

Chapter 30: Qualifiers

Bentheim hosted the Young Tigers Exhibition in a large, multi-building convention complex built for the purpose. It occupied a gigantic amount of prime real estate that offered plenty of space to the tourists and mech enthusiasts who visited the event. Naturally, the organizers treated mech pilot competition as the main event. The opening ceremony and the introduction of the star pilots commenced while the qualifiers of the mech design competition occurred in a smaller and much less crowded side building.

Before he did anything else, Ves checked his Status and noticed he finally accumulated 300 DP. With this amount, he immediately bought the Jury Rigging II sub-skill, which induced another minor headache for him. It made him get ready for the day a bit later than he thought. Even as he rushed his breakfast, he still had to sort out the strange way the System rearranged his brain.

"Time's almost up!" Captain Gillian called at the dining room. "Gather at the lobby of the hotel."

Ves left his gem cat in his hotel room this time. It was not appropriate for him to bring Lucky along as he competed. Not just because pets weren't allowed, but also due to the possibility of cheating.

So he came to the qualifiers alone. Compared to the festive bombast of the main event, the mech designer competition was a subdued event that attracted only a fraction of the crowd. Most of those attending were friends and family of the mech designers. The real crowd would show up tomorrow, when only the eight best competitors came up on stage.

"Ves! Wow man, nice to see you!" A chubby young man with flaring pink hair spotted Ves and came over with a cheerful smile. "Man, we haven't been in touch ever since we graduated. It's like you fell into a black hole."

Ves smiled and bumped his former classmate with his fist. "Hey Carlos. I've been having some trouble at home. Starting your own mech design workshop is harder than it looks."

"You actually went through with it?! Nevermind the hardware, how are you even capable of paying for the licenses?"

"I had a little luck there." Ves proceeded to fill in most of what he did the last two months to his friend.

Carlos Shaw looked at Ves with a mixed expression. "I can't decide whether you're a lucky bastard or not. Only the dumbest grant institutes would give you a production license for the Caesar Augustus."

"Yeah, I'm still wracking my head around trying to reproduce it without getting bankrupt. That's also why I'm here. I have to find a customer for my first mech or else I'm in deep shit."

"I envy your independence. You should see what I do for a living nowadays. My dad got me a connection to the quality control department of a wholesaler here in Bentheim."

Carlos followed the path of many other mech designers who graduated from Rittersberg. They started at the bottom in large corporations. Like many other young graduates, Carlos' current job had nothing to do with mech design in any shape or way. The only thing the job required of him was to test the mechs that the company imported and note which parts were faulty.

Carlos might be an average mech designer, but with the things he learned in college he was an overqualified mech technician. Basically, any mech designer that hadn't studied from one of the renowned universities from at least a second-rate human state could forget about entering the world of real mech design.

The pathetic state of this industry in the Bright Republic was perhaps the biggest reason why it held this competition. The government wanted to stimulate a domestic mech industry, or at least not become too dependent on foreign trans-galactic corporations.

They chit-chatted a little more on what they experienced after graduation. After waiting in line, security confirmed their credentials and allowed them to enter the waiting room for contestants. Already about a hundred young mech designers sat on the comfortable seats or caught up with their friends and acquaintances.

Ves spotted a few more notable classmates, including the top student Patricia Schneider. Her parents worked at mid-level positions at Bosworth's, which might not sound impressive but represented the apex of local influence in the huge corporation. With Patricia's background, she should have been qualified to study at a prestigious university from a second-rate state. Instead, she stayed in the Bright Republic and attended the Rittersberg University of Technology like the other poor and untalented locals.

"How much do you think Patricia's chances are of winning first place?"

"About 20%." Carlos casually estimated. "I heard she somehow managed to catch the attention of a senior mech designer and became his apprentice. No idea who he is, but that's what people are telling me. They're even saying that the mech designer tutored Patricia during her studies in our college."

"No wonder she managed to score full marks in every theoretical test."

"Yeah, thank god she's not as good in practicals, or else she'd wipe the floor of this contest."

Rubbing his chin, Ves turned away from Patricia and looked at a couple of other contestants. A few held up their chests in a more confident posture, very

unlike a local student. They practically oozed the same level of superiority as potentates!

"I've spotted at least seven poncies who studied abroad at an elite university." Carlos said, as he was much more familiar with the people he studied with at Rittersberg. "I don't know who most of them are, but I do recognize that bastard Edwin McKinney."

The young man in question stood in front of a gaggle of admirers. His face oozed as much superiority as all the other elites in the room put together.

"What's his background?"

"He attended a university in the New Rubarth Empire. Dunno what's the name, but it's Rubarthan so who cares. Even though it's not one of the elite institutions at Estelon, he still prances about his prestige whenever he can. It's as if he's an enlightened gentleman bringing civilization to us savages."

Though it sounded ugly, the attention was not unwarranted. Even Ves felt the urge to pick Edwin's brains on the latest development in mechs. Studying mech design in a random NRE university was a wholly different concept than studying the same degree in a backwater country like the Bright Republic. Even the cheapest trash mechs the NRE fielded in their mech corps were at least two generations. Advanced technologies that sounded like fantasy to Ves was commonplace in those mighty first-rate states.

Ves felt a little regret he hadn't studied harder in his teenage years. If he worked hard and achieved better results back then, he might have received the opportunity to attend an elite institution in a second or first-rate state.

"We live in different worlds. It's no use associating with him. Better focus on your own career." Ves advised, though the real reason he acted nonchalant was because he could rely on the Mech Designer System to overcome these rivals in the future. It was an advantage he was certain not even the best

young mech designers possessed. With its power, he had a real shot at reaching the apex of mech design. All it took was time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Bright Republic's best and brightest!"

An attendant gestured the contestants to exit the waiting room. They arrived in front of a podium with all 150 contestants present. They bowed before a crowd of familiar and unfamiliar faces.

The presenter was a silver-haired man with a robust voice, likely another veteran of the Mech Corps. "As you can see, it would be too extravagant to allocate a personal workshop and quota of parts to each contestants. With the help of the convention center's holographic projectors, we can nevertheless save space and resources by conducting the qualifiers in a virtual reality with unprecedented realism."

A few groans escaped the lips of the contestants. They all wanted to play around with real mech parts and were hopeful this time was different.

"Now, just like last year, we wish to present our young mech designers with the challenge of designing and assembling a functioning mech from preselected parts. It is not a challenge to make a mech work, but it takes skill and talent to create the best mech from sub-optimal parts. Your task is to create a mech that will be tested in a standard 10 kilometer guantlet. Your mechs will all be test piloted by Hans over here,"

Another veteran mech pilot waved his hand from the side.

"-who is a strict professional and will treat any mech the same. Any questions?"

"How much time do we have?"

"Twelve hours from the start of the qualifiers."

"Are there any limits on weight class and weaponry?"

The presenter grinned. "Design any mech you want at your heart's content. We do not place any limits on the design so long it fits the definition of a mech. Do you want to stick four arms on a mech? Fine. Do you want to design a mech with its torso upside down? Go ahead. We specifically enlisted the aid of Hans because he is an all-rounder. He can pilot light, medium and heavy mechs with the same proficiency. He has plenty of experience piloting the most popular animal designs as well. He can kill the same amount of enemies whether he's given a sword or a rifle."

"Is he an AI?"

That elicited a bit of laughter from the people present.

"I can assure you, he is 100% homo sapiens."

That actually reassured Ves. His only advantage over the other contestants was his ability to actualize the X-Factor in a mech. If his finished product gets tested by an artificial intelligence, then he seriously doubted the emotionally lifeless software program would notice the difference.

"Very well, if there are no more questions, then please take your place at the designated areas. If you don't possess a tactile implant, then please wear the provided gloves in order to ensure you can move the holographic projections around."

Most mech designers had implanted their bodies with technologies that allowed them to touch holograms as if they were real items. It didn't convey the weight of the objects, but it functioned properly enough for today's purposes.

"On your mark. Get Set. GO!"

The empty spaces in front of each participant shimmered as a miniature pile of holographic parts and mech frames littered their view. It looked like someone took out a random pile of parts from a junkyard and put them in front of everyone. The only thing that separated it from junk was that the parts looked new and unused and that every participant had to work with the same parts. When Ves approached a power reactor and tried to touch it, the component enlarged until it reached its real proportions.

"So that's how they save space here."

It made sense to scale down the unused parts. Otherwise the entire venue ran out of space to hold 150 contestants if they all worked on full scale components. Ves looked around how others fared with the impending challenge. Most looked at the pile of junk and got briefly overwhelmed. Carlos scratched his head as he slowly went over his options. Patricia Schneider immediately chose a fairly standard humanoid internal frame and started sorting through different components to add to her new mech.

As for Edwin McKinney, the young elite chose a bold direction for his mech. He chose to pair a lightweight eagle-shaped mech with a robust flight system. Such a combination would result in a flyer that hovers between the light and medium weight class, which was not a good area to fall into. Ves suspected that Edwin had a few surprises in store.

As for his own design, he took a brief look at the components available. Most of the parts seemed outdated, roughly around two to four generations old. In Iron Spirit, these parts would be considered 3-star or 4-star parts, somewhat advanced for novice mech designers but not to the point of overwhelming them if they stuck to the simpler parts. The standard parts were all within his competence.

Instead of starting to pick the parts he preferred, Ves took a different approach. He studied Hans, the test pilot for his competition design, and

thought about the presenter's description of him. If Ves wanted to make it out of the qualifiers, he had to use his strengths, and that meant integrating the X-Factor into his design.

"It's a risk if I go this route. If I let my emotions instead of logic drive my design, then I won't make the most optimal choices. Other mechs will have better specs than mine."

Yet what does it matter if his mech performed worse than other mechs by 5% or so? Only the mechs that performed the best in the gauntlet made it through the qualifiers. No matter how many bells and whistles a designer added to the mech, if Hans didn't use it to its full potential, then it wasn't a good design.

The product had to fit the pilot, not the mech designer's preferences.

"What kind of mech does Hans prefer to pilot the most?"

Too bad Ves wasn't allowed to access the galactic net during this competition. He only had the brief story from the presenter to make a guess. What was this pilot's greatest strength?

"Versatility."

Hans could pilot almost every mech in the market. That took a lot of training. This man dedicated much of his piloting career learning how to pilot many different kinds of mechs. He practiced shoring up both his melee and ranged weapon skill until he could use them interchangeably without affecting his battle strength.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but Ves thought a mech like the Marc Antony fit Hans well. The medium mech offered maximum flexibility, allowing Hans to dodge attacks that could be dodged and tank what he could withstand. With a mace and shield, Hans could tear any mech apart except for heavy knights, and with his wrist-mounted laser cannons he could shoot down anyone from

mid-range. The lack of endurance wouldn't be much of an issue, considering the mech only had to go through a short but intensive 10 kilometer gauntlet.

"There's no need to seek out a particular extreme. If I have the chance to use my familiarity to my advantage, then I should take it. There's no shame in using a design I know well as a reference. As long as my design can do the job, then Hans will easily pass through the gauntlet."

Ves finally stepped forward and picked a couple of promising but also fitting components. He envisioned the mech he had in mind for a pilot with a broad set of skills.

"First, the mech should be a mediumweight in order to maintain the mech's flexibility. The mech should be a flier, but the wings don't need to be strong. Flight is just a means to an end. Next, it needs a balanced focus on melee and ranged offensive options."

What Ves imagined Hans preferred to pilot was a workhorse model. It shouldn't be too fancy, and it doesn't need all the bells and whistles. The design needed to do the job and nothing more. Through this process of thought, Ves imagined the competition organizers implied much more than what they revealed on the surface.

"They presented us with a pile of parts, some of them more advanced than we ought to know how to handle." Ves shook his head and glanced at his fellow mech designers who seemingly went crazy at the possibilities. "It's actually a subtle trap. If we get carried away with forcing an advanced component into an unsuitable design, then Hans won't be able to perform that well and won't be able to endure in the gauntlet."

Ves felt a little confident in his chances now. While the likes of Patricia and Edwin remained superior contestants, he felt he stood a chance of making it in the bottom of the top 8.

"Let's see if I can recreate the ghetto version of the Marc Antony with these parts."