take the lead."

"Women cannot lose."

Why should she lose this battle?

She won with the Frokyn before! Was she destined to lose because she hit the Valkyrie Redeemer a little too hard the previous match?

"It's not fair!"

She was a winner! She refused to concede against Carter Day. Even though he respected her opponent, it did not change the fact that she thought she was better.

"If my Valkyrie Redeemer was in the same condition as the Frokyn, then I would have won by now!"

This was not an idle boast. The performance of her current mech fell below that of the Frokyn, yet she was holding her ground just fine so far. Her skill expression slowly rose over time as she became increasingly more familiar with the Valkyrie Redeemer in multiple ways.

Clang!

The Frokyn managed to chop apart the shield held by the Valkyrie Redeemer! Axes were highly suited to destroy shields to begin with and Carter Day already knew that he had to get rid of this obstacle in order to launch a fatal blow against the Valkyrie Redeemer.

However, Mireilla Linschoten wasn't stupid. She always knew that the shield wouldn't be able to last the fight. It was not a thick and sturdy tower shield that was designed to withstand immense bombardment. It was more of a delaying tool that could be utilized to make favorable trades.

A spout of purple blood sprayed from the wound as the spear retracted from the flesh. Scabs hastily formed over the nasty wound, preventing the organic machine from leaking out more blood, but the damage was already done!

The Frokyn became a bit less responsive. Although the wound hadn't struck anything critical, it still interfered with the functioning of the biomech. Dr. Navarro began to look quite concerned as he observed the match!

The successful blow inflated Mireilla Linschoten's confidence. Her momentum increased and her fit with her mech increased even further!

This allowed the Superior Mother to exert even more influence over the mech. When Ves prepared this specific machine, he already tweaked its spiritual design and warned the design spirit that the mech pilot deserved extra care.

As a maternal spirit, the Superior Mother excelled at giving care, especially towards those that helped out her son!

Ves could see what she was doing. His spiritual senses noticed the increased activity from the Valkyrie Redeemer.

His face grew a little grave when he noticed what was happening.

He hadn't prompted the Superior Mother to do anything throughout the entire match, but his helpful 'mother' took the initiative to intervene on her own accord!

The difference became increasingly more telling. The strength of the Valkyrie Redeemer's glow grew stronger. Even with its ruined head, the Hexer mech was still radiating a sharp glow onto the Frokyn, which exerted more and more psychological pressure on its mech pilot.

"No wonder the Fridaymen all hate this mech! The Valkyrie Redeemer is truly difficult to fight against!"

His responses became less tight and his mech began to incur more stab wounds. Even though the difference was relatively minor, he felt increasingly more pressed to keep up his performance.

"Get down already!" Linschoten shouted as her spear seemed to possess a touch of brilliance as it whipped past the Frokyn's axe and punctured a shoulder!

Though the wound inflicted by the Valkyrie Redeemer was fairly shallow, it was nonetheless a concerning attack because a follow-up strike might very well be able to knock out one of the Frokyn's arms!

The biomech was not harmless, however. Even as Carter Day came under increasing pressure, he became more determined to end the match before his mech reached the point of failure!

"I can't let you grow any further!"

The match suddenly heated up as Carter recognized that time would only make the Valkyrie Redeemer stronger instead of the opposite. He had to cut this strange growth process short by attempting to chop down the Valkyrie Redeemer sooner!

The Frokyn no longer made any sparing attack runs. Instead, it flew forward and attempted to stick close to the Valkyrie Redeemer!

Its weapon might have a shorter reach, but that meant it would definitely be able to savage the Valkyrie Redeemer up close!

More puncture wounds adorned the Frokyn's surface as it tried and failed to get past the guard of the spear-wielding mech!

The spear held in the Valkyrie Redeemer's hand was like a wall that blocked the biomech's path. The Frokyn had no choice but to face the spear attacks head-on in an attempt to get closer, and that made it extremely difficult for it to get past this challenge.

Eventually, Carter Day decided to throw caution to the wind.

"I'll accept any blow as long as I can get close enough to hack at you with my axe!"

The Frokyn fearlessly dashed forward! It held its axe in a blocking manner in an attempt to guard its c.h.e.s.t, but the spear that sn.a.k.e.d forward keenly avoided every obstacle and stabbed deep in the already-wounded abdomen of the biomech!

Yet no matter how serious this injury appeared, the Frokyn succeeded in getting close!

Its biometal axe is already chopped down like a descending moon. The air whipped as the sharp and resilient axe blade hungered to split apart the c.h.e.s.t plating of the Valkyrie Redeemer!

Yet just before the axe was close to doing so, the Valkyrie Redeemer abruptly detonated its last Starburst grenade while simultaneously activating its strongest Shock and Awe Pulse yet! More raw power had been pumped into the latter than ever before, causing Carter Day to be blanked for a small moment before he regained his wits.

The Valkyrie Redeemer's spear was still thrust into the abdomen of the Frokyn, but the mech that previously held the weapon was gone from its place!

"Where!?" Carter became alarmed. The Frokyn's axe cut through empty air, signalling that its opponent was truly gone. "Wait a second..."

The sense of doom that was directed towards him no longer came from the front.

Instead, it came from below!

It turned out that the Valkyrie Redeemer cut off its propulsion at the same time it activated its close-ranged counter-measures!

This caused the mech to lose altitude for just a moment until its flight system came online again. Mireilala Linschoten pumped more power into the flight system than ever before, causing it to rise up just enough to empower her next blow!

"This is the end!" She yelled as her will seemed to echo with her mech and the spirit that was supporting her from behind!

The Valkyrie Redeemer's backup knife rapidly rose up from between the legs of the Frokyn before sinking straight into the crotch of the biomech!

More purple blood leaked out from the mech than ever before as the spear dug deep into the flesh and internals in its way!

The Frokyn suffered a terrible blow!

Carter screamed, and so did much of the audience!

Chapter 2807 - Stripped Facade

The Frokyn suffered a blow no one wanted to suffer. Men especially reacted with horror at the final blow of the Valkyrie Redeemer.

A knife had been struck straight through the underside of the crotch of the Frokyn!

It would have been worse if Dr. Navarro equipped this particular mech with organs, but even in its b.a.r.e and smooth form, it was still a place where no mech wanted to get hurt!

The Frokyn obviously lacked an independent consciousness, but Carter Day's instinctual behavior caused the mech to bend in a manner that was very characteristic of mech who got hurt in this fashion!

More blood poured from the biomech than ever before as the Valkyrie Redeemer cruelly twisted the knife before pulling it out. It was as if the Hexer mech delighted in paying back the suffering it endured at the hands of the formerly-hairy mech.

It was the female mech's turn to torment its opponent!

As an experienced mech pilot, Mireilla Linschoten was not stupid enough to let down her guard. While the Frokyn belatedly recovered and attempted to put up a guard, the Valkyrie Redeemer was already a step ahead.

Even though the Frokyn descended from the air in an attempt to generate some distance from its opponent, the Valkyrie Redeemer was already a step ahead. The metallic mech dove and maneuvered around until it was able to stab its knife straight into the flight system of the organic machine!

The Valkyrie Redeemer acted as if it had gone psychotic as it repeatedly stabbed the rear of the Frokyn in rapid tempo!

In order to make sure the bleeding mech wasn't able to escape, the feminine mech sn.a.k.e.d its legs around the Frokyn's torso and rode the biomech's backside as if it was a mount!

Stab! Stab! Stab!

Over a dozen different stabs pierced the Frokyn's inadequately-protected rear. The flesh and bone that made up its rear hardly posed an obstacle against the Valkyrie Redeemer's repeat strikes.

Mireilla Linschoten had piloted the Frokyn just before. She still remembered much of its properties when she interfaced with her mech, including where all of the critical parts were located and how she could damage them from the rear!

This knowledge came in very handy at this time as her seemingly thoughtless attacks were actually premeditated. Each stab struck a critical component or cut through some vital connections!

The sheer amount of purple blood flooding through the stab wounds was indicative of how much suffering the Frokyn must be going through!

In desperation, the biomech attempted to swing its biometal axe over its head so that its blade was able to chop into the mech that had glued itself onto its back, but the Valkyrie Redeemer merely reared its torso back, causing the attempt to fail!

After suffering so many small but critical blows, the Frokyn already lost a lot of strength. Its flight system had already been knocked offline so the two entangled mechs were rapidly approaching the surface.

Everyone looked at the victorious Valkyrie Redeemer. Wielding a modest blade that was covered in blood, the damaged mech looked as if it wasn't done yet! The Hexer mech looked as if it was eager to emasculate another organic machine!

"This is why mechs need codpieces!" Vincent winced as he moved his hands over his l.a.p.

[The ninth match has concluded.] The announcer stated in a neutral voice. [Mr. Larkinson has achieved an upset. The Valkyrie Redeemer's unanticipated success brings the score to 6-3 in favor of our foreign guest.]

The response to this result was graver than the previous one. It took a long time for the audience to process what had happened, but once they did, they became swept by denial and anger!

"This can't be! The Frokyn was clearly in a better shape than the Valkyrie Redeemer, so why did our biomech lose?!"

"What the hell was Dr. Navarro doing?! Why didn't he regrow the Frokyn's hair? Did he actually think that stupid net launcher was going to work?"

"Our current record looks awful! Our score has already gone negative and it's not possible for us to recover anymore. At most, we can make our defeat more graceful if we manage to win the final match."

"What good will that do? And didn't you forget that we lost the previous heavy artillery mech bout? Dr. Navarro's last biomech will have to fight an uphill battle if it wants to win."

"It's hopeless!"

The people's faith in Dr. Navarro's abilities had sunk to a low point at this time.

Previously, the Lifers watching the matches were still able to believe that the biomech designer was putting up a decent fight. After all, the outcomes of the latest matches fell in line with the past. The mechs that won the previous time also achieved another victory today.

The Valkyrie Redeemer broke this pattern. The Frokyn effectively countered the metallic mech in their first confrontation, but during the second one, the biomech was no longer able to grow out its hair for some reason.

Without its absurdly-effective hair, the Frokyn wasn't that impressive anymore. It fought like any other biomech, but that was not enough to prevail against the Valkyrie Redeemer.

The most emotional and unstable Lifers lashed out again as a result! While the people who were spectating the design duel in person remained calm under the suppression of the guards, elsewhere the citizens of the LRA vented their anger in many different ways!

Some shouted in the air as if they tried to warp reality with their words!

Others started to abuse maintenance beetles left and right in an attempt to channel their frustration!

Lots of beetles got kicked, stabbed or crushed as angry mobs of people descended upon these innocent creatures to get their taste of blood!

The authorities largely allowed the mobs to do so. In fact, more beetles flooded from the tree buildings and conveniently turned themselves into targets.

As long as the mobs were preoccupied with trashing cheap, disposable beetles, they weren't doing something worse!

More fires started to break out. While automatic fire suppression measures quickly doused these potential hazards, there were some instances where creative firestarters managed to ignite a number of vehicles!

Fortunately, no one launched any powerful attacks or detonated any explosives, but the authorities received worrying signals.

The responses from all of the people on the VIP platform were mostly grave. The conservatives such as Master Cline all smelled trouble on the horizon.

However, those who aligned themselves with the opposition did not seem too troubled by the latest turn of events.

Master Brixton did not even bother to put on a facade. The taunting grin on his face rubbed a lot of adherents of the conservative faction the wrong way!

"See what your complacency has led us to?" The old man passionately spoke. "Look at how fragile our people are. The false pride that you have instilled into their heads has kept them docile but also blind to reality. We were never as strong as we thought. Our biomech industry has stagnated for so long that not even our foremost professionals are

able to pull themselves out of the pit they dug. Now look at us! Once we are stripped of our delusions, our true faces are revealed!"

Master Cline sent a very sharp glance towards the leader of the combinants. "Master Brixton, the design duel has yet to come to an end. Let us wait until the winner has been decided before we talk any further."

"Heh, I hope you will make the correct choice by that time and shed all pretenses, my friend."

After this public exchange ended, the Masters no longer spoke to each other.

"I don't know what is going on, but I feel less and less comfortable at the moment." Venerable Jannzi quietly said. "We should leave."

Ves shook his head. "We can't leave. I'm one of the main stars of the show. My absence is inexcusable. I'm sure there will be people who will attempt to stop us if we try to get away. We have to wait until the final act has ended before we can exit the stage."

The contradictions between the conservatives and the other factions had become more blatant. Though the conservatives dominated this viewing platform, those who held other viewpoints had grown bolder all of a sudden!

Strangely enough, Dr. Navarro schooled his face into a neutral expression. Even though he previously showed different emotions, the fall of the Frokyn caused him to wall himself up. He did not reply to anyone attempting to speak with him and even his student Yelkin seemed to disappear from his mind!

Ves didn't know what to make of it. It was Dr. Navarro who originally led them to this path. It was the biomech designer who took the initiative to propose a duel to determine which mechs were more alive.

Any passionate mech designer who cared about his work and the principles behind them should feel despair at this point.

Yet despite losing six out of nine matches, Dr. Navarro did not exhibit any of the pessimism of his fellow conservatives.

"Strange."

Ves didn't try to puzzle this situation out any further. He just wanted the final match to conclude as quickly as possible so that he could end this stupid show and leave this stupid planet as soon as possible.

He had long lost his fascination for Prosperous Hill VI! The people who lived on this planet were way too preoccupied with frivolous matters! A lot of people were fighting and dying in a neighboring star sector, but the citizens of the LRA were already starting to stir up trouble amongst themselves.

After several announcements attempted to quell the unrest, the last match was about to start. Perhaps the conservatives wanted the design duel to end before it got any worse, but the opposition didn't want that to happen!

At this time, two different heavy mechs stepped onto the field.

The Transcendent Punisher looked like a bad second-hand mech. Its worn and patched exterior and its hastily-repaired legs only partially restored the defensive strength of the heavy artillery mech.

Its weapons looked fully intact though. Ves paid special attention to the armament systems. He knew that offense was its strongest trait and the quality it needed to rely on to prevail once again.

With six fully-functional cannons, the Transcendent Punisher was able to hit just as hard as in its previous match!

"Now let's see what it has to face."

The Swarm Monarch looked a bit different from before. Its exoskeleton adopted a slightly different shape as the areas that had been patched up looked a little incongruous.

Six cannons were mounted on its back this time. Two of them looked like they were positron beam cannons, but the other four were mounted at the same angles as the drilling beetle cannons.

Will the Swarm Monarch launch dangerous insects at the Transcendent Punisher once again? What if they fired conventional explosive shells?

With how shaky the upper side of the Transcendent Punisher looked, Ves was worried that his mech might not be able to endure the bombardment!

[The final match is about to begin. The Swarm Monarch must fight to preserve Dr. Navarro's honor. Since the Valkyrie Redeemer was able to overcome its barriers, the Swarm Monarch might do the improbable as well!]

Even though the situation seemed bleak, winning the last match might do much to soothe the Lifers! Many important figures hoped that Dr. Navarro invested enough time and effort into the Swarm Monarch to alter its strength.

[Begin!]

Chapter 2808 - Beetle Mech

The two mechs tore into each other as soon as the match commenced!

Explosions and other loud sounds rippled through the air as the two artillery mechs unleashed all of their weapons at the same time!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The partially-healed Swarm Monarch immediately got blasted by positron beams and gauss cannon rounds. The combination of pure kinetic force and energy damage caused the Swarm Monarch's tough exterior to weaken and deform.

Compared to before, this process proceeded faster due to the Swarm Monarch's incomplete healing process. It incurred a lot of frontal damage last time so the massive biomech was still full of structural weaknesses!

Since Ilse Lieberman experienced those blows first-hand three days ago, she knew exactly where to aim her guns! She didn't even need to rely on any foresight from the Transcendent Punisher to dismantle the Swarm Monarch in the most efficient manner possible!

However, Gwineth Ulser had the same thoughts in mind. She still recalled all of the areas where the Transcendent Punisher had almost been breached and adjusted her aim to target those sections.

The two forward cannons both unleashed positron beams that were nearly identical in performance to the cannons mounted on the Transcendent Punisher.

Its rear guns were different, though. Instead of lobbing living beetles at the enemy mech, they launched heavy shells that exploded in flames and heat upon impact!

"Incendiary shells!" Ves leaned forward. "This is troublesome."

If the Ylvainan mech was in a pristine state, then its heat isolation capabilities should still be good. Even if a massive barbecue took place onto its frame, its internals should still be relatively cool for a time.

Yet that wasn't the case anymore! All of the drilling and other damage incurred by the Transcendent Punisher permanently weakened its structure. Even if Ves hastily patched it up with replacement armor or filler material, the mech's internals were much more susceptible to external influences.

One example of that is lots of flames burning on its surface!

The energy-dense propellant used to heat up the Transcendent Punisher was specially designed to release as much thermal energy as possible!

Even though its armor plating wasn't about to melt into a puddle anytime soon, much of the heat generated on the surface still transferred inwards, causing the internals closest to the surface to experience difficulties.

Not every component was designed to operate when subjected to excess heat! Many parts had different tolerances to heat, but there were always a few who were more vulnerable to it than others.

Transcendent Punisher was already feeling the pressure! The mech didn't possess much countermeasures against incendiaries. The anti-beetle guns that Ves had jury-rigged onto the mech were completely useless against this threat.

The artillery mech on fire was on a timeline!

Could it last long enough to take down its opponent, or would the metallic mech fall over after its internals were no longer able to function?

The two mechs didn't sit still. Both of them were hexapods, and both utilized their legs as best as possible.

They didn't circle around this time. Instead, the Transcendent Punisher slowly crawled forward. Ilse Lieberman knew it was a lot more troublesome to lob shells at an enemy at close range!

In the worst case scenario, the incendiary shells fired by the Swarm Monarch might land on top of its starting point!

However, getting closer was not necessarily good in other ways. It became more difficult to concentrate attacks on a single point as the Swarm Monarch deliberately rotated its bulk in order to present a less-damaged side to the incoming firepower.

The Swarm Monarch employed the same strategy as the last match! Instead of utilizing drilling beetles, it instead utilized incendiary shells.

The sight was drastic. The Transcendent Punisher looked terrible as if was constantly covered in flames. Its upper layers even started to glow red due to all of the heat they absorbed!

"Can we win?"

"Maybe."

"It looks better than before. Why doesn't the Swarm Monarch keep its distance, though?"

The Transcendent Punisher slowly closed the distance, but the Swarm Monarch wasn't even attempting to stop that. It could have crawled backwards at roughly the same pace, but instead it was turning and weaving from side to side to spread the incoming firepower over the widest possible surface area.

Ilse Lieberman became a bit suspicious of this. An artillery mech never allowed a hostile mech to get closer under normal circumstances.

She didn't stop her current actions, though. Her mech constantly fired its guns at the Swarm Monarch, which slowly wore away its partially-healed exoskeleton.

Most notable, the protection at the top also broke down at a steady pace! This was where the Swarm Monarch had been breached the last time. If the Transcendent Punisher managed to open a gap here, it might be able to achieve victory in the same manner as last time!

Yet as the two mechs came awfully close, the Swarm Monarch no longer pounded the Transcendent Punisher.

The biomech incurred too many hits at this time. Its exoskeleton had already crumbled in multiple places. The Swarm Monarch already suffered some minor internal damage. Though none of it knocked out anything too critical, it had become clear that it might very well fall before the Transcendent Punisher finally succumbed from all of the heat.

Yet the beetle mech was not down for the count just yet. Even though its frontal side looked battered beyond recognition, it still managed to keep standing!

"If it's about to do something special, then this is the time." Ves whispered.

What he predicted came to pass just a few seconds later!

Large portions of the Swarm Monarch's organic frame suddenly fell apart! Its huge exoskeleton parted and the damaged shells at the back split apart in order to reveal an opening.

Everything that was made of flesh was being drained at the same time, causing the damaged exoskeleton to resemble fossilized remains.

All of that energy and nutrients were being channeled to the rear side of the biomech. Underneath where the rear shells used to be, a strange shape gradually emerged from all of the dried flesh and other icky substances.

"Is that.. another mech?!" Ves was stunned. "What a crazy idea!"

The technical challenges involved with putting a mech within a mech was very complicated. He couldn't believe a Journeyman was capable of implementing it without seriously compromising the battle effectiveness of both modes.

"It's so small though." Vincent remarked. "It's like a child compared to other mechs. Even light mechs aren't as small!"

Venerable Jannzi concurred with Vincent for once. "The c.o.c.kpit must be taking up a lot of space."

That was undoubtedly true, but the beetle shape of the mini mech made it a bit more tolerable.

As soon as the ultralight biomech had charged itself, it jumped out of the husk of the Swarm Monarch and landed right behind the Transcendent Punisher!

"Oh no!"

While the flames burning on the Transcendent Punisher's surface was incredibly threatening, the danger wasn't acute.

This was different!

No artillery mech liked to be approached from the rear!

The Transcendent Punisher swiveled its guns as fast as possible, but it was not possible to train all of its cannons towards an enemy from the rear.

Unfortunately, only its secondary pulse cannons were able to adopt the correct angle! The other guns weren't capable of firing straight backs. The Transcendent Punisher had no choice but to turn around in order to put its other weapons to use, but it took many seconds to rotate a heavy mech!

At this time, the slim beetle mech that emerged from the Swarm Monarch started to skitter forward.

Unlike its progenitor, the downsized beetle mech moved remarkably quickly. The ultralight biomech reached the rear of the Transcendent Punisher in no time!

The secondary beetle mech already looked a bit beat up. The pulse cannons might be weak, but the ultralight biomech hardly boasted any protection!

Unfortunately for the Transcendent Punisher, its pulse cannons weren't able to target the beetle mech any longer now that it had gotten this close!

After a few seconds, the beetle mech finally revealed its arsenal.

"Is that.. a drill?" Vincent widened his eyes.

A drill extended straight from the miniature beetle's mouth! Compared to the main weapons of the drilling beetles from the previous match, this one looked substantially more threatening!

The ultralight beetle then proceeded to do something remarkable. It jumped and clamped its legs to the backside of the Transcendent Punisher!

Although the rear of the mech was covered in flames as well, it was not as intense as in the front. Perhaps Gwineth Ulser deliberately did this in order to prepare for this unorthodox move.

The Transcendent Punisher did not take kindly to the parasite that had climbed onto its b.u.t.t. The mech lowered its main body to the ground, but the angle adopted by the beetle was just high enough to avoid getting crushed!

"Damn!" Ves cursed.

He could already tell it was impossible to shake off the beetle mech in this fashion. The six legs of the Transcendent Punishers weren't particularly long or versatile. The mech was never designed to traverse mountainous terrain or tilt its main body at extreme angles.

This meant that it wasn't able to maneuver itself in a way that could threaten the beetle mech. The only real solution was to run up to the side of the dueling ring and attempt to squeeze the ultralight biomech against the surface of an energy shield!

The Transcendent Punisher attempted to do just that. It slowly scurried over to the edge of the dueling ring, but its opponent was already launching its attack!

"That's nasty!" Vincent looked sicked, and so did many other spectators.

The beetle mech's mouth drill was spinning rapidly as it attempted to bore open a hole in the rear of the Transcendent Punisher.

The Ylvainan mech couldn't do anything to stop the beetle mech! The Transcendent Punisher was like a warship. It could unleash devastating firepower at longer distances, but at point-blank range, none of the main armaments were able to turn their muzzles inward. They were physically unable to angle in a way that they were able to fire at themselves!

This was both a safety precaution and an inherent design limitation. The theory was that artillery mechs should be able to rely on other mechs to get rid of threats at close range.

While that mostly worked out in practice, this time was different! The Transcendent Punisher was all alone and despite the ultralight beetle mech's fragility, none of its powerful cannons were able to target the cleverly-positioned parasite!

Ves didn't know how Dr. Navarro could implement such a powerful drill in a mech that was so small and weak, but it didn't take long before a cavity opened up in the rear of the Transcendent Punisher.

The metallic mech was in big trouble at this time!

The beetle mech retracted its drill and began to unleash its next weapon.

Hundreds of tiny beetles poured out of the organic mech. They automatically crawled through the gap before proceeding to wreak havoc inside!

The Transcendent Punisher may look relatively stable from the outside, but hundreds of infiltrators were slowly beginning to dismantle it from the inside!

Ves could practically feel the pain of the mech as it was enduring enough torture to render a human mad. He sympathised with his mech, but nothing could be done about the situation.

He jerked upwards a bit. "Wait. That might not be the case."

His eyes narrowed as he grew a bit thoughtful. He implemented various surprises in each of his mechs. Even though Ves hadn't felt inclined to activate them, seeing his mech in so much agony made him feel frustrated.

No mech should undergo this level of torture, least of all one of his own!

Chapter 2809 - Spiritual Platform

The final match was a spectacle!

After suffering multiple defeats, the last biomech to enter the arena finally showed a lot of fight!

The Swarm Monarch was the heftiest biomech to take part in the design duel. Its mass, size and other parameters granted it much greater capacity than any other mech.

Usually, heavy artillery mechs utilized much of that capacity in favor of increasing its defenses, mounting bigger weapons, stuffing more energy cells and ammunition inside its frame and so on. Heavy mechs were able to bear a lot of parts and supplies, but they needed it because they weren't able to fight without all of these goods!

Heavy mechs largely eschewed mobility in order to raise their other strength at a level that was unattainable by medium mechs. They broke the size and mass ceilings of smaller machines in order to provide great value in a single unit.

Some mech theorists predicted that heavy mechs would become the only viable weight class of humanity. This was because heavy mechs were capable of packing much more weapons and armor than other mechs.

Yet reality proved otherwise.

They were slow and lumbering, making them incapable of performing scouting functions and other roles that demanded speed.

They were easy to bombard from a distance because of their inability to displace themselves fast enough.

They were also easily exploited by swifter mechs that could quickly get close and attack their vulnerable rear!

Heavy artillery mechs happened to be the most representative mech types of this weight class, just as how light skirmishers defined light mechs as a whole.

That meant that any heavy artillery mech, including the Transcendent Punisher, suffered from all of the aforementioned weaknesses!

Ves designed the Transcendent Punisher with the Larkinson Clan in mind. He did not invest too much in its ability to fend off melee attackers or light skirmishers because that was not its role.

Heavy artillery mechs excelled at unleashing devastating firepower at medium to long ranges, so their entire designs should strengthen this specialty.

Perhaps such a mech would be better suited for the arena, but in a battlefield situation many mech forces would rather have a specialized model!

This was why the Transcendent Punisher was suffering right now. Any escort mech could have easily dealt with the ultralight beetle mech that had emerged from the corpse of the Swarm Monarch and jumped onto the rear of the Ylvainan mech!

In fact, even a third-class mech would have been able to defeat this tiny ultralight mech with ease!

Yet due to the Transcendent Punisher's high degree of specialization, the mech was comically unable to fend off the parasite!

With over a hundred beetles crawling through the interior of the Transcendent Punisher, the Ylvainan mech was already starting to lose functionality.

Its rear legs even started to stiffen up, signalling that the control or power transfer to this section was under serious threat!

Nothing Ilse Lieberman could come up with would work. If she had a choice, she wanted to separate or blast apart the rear third of her hexapod mech, but the Transcendent Punisher simply didn't work that way.

Implementing such a function would not only demand a drastic rework of the Transcendent Punisher design, but also take up needless capacity that could have been spent on thicker armor or stronger cannons!

The mech was never designed to function as a self-sufficient unit, so it needed external help in order to solve its current predicament.

Since this was a duel, that wasn't possible.

Yet Ves had other means. Spiritual means. While he was pretty sure that he was not supposed to intervene directly in the match, he didn't feel as if there was anything wrong with his choice.

Just like in the previous case where he manually switched the glows of his Bright Warriors, he was only activating something his mech was already capable of doing. The design duel was still about pitting his work against the work of Dr. Navarro. Ves merely stretched the definition a bit so that it encompassed a wider net of spiritual phenomena.

By borrowing this warped logic, Ves' conscience remained fully intact.

He wasn't cheating. Cheating was trying to do something extra that was not supposed to happen.

What Ves was doing instead was utilizing his existing work to a greater degree!

When his mechs performed normally, they were actually holding back their potential. What Ves was about to do would liberate them and allow them to perform to their fullest!

The logic was simple. Since external influences such as design spirits were part of the strength of the Transcendent Punisher, what if another external influence came into play?

Ves just had a very interesting thought about Dr. Navarro's work.

"The Swarm Monarch relies on organic drones in order to enhance its performance." He muttered.

Mechs like these were not common, but they were useful in many situations, particularly non-combat ones.

Yet there was a good reason why drones hadn't dominated human warfare. Their dependence on algorithms and AIs made them vulnerable to subversion. It was a lot easier to hack a drone than to hack a mech pilot!

Of course, this happened to be a scenario where Dr. Navarro felt extremely confident about deploying the Swarm Monarch.

Perhaps he might have been forced to exhibit a lot more vigilance if he squared off against another biomech designer, but Ves was different! He didn't know anything about biotechnology!

For this reason, there was no way the Transcendent Punisher possessed any countermeasures against organic drones. The living beetles that were wreaking havoc inside the frame of the mech were merrily able to go about their day because there was virtually no chance that the mech possessed some kind of organic hacking module that was capable of subverting their bioprogramming!

In fact, the Transcendent Punisher didn't possess any virtual security countermeasures against mechanical drones either. Other mechs were supposed to solve this issue, but Ves belatedly realized he had yet to design a mech that excelled at cyber warfare.

"Well, that's another mech I'll have to add to my list." He quietly promised.

Hacker mechs existed under the category of auxiliary mechs. While they usually weren't armed, their frames were packed with auxiliary modules that were geared towards codebreaking, jamming, communication, sabotage and other cyber warfare functions.

While most hacker mechs weren't capable of taking over control of drones on the battlefield, they were usually good enough to disable the small machines or at least debilitate them so that their threat was reduced.

Most sh.i.p.s possessed numerous powerful security systems that made it hell for boarding parties to advance through their hulls. Hacker mechs could interfere with many of these defensive measures and increase the odds of capturing a ship intact.

Of course, there were many other areas where hacker mechs could play a useful role. They were also useful in a defensive capacity. They could be employed to guard a unit against hostile hackers or assist in detecting sabotage.

While hacker mechs weren't all that common in the Yeina Star Cl.u.s.ter, Ves knew they were much more common in the prosperous parts of human space!

In any case, the Transcendent Punisher was not a hacker mech, but that didn't mean that it was helpless against the saboteur beetles.

Ves recently realized that the spiritual foundation of his mechs served as a base that allowed it to channel the presence and abilities of other spiritual entities.

Although this sounded rather obvious, the statement was actually a lot more broad than he initially realized!

As Ves concentrated his mind and reached out to the Transcendent Punisher that was currently in great pain, he began to do something remarkable.

He did not reach out to his other design spirits. While entities such as the Golden Cat, the Solemn Guardian, the Superior Mother and Qilanxo were all powerful, they excelled in different areas.

What Ves wanted to accomplish was something that no other design spirit was capable of doing!

"I'll have to do it myself this time."

Although it sounded crazy, this time Ves utilized himself as a design spirit!

What he did to accomplish this was indescribable. He immersed himself into the spiritual foundation of the mech in the dueling arena and integrated with it to a degree.

He didn't need to become a permanent part of it. He just wanted to get inside long enough to do his job.

The process proceeded a lot more smoothly than he thought. He expected to encounter difficulties because he wasn't actually a design spirit, but it turned out that he was quite suited for this purpose!

"Makes sense. I've created this concept. Everything flows from me. As the progenitor, how can I lack control over my own creations?"

Ves did not entangle himself over this question any further. By adopting a model where Ves treated himself as a design spirit, he began to integrate with the Transcendent Punisher on an unprecedented level!

He began to receive all kinds of vague and profound spiritual input, but Ves wasn't interested in all of this irrelevant data. He instantly filtered them all out and tried to focus on his only purpose.

Using the Transcendent Punisher as a platform, he extended his spiritual influence and sought out every form of life that was currently crawling inside the mech.

Due to the very limited range, Ves easily managed to 'sense' the saboteur beetles chewing through power lines, drilling apart vulnerable components and performing other forms of mischief.

"STOP!" Ves spiritually boomed at these critters!

The beetles didn't listen to his spiritual command.

According to their bioprogramming, the beetles weren't supposed to listen to enemy commands. They were programmed to only obey signals that transmitted the right code at the right frequencies.

Ves didn't know all of that, but his manner of communication was a lot more direct and intimate. He assumed he'd be able to bypass most of the security measures programmed in the beetles, but it appeared the situation was a lot more complicated than he thought.

This was his first time, after all. He was bound to make a mistake.

After a quick examination, he figured out the fundamental problem.

The beetles weren't sentient.

This was a bit remarkable because the beetles were actually quite intelligent. This was by design because they needed to know how mechs worked and how to sabotage them in the most efficient manner possible. They had to learn how to recognize every mech part and be able to make a list of priorities that ranked important and more vulnerable parts higher than ones that were more difficult and not as vital to the functioning of the mech.

This gave Ves an opening.

It would have been a lot more difficult to solve this problem if the saboteur beetles possessed tiny brain capacities and slow thought processes, but this was not the case. The beetles might look small relative to mechs, but they were actually quite sizable when compared to human bodies!

Since they were comparable in size to humans, were they able to think like humans as well?

"Let's find out."

Ves had never done this before, but he was confident in his theories.

He created numerous spiritual products throughout his career. He was familiar with creating life where none existed before.

What Ves intended to do in this instance was not that different from this process. Instead of creating a new sentient lifeform from scratch, he intended to impart sentience to life that already existed!

"How exciting!" He tried his best to contain his enthusiasm.

Ves was actually thinking of performing a spontaneous experiment during an event that was not only viewed by hundreds of thousands of Lifers, but also witnessed by an uncountable amount of other humans!

He simply couldn't resist!

Chapter 2810 - Imparting Thought

One of the most important ways to distinguish sentient life from non-sentient life was the ability to resist instinctual behavior.

The main reason why humans were able to dominate Old Earth and rule over every other form of life on their origin planet was because of their capability of higher thought!

Since Ves constantly worked with different forms of spirituality, he began to develop his own thoughts on sentience.

According to his personal understanding, sentience was a higher quality of thinking that Humans were able to defy their instincts.

What did this mean?

It meant that sentient lifeforms were able to resist their biological impulses! This allowed them to pursue greater purposes that instinctual creatures would never be able to perform!

For example, Clixie did not automatically hunt down and eat every pet bird or mouse whenever she was hungry.

Qilanxo was able to get over the fact that the Flagrant Swordmaidens killed her mate, upended her entire life and basically initiated the events that led to the end of Aeon Corona VII's entire ecosystem.

Ves was able to hold on to his principles and remain honest even when he was presented by tempting offers.

All of these examples and more signified how sentient beings were able to use their higher functioning to override the programming of their own species!

Of course, that didn't mean that sentient thinking was able to override instinctual impulses entirely. Instead, the two usually maintained a balance. This was a very complicated discussion that was best left to exobiologists and other experts.

What Ves cared about was stopping the saboteur beetles from wrecking the Transcendent Punisher.

As long as the beetles no longer threatened his mech, the ultralight beetle mech lost its strongest offensive weapon!

Ves keenly recognized that this small backup biomech did not possess a lot of solutions. It was more of a glorified mech c.o.c.kpit that was able to fight when the main mech was no longer able to fight.

"Let's see how I can do this."

If Ves wanted to impart sentience in creatures that were explicitly designed to act as drones, then he had to add something that they didn't originally possess.

He had to inject them with spiritual energy.

He considered various ideas and decided to try out the simplest solution first.

His Spirituality reached out and tried to affect the beetles. Ves exerted himself a bit more in order to impart spiritual energy into their heads.

Ves had a feeling that most of his spiritual energy strayed away. Hardly any of it 'caught' on to the beetles, which meant that this was an incredibly wasteful and inefficient process.

However, Ves didn't care too much. As long as at least a portion of his spiritual energy managed to sink into the nearly non-existent minds of the beetles, then he was able to proceed.

Interestingly enough, his spiritual energy encountered remarkably little rejection. Even non-sentient creatures should have possessed the ability to resist foreign influences, but perhaps there was something about his own Life domain or his affinity with other lifeforms that caused the beetles to lower their resistance.

It could also be that they were designed to obey specific instructions and that Ves inadvertently took advantage of a loophole.

Whatever the case, Ves flooded the minds of the beetles with his spiritual energy.

The moment any of his energy entered their minds, they immediately went to work. Perhaps other forms of spiritual energy would wreak havoc to the mental capacities of the organic products, but this was different!

Ves dedicated his entire career towards fostering synergy. He possessed a gentler domain than other mech designers and he was able to achieve an unprecedented degree of cooperation with many forms of life, whether it was mechs or exobeasts.

The saboteur beetles weren't all that different from the lifeforms that Ves had cooperated with before.

As his mind touched these simple creatures, he felt a rigid purpose in each of them. Their entire lives revolved around performing their narrow mission.

"How sad."

There was hardly anything in their minds except how to best destroy mechs and other complicated machinery from within!

The only other functions they possessed were all related to their primary mission in some way.

They were able to procreate, but that was only because this made it easier to maintain a healthy stock of saboteur beetles.

The beetles were able to fight against hostile organic creatures or bots if any of them hindered their mission.

The disposable insects didn't live to old age. Instead, they died exactly 262 days after they were born, because that was the point where their organic functions began to deteriorate. Rather than waste precious space and resources, the older beetles might as well die off and make room for fresher replacements!

Other than that, there was very little about them that signified that there was anything present! Even their eating times and bathroom breaks were regularized according to their biological clocks!

The more Ves learned about the beetles through exploring the essence of their lives, the more he became disgusted at what he saw.

This was not life!

This was a perversion of life!

Even if they were humble beetles, these creatures of life were slaves to their own bioprogramming. Heartless beast designers discarded everything in their genes that

conformed to nature and inserted artificial instructions that left no room for free will or independent expression!

While Ves understood the reasoning behind this approach, his heart was very conflicted!

Not everything had to be sentient. Bots were tools that people used to perform specific jobs. There was no reason to impart them with any higher function.

The organic products should be no different, but Ves felt they should be treated differently than bots!

It was a very odd feeling. As a classical mech designer who grew up in a relatively mundane state, he always grew up with the idea that machines should be lifeless. Living critters deserved to be treated with more respect, although no one minded if someone swatted a fly or crushed a bug.

Ves deviated from this orthodoxy by expanding his definition of life to include mechs. In the right circumstances, machines could become sentient as well, and that had the potential to make them a lot more useful than other products!

Since mechanical machines could become alive, why not organic machines?

It was an argument that Ves hesitated to accept. He did not implicitly reject the notion, but he feared the consequences of embracing it. Continuing with this train of thought would lead to a slippery slope where Ves might eventually consider every object to be alive!

He shook his head. "I don't need to deal with these questions. I need to hurry up before the saboteur beetles finish the job!"

Ves did not hesitate any further and tried to impart sentience into the beetles. He actively encouraged his spiritual energy to contaminate the minds of the beetles.

This went remarkably easy, but that was a given considering not much was there in the first place. While his spiritual energy originally wasn't able to root in the minds of the non-sentient creatures, the story was different once they became contaminated!

Since his spiritual energy possessed a very strong life attribute, the minds of the beetles embraced this attribute and everything else that came along with it. A mysterious process took place where Ves felt as if the insects slowly elevated themselves.

Unfortunately, due to the limitations of his method, spiritual energy and the mental capacity of the beetles, not that much had changed. The creatures only felt slightly smarter than before.

This was enough. Ves halted his current actions and issued his command once again.

"STOP."

This time, the saboteur beetles responded. Each of them halted no matter what they were doing.

While the beetles were technically required to continue their actions, they accepted the spiritual command that Ves had issued!

The beetles weren't suppose to harbor any feelings, but somehow they felt reverent towards the progenitor that had uplifted them to a higher degree of existence.

No exobiologist or beast designer had ever heard of this! If they learned what Ves had done, they would have captured him and taken him away in order to learn how to master this remarkable ability!

Fortunately, all of this took place in a fairly subtle manner. The mechs in the arena were so far away that not even Ves was able to pick up the spiritual fluctuations. He was only able to extend his senses by latching on to one of his own creations.

Anyway, time was running out. Just because the beetles had stopped didn't mean that the Transcendent Punisher was in the clear.

With the incendiaries continuing to inflict damage on the Ylvainan mech, Ves had to do something to defeat the opponent!

"Kill." He mentally commanded.

He imparted an image of the ultralight beetle mech while he conveyed this command.

For a moment, the saboteur beetles struggled. Their newly-born sentience warred against their bioprogramming.

They weren't supposed to attack their source! Several safeguards came to life in order to prevent the organic products from turning against their own side!

Ves merely repeated his actions.

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill."

The constant repetition seemed to help. Eventually, the beetles finally defeated a portion of their programmed instincts! Every impulse related to preventing them from attacking their own side had temporarily died, allowing the beetles to see their own allies as enemies, if only for a moment!

Like mind-controlled beasts, the beetles all scurried out of the cavity of the Transcendent Punisher and quickly began to attack the mech that originally carried them within its belly!

"What is happening?!"

"Have the beetles been hacked?!"

"This is impossible!"

Ves quietly retracted his influence and pretended as if he wasn't responsible. He tried to act as surprised as everyone else.

Hundreds of saboteur beetles crawled over the frame of the secondary biomech!

While the subverted attacker bugs weren't very big, their mandibles were surprisingly sharp and were easily capable of digging through the exterior of any ultralight mech!

It only took a dozen seconds for the first beetle to chew through the thin and fragile exoskeleton of the beetle. The internal organs were not even reinforced, so they succumbed in an instant as soon as the beetles tore into the vulnerable flesh.

There was nothing the beetle mech could do to fend off the attacking creatures!

None of the commands transmitted by the small mech succeeded in asserting control over the saboteur beetles. Even the command that forced the beetles to commit suicide failed to produce any effects!

As the mech was rapidly being chewed apart, the officials couldn't hold back any longer.

A strong gravitic wave emanated from the arena that pushed all of the out-of-control beetles away from their current target!

Another forcefully doused the flames on top of the heavily-damaged Transcendent Punisher.

Energy shields came to life to prevent both sides from attacking each other any further.

[The final match of the second phase has ended! On account of what has happened, we have no choice but to declare the Transcendent Punisher to be the winner.]

If the match hadn't ended, the saboteur beetles could have easily breached into the tiny c.o.c.kpit where Gwineth Ulser piloted the beetle mech!

While many people were able to realize this, the drastic turn of events was too shocking for everyone to accept.

Why did the saboteur beetles rebel?

Weren't they close to defeating the Transcendent Punisher?

The Ylvainan mech was well on its way to losing before this happened.

The audience couldn't accept this last-minute turnaround!

"HE CHEATED!"

"THIS DESIGN DUEL IS A FARCE!"

"WE WILL NOT BE HUMILIATED!"