

Mech 3441

Chapter 3441: A Contrarian Design Concept

Ves appreciated the BDX-35F-3 for presenting him with a novel mech concept.

The idea of designing a mech that allowed mech pilots to become unaffected by fear and other negative emotions had a lot of uses, particularly for mech forces with low-quality mech pilots.

A mech pilot that depended less on emotions had to fill up the void in another way, and that mostly translated into greater rationality.

What Ves found particularly brilliant about the BDX-35F-3 model was that its advanced neural interface enabled mech pilots to directly access the formidable processing power of their mechs.

This caused the mech pilots to aim the weapons of their mechs more precisely and become a lot more deliberate about their coordination. It was a good way for bad or average mech pilots to increase their effective performance in battle, especially when subjected to a lot of pressure.

Although the BDX-35F-3 model ultimately failed to gain popularity, Ves still wanted to work with this idea.

His innovative desires began to fire up his passion again. The challenge presented by the BDX-35F-3 and its concept was just right for him. Whereas others would probably fail if they tried to work with this idea, Ves was confident that his specialty and his circumstances would allow him to succeed!

He recalled the time when the Battle Criers fought against the Burza Fens of the Molten Hammers.

The Battle Criers did not lose courage immediately, which was commendable, but they were definitely intimidated by their opponent. The powerful force of will of the enemy expert pilot had likely suppressed the Battle Crier mech pilots to a certain degree, causing them to feel more burdened than normal.

The superior mobility of the axe-wielding expert mech also posed a hindrance to the Battle Criers. The expert pilot might not excel at evasion, but his high skill level combined with his powerful machine caused a lot of incoming shots to miss.

If Ves was able to take the premise of the BDX-35F-3 and put his own spin on it, he could equip the Battle Criers that could help them perform a lot better in the same scenario!

"In fact, it's not just an effective solution against enemy expert mechs. It's also good against other kinds of opposition!"

The Larkinson Army was filled with emotional mech pilots. They paired well with living mechs and they were also key to increasing the chance of breakthroughs.

The clan culture also placed a great importance on emotional attachment. A good clansman was someone who cared about family, loved their fellow brothers and sisters and was invested in the success of the clan.

When Ves looked back on his work so far, he realized that every mech leveraged strong emotions in one way or another. It was a formula that had always paired well with the kind of mechs he liked to design.

The recent expert mech design projects exemplified this design direction as far as he was concerned.

For example, the Dark Zephyr actively stimulated Venerable Tusa's desire to pursue speed and freedom. By increasing the expert pilot's main tendencies, the expert mech performed a bit better due to arousing greater resonance between expert pilot and expert mech.

The Shield of Samar was an even more extreme case. This masterwork expert mech depended a lot more on its resonance abilities to show its value. The more Venerable Jannzi feared the deaths of fellow clansmen and the more she yearned to shield the vulnerable Larkinsons from attacks, the stronger she and her machine partner could project a powerful resonance-enhanced barrier!

Though Ves had never seen this dynamic play out in a real battle, he was pretty certain it worked that way based on his own understanding and the performance of other expert mechs.

"The point is that I've been relying so much on this single direction that I have never considered any alternatives."

As a passionate mech designer that was sensitive towards life, Ves loved to embrace emotions.

Emotion was life, both figuratively and literally. Spiritual energy was not neutral, but instead emerged from the thoughts and emotions of sentient life. This had further pushed him towards using and leveraging emotions to his advantage.

This realization presented him with a daring notion.

Instead of designing yet another living mech that centered around emotions again, what if he went into the opposite direction?

What if he focused on developing a new mech that emphasized total rationality in place of emotions?

Ves ignored everything else around him and played this idea out in his imagination.

A mech based on rationality likely wouldn't translate well in a melee mech. Melee mech pilots depended heavily on instinct and unconscious reactions to make split-second decisions on how to defeat opponents right in front of them. Perhaps he could find a way to make it work, but the consequences of failure were much more direct and impactful.

It was better to apply it to a ranged mech where there was more room for deliberation. The price of failure was not as dire, as a missed shot was nothing special.

The goal behind a ranged mech based on rationality was to minimize flaws and inconsistent behavior, though. While Ves did not expect to achieve total accuracy, he at least wanted to give mech pilots the capability to leverage the processing power of a mech to make more accurate judgements about the positioning of a fast-moving opponent.

The more he thought about it, the more he wanted to tackle this project right away!

This was a good sign. As long as he was interested in realizing a new vision, he would undoubtedly put his best effort into the design project.

That said, he did not completely let his emotions run away with this new idea. His more cautious side recognized that this was a riskier design project than usual.

Trying to develop a mech that adopted a completely opposite paradigm was not for the faint of heart!

Ves would be entering new territory where he could not rely on a great portion of his previous accumulation to steer a design project towards a successful implementation.

The lead designer of the BDX-35F-3 was a Master Mech Designer who not only excelled at changing neural interfaces to fit his needs, but also found ways to decrease the distance between man and machine.

Yet despite these exceptional technical accomplishments, the best effort of this Master resulted in a flop that had ultimately been phased out after being fielded in limited numbers!

Ves could not ignore this failure. Although he could learn from it and try to address the shortcomings that made the BDX-35F-3 model unpopular, he wasn't sure whether he could fix all of the fundamental disadvantages of this concept.

For example, that little detail about producing not a hint of a breakthrough was pretty serious!

If he truly wanted to add this unorthodox mech model to the Battle Crier's mech roster, then he either had to solve this problem or accept that its mech pilots would be giving up their opportunity to become greater.

Fortunately, this problem wasn't as serious to the Larkinson Clan than others. Ves had the ability to identify spiritual potential in other people. If he could make it so that those with the possibility of undergoing apotheosis piloted a different mech, then the Battle Criers shouldn't suffer a loss.

All of this entailed a lot of work, though. This was one of the prices that he had to pay for designing such a weird and different mech from the norm. He had to tread new ground and invent many new solutions to many new problems.

It all excited him. Though he didn't intend to give up on designing 'normal' living mechs, one of the reasons why he wanted to embark on solo mech design projects was to explore whacky and unconventional ideas just like this one! By relying on his own expertise and efforts, he would have much more room to experiment without conflicting with the work or area of responsibility of one of his colleagues.

Once he fully resolved to design a special spaceborn rifleman mech for the Battle Criers, he discreetly took action.

Even as he and his wife moved on to the next exhibit, Blinky secretly exited his mind and soared towards the BDX-35F-3 in order to make contact.

It was easy to persuade this neglected masterwork mech to give away a piece of itself. Ves merely had to state that he intended to use its strength to design a new mech that successfully implemented the vision that it was based upon.

Ves' goal fully aligned with the goal of the lead designer of the BDX-35F-3, so the masterwork mech was already inclined to agree.

Due to the machine's low life order, it didn't even question Ves' sincerity. He only had to convey his passion in order to hoodwink the masterwork mech into giving up a spiritual fragment!

This was the riskiest part about this covert move. Ves casually turned and swept his gaze across the entire hall. He pretended to admire all of the masterwork mechs in sight, but what he was actually doing was confirming that there were no other people in the vicinity.

Luckily, he picked a good moment to act, before the last group of visitors had exited the hall a few minutes ago. This was as good a time as any for him to make his move.

"Do it." He silently commanded Blinky.

The companion spirit chomped a portion of BDX-35F-3 spiritual foundation and quickly snuck back into Ves' mind!

Barely a second had passed as Ves and Blinky quickly pulled off their invisible heist!

Ves forcibly tried to remain calm. He even donned a spiritual mask in order to suppress his body language and make it so that he remained as casual as ever.

He was more than cognizant that the MTA's ubiquitous monitoring system was watching everything. It could easily pick up any abnormal behavior on the surface and prompt greater investigation.

Nothing happened.

No alarms rang in the hall. No energy shields came up to separate the valuable exhibits. No guards poured in to arrest Ves on suspicion of tampering with other people's property.

Although Ves could clearly feel that the BDX-35F-3 was hurt and had lost a part of its strength, that was because he was sensitive towards these changes.

Other mech designers might vaguely be able to recognize that something had changed, but they might not be able to identify the issue right away.

Even if they detected anything amiss, then they might not tie it back to a random and inconsequential Journeymen.

At least he hoped that would be the case.

Ah well. At most, he would get a lifetime ban from visiting another Masterwork Gallery. That was an acceptable price to pay.

With one spiritual fragment in his grasp, Ves continued to act as if nothing had changed at all. Though Gloriana gave him a sidelong look that lasted longer than usual, she quickly directed her attention back to Aurelia who had grown hungry again.

Ves was already looking for his next mark. Though the chances of exposure was greater if he repeated his earlier deed, he did not want to leave with such a meager prize.

Where should he harvest his next spiritual fragment?

The answer to this question was dependent on the mechs he intended to design.

He already committed to designing a new rifleman mech for the Battle Criers. He needed to think about providing a solution to another mech legion.

Two of them came to mind right now. The Living Sentinels and the Flagrant Vandals could also use a bit of love.

It was difficult for Ves to choose what kind of specialized mech he should provide to the Living Sentinels. They were the only non-elite mech legion of the Larkinson Army and therefore had lower demands. The Bright Warrior already fit them well due to its large tolerance and lower skill floor.

The Flagrant Vandals on the other hand could use a new signature mech that strengthened their reconnaissance role. The Ferocious Piranha was a great mech to employ against weak-willed and undisciplined opponents, but many pioneers tended to employ highly-trained individuals who possessed a lot more mental fortitude than normal!

What the Flagrant Vandals needed was a new light mech that could fully make them relevant in the Red Ocean.

Chapter 3442: Checkered Gabardine

Currently, the Larkinson Army's mech roster was heavily slanted towards medium mechs.

This was not a big issue in most cases. Medium mechs were the most balanced and versatile of weight categories. The general definition of it was that it was massive enough to resist a fair amount of damage while also being light enough to evade a fair amount of attacks.

Of course, there were a lot of ways a mech designer could shift this balance.

There were times when speed and flexibility were more important, so a mech design might lose a little weight.

There were other times when a mech needed to resist more damage, so its design consciously sacrificed a bit of speed.

Ideally, any mech should rank high on categories, but such a perfect configuration either didn't exist or required the use of materials that were worth as much as an entire first-rate state!

In a reality where scarcity and physical limitations couldn't be overcome, mech designers like Ves had no choice but to make tradeoffs.

Light mechs presented a rather extreme package compared to medium mechs. They were smaller, lighter and more fragile in order to increase their mobility far above the limits of their larger cousins!

Although this sounded rather simple, light mechs possessed a lot of depth and nuance that Ves had not yet sufficiently explored.

He became eager to work with light mechs in a different way than he had before.

The characteristic light mech was the light skirmisher, a fast and agile melee mech that could be employed in various ways. In most cases, they were either used as scouts, flankers, saboteurs or even assassins.

Although they were fairly cheap to produce, they demanded a higher level of skill and courage to pilot than more ordinary machines. This had always been one of the significant hindrances towards popularizing them, as mech pilots generally didn't like to entrust their lives to flimsy machines that could easily collapse when struck by just a couple of serious blows.

However, those who excelled at speed and possessed the courage to pilot these high-risk and high-reward machines, the impact they could exert was significant!

From circling around to attack the enemy's weak side to outrunning any opponent that was stronger, superior mobility conveyed a lot of advantages that could significantly change the course of a battle.

Light mechs revolved around initiative. Their superior acceleration and their nimble maneuvering gave them the choice to engage whenever they wanted and prevent the enemy from forcing it to take action under adverse circumstances.

When Ves was thinking about designing a new light mech for the Flagrant Vandals, he didn't think about providing them with another light skirmisher.

The Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B served that purpose adequately for now. Perhaps it needed to be updated with new tech and materials that were available in the Red Ocean, but the overall concept was still sound.

Even if the elite mech pilots brought by the pioneers were firm enough to retain their battle effectiveness under the effect of a suppressive glow, they still needed to spend at least some effort to resist the effect, which inevitably threw them off and affected their performance.

What Ves truly sought was a complement to the Ferocious Piranha. He wanted to create a form of synergy between different mech models that allowed them to exert much greater strength when working together than if they fought by themselves.

The Molten Hammers and the Hivar Roarers already provided him with two working examples. Each of their systems worked out for them, but Ves couldn't blindly copy them. He had to create a new system for the Vandals that fit their fighting style and martial tradition.

The fundamental character of the Flagrant Vandals was that they were a bunch of devious bastards who loved to play dirty and had no scruples about using dishonorable means to defeat an opponent.

"I need to use the Ferocious Piranha as a base since it already serves them well. What kind of addition can complement its performance?"

The second light mech design for the Flagrant Vandals had to meet three goals.

First, it needed to be quick enough to keep up with the maneuvers of the Ferocious Piranha. The Flagrant Vandal units shouldn't be shackled with slower mechs that restricted their tactical flexibility and forced them to wait until their heavier units caught up to their vanguard.

Second, the new mech design had to take advantage of the suppression produced by the Ferocious Piranha. One of the shortcomings of the light mech was that it could get close enough to affect enemy mech pilots with its glow, but did not necessarily have the capability to close in for the kill! This led to awkward situations where the Ferocious Piranhas just buzzed around enemy formations like aimless flies!

Third, the new addition had to be able to exert an additional form of suppression towards the enemy. Ves figured that since the Ferocious Piranha's disorienting glow wasn't enough to disable most elite mech pilots, perhaps his troops might achieve better results by stacking another suppressive glow on top of this effect!

In fact, the Larkinson Army was already capable of doing this to a degree. In the previous battles, there were several instances where the Flagrant Vandals combined forces with the Penitent Sisters. When their Ferocious Piranhas and their Valkyrie Redeemers both directed their glows towards the same targets, the enemy mech pilots displayed even less battle effectiveness than before.

This gave Ves a better idea on how the Flagrant Vandals should be distinguished from other mech legions.

Aside from specializing in fielding light mechs, Ves wanted the Vandals to excel at making the lives of enemy mech pilots hell!

By deploying a variety of suppressive glows, they could torment and discomfort enemies to such a degree that battles became a lot easier to win as a consequence!

By themselves, the Flagrant Vandals should be able to punch above their weight and dismantle equal opponents without suffering painful losses.

In cooperation with other mech legions, the Flagrant Vandals should act harassers and disruptors that plagued enemy formations in as many ways as possible so that other units such as the Avatars of Myth could smash through the opposition with greater ease!

This was a great strategy and one that should be effective against many different mech forces.

It might even be effective against alien forces if the circumstances were right. The existence of multiple different suppressive glows at least gave the Larkinson Clan additional solutions to different threats.

This was something he was keen to realize as the confrontation against the Olympus Mons had taught him that he should never stop working on new ways to defeat powerful opponents.

Now that he set his criteria, he just needed to come up with a good idea for a new light mech.

At this point, he and Gloriana had spent hours in the Masterwork Gallery. They had gone through almost all of the exhibition halls by now. Ves had already seen dozens of masterwork light mechs, each of which demonstrated all of the different ways this weight class could excel in battle.

He quickly ran his memories through the examples he had seen and felt that one of them fit the needs of the Flagrant Vandals.

He turned towards his wife. "Could we swing back to a couple of the earlier halls? I've gained a bit of inspiration for my upcoming mech design projects and I need to get back in order to observe additional details that I have missed."

"Sure. Just don't take too long. I want to tour a number of other places in Chance Bay as well." Gloriana replied.

As a mech designer, she could understand what Ves was going through. She too had been taking notes and gaining inspiration from all of these great works. As a masterwork mech designer herself, she found a lot of value in identifying what others excelled at in order to elevate their mechs up the second rung of the ladder.

The couple slowly floated back to one of the earlier halls they visited. Ves stopped before a mech that was designed and made in a completely different region of the galactic rim.

The light marauder he was scrutinizing at the moment was called the Checkered Gabardine. Its checkered pattern of several colors caused the mech's profile to look confusing and hard to distinguish from the naked eye.

It didn't help that every part of the mech including its weapon was coated in the exact same way!

Although these little tricks had relatively little influence in most mech battles due to the use of alternate means of observation, the Checkered Gabardine happened to employ other measures that obfuscated enemy observation.

The model it was based upon was not a stealth mech. The light marauder was definitely designed for frontline battle service, but it did so in a way by making it as difficult to detect and lock on to it while still retaining enough protection to survive a typical battlefield.

Therefore, if the bright and confusing pattern didn't already announce it, the Checkered Gabardine was not a true stealth mech.

That said, its various ECM systems and low energy signature made it so that it was damn hard to detect under any circumstances. Even if the enemy discovered its presence, they still wouldn't be able to land a lot of hits onto this bizarre-looking masterwork mech.

The Checkered Gabardine was not only quick and agile, but it also incorporated a number of sophisticated active ECM systems that each threw the enemy's sensor and targeting systems into further confusion!

Mech pilots could no longer trust the input of their mechs as the quality and accuracy of the incoming data dropped to a distressing level. The result was that a lot of attacks that should have hit in ordinary circumstances went wide!

Even Gloriana was impressed. "I don't blame you for taking another look at the Checkered Gabardine. The way the lead designer integrated all of these different ECM systems in a light frame without overburdening it is genial."

She was right, though the lead designer of the original mech design had to make a lot of compromises in order to preserve its powerful mobility and ECM capabilities.

For one, its offensive capabilities weren't that impressive. Its submachine gun was so light and weak that it was more of an afterthought unless it fought against another light mech. Its twin knives were thinner than usual because the design didn't incorporate a lot of arm strength.

Despite the lackluster attack and defensive properties of the Checkered Gabardine, its strengths enabled the masterwork mech to fight differently from any other machine. It achieved many brilliant feats at the hands of several skilled and creative mech pilots.

What each of these mech pilots had in common was that they worked around the limitations of the Checkered Gabardine and made the most out of its advantages. Superior mobility and excellent ECM systems allowed this potent mech to sneak up on enemies in many different circumstances!

"The Checkered Garbadine is sort of like an ancestor to the Dark Zephyr." Ves remarked. "Their tech and strength levels are different, but the concepts are roughly similar."

The Dark Zephyr had already proven the concept that superior mobility augmented with additional evasion-oriented systems was a winning formula. The Larkinson Clan wouldn't have been able to take out the formidable Gauss Baron so easily during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra if Venerable Tusa didn't believe his mech could carry him all the way to one of the enemy capital ships by himself!

That solo attack run was already a legendary feat in the clan! Other light mech specialists looked up to Venerable Tusa due to how much he exemplified their ideal!

Although it wasn't practical for Ves to translate the Dark Zephyr's configuration into a standard mech form, it could still serve as a useful guide on how he should approach his next light mech design project.

"My next design project will be based around a light ranged mech..." Ves decided.

Chapter 3443: A New Countermeasure

Inspiration worked in different ways.

In the previous case, Ves became impressed by the design concept of the BDX-35F-3. He decided to copy the idea behind this design and refine in his own way in the hopes that he could succeed where the original designer failed.

This was a different case. The Checkered Gabardine presented him with another attractive design concept, but that did not mean that Ves should copy it wholesale.

What he should really be asking first was whether it fit the needs of his target audience.

Ves quickly ran through the requirements he set for the second light mech of the Flagrant Vandals.

First, it needed to be a light mech that could keep up with the Ferocious Piranha. Second, it should be able to exploit vulnerabilities generated by suppressive glows.

Third, it had to possess the capability to mess with opponents with its own form of suppressive glow.

He concluded that he should be able to hit all of these targets if he designed a light ranged mech that possessed the ability to project its glow from a distance.

In situations where the Ferocious Piranha could not close in to a suppressed enemy mech unit, his new light ranged mech should be able to inflict at least some damage in this favorable circumstance.

The ability for this new mech model to mess with enemy mech pilots at range also made it easier for the Ferocious Piranhas to approach and even attack enemy positions.

In other words, combining the capabilities of the Ferocious Piranha and this new proposed mech model should result in significantly greater results than if they were deployed on their own!

All of this fully satisfied the goals that Ves wanted to meet. With just a single additional mech model, the Flagrant Vandals turned into a truly formidable mobile mech legion that excelled in battlefield disruption and decapitation strikes!

The only remaining fundamental shortcoming of the Flagrant Vandals at this point was the lack of specialized scouting and detection functionality.

Ves could address this missing piece by designing a third light mech, one that truly fulfilled the scouting and reconnaissance role.

"I'll think about that later."

Every mech legion needed a lot of new specialized mechs, and it was too much for Ves to tackle them all at once. It was better to take it one at a time, especially when just a single new addition to the mech roster already sparked a lot of changes to the battle methods of a mech legion.

Now that Ves set an overall framework that his next light mech design should fit into, it was time to flesh it out into a well-defined mech concept.

His imagination already presented him with a possibility.

Ves envisioned a light rifleman mech that was not as effective at longer ranges but made up for it with superior performance at closer ranges.

Such light mechs ordinarily weren't called rifleman mechs but rather harassers or by other terms. Harasser mechs were usually armed with carbines, sub-machine guns or even light sniper rifles.

Due to their lighter armament, they didn't pack as much of a punch as regular medium rifleman mechs. Their damage also fell off harder at longer distances due to lack of precision and lack of assisting systems.

Yet harasser mechs worked well as long as they leveraged their superior mobility correctly. They weren't supposed to attack an enemy force from the front.

Instead, they circled around and used their light weapons to direct their firepower at the weaker sides or rear of an enemy formation. Since the targets at these orientations were usually more susceptible to damage, the lighter calibers of the weapons wielded by the harasser mechs should still be effective.

It was even possible for harasser mechs to pressure or take down heavily-armored mechs when attacking from the rear!

Of course, this was only an ideal scenario. In practice, this proposed light harasser mech shouldn't be able to tear through enemy mechs as easily as the Olympus Mons ripped apart the Avatar mechs with its light machine gun module.

"Lack of offensive punch is a persistent problem of every light mech. This is not a unique problem."

It was why every light mech from the Ferocious Piranha to the Dark Zephyr preferred to attack their targets from the rear.

Ves ultimately accepted that his proposed light harasser mech wouldn't carry any heavier armament. Not only did such weapons impose a greater mass burden and decrease the handling characteristics of a light mech, they also demanded a lot more space for ammunition or energy cells.

Though Ves could technically design a light mech armed with a cannon, the mech frame possessed so little capacity that the weapon would run out of shots in just a couple of minutes or less!

This was way too wasteful and inefficient for a light mech that was supposed to go behind enemy lines and operate away from the main elements of the Larkinson Army. It needed to be able to possess a decent amount of endurance and operation time in order for it to fulfill its role in a single deployment.

After Ves settled the basic parameters in his mind, he moved on to defining its special sauce.

If he took the Valkyrie Redeemer as an example, then the maximum effective range a glow could reach was a couple of kilometers.

Ves couldn't come up with a more precise figure because it depended on how he interpreted 'effective range'.

In general, he took that to mean a distance from 2 kilometers to 5 kilometers. Any further than that and the impact on an enemy mech pilot was too negligible to achieve a substantial change on the battlefield.

"This is enough distance." He concluded.

In space battle terms, a range of 5 kilometers was pathetic. Melee mechs didn't need to take too much time to cross this relatively short distance.

However, since his proposed light harasser mech was designed to be fast, it should be able to outrun nearly any enemy mech!

Even if an enemy force deployed a light mech that flew fast enough to catch up with his harasser mech, that only meant that the enemy frames ought to be too thin and light to resist much damage!

Dispatching light mechs after his harasser mechs might just end up feeding the former to the latter!

The survivability of the light harasser mech shouldn't be in question. It was even better than that of the Ferocious Piranha as the new mech model didn't have to get close to any threatening enemy mech in order for it to perform its role!

At this short distance, weapons such as carbines and maybe sub-machine guns should be able to achieve a good effect. Ves just had to pair the light harasser mech model with a glow that complemented its role.

This was why Ves sought out the Checkered Gabardine instead of other masterwork light mechs.

It presented him with an idea on how his next suppressive glow should work.

The Devious mech that he had designed for the Hex Army a while ago proved that he could develop glows that specifically messed with other people's perception.

Ves wanted to create something similar that was effective at range and combined well with the Ferocious Piranha's disorientation effect.

"A light harasser mech that can make enemy mech pilots make misjudgements should do the trick."

The Checkered Gabardine employed an ingenious arrangement of ECM systems to fool and mess with its enemies to such an extent that it got struck a lot less times than it should.

Ves intended to integrate similar ECM systems in his own light harasser mech, but he didn't think his implementation would be as good.

What he could do was to develop a 'spiritual countermeasure' or SCM system that specifically aimed to disrupt mech pilots instead of their mechs!

He already created several different SCM systems in the past. He just didn't label it with a fancy new name back then. Now that he had reached this point, he was ready to add substance to this newly-formalized concept by taking its performance to the next level!

He could see how implementing an SCM system that could alter an enemy mech pilot's perception would be able to yield great results.

Even if a mech pilot was only a little bit affected, a slight misjudgement might cause an enemy mech to miss a ranged or melee strike that should have hit its mark!

Ves wasn't sure how effective this new suppressive glow would be. If the enemy was prepared, then the results might not improve as much as he hoped.

"What if it combines with the glow of a Ferocious Piranha?"

A grin slowly appeared on his face.

Now that was an interesting prospect. A mech pilot that was distracted or encumbered by the glow of the Ferocious Piranha should have much less capacity left to resist the glow of the new light harasser mech!

"It can work the other way around as well!"

A mech pilot that was trying his best to overcome the distortion to his perception and observation should be in an even worse position to resist the disorientation generated by the Ferocious Piranha!

The two glows were both suppressive in nature, but attacked from different angles.

Just like how a typical army became a lot more flustered if it was attacked from two sides instead of one, the combination of the two malicious glows should produce a much stronger impact than if they worked in isolation!

"This can definitely become the core battle strategy of the Flagrant Vandals!" Ves concluded.

Just as with his proposed rationality-based rifleman mech, he became enthused about designing this new SCM-oriented light harasser mech!

It presented a set of different challenges to Ves that not only excited him, but would also advance his design philosophy a few steps further if he resolved all of the advanced problems!

This design project did not seek to explore his design approach from a different direction.

Instead, it sought to deepen his current direction and push it further than he had gone before.

Regardless, Ves stood to gain a lot if he completed both projects. He was not lacking in passion and was confident he could turn each of them into the new mainstays of their respective mech legions.

A part of him even wanted to head straight back to the Spirit of Bentheim so that he could work on a couple of draft designs!

He quickly controlled himself. He was still on a vacation and had only toured a tiny fraction of what Chance Bay had to offer.

If only a single venue was able to provide him with two novel mech concepts, he would definitely be able to obtain further harvests if he visited other places!

He still needed to complete a couple of chores before he left the Masterwork Gallery, though.

In the next twenty minutes or so, Ves pretended to study the Checkered Gabardine, the Husk Maker and a few other random display pieces.

The museum didn't have a clue that Ves had secretly dispatched Blinky two more times in order to harvest modest spiritual fragments from the aforementioned masterwork mechs.

Ves already had a good idea on how he should make use of the spiritual fragments of the BDX-35F-3 and the Checkered Gabardine.

He didn't have an immediate use for the spiritual fragment of the Husk Maker, though. It was a solution looking for a problem. The only reason why Ves claimed it was because he sympathized with the poor fate of the masterwork mech and because he saw potential in its strength.

Currently, there was little reason for Ves to design a doom crawler for the Larkinson Army. Not only was it a model that was useless unless it was deployed on the ground, it also took up a lot of mech capacity that his diminished fleet simply couldn't spare!

"Still, that doesn't mean that other customers are working under the same constraints..."

Perhaps... his next commercial mech design project might center around a doom crawler mech!

Chapter 3444: Demand for Destruction

Ves could already imagine how a destructive engine of doom might be useful to certain forces.

In situations where there were limitations to attacking ground settlements from space or from the air, a powerful ground force was needed to sweep them up. A tough and destructive doom crawler that excelled in laying waste to cities and strongholds sounded like an excellent addition to a ground force's arsenal!

The best part about this new product was there was definitely demand for this kind of machine.

The reason for that was that a lot of pioneering fleets tended to colonize planets that were previously occupied by alien races.

Even if these aliens preferred to live in different environments than human beings, they all had one thing in common.

Everyone needed resources in order to thrive.

Whether it was phasewater or other exotics, every sentient race in the Red Ocean sought to occupy the most resource-rich planets in order to fuel their own development.

Before humanity invaded the dwarf galaxy, the native alien races such as the nunsers and the puelmers already occupied all of the resource-rich planets.

Once the MTA and CFA entered the scene, their warfleets didn't just defeat all of the alien combat forces. They also passed through one alien-occupied star system after another, bombing a lot of places flat.

However, just because the Big Two cleaned up the interior of their newly-conquered territories didn't necessarily mean they were thorough.

The Big Two had to sweep through a huge amount of territory, which meant the warfleets and their commanders weren't always that attentive.

Sometimes they missed a few strongholds.

Sometimes the enemy aliens succeeded in slipping through the net.

Sometimes the MTA and CFA outright skipped the less important star systems with weaker alien presences.

Of course, what counted as 'weak' in the eyes of the Big Two was usually a lot stronger to the pioneers!

All of this meant that the pioneering organizations sometimes had to finish the job in order to claim an attractive planet, and that meant going on a destruction spree.

"There are no mechs that are better at inflicting destruction than heavy artillery mechs and heavy doom crawlers."

Both of them possessed a huge amount of massed firepower. While heavy artillery mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher packed the biggest punch, they weren't designed to confront enemies directly.

Other mechs were supposed to do that in their stead. This was why artillery mechs usually became lambs to the slaughter if any melee mech unit managed to get through the escort mechs and hit these slow and cumbersome machines up close!

Doom crawlers didn't suffer from this weakness. Not as much, at least. They not only carried substantially more armor, but were also better at repelling enemy mechs that came close.

they weren't necessarily superior to artillery mechs or vice versa. They were just different mech types that excelled in different situations.

However, doom crawlers were a bit more suitable to deploy in most conditions in the new frontier due to their greater independence and self-reliance. They were much tougher and didn't require as much babying to handle.

This sounded perfect for the Red Ocean, where pioneering fleets were not only far away from friendly support, but also didn't have access to nearby markets or infrastructure.

Deploying artillery mechs in the field required a lot of thought, preparation and effort. They required constant protection and should never be caught in an enemy counterattack.

While the rewards from using them correctly were great, not everyone had the patience to go through all of this trouble!

It was a lot easier to just field as many doom crawlers as possible and have them advance towards an enemy fortification with unstoppable momentum!

Sure, it sounded like a brain dead strategy, but who cared as long as it worked.

"There should definitely be demand for a good doom crawler model in the Red Ocean's mech market."

That didn't mean it had to be his product that people wanted to buy.

His expression drooped when he realized the competition he was facing.

There were a lot of fantastic Masters and Seniors that were already churning mechs that possessed a lot of distinct advantages!

What was worse was that these prestigious mech designers who had already built up their illustrious reputations in the old galaxy monopolized the bulk of the available resources produced in the Red Ocean.

In this early period of colonization, there were plenty of people who wanted to design and build their own mechs, but the supply of raw materials was too low to accommodate all of their needs!

To Ves, this meant that he couldn't produce and sell mechs in large volumes, at least when it came to the Red Ocean.

Any mech he did manage to produce would have to be sold at wildly-inflated prices due to the high cost of scarce raw materials, which would inevitably depress demand.

Still, Ves was not willing to give up on this interesting idea.

Doom crawlers fascinated him for some reason. Out of every mech type that he was familiar with, doom crawlers possessed a romance about them that pleased Ves in an unexplainable but irrational way.

Ever since he accepted a job to modify a doom crawler design so that it was mounted with weapons of mass destruction, Ves gained a special affinity and destiny with doom crawlers.

Sure, the people who received his work went on to raze entire cities and kill billions of innocent civilians, but that wasn't his fault.

What was undeniable was that Ves got swept in the romance of doom crawlers. Whether it was their slow but unstoppable advances or their ability to take a lot of punishment and keep going, all of this increased his attraction to this mech type!

Still, just because he felt like designing a commercial doom crawler didn't mean he could just go ahead and do it. He still had to solve two different problems.

First, he needed to come up with a viable mech concept that could actually persuade customers into buying the work of a Journeyman over the work of a Master.

Second, he had to find a source of raw materials and probably establish a fixed production facility in order to produce all of his new doom crawlers!

It didn't help that doom crawlers were almost always heavy mechs that demanded a large quantity of tough and expensive materials in order to build.

Vees may have big dreams, but if he could not solve these two fundamental problems, there was no point in starting this new design project.

"Maybe I should wait a couple of years before designing this new mech."

It was a lot easier for Ves to design a sellable product for the Yeina Star Cluster back in the old galaxy. He should prioritize that instead, but doom crawlers didn't sell well in stabler regions.

There was another reason why he thought that doom crawlers were much more promising in the Red Ocean.

Pioneers didn't just want a mech that could help them destroy remnant alien settlements.

Sometimes, they also wanted a machine that could demolish a human settlement.

It was dirty business, but it happened. Not everyone calmly agreed to go the other way when a planet they were eying had already been settled by another pioneer.

The Big Two didn't seem interested in preventing these massacres. There was an implicit assumption that anyone heading into the Red Ocean had to grasp their opportunities by relying on their own efforts.

There was another guiding thought that stated that only the strongest and most successful pioneers had the right to occupy the Red Ocean. There was no place for weaklings in the new frontier.

Instead of spending an unreasonable amount of effort and resources to forcibly support all of these weak and incompetent colonists, the Big Two would rather finish their conquest!

All of this meant that Ves had good reason to assume that doom crawlers would remain a popular product in the Red Ocean's mech market for at least a century.

Ves wanted in on this lucrative business. If he was able to make his stamp early when no other mech company had yet to become the market leader in this product category, a successful doom crawler product line would probably remain a cash cow for several mech generations!

"It's not wrong for me to wait until the market environment improves, but by then it's too late for me to make my move. Other rivals who don't have as much patience as me would have published their own brilliant doom crawler designs by now, thereby securing an early advantage."

This was the dilemma he was currently facing. He could try and design a mech that the LMC could not yet sell at a profit in order to build up an early market presence, or he could just wait and risk getting overtaken by all of the competition.

"Damn. What a difficult choice."

Emotionally, Ves really wanted to design a commercial doom crawler. He had the passion and the drive. He was just as interested in designing it as the previous two mech concepts he came up with earlier.

Rationally, Ves thought this was an exceptionally poor gamble. Not only was it unnecessary for him to insist on designing a commercial doom crawler, the odds that he was actually able to outcompete Master Mech Designers at their own craft was too low!

The biggest hindrance that he faced was his lack of ideas on how to translate his specialty into this commercial design project.

Unlike the previous cases, he wasn't able to come up with solid ideas, especially ones that made use of the spiritual fragment of the Husk Maker.

Perhaps he had expended his creative juices for the day. He should already be happy for coming up with two excellent proposals.

"I'm done here." He said to his wife. "I wish we could get more value out of the 20 MTA credits we paid to access this overpriced gallery, but I'm not getting any new insights anymore."

Gloriana agreed. "Same. Let's head to a restaurant before we continue to our next stop."

The pair together with their baby and their cats nonchalantly headed to the exit and passed through the gates without kicking off any alarms.

Their guards joined them again as they floated outside of the masterwork palace. Now that Ves had seen a lot of different masterwork mechs up close, the structure didn't look

so special to him anymore. The only impressive part about it was that its scale was immense for a masterwork.

The couple proceeded to enjoy the rest of their day in Chance Bay. They not only dined at an exotic restaurant, but also visited other interesting sites such as a mall that sold frivolous luxury products sourced from the most developed parts of the Milky Way.

None of these places provided him with any new sources of inspiration, but that left him with more time to flesh out his existing ideas. Half his mind was occupied with work as he explored how he could turn his oddball ideas into working mech designs.

Over the course of the day, Gloriana suddenly brought up an interesting topic that briefly pulled his mind away from his new mech design projects.

"You wanted to add more Journeymen to our Design Department, right?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. That's right. I plan to start my search in a couple of days. There ought to be a bunch of mech designers here that meet my criteria."

"Have you thought about the specialties of the Journeymen you want to recruit?"

"That's not an easy matter to explain." Ves replied with a hint of reluctance. "I have many thoughts about it, but it's difficult to make up my mind. For now, I'm leaning towards obtaining a defensive specialist and a neural interface specialist, but that's not nearly enough to cover every essential area. To be honest, I'm not sure that the Vult Central Star Node even offers any Journeymen with the specialties I'm looking for... I might have to settle for whatever I can get at this point."

Chapter 3445: Small Fry

After a few days of unwinding on the surface of Chance Bay, the leaders of the Larkinson Clan were ready to get back to work.

They couldn't afford to take extended vacations. The clan needed to accomplish so many different tasks that it needed a lot of direction from the top.

For this reason, the relevant clansmen all attended a meeting in the morning according to standard time.

Since a lot of Larkinsons were stationed on different ships or at different hotels and venues on the surface of Vulit XIV-B, they decided to hold the meeting in a virtual space.

There were downsides to doing this. The Big Two watched everything and they most assuredly eavesdropped on any signals being transmitted back and forth.

However, there were no better alternatives that could offer the Larkinsons a more secure way to discuss their affairs.

"Just give up, Ves." Calabast told him a few minutes before the start of the meeting. "Even if we all stuff ourselves in the most isolated and secure conference room aboard the Blinding Banshee, the MTA has a wealth of high technology at its disposal that could easily penetrate our crude security methods."

That just made the Larkinsons throw up their hands and just work on the assumption that a silent representative of the MTA was sitting right next to the conference table. There was no point in fussing about this issue any further.

Once everyone's virtual avatar arrived in the virtual conference room, Ves stood up to commence the meeting.

"Alright, folks. I hope you've managed to recharge and get your bearings in the Red Ocean, because our true work starts now. Anyone who has stepped foot on Chance Bay should have been able to get a good glimpse of what this part of the cosmos is like. As the new focus of human civilization and the melting pot of some of the best humans from the old galaxy, we're in a much bigger pond right now. It's a drastic difference from what natives from the most underdeveloped parts of the galactic rim like us are accustomed to. There's no other way to describe our situation except to state that we are small fry."

This was a considerable step back from their status back in the old galaxy. Even though the Golden Skull Alliance still wasn't able to contend against entire states, their strength and prestige had reached a level where not a single pirate or private organization wished to provoke their strong mech force.

Sadly, the expeditionary fleet had lost most of its advantages after entering the Red Ocean. The lack of mechs and combat carrier and the difficulty in procuring both significantly put them all at a disadvantage.

"It's not all bad, though." He smiled at the virtual avatars. "We have two distinct advantages that we can count upon to get ahead. First, we have the 10-year free trade writ. Not only does it allow us to pay less money for tickets in every central star node, we can also save a lot of money purchasing a lot of bulk goods. Although we are already well-stocked with many different goods and supplies, we should make sure to purchase plenty of items that we previously didn't have access to before we depart."

There were a lot of items on their shopping list that they couldn't obtain back in the galactic rim. The Red Ocean offered a much greater diversity of products due to the MTA's greater efforts and the rising entrepreneurship of incoming pioneers.

Sure, supply was low and prices were exorbitant, but at least the Larkinsons had the option of stocking up on technological marvels such as anti-teleportation technology and other sophisticated systems with money rather than with merits!

The discussion on what necessities they should spend their money on dominated the first half of the meeting. Plenty of people made useful suggestions on what their fleet lacked and what they needed to do in order to improve their chances of surviving the myriad of threats that were lurking in the new frontier.

"There's these powerful sentient aliens called the phase whales that are rumored to be lurking in hidden pockets of space all across the Red Ocean." Commander Casella Ingvar stated. "Their methods of combat are very hard to deal with, but if we acquire anti-phasing or dimensional reinforcement technology, we at least have a chance of killing one of these powerful whales."

When Ves discovered the existence of phase whales and heard what they could do, he thought back on a couple of past encounters and incidents.

He wasn't the only one in the meeting who recalled certain matters.

Ves briefly pulled his attention away from the virtual space and threw a glance at Lucky, who was casually basking in the filtered sun rays pouring through the window of his hotel.

"You better be careful, Lucky. Your days of phasing through every deck and bulkhead might be over soon." He grinned.

"...Meow?"

Back in the meeting, the various leaders weren't short of suggestions. The clan's incredibly long shopping list grew even more cumbersome when people kept mentioning more 'necessities' that they all had to obtain in order to make their stay in the Red Ocean a little easier.

Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson grew increasingly more despondent as people kept bringing up additional must-buy items.

Ves noticed the man's discomfort and raised his hand to interrupt the next speaker. "Raymond, how healthy are our finances? Will we be able to procure everything we need from this central star node?"

The chief minister shook his head. "Not even close. When we initially entered the Red Ocean, we already accrued a debt of 8 trillion hex credits. This figure should have been larger, but we managed to alleviate our financial burden by carrying those 4 extra capital ships through the greater beyonder gate. Nonetheless, our debt burden has already grown by 0.5 trillion hex credits and this is just the first week! Hearing all of

these spending plans makes me want to remind you all that we can't go on a spending spree like before. Not only has our clan grown faster than our earnings can keep up with, everything that's for sale in the Red Ocean is much more expensive than the products back in the old galaxy."

The former COO of the Living Mech Corporation was one of the few Larkinsons in the virtual conference room who paid attention to how they needed to finance all of their ambitious plans.

Other Larkinsons didn't possess a background in business, finance or economics, so they neglected this issue or just assumed that the LMC would wordlessly foot the bill like before.

Ves let out a deep breath as he pressed his fingers against his forehead. "I'm aware that our increasingly inadequate income is limiting what we can do. Designing a new commercial mech is definitely on the agenda, but it will take months before we can develop another potential cash cow. Until then, we need to make do with what we have."

It took time to put a new product to market. Raymond knew that they could do nothing but wait until the Design Department pumped out a batch of new commercial mech designs that would finally refresh the LMC's stale mech catalog.

"We should discuss our business operations in the Red Ocean at a later date." The chief minister spoke. "I have a number of ideas on how we might be able to get a footing in this lucrative but difficult mech market, but it will require you to make decisions that might not sound comfortable to you at first."

Well, that sounded pleasant. Ves looked forward to hearing what Raymond had to offer, but it was obviously too specific to discuss in this general meeting.

"Alright, we can speak afterwards. Is there anything else you wish to bring to our attention, Raymond?"

The old man nodded and brought up more encouraging news. "Although the LMC is no longer growing as rapidly as before, it is still a stable company that is able to deliver consistent profits. You have also shown you have the capability to design bestsellers. As long as we present our case to a bank or other financial institution, we can easily borrow tens of trillions of hex credits. The main limiting factors that prevent us from borrowing 100 trillion hex credits right away is our lack of history and the inherent risks involved with operating in the Red Ocean."

"A lot of moneylenders had taken root in the Red Ocean, but none of them are as simple as they appear on the surface." Foreign Minister Shederin Purnesse warned. "Not only do they see a lucrative opportunity to earn lavish profits from ambitious pioneers like us, they also seek to forge new connections. If we ever borrow money

from a bank in the Red Ocean, then we must make sure who is backing that particular institution."

That was a helpful reminder. Few companies that had set up shop in the Red Ocean were standalone entities. The mechers, fleeters, Terrans, Rubarthans and many other wealthy and powerful parties based in the old galaxy had extended their tentacles to the new frontier.

Their goal wasn't as simple as making money. What they truly sought was to achieve dominion in the new colonies of mankind.

Since Ves prized his independence, he could not afford the Larkinson Clan to become an unwitting pawn to a wealthy stranger.

"Noted." He said in acknowledgement. "We will definitely need to take more loans in order to fund our considerable short-term acquisitions, so we can't avoid entanglement. The most we can do is to pick our working partners carefully. Raymond, Shederin, I'd like the two of you to work together to select the most appropriate bank to borrow money from. You should already know who to avoid."

"We'll get right on it, sir."

With that taken care of, the meeting went back on track. They soon arrived at one of the most important necessities of the Larkinson Clan.

"I'm sorry to say that we are currently unable to procure any additional starships." Chief Ship Designer Vivian Tsai said. She looked a lot more weary than usual due to her lack of results. "I have approached over a hundred different shipyards based in many different zones, but none of them are willing to hear us out or accept our order. The shipbuilding companies are already swamped with orders, many of them originating from pioneering organizations that are backed by powerful first-raters, prestigious Master Mech Designers or other major customers. Given our current status, strength and wealth, we are just minor customers to these companies, and that means that we need to wait at the back of a very long line."

The news did not surprise Ves at all, but it was still depressing that one of his pessimistic predictions came true.

"What about the second-hand market? Do we have better luck there?"

Vivian shook her head again. "There are an enormous number of pioneering organizations snapping the first available ship that is listed on the marketplace. In most cases, pioneers aren't stupid to sell their own ships. They would rather hoard them or trade them directly to trusted partners in order to obtain favors."

"What about relying on producing ships ourselves? We have the Diligent Ovenbird."

"We do, sir, but that doesn't count for much. If we cut as many corners as possible and focus on building basic light carriers that can carry the most mechs with the least amount of effort, we can probably churn out one vessel per month once our shipbuilding crews get over the initial hurdles. However, even the flimsiest starships require a lot of materials to build. We need to secure a large, stable and consistent supply of ship-grade alloys and other materials if we want to build our own ships."

Ves sighed. "Minister Shederin, I'll leave that up to you. Help Vivian and the Naval Design Department get in touch with a material wholesaler."

"I will try my best, sir, but our chances of signing a contract with a material supplier is extremely low given our current conditions."

Great.

Chapter 3446: Public Performers

Relying on the Diligent Ovenbird to pump out homegrown carrier ships was not a realistic solution.

Sure, the Larkinson Clan was awfully short of carriers and would settle for any rustbucket that could hold mechs and fly in space, but the Larkinsons had at least some standards!

In order for the Diligent Ovenbird to help increase the mech capacity of the Larkinson fleet as quickly as possible, Vivian Tsai and the Naval Design Department had already developed an extremely basic, barebones carrier that could hold just twenty mechs.

Ves and the others studied the projection of the vessel that was officially classified as a light carrier.

"...To summarize, the Jhamper-class light carrier is not built for defense, mobility, support, carrying capacity, self-sufficiency or longevity." Vivian Tsai finished her short presentation. "What our new ship design does excel at is saving costs, using up less materials and speeding up construction as much as possible. The ship design is a stopgap that can solve our most immediate needs, but don't expect anything more out of it. We should replace any Jhampers we add to our fleet with proper combat carriers at the first possible opportunity."

Compared to the second-class starships that the Larkinsons owned before, the Jhamper was a step back in almost every possible front. Some Larkinsons even looked disgusted at the thought of putting their precious mechs and crews inside these flimsy death traps.

Yet what else could they do? Without any additional carriers, a lot of Larkinson mech pilots had no choice but to stay back and cheer for the lucky ones that did get to pilot one of the few mechs that were available for deployment.

"The Jhamper is... a good ship design." Ves said, not wishing to disparage Vivian's work. "As a mech designer, I understand the constraints you are working under. A good design is one that fits the needs of the client, not one that performs better than older works. Given our many difficulties, a ship design that imposes the least burden possible on our supply and construction conditions is definitely the most appropriate choice."

Vivian looked a little more at ease after hearing this. "Thank you, sir. I am not proud of the Jhamper, but it is a decent carrier that can serve us well in the first years of our stay in the Red Ocean. Hopefully, we'll be able to work on obtaining proper carriers in the following months and years."

"I have a possible suggestion for us to obtain a batch of starships quickly." Director Raella Larkinson unexpectedly announced.

Everyone in the virtual meeting room directed their attention to the head of the Larkinson Clan's competitive mech circuit.

Her presence here was more of an afterthought so far. Compared to greater and more fundamental issues such as financing and carrier procurement, sports entertainment ranked quite low on everyone's list of priority!

It was therefore a complete surprise that Raella of all people had a potential solution.

Though Ves was skeptical, it wouldn't do to shoot her down right away.

"Let's hear it, then."

The woman grinned. "All of you fellows are thinking about obtaining ships the old-fashioned way by buying them, but that's not the only way to get a ship. Have you ever thought about participating in contests and winning them in order to receive ships as our rewards?"

The Larkinsons all looked surprised.

"You can earn carrier vessels by winning contests?"

"Definitely! Just look at these contests that I have looked up in the last few days."

Raella projected a montage of footage that depicted various different contests. There were massive competitive matches that pitted hundred mechs against each other. There were smaller duels between two different champions. There was even a clip that displayed a spectacular design duel.

What each of these competitions had in common was that the top finalists were entitled to receive starships, and carrier vessels nonetheless!

Ves sat up straighter as he saw that the top 3, top 5 or other groups of finalists received a varying amount of combat carriers for their efforts.

The higher their ranking, the greater their reward! A better result either allowed a contestant to obtain a higher-quality starship or a greater quantity of hulls!

The first-place winner of the massive mech battalion tournament even won a brand-new fleet carrier!

Seeing that every Larkinson in the virtual meeting became enthralled by the attractive prize pools, Raella continued to illuminate her fellow clansmen to the opportunities that she thought was worth exploring.

"What you all need to understand is that the Vulit Central Star Node is not just a collection of shops and tourist attractions. It's a gathering place of billions of second-raters, many of whom are bored and want to be entertained. Then there are all of the mech pilots who are chafing under the restrictive rules that prevent them from conducting any live practice sessions. Then you have all of the pioneers who are worried about whether their mech forces are strong enough to fight against their rivals. All of these factors combine in a perfect storm where there is a large demand for competitions."

Many of the Larkinsons present in the meeting didn't put much thought on this angle. What Raella just said made a lot of sense.

Competitions weren't solely about entertainment, especially in a complex location like Vulit. Clever entrepreneurs had analyzed the possibilities and seized their chance to build arenas and hold competitions that attracted enormous crowds of paying spectators!

Compared to the leagues and competitions that took place in the Milky Way, the ones held in the Red Ocean were much more interesting! Not only was the location a lot more exotic, but the convergence of so many different forces from so many regions of the old galaxy led to an unprecedented variety of participants!

For this reason, competitions in Vulit and in other central star nodes were currently booming. No matter how much it cost to hold these extravagant tournaments in places as expensive as Chance Bay, the virtual ticket sales alone were enough to compensate for all of the costs!

"How is it possible that these tournament organizers are able to offer carrier ships as prizes?" Commander Melkor asked in confusion.

"They're well-connected, that's why." Raella answered. "They're either bigshots or working on behalf of them. Anyway, that's none of your business. What matters is that these tournament organizers know that there is no better way to attract a pioneering organization to take part in their games than to offer carriers as one of the main prizes! You can't imagine how many different people like us have agreed to perform in front of a crowd just to get a chance to expand their fleets."

This sounded like a win-win arrangement to Ves. The tournament organizers were able to attract huge crowds with their exciting competitions while the pioneers were able to exercise their mech pilots, see where they stood compared to other peers and potentially win a combat carrier or two if they performed well enough.

Still, Ves did not make it all the way to the Red Ocean by looking at only a single side of an equation.

"All of this sounds great, Raella, but what are the downsides to taking part in these spectacles?" He asked.

The woman expected this to come up. She took a quick breath.

"There are many participants, but only a few of them can be winners. These tournaments are hard. Many elite mech pilots and many talented mech designers take part in every competition that offers a carrier ship or other big prize. If we want to participate, we have to be prepared to face extremely stiff competition from other pioneers. If we become one of the many losers, we will not only waste our time, but also incur other costs."

"What costs are you talking about?"

"For example, in order for us to participate in a mech tournament, we either need to buy the mechs that the organizers have prepared for us or bring our own mechs. If we win the matches and preserve our combat machines, then that is great, but if we lose, chances are that most if not all of our machines are broken. If we keep this up, we will run out of our own mechs."

That was indeed a serious danger. Ves could see how bad this could work out if the Larkinsons failed to win enough tournaments.

However, the Larkinson Clan had a lot of leeway at the moment.

"We brought a surplus of thousands of mechs when we entered the Red Ocean." He said. "Many of these mechs remained packed and are unusable since we cannot deploy them in any battle in a short amount of time. Since we can't obtain a lot of ships anytime soon, we might as well throw our spare mechs in these tournaments and gamble on victories. We've got around 20,000 mech pilots, right?"

"That's correct, sir." General Verle confirmed.

Ves smirked. "Then pick out the better ones and have them take part in these potentially lucrative mech tournaments. Who knows, we might even win a few. There is no risk of death, right?"

"The Big Two has employed state-of-the-art technology to prevent any accidents in even the largest group matches. The tournaments are all regulated. There's no way that anyone is able to hold any underground duels in this place."

That was a welcome piece of news, but not everyone looked comfortable with the idea of parading their mechs in a public arena. They also lacked confidence in their own chances.

"Sir, we're stronger than we look, but we might not be able to measure up against the more powerful second-class mech forces that pioneers brought into the Red Ocean." Commander Casella cautiously said. "If we want to maximize our chances, we'll have to display our real capabilities, and that means revealing our trump cards."

"Even if we show our trump cards, we might not win anyway. Some of the mechs and mech pilots in the arena are just that strong." Raella admitted.

Ves frowned a bit. "I understand, but we cannot miss this opportunity. It's better to try and fail than to do nothing at all. At least we have a chance of improving our fleet strength if we take the initiative. Besides, all of those surplus mechs are just taking up valuable space on our ships. I always intended to get rid of them or store them in some warehouse or something. This way, they can at least be more useful."

With his support, the clan decided to embrace this opportunity. The good thing about Chance Bay was that a lot of tournaments and competitions took place every day. It was a booming business and there was already a huge amount of arenas that could accommodate many different types of matches.

Of course, many of them imposed different requirements that the Larkinson Clan might not be able to meet. Even if the clan was able to participate, it might not choose to do so because the competition format favored stronger and wealthier participants.

Even Ves thought about taking part in a couple of mech design competitions. It had been a long time since he flexed his abilities in this way. Compared to where he stood in the past, he was a lot more confident about his abilities.

Not only did he possess solid basics, plenty of design experience and a vastly improved mech affinity, he also enjoyed distinct advantages in fabricating mechs, which had always been an important element in proper design duels.

By borrowing the assistance of Vulcan, Ves was certain he could build better quality mechs than pretty much any other Journeymen!

Still, he was not arrogant to assume he would be able to claim the top prizes in every design tournament he took part in. Other Journeymen might lack his unique advantages, but they made up for them by possessing much more refined knowledge and greater familiarity with useful high technology.

Ves was not afraid of competing against them. In fact, he looked forward to the prospect of comparing his abilities to other strong mech designers at his level!

His competitive drive, which had long remained dormant in his heart, began to burn again. Perhaps his stay in the Vulit Central Star Node would become a lot more exciting than he thought!

Chapter 3447: Building Rep

Raella's proposal completely derailed the meeting, but this was not a bad change.

Ves and many other Larkinsons recognized that they could solve their biggest problem by engaging in unconventional solutions.

Though trying to win all of these tournaments was an extremely risky and unreliable method of obtaining additional carrier vessels, it wasn't as if the clan had any better options at the moment!

However, before the Larkinsons could look up the list of upcoming tournaments and sign up on the ones they thought they could win, they needed to take a few more factors into consideration.

"You know, from what I have heard about our problems so far, a lot of it has to do with our lack of reputation." Raella cleverly observed as she swept her gaze across the virtual meeting room. "In my experience, building up fame and reputation makes everything easier. People who used to ignore or dismiss you will take you a lot more seriously if your name is on people's lips. There are many ways to build up our rep, but winning tournaments is one of the fastest ways to do so. Even if we don't win any of them, we will still be able to impress a lot of different observers. Some of them might want to approach us in order to work together or something."

That was great news. Ves directed his gaze towards Minister Shederin, who agreed with the young woman.

"Director Raella Larkinson indeed makes a good point, but there is another side to this coin. As long as we perform well enough, people will look at us with more respect. However, if we perform poorly in public, we will be branded as losers or laughingstocks. We need to be careful not to participate in any competitions that are too difficult for us.

Even if we forgo the most attractive prize pools, it is not worth embarrassing ourselves in front of every pioneer and facilitator in the Red Ocean."

"That's true, minister." Ves said as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Back in the galactic rim, we were able to accomplish a lot more than other organizations due to all of the fame, prestige and notoriety we accrued. We've lost much of the advantages we used to enjoy because it is too hard to transfer all of that stuff to the Red Ocean. There are pioneering organizations with much more impressive backgrounds in this place. Perhaps we might be able to get individual people and organizations to give us a second look if they know about our record and accomplishments, but that is not as good as building our reputation right here in front of everyone."

The prior discussions already made it clear that people in the Red Ocean did not operate based on open transactions, but rather leaned on private connections.

Making friends, impressing business partners and establishing long-term cooperative agreements with individual organizations was the only way to cut through the extremely long lines.

Perhaps this might change fifty or a hundred years from now. By that time, trade and industry would have developed to a point where they were able to support properly functioning markets for many different goods.

Yet Ves and the Larkinson Clan couldn't afford to stand still and do nothing for five whole decades. The entire point of entering the Red Ocean early was to take advantage of the rising tide at its onset!

In any case, as long as the Larkinsons performed well enough, they not only had a chance of winning extremely precious carrier ships, but also made a name for themselves in the local community. This made it even more compelling for the clan to take part in these activities!

The lengthy meeting soon moved on to other topics, but after discussing a few more boring matters, it finally came to an end.

Everyone knew what they had to do for the next few days and weeks. Aside from recruiting personnel, procuring essential goods and taking care of a few other essential matters, the Larkinsons also prepared to participate in many different tournaments!

Raella took it upon herself to coordinate this matter. Her competitive background and familiarity with mech duels and tournaments would be extremely helpful in determining which competitions the Larkinsons actually had a shot at winning.

"By the way, Raella, are there any tournaments where our expert pilots can take part in?" Ves asked as many other Larkinsons started to leave the virtual conference room.

She shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. The MTA has always maintained the stance that expert pilots should never devolve into gladiators. It would only cheapen, corrupt and devolve these noble warriors. Besides, it is way too difficult to ensure the safety of the expert pilots and the audience during these intensive duels. Expert mechs are not only powerful, their ability to leverage true resonance allows them to break many limitations, such as the protective barriers that shield people from damage..."

"Damn." Ves spoke, though he didn't have much hope in the first place. He was already familiar with these arguments. "I'm not sure whether our regular mech troops are competitive enough here in Vulit, but I'm pretty sure that our expert mechs can vanquish over other ones as long as they aren't high-tier machines."

Raella looked wistful for a moment. "It would have been nice to show off all of our masterwork expert mechs in a full arena."

The Amaranto, the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger were all spectacular machines!

The latter was exceptionally suited to perform in mech duels due to its fantastic versatility and adaptability. As long as Ves learned about Venerable Joshua's next opponent in advance, he could quickly change the configuration of the Everchanger to counter the enemy machine!

It was too bad the MTA were being so high-minded about this issue. Everything that happened in the Vulit Central Star Node had to conform with the rules.

Raella smirked. "The MTA isn't as strong and oppressive in every part of the Red Ocean, Ves. I haven't heard any rumors or anything, but I'm guessing that there are definitely locations in the Red Ocean where people have a... different idea about allowing expert pilots to compete."

Ves coughed. "You're probably right, but we will CERTAINLY not venture anywhere close to these shady places just so that we can compete in these shady tournaments. Isn't that correct, director?"

He did not forget that everything was being monitored by the MTA. Talking about anything that went against the MTA's policies was a great way to attract unwanted attention!

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say, Ves. In any case, I have an appointment with General Verle. I've already scouted a number of tournaments where I think it would be great if a couple of our mech pilots and mech legions take part."

"Okay. Ah, one more question. Can expert candidates enter these competitions as well?"

"They can." Raella confirmed. "Of course, each tournament sets their own rules about this. If we are able to field expert candidates, then so can the enemy, so take that into account."

"And the MTA is okay with that?"

"Sure. Unlike expert pilots, expert candidates are much easier to contain in battle. The only exception is when they manage to achieve a breakthrough, but this is a happy and a spectacular occasion. In fact, any mech tournament where an expert candidate can participate is basically a convenient opportunity for them to find their breakthrough opportunity. I highly suggest we put all of our expert candidates to use. They can take part in both individual duels and large group matches alongside regular mech pilots."

"Okay, you can work it out with General Verle." Ves said. "Although I'm not in the mood to start another expert mech design project, the clan urgently needs more individually-powerful machines, so we will develop other ones if we gain additional expert pilots."

Once Ves parted ways with Raella, he spent the next hour meeting with individual leaders.

An important matter was the question of how the LMC should conduct business in the Red Ocean. Ves preferred to return to a boutique approach where he designed and sold smaller batches of high-quality products, but Chief Minister Raymond thought that this was too limited.

"There are limits to how much you can charge customers by adopting this business strategy." The older Larkinson told Ves. "Although the conditions aren't good yet, as long as we are able to befriend parties that hold actual territory in the new frontier, I would like to explore the option of building a large manufacturing complex on a planet. This way, we can not only ramp up our local production, but also serve a fixed market."

This was a severe deviation of Ves' original intentions for his clan. His goal was to avoid any possible reason to get anchored to a specific state or planet.

However, the reality was not as good as he wished. Considering all of their difficulties, it might be better for Ves to soften his stance.

"I'm not opposed to the idea, but only if it is affordable for us to abandon this ground installation and cut our losses if we are under threat." He told Raymond. "The production facility shouldn't be too costly and I don't want any of our clansmen to get stuck in such a place."

"These are... difficult demands to meet."

"Well, too bad, because I don't want to enter a situation where I have to bring my entire fleet straight into a trap because our enemies have threatened to raze our ground installation if we don't show up." Ves snorted.

Given his past history, it was quite likely that his enemies would resort to such an act!

Though Raymond hoped that Ves would make a greater commitment, he was willing to work with what he got. He didn't expect to make much progress on this front, though.

"What Raella said is correct, sadly. Our reputation is nearly non-existent in the Red Ocean. As long as that is the case, it is improbable that our clan will be able to lease territory on a newly-colonized planet so that we can build a manufacturing complex. This might change if we win a couple of tournaments, though."

"Wait for the good news."

Once Ves concluded all of the private meetings, he withdrew from the virtual space and fully returned to his hotel.

Lucky had already left the window and had joined Clixie in watching over a sleeping Aurelia.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

Gloriana had been spending her time on other activities. She got in touch with other Hexers in the Red Ocean and watched the local news feeds while also tending to her baby.

When Ves sat next to her on the couch, he leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. This also gave him a good opportunity to enjoy her fresh scent.

It was different from her other ones. Perhaps it was one of the many new perfumes she bought from the mall they recently visited.

"How did the meeting go?" She asked.

"We talked about a lot of stuff. There's one matter that is quite interesting to us, though."

He quickly explained all of the competitions and tournaments that took place in Vulit.

Unlike Ves, Gloriana wasn't as enthused about the prospect of competing in public.

"Don't you remember that I abhor design competitions?" She frowned. "There's always too little time for us to complete a sound mech. Each and every competition mech we

design and make are horrible rush jobs that are riddled with flaws. They're so grating on me that I simply can't stand them. If you or Ketis or any other mech designer in the clan want to go off designing horrible, poorly-made mechs that are only designed to last a couple of fights at best, then be my guest, but I will not profane my eyes by developing a shoddy product!"

"...Okay. Suit yourself then, honey... I think you're missing out, though."

Chapter 3448: Tournaments Everywhere

A tournament fever had befallen the Larkinson Clan!

After encountering continuous setbacks and difficulties in their attempts to procure carrier vessels and secure contracts with vital resource suppliers, it became clear to the Larkinsons that they needed to solve their problems from a different direction.

Winning a competition would definitely help! An excellent performance in front of a large audience would not only showcase the Larkinson Clan's strength and potential to interested parties, but also yield fantastic prizes such as combat carriers and other valuable goods.

Of course, the Larkinsons weren't the only newcomers to the Red Ocean who understood the benefits. There were lots of other pioneering organizations that faced similar problems and made the same choice. This led to an unprecedented degree of competition!

There could only be a handful of winners for every competition. Most participants came away with only greater experience and another failure to their names. There were so many skilled mech pilots and brilliant mech designers that it was truly hard to reach the top of any given competition.

Despite that, pioneers and adventurers kept applying to them in droves. Few were resigned to mediocrity and wanted to find their opportunity to greatness.

There were many different competitions the Larkinsons could participate in. Chance Bay was a hub to many of them and specifically set up contests that were geared towards transient visitors.

"That's convenient." Ves said after he read up on the rules of several different tournaments. "Since it is expensive for so many people to stay in a central star node, these contests never take more than a couple of days. The majority even end on the same day they start."

Aspiring contestants didn't have to apply too far in advance to take part in these short competitions. As long as they met the requirements, they could get in even if the

occasion started the next day. The tournament organizers were quite accommodating in this regard, and the format of their contests easily adapted to any additions or removals.

Shorter competitions were also more convenient to the live spectators who visited the Vulit Central Star Node in droves but could only stay for a short period of time.

"...Guu...waaawaaa..."

"Oh, daddy is just thinking about what design tournaments he should sign up for. Would you like to help me choose?"

"...Fuuwaawaaawaaa..."

Ves' heart melted as he leaned in to kiss his little daughter which he held against his chest. Feeling her body warmth against his chest and sensing the pure and innocent joy from her mind delighted him to no end!

Pure love radiated from him as he cooed and played with his baby. Becoming a father was one of the happiest instances of his life. Though the way he went about his day hadn't changed all that much, Aurelia's appearance had made his life a lot more joyful every day.

"...Miew... miew..."

His daughter's companion spirit was also a cute bundle of joy. Just like Aurelia, Mana spent much of her time sleeping and resting.

However, after spending so much time inside Aurelia's little mind, she had grown more curious of what lay outside her safe and cozy home.

Nyaaaa.

The Golden Cat hovered around the little white kitten and made sure that Mana did not do anything dangerous. She also just loved to spend time with her newest kin.

"Miew!... Miew!..."

Mana rolled around as Goldie gave her a bath. Even though spiritual cats didn't need to be cleaned, the habit was ingrained in their species!

Ves chuckled at the amusing sight. Even Aurelia stopped reaching out towards her father's face. Since Mana was another part of herself, she was able to experience the feeling of getting licked by Goldie as well!

"Waaaa..."

"Don't think about it too much, sweetie. You are you and Mana is Mana. You're a human, not a cat."

Once he finished attending to his baby, he swept his gaze back to the projected display.

The Larkinson Clan had the ability to participate in many tournaments. Ves allowed the rest of the clan to make its own decisions on which ones they should join. General Verle and the legion commanders knew their soldiers better than anyone else and could make far better judgments on where they could achieve higher rankings.

The Larkinsons weren't arrogant enough to believe they could realistically get into first place all the time, but the prizes for entering the top 5 usually weren't that bad. Larger and more elaborate competitions also showered generous rewards to those who ended up in the top 10.

Aside from that, individual clansmen such as the expert candidates were also allowed to apply to individual tournaments themselves.

There was a considerable risk to doing so as letting so many of them enter into random tournaments might yield a lot of embarrassing defeats.

"It's okay. It's better to try and fail than not try and miss a potentially great opportunity."

Even if there was only a 0.1 percent chance that any of these Larkinsons became a finalist, the possibility of bringing home an additional combat carrier or two was worth the effort!

The tournaments, specially the ones revolving around mech combat, were also fantastic opportunities for the Larkinson mech pilots to gain valuable combat experience in a safe and controlled environment. Even if they lost, they at least learned a lot of lessons from their beatdowns.

As for the embarrassment they would cause to themselves or their clan, Ves didn't consider this to be a big deal.

Other organizations might be a lot more sensitive towards the impact that losses would have on their reputation, but Ves knew that if he and a few other Larkinsons managed to perform brilliantly in a couple of contests, their glorious achievements would easily outshine the clan's trivial losses!

"At the end of the day, reputation is a means to an end. We don't need to get too fixated on becoming famous. What really matters is translating these intangibles into solid resources that increase the combat strength of our fleet." Ves reminded himself.

It was for this reason that he didn't care what his other clansmen were doing as long as they applied to enough tournaments.

Ves just needed to focus on what he was able to do by himself. He pulled up a giant list of mech design tournaments that were scheduled to start within a month.

Though mech design tournaments weren't as popular as mech combat tournaments, they were still attended by plenty of people.

Although there weren't as many laymen in the audience, design tournaments attracted a lot more industry insiders. Mech technicians, salesmen, mech designers and so on all liked to attend these interesting events.

Perhaps mech pilots might get bored seeing mech designers spend hours on fiddling with designs or fabricating an entire mech from scratch, but those with the relevant background in mech design and mech manufacturing found them to be incredibly fascinating!

Novice Mech Designers and Apprentice Mech Designers cherished these opportunities the most. Design duels and design competitions were one of the few instances where they could see other, better mech designers perform their craft in the open.

Each of them hoped that they might be able to grasp new insights, gain bursts of inspirations, learn valuable lessons and at worst widen their horizons from observing the methods of more successful mech designers.

"Hmmm, there's tournaments for Seniors and Masters as well." Ves noted with a bit of surprise.

These were usually high-end affairs that attracted a more elite crowd. They weren't held as often but always attracted a large amount of media attention. Ticket prices were much higher, but the Red Ocean wasn't short of filthy rich people who were willing to splurge.

The prize pools weren't simple either. After all, Seniors and especially Masters were already successful and capable in their own right. They often had better things to do with their time, so the only way to convince them to perform in public was to lure them with excellent fleet carriers, exclusive entry passes and even batches of phasewater!

Ves momentarily grew red when he learned that the winners of these prestigious competitions were able to receive phasewater, but he quickly shook his head.

"I'm far from becoming a Master, let alone a Senior. Even if I break through tomorrow, I won't have any accumulation that would allow me to beat other mech designers at this rank."

He could only settle for the contests that centered around Journeymen. Once he applied a couple of filters to the list, the number of tournaments dropped by a huge amount.

The main reason for that was because he removed all of the tournaments that centered around Novices and Apprentices as well.

There were a lot of competitions for low-ranking mech designers. They attracted huge crowds because they were cheaper and their learning content was more accessible to those with shallower foundations.

As for Journeyman-level design tournaments, they were highly relevant to Apprentices who already developed solid ideas for their design philosophies but sought ways to push them to the next level.

"This is also a good opportunity for me to recruit additional assistant mech designers." He realized.

If he performed impressive enough, then even if he failed to win any prizes, he could still come away with a harvest by recruiting additional personnel.

Sometimes, there were also other Journeymen in the audience who wanted to witness how their fellow colleagues approached their craft.

"I can also approach other contestants in these tournaments!"

One of his goals was to recruit two additional Journeymen. However, even after the clan had posted a recruitment notice at the local job market, not a single person answered back.

The Larkinson Clan was too unremarkable and obscure in the Red Ocean. Journeymen were already formidable professionals, so they could easily find employment in larger and stronger organizations!

If Ves wanted to attract available Journeymen, then he needed to make a splash and get in touch with them in person.

He was quite confident in his persuasive abilities. As long as he could hoodwink two of them to take a gamble and join an ascending organization in its early days, the Design Department would be able to complete 50 percent more mech design projects in the same amount of time. This was a massive leap in output!

Of course, all of this was fantasy if he was not able to achieve any good results. With Journeymen who grew up in more developed places such as the galactic heartland and the galactic center taking part in these contests, Ves knew that he would have a tough time regardless of his choices.

"I need to stack the deck in my favor as much as possible."

Many design tournaments adopted different formats, durations, requirements and themes.

For example, there was one design tournament that ran for three days and centered solely around designing knight mechs.

There was another design tournament that did not impose any restrictions on the mech type that contestants were allowed to design, making them a lot more diverse and chaotic.

The method of deciding which competition mech was the winner is also different from event to event.

In some of the competitions, the mech designers were allowed to bring their own champions who piloted their new works.

In other events, the tournament organizers provided mech pilots from their own pools.

There were even tournaments where the competition mechs didn't fight to eliminate each other, but instead faced several challenges in order to achieve the highest scores.

Some of the larger and more extravagant tournaments even utilized advanced technologies to produce duplicate mechs or quickly repair heavily-damaged machines!

This way, these competition mechs could continue to duel each other multiple times with minimal delay, thereby preventing the audience from having to wait hours while nothing important took place.

There were so many different options that Ves grew dizzy from it all. Since he and his clan could only stay in the Vulit Central Star Node for a limited amount of time, he had to weigh his choices carefully in order to avoid squandering his time!

Chapter 3449: Choice of Tournaments

Since the amount of tournaments he could apply to was still overwhelmingly great, Ves knew that he had to take additional measures to narrow down his choices.

First, he needed to list out his own strengths and weaknesses.

"My basics are solid, but my knowledge base is probably a bit too basic compared to all of the talented Journeymen who studied at much more impressive mech universities than I. My best trait is my extensive practical and hands-on experience with fabricating mechs. I'm pretty sure that there are no other Journeymen in Chance Bay that can exceed my success when it comes to producing masterwork mechs!"

Not even his wife or the other Larkinson mech designers had him beat in this area. Gloriana might possess the same number of masterwork certificates as him, but he created an additional unregistered masterwork mech in the form of the Devil Tiger.

His mech affinity had improved so many times that his feel and intimacy towards mechs were unnaturally high compared to his rivals.

In more concrete terms, he was able to design more efficiently, detect a lot more flaws in his work, manipulate materials to a better degree and output higher-quality mechs at a much greater consistency.

However, Ves did not believe he could rely solely on these advantages to win any given design tournament. He had to bring more to the table to defeat those who possessed their own strong points!

"I'll have to rely on my design philosophy to make the difference."

He specialized in man-machine symbiosis, which at a basic level increased the fit between mech and mech pilot.

His mechs performed better because their mech pilots grew closer to them. This allowed the latter to utilize the capabilities of the former to a better degree.

This was a decently good advantage in tournament settings. The reason for that was that mech pilots who piloted newly-made competition mechs never utilized them to the fullest extent.

If Ves was able to design a mech that accelerated this adaptation process, then his entry would be able to perform better solely on the basis of indirectly improving the performance of the mech pilot!

This was the root of his design philosophy and an element that was constant in each of his work. No matter if it was the Everchanger which took a year to develop or some random competition mech that he had cobbled together from loose parts in less than a day, both of them worked in a similar fashion!

In addition to that, design spirits could convey even greater advantages to his works!

"Both Larkinsons and non-Larkinsons can deliver better performances with my mechs."

The advantage of allowing his own Larkinson mech pilots to pilot his mechs was that they were already familiar with this phenomenon and needed no time to adapt.

Living mechs were also helpful for those who became exposed to them for the first time. Third-party mech pilots had already reacted to their first experiences with piloting LMC

mechs with delight, and that led to significant boosts in morale and effective performance.

Ves already knew that he would probably be able to score high in competitions where the mech pilots acted as judges!

"If I can join a contest that is similar to the design duel that I managed to win back on Prosperous Hill VI, then I'm confident that I can enter the top 3!"

He searched the list of tournaments for several minutes but failed to find any that judged the competition mechs in this manner.

It turned out that relying on the subjective opinions of mech pilots was considered too fuzzy to determine the best competition mechs. Any judgment that was even slightly controversial often attracted a great amount of contention!

Deciding the winners via score systems with well-defined rules or through achieving the most victories in mech duels were much simpler and more decisive! The losers hardly had any openings to complain about after the fact.

"If that's the case, then it doesn't matter who gets to pilot my mechs. Whether they are piloted by my own people or neutral third parties, there is little distinction."

He preferred to use his own Larkinson mech pilots, but the danger with that was that their skills might not keep up against the champions of other Journeymen.

The general Larkinson mech pilots were decently well-trained and often possessed a good amount of battle experience.

Yet Ves was not blind to the fact that there were even better-trained mech pilots out there. Many of them received superior augments and graduated from much better mech academies. The performance of the MTA mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan made it clear how enormous the gap could be. The difference could be massive!

Therefore, taking part in tournaments where the tournament organizers provided the mech pilots was generally better for mech designers with shallower backgrounds like Ves. He just had to trust these strangers to judge every work fairly.

"The chance that they will do so is high since they are operating in MTA territory. Who would ever dare to cheat in this highly-monitored environment?"

Chance Bay was not only a money-making paradise, but also a way for the MTA to showcase their vision of an ideal society to the pioneers. In particular, anything that had to do with mechs needed to proceed strictly according to the rules.

With that reassurance, Ves began to look at tournaments that supplied their own mech pilots. He figured that exposing his living mechs directly to other parties might allow him to win over his first new business partners in the Red Ocean.

One short contest called the High Tide Tournament was scheduled to start tomorrow. It was a fairly generic tournament that did not impose any strange conditions.

"That's also the problem. It's a bit too free form."

Contestants were free to choose the mech type of their competition entries. They had 12 hours to design and build a complete mech from scratch. They not only had access to a wide selection of materials, but were also allowed to produce their mechs with the superfabs provided by Hysphalin Industries, the organizers of this particular contest, who also happened to make and sell these fantastic production machines.

Superfabs were similar to the autoforges that Ves had once worked with. Both of them made production a lot faster and more convenient, but superfabs were leagues ahead in terms of performance and sophistication.

As an amalgamation of high technology, superfabs were usually first-class machines that represented the pinnacle of fabrication technology. They were fast, consistent, extremely energy hungry and amazingly expensive and difficult to build.

Only materializers were faster and more consistent, but left no room for human intervention.

It was for this reason that many first-class mech designers who valued craftsmanship and hands-on experience still preferred to work with the supposedly 'inferior' superfabs.

Ves had never worked with a superfab before, but he could easily brush up on them by spending a day on simulation training.

"I'll be working with superfabs a lot, so I better get familiar with them as soon as possible."

The tech might be new but the functions were the same. Ves did not think it would be difficult for him to adapt to this advanced production machine.

Ves turned his attention back to the remaining conditions of the High Tide Tournament.

The scoring system was a little special. The tournament provided its own mech pilots who needed to fight against three random opponents. The performance of the competition mechs were scored regardless of whether they won or lost.

After every bout, the Hysphalin Industries made sure to rapidly repair the damaged machines so they could quickly complete their subsequent rounds.

At the end, the worst score of a competition mech was disregarded. Only its two best performances were taken into consideration. By summing up these numerical scores, a clear ranking would emerge that quickly determined the ultimate winners of the High Tide Tournament.

"Sounds simple enough. It's a good format for a competition that only lasts a single day."

Ves decided to sign up for it because it was a good first opportunity for him to experience what it was like to take part in these kinds of spectacles.

He was also reasonably confident in his own abilities. Trying to design and fabricate a complete mech in just 12 hours was incredibly stressful, but Ves believed that rushing out designs and mechs was one of his strong points!

"I'm the opposite of Gloriana in this regard!"

The prize pool was relatively sparse and concentrated at the top, though.

Only the top 3 won meaningful prizes.

The first-place contestant was eligible to receive 5 second-class combat carriers.

The second-place winner could only earn 2 combat carriers.

The third-place winner had to make do with just 1 combat carrier.

As for the fourth-place winner and lower, Ves didn't even take these consolation prizes seriously!

"Reaching the top 3 when up to 100 second-class Journeymen can compete is difficult!"

What was worse was that the maximum age limit was set at 100 years old!

People who were almost three times as old as Ves might not be more talented, but they would definitely have a wealth of experience and knowledge to rely upon!

Ves signed up anyway. There were no better alternatives available at that time. There were still lots of other tournaments he could apply for, but the duration, tournament format and requirements didn't suit his needs.

"The High Tide Tournament only lasts a single day. After I rest on the day after that, I'll be ready to compete in another tournament!"

Once he gained experience in competing in a short and basic tournament, he believed he would be ready to tackle a more interesting event.

He filtered the list in order to see what interesting competitions started a short time after the High Tide Tournament.

A five-day contest immediately stood out to Ves. The so-called Wild Brawl Bowl was a rather grungy tournament organized by the Wild Fighter Association, which was basically a club for enthusiastic melee mech pilots.

Due to this organization's obvious interest in melee mechs, the participating journeymen were only limited to designing landbound medium melee mechs.

Whether the competition mechs wielded swords or axes, it didn't matter as long as they didn't carry any ranged weapons!

Contestants had 3 days to design and produce their mechs with the help of superfabs. This was quite a generous time limit compared to the other competitions that Ves had participated in the past.

Of particular note was that the design budget was fairly low and the quality of materials provided by the tournament weren't the best.

This fit with the theme of the Wild Brawl Bowl, which was supposed to showcase messy battles between melee mechs with clear weaknesses in construction!

"It also helps in saving costs." Ves muttered.

Just like the previous tournament, the Wild Brawl Bowl provided its own mech pilots. After every fight, any battle damage would be rapidly repaired as long as the competition mech was eligible to fight another round.

What was different this time was that the competition mechs had to go through a single elimination bracket.

The first round featured 32 competition mechs. Each of them would fight a single duel, eliminating the losers right away. This went on up to the fifth round where the finalists determined the final ranking.

The prize pool was a lot more impressive for this five-day tournament.

First place received a brand-new second-class fleet carrier!

Second place received 5 second-class combat carriers.

Third place received 4 combat carriers.

This went on until the sixth place only received a single combat carrier.

Ves was incredibly attracted to the top prize. A fleet carrier was an incredible treasure. He already had plenty of mechs and personnel on hand to make full use of such a useful capital ship.

Even if he failed to reach first place, he would still be happy if he ended up in the top 3!

"The participation requirements are also much more favorable this time!"

Only second-class Journeymen up to 50 years old were allowed to participate, which already cut out a lot of capable rivals!

There was only one complication, though. The number of contestants that could sign up for the Wild Brawl Bowl was not 32 mech designers, but 64!

"It's a team tournament!"

Two Journeymen had to sign up as a team and collaborate on a single competition mech.

This presented a lot more interesting variables and helped to spice up the Wild Brawl Bowl.

Ves didn't mind working together with someone else. In fact, he found it quite interesting to take part in a team design tournament!

He just needed to find a suitable partner. He first contacted his wife.

"Hey Gloriana, there's this event called the Wild Brawl Bowl—"

"I SAID NO, VES! AND WHAT KIND OF STUPID CONTEST IS THIS WILD BRAWL BOWL, ANYWAY?! THIS EVENT IS COMPLETELY BENEATH MY STATION!"

Well, his wife had certainly made her opinion clear.

There was only one other Journeymen in the clan that he thought was suitable for him to partner up for this occasion.

"Hey Ketis, want to do something fun together?"

Chapter 3450: Tournament Nuances

Ketis initially had other plans in mind.

"What did you plan to do instead?" Ves asked over the comm.

"Well, other than going on romantic dates with Joshua, I wanted to enter a couple of personal combat tournaments." She answered. "Mech pilots and mech designers aren't the only people in the Red Ocean who want to compare themselves against each other. There are warriors who have mastered powerful combat arts back in the old galaxy. I don't know if you are aware about it, but bloodsports are really popular in Chance Bay. The prize pools aren't any less compared to the other kinds of competitions."

She was right. Tournaments involving mech design or mech combat were both fantastic in their own ways, but their content could be a little too technical or far removed from the daily lives of ordinary people.

Compared to the intricacies of designing a mech, it was a lot easier for a normal person to appreciate a punch!

It was also a lot easier for humans to aspire to become their heroes when they didn't need to possess genetic aptitude or a degree in mech design. Anyone with a sound body could perform a kick or swing a sword!

While it was a lot more difficult to get good at doing so, at the very least the barrier to entry was a lot lower!

As a result, these biggest bloodsport tournaments tended to draw some of the biggest crowds of laymen. The volume of ticket sales were absolutely massive, especially when famous fighters signed up for them. The legends among them were even household names across hundreds of star sectors!

A genuine swordmaster would definitely perform marvelously in these tournaments, though he didn't understand the other contestants. Perhaps they didn't inherit a fantastic swordsmanship tradition like Ketis, but humanity definitely developed other supreme fighting methods!

"Well, no matter how well you think you can perform in these personal combat tournaments, don't forget your other profession. You should at least test your mettle against other mech designers while we are still in the Vulit Central Star Node. This is a valuable experience that you can't easily find anywhere else. In my early days, I learned a lot from what I've done and what I've witnessed during these kinds of events. You're a bit further ahead than me back then, but that doesn't mean it's too late."

"I don't know, Ves." She furrowed her brows. "I'm confident in my ability to win in a sword fighting tournament, but I'm not so sure about design tournaments. I can't compare myself to you on most fronts. If I can't even beat you, how will I be able to beat others?"

This was why she hadn't signed up to any design tournaments. She had taken a good look at them, but even if she only considered those that set the lowest age limits for Journeymen, she still didn't rate her chances highly.

"Hey, perhaps you have a point, but this is a team competition, not a solo one. You will have me by your side at all times. I can cover all of the areas that you are worried about. All you need to do is focus on the few areas you do excel at. If it makes you more comfortable, then just treat this as a design project where I'll be the lead designer and you will be the contributing designer."

"I..."

"Besides, the Wild Brawl Bowl is a good opportunity for you to preview and experiment with some of the ideas that you intend to apply to your upcoming Monster Slayer design. Whatever theories and assumptions that you have built up in your mind might not work out in practice. This melee mech tournament will allow you to test them against other comparatively powerful mechs!"

That finally won her over.

"Okay, Ves. If you truly think that I can be of use to you in this tournament, I'll work with you. We will design the best damn swordsman mech in this Wild Brawl Bowl, mark my words!"

"That's the spirit!" He grinned.

The two quickly registered to participate in this interesting team tournament. They agreed to meet up at a later date in order to discuss and plan their approach for their upcoming collaboration.

Almost every tournament tended to randomize specific conditions such as material availability, component design availability and other random requirements such as height limits in order to keep them fresh and prevent pre-designing.

It would be no fun if many contestants immediately whipped out a complete and functional mech design right at the start! It was even worse if those prior designs were prepared by other, better mech designers!

While that meant that he and Ketis couldn't prepare anything too specific, they could settle a couple of overall design choices. This would save them valuable time on discussions and allow them to settle on a given direction right away.

Now that Ves signed up for two different tournaments, he did not continue to look at any subsequent ones. He could sign up for the later ones after he had a better idea of what it was like and what he needed to pay attention to in order to maximize his chances of winning.

"The design tournaments that take place here are a lot different from the ones back in my home region."

Better tech, more wealth, greater ticket sales, much more formidable competition and the implicit support from the MTA all elevated these design tournaments to a much higher level.

Ves needed to work hard and make use of all of his advantages in order to at least achieve a decent result. He also needed an element of luck as the different tournament formats could give some contestants greater advantages than others.

For example, Ves might have poor luck in the drawing of opponents in the fighting stages and get matched up against a tournament favorite.

The allocation of mech pilots was also unequal most of the time.

It was impossible for the tournament organizers to gather mech pilots that all performed exactly the same. Some were better and some were worse. A few might specialize in ranged combat while others had a preference for defensive combat.

"A good mech pilot can propel a contestant to first place while a poorer one can sink a chance to win a combat carrier!"

Ves quickly read up on the rules concerning this matter.

The allocation of mech pilots for the Wild Brawl Bowl was quite fair.

The Wild Fighting Association was an organization that principally represented the rights and interests of melee mech pilots. As a result, it had a lot of rambunctious warriors at its disposal!

At the start of the competition, each pair of mech designers would be allowed to select their chosen mech pilot from a varied selection of 20 candidates.

The youngest team of Journeymen were allowed to pick first while the oldest team had to wait until last.

Each of them would have different strengths and weaknesses, but by allowing the mech designers to select the mech pilot in advance, they could tailor their design to the individual over the course of three whole days.

"It would have been great if Gloriana agreed to team up with me for this, but Ketis is also a great choice."

Ves recognized that the Wild Brawl Bowl was a way for the Wild Fighting Association to hit multiple birds with one stone. It aimed to increase the popularity of melee mechs. It also aimed to showcase the combat prowess of its members through this single elimination bracket.

"On the surface, it's a design tournament. In truth, it's probably more about giving these members a chance to excel, both by getting selected and by performing well with the mechs they eventually obtain!"

The Wild Fighting Association would have been a lot more reluctant to organize and fund this expensive tournament if these added considerations didn't exist.

The High Tide Tournament did things differently. The reason why it lasted so short was to put greater emphasis on the performance of the superfabs. It was basically an indirect advertising campaign of Hysphalin Industries, who not only sold superfabs, but all kinds of other high-quality industrial machines as well.

The allocation of mech pilots was also a bit more challenging to work with. Apparently, they were all supposed to observe the mech designers at work and eventually make their own selections after the competition mechs had been designed and built.

The best mech pilot was able to choose first. The weaker ones had to wait their turn.

This was an interesting dynamic that forced mech designers to make sure their works were as attractive and compelling as possible.

If mech pilots didn't like a competition mech, then it would eventually be chosen as last by the mech pilot with the worst performance in the group!

Ves frowned as he thought of the implications. "If the mech pilots base their decision on not just the competition mechs but also their makers, then the better soldiers will likely flock to the machines that are developed by older and more experienced mech designers!"

Though Ves was not actually that young anymore, he was still under forty years old. It was hard to imagine that he could beat a Journeyman that was close to 100 years old.

"I'll have to try, though. I'm not afraid of the competition and I'm confident in my craftsmanship!"

There were other details that he needed to pay attention to. There were lots of guides on the galactic net that provided people like Ves basic guidelines on how to approach different design tournaments. From preparing a set of different options to how to choose a mech type in a less restricted competition, Ves read up on a lot of common sense matters that made him a little better aware of what he should do in the following days.

"In the day after tomorrow, I will only have 12 hours to design and make a complete competition mech." He said. "That is an extremely short amount of time. The conditions for designing the mech are also a lot harsher than the ones that I work with before."

In previous tournaments, he worked with pre-prepared components. His job actually amounted to picking the right configuration of existing parts before merging them all together into a working machine.

Such a mode was suitable for Novices and Apprentices who couldn't design a complete mech within a day, but Journeymen like Ves were better than that. The competitions took off the training wheels by providing a limited range of component designs. The mech designers had to fabricate them all on their own before assembling them together to form complete mechs.

"This can only be done in a reasonable amount of time by relying on the capabilities of the superfab."

Ves immediately understood the importance of familiarizing with this powerful production machine. A superfab partially worked like a powerful 3D printer, but also combined many other functions in a cohesive and efficient manner to massively speed up every production task.

Despite the fast pace of production, the output was also a lot more regular and less prone to production-related faults.

It would be great if the Larkinson Clan could get its hands on at least one superfab, but this was unrealistic in the short term. The price was too high!

"They're all first-class machines, so it's not unreasonable for them to be worth more than a second-class fleet carrier!"

Superfabs were truly good, though. Ves was a bit more confident in his ability to produce a masterwork mech if he was able to install one in his personal workshop! It made his life so much easier in many ways. This allowed him to pay less attention to tedious matters and focus more on the more critical matters that had a greater impact on the quality and performance of the end product!

"Damn, my strongest competition might already be familiar with working with these superfabs. I better catch up quickly or else I'll fall behind!"

Ves quickly browsed the galactic net and activated a simulation of the same model of superfabs that would be used in the upcoming High Tide Tournament.

"Hysphalin Industries... let's see whether your product is good."