

Mech 3451

Chapter 3451: G-Aena League

"Careful with those mechs! They're responsible for giving us extra combat carriers if everything goes right. If one of our mech pilots trip during a match because you bumped a crate due to your sloppiness, I will have your head!"

The Larkinson fleet had burst into activity shortly after the Larkinsons signed into their first tournaments. The Gorgoneion alone had become incredibly active as hundreds of packed mechs had to be shipped to the surface of Chance Bay.

To many of the combat-oriented clansmen, their vacations were over. Now that the top had given them a directive to compete in tournaments, they all readied themselves to perform in front of crowds!

It soon became clear that the Larkinsons mainly signed up for mech combat and mech design tournaments. The clan heavily emphasized both its mech pilots and its mech designers, after all.

Not everyone was allowed to sign up, though. Only the better ones were allowed to go in order to ensure their younger and more inexperienced clansmen didn't shame the clan too much.

To mech pilots, this was especially important because the Larkinson Clan only planned to use up 2000 mechs at most.

In competitions where the contestants had to bring their own mechs, the machines usually got trashed at the end. The amount of churn that would ensue in the following weeks would definitely be exaggerated!

Fortunately, a lot of battle damage was still fixable. The Spirit of Bentheim's production crews already stood ready to repair or reconstruct any mechs that got wrecked in all of the mech combat tournaments.

Even if the clan anticipated that there would be a lot of unrecoverable losses, the repair personnel would still be able to salvage at least some spare parts and recycled materials out of any inoperable machine. These recovered goods could be utilized to repair other heavily-damaged machines, thereby giving them second lives.

In fact, Ves didn't mind if all 2000 mechs got utterly ruined beyond recognition. While it was sad to see these living mechs go, they would have served their purpose and maybe deliver great results before they died.

Currently, the Larkinson Clan possessed way too many mechs and not enough carriers. Being able to trade the former for the latter was a great opportunity in his opinion!

The only question was how many mechs the Larkinsons needed to sacrifice in order to obtain a decent carrier. If the 'exchange rate' was too awful due to the poor performance of the mechs or mech pilots, then the clan would definitely bleed!

It was for this reason that the Larkinson Army took this responsibility absolutely seriously. General Verle treated this as a military operation and expected his soldiers to fight as if the lives of everyone on the fleet was at stake.

Given the many dangers of the Red Ocean, this was not an exaggeration!

Since the Larkinsons had to perform at their best, the Living Sentinels mostly sat out the fights.

There was nothing wrong with them, but the Larkinsons simply had too many other mech pilots that were better.

In fact, with a pool of 20,000 mech pilots, the struggle to earn a spot in one of the mech combat tournaments was intense!

Since the Larkinson Clan prioritized winning rather than other goals such as gaining experience or experimenting with new battle strategies, certain mech legions and individual mech pilots received much more priority than others. The expectations on them were also a lot higher.

Of particular note was the swordsmen and swordswomen of the Larkinson Clan. The Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders were both excellent duelists and felt right at home in the mech arenas.

They already signed up to many tournaments that featured mixed mech types or only melee mech types. Whether it was solo combat, duo combat, squad combat or greater, the swordsman mech enthusiasts of the Larkinson Clan were expected to play leading roles!

In fact, the infantry swordsmen of the Larkinson Clan also applied to various person combat tournaments in droves. Unlike their mech pilot counterparts, they didn't have to bring any mechs, so it was much cheaper and more convenient for them to take part in a lot of different martial competitions.

Many Larkinsons expected decent results from them. While their augmentations might not be able to keep up with those who originated from the more prosperous parts of the old galaxy, their training and combat methods were quite excellent, especially if they embraced the Heavensword Association's galaxy-renowned swordsmanship tradition!

Aside from these sword fanatics, other powerful mech legions such as the Avatars of Myth and the Penitent Sisters were expected to step up, particularly in group combat tournaments.

All seven legion commanders had gathered on a catwalk overlooking one of the busy hangar bays of the Gorgoneion.

Many of them had been hard at work. It was hard to choose the right tournaments and to select the most suitable mech pilots to go on stage.

Commander Casella sighed. "It's a pity that my Living Sentinels are being left out of this excitement."

Commander Melkor patted her shoulder. "You can still represent your mech legion by yourself. There's also Percival and Trinity."

The Living Sentinels had three expert candidates that could take part in a select few mech combat tournaments. Not only did they sign up for solo competitions, a few of them would even show up in group competitions.

"We'll be relying on you to command our troops in the big one." Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens stated. "We cannot afford to falter in the battles we should be best at. If we can't win against a mech battalion in the arena, how much better will we fare on the battlefield?"

The 'big one' that the legion commander was referring to was the G-Aena League, a large battalion-level mech combat tournament!

The league that was sponsored by G-Aena Mech Supplies was well-funded and took place in one of the largest mech arenas on Chance Bay. Millions of live spectators along with billions of virtual ticket holders from all across the old galaxy were expected to watch each and every match. There were even expectations that the total number of viewers would surpass 1 trillion for the finals!

This was by far the most important tournament the clan took part in, and the 500 mech pilots selected to take part in this spectacle were definitely the best the Larkinson Army had to offer!

Unfortunately, no expert pilots and expert mechs were allowed to fight in the G-Aena League. The competition also limited the amount of expert candidates that were allowed to participate.

This was a rule that took into consideration that not every pioneer was able to whip up an expert candidate. A single expert candidate among hundreds of mech pilots wouldn't be able to make too much of a difference, even though past group combat tournaments showed that the finalists all had them in their ranks.

Out of all of the expert candidates that the Larkinson Army had to offer, the honor of leading the Larkinsons in the G-Aena League went to Commander Casella Ingvar.

Though the other expert candidates were no slouches, Casella possessed three distinct advantages.

First, she was the most popular and well-liked expert candidate in the clan. Her presence would definitely boost morale and allow the other 499 mech pilots to put up a more tenacious struggle against tougher opponents!

Second, she was a capable and proven battlefield commander. Even though she belonged to the Living Sentinels, the mech pilots from other legions had no qualms about following her commands.

Third, she was the currently-designated mech pilot of the Quint. This heavily-modified and upgraded Bright Warrior was one of the Larkinson Clan's treasured masterwork mechs.

That alone was enough of a reason to put both Casella and this precious living mech in the arena.

Still, not everyone was comfortable with putting the Quint at risk in a mech arena. What if the machine got wrecked beyond recovery in a difficult match? The loss of a masterwork mech, particularly one that was compatible with regular mech pilots, would be a disaster for the Larkinson Clan!

However, Larkinsons had to bring out their best, and they couldn't afford to leave the Quint on the Gorgoneion.

A lot of pressure and expectation rested on the shoulders of Commander Casella.

"I will not let down your trust." She solemnly declared to the other legion commanders. "I cannot promise that we'll be able to go all the way to the end, but we must definitely bring back enough combat carriers."

The battalion that she was slated to lead in the G-Aena League consisted of a mix of Avatars, Vandals, Swordmaidens, Penitent Sisters and a small complement of Ylvainans. This presented them with a relatively balanced lineup that would have a response for many different situations.

Of course, the mech composition also possessed clear weaknesses and shortcomings. The Larkinson battalion did not excel at defensive combat and could not overpower opponents by relying heavily on ranged combat.

No matter what, the Larkinsons had to go on the attack and drive their mechs right into the faces of their opponents!

"Let's hope we don't get matched up against any defensive battalions." Commander Melkor said as he adjusted his visor. "Even if we can come out on top, our mechs will definitely be in poor shape."

If not for the fact that the G-Aena League was willing to repair light or moderately-damaged mechs, it would have been too painful for most groups to compete in this huge event!

While the legion commanders continued to discuss their strategies for their upcoming group matches, a lot of individual Larkinson mech pilots readied themselves to deliver their best performances in numerous smaller-scale occasions.

Imon Ingvar and Vincent Ricklin had both gathered in front of one of the smaller mech arenas of Chance Bay.

The New Stars Tournament was a 1 week affair that was meant to showcase the combat prowess of many expert candidates. In order to make sure that enough of them showed up, the tournament organizers set up an attractive prize pool.

Imon and Vincent weren't the only Larkinson expert candidates who participated in this particular competition. They just arrived early because they couldn't wait!

"Ah, this is where I belong!" Vincent spread his arms. "After all of that boring practice and training, I can finally show off my skills in front of an adoring crowd!"

Imon crossed his arms and scoffed at his friend's attitude. "The clan didn't give you a mech in order to stroke your ego. We're expected to win and climb up the rankings. Leave all of the showboating after you have won a combat carrier for the clan."

"Hey man, this is a competitive sport, not an actual battle. Don't be so serious. If you step into the arena with a different mindset, you'll just get crushed on all of the expectations that people place on you. What you should really do is to let go and have fun!"

The two couldn't agree on this issue, but it didn't matter. Enough Larkinsons had signed up to the New Stars Tournament that only one of them had to do well enough to deliver a satisfying result.

Both of them shook their hands and wished each other luck before they marched forward.

Once Imon and Vincent stepped inside the arena, they would become competitors.

Many other notable Larkinson mech pilots entered into other arenas at this time. People such as Dietrich Krotz and Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens would soon be demonstrating what the Larkinson Clan was capable of in the Red Ocean!

While all of this went on, a group of Larkinsons arrived at a special venue where another sort of tournament was about to commence.

"We're here." Ves announced as he held Lucky in his arms. "I missed this feeling."

"Meow."

Alongside his bodyguards, four other Larkinsons followed right behind him. While a lot of other clansmen, most notably the assistant mech designers of the Design Department, had already bought tickets to watch their patriarch in action in the stands, Ves was allowed to bring a handful of his people to the backstage.

He turned around to face the young clansmen.

"I brought you here in order to learn. Pay attention to your conduct and don't argue with any people. We're bound to bump into all kinds of strange personalities inside, but no matter what happens, don't do anything without me. Understood?"

Maikel, Zanthar, Maisie Ann and Rennie all nodded. No matter how freely they behaved aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, they were in a completely different environment now. Even the girls restrained their behavior this time.

"Alright, let's head inside and start this show!"

Chapter 3452: Korok Alpha KA-35

The High Tide Tournament was a relatively smaller and unremarkable mech design tournament. It only lasted a single day, which meant that any competition mechs that the contestants managed to cobble together wouldn't perform that well.

Even so, hundreds of thousands of people already paid tickets for this event. The short duration made it easy for many visitors of Chance Bay to take a day out of their schedule to attend a complete tournament from beginning to end.

Contestants like Ves didn't have to go through the busy main entrance. They instead entered the large competition space from the back.

After a quick round of verification, Ves and his people soon entered a private waiting room where an attendant awaited their arrival.

The well-behaved man in uniform initially bowed in greeting. "On behalf of Hysphalin Industries, we thank you for entering the High Tide Tournament, Patriarch Larkinson. We are honored to host an impressive Journeyman and pioneer such as yourself. While you must rely on your own abilities to win this tournament, we shall endeavor to help you work without any unnecessary hindrance."

These were just empty words, but Ves still appreciated the gesture.

"Thank you. I look forward to showing off my design abilities. I might not be the most experienced Journeymen in this tournament, but I'm confident that my mech will stand out from the rest."

Half an hour went by as the attendant explained the rules and procedures for this tournament. He also answered a few questions from Ves.

Once Ves understood everything he needed to know, the attendant brought them to a larger waiting hall where dozens of other hopeful Journeymen and their followers were waiting to appear on stage.

"Almost everyone has arrived on time. The High Tide Tournament will commence within an hour. We will call you to step forward when the time comes."

"I understand."

Ves and the four Larkinson mech design students all gazed at the other groups. There was a lot of variety, which was not surprising since the High Tide Tournament attracted up to a hundred Journeymen who originated from all across the old galaxy.

Many of these Journeymen had already achieved acclaim in their careers. Their faces, profiles and accomplishments were part of the public record.

Ves could easily trace their identities and their accomplishments by using his implant to perform a search on the galactic net with the help of an image capture of their faces.

Before he studied anyone's individual record, he first made an overall tally so that he could get a high-level overview of the competition.

At this time, 85 Journeymen aside from Ves were already present. 34 came from the galactic rim, 46 originated from the galactic heartland while just 6 came from the galactic center.

This was a relatively normal distribution as far as mech design tournaments went.

The galactic rim might not be the most prosperous place in the old galaxy, but it was never short of mech designers. The frequent wars and conflicts that took place in this less stable region also provided a lot of opportunities for them to see their work in action.

The galactic heartland was a lot more stable due to the higher prevalence of stable regimes. However, humanity's violent side could never be completely restrained. Any wars that broke out were absolutely massive, and a lot of smaller skirmishes happened even in the quietest of times.

"Hmm, I'll need to watch out for those six." Ves murmured as he paid special attention to the six individuals who were brought up in a state in the galactic center. "That doesn't mean I can ignore the threat of the other ones, though."

He should not underestimate any Journeymen who had the courage to enter this tournament. Mech designers at this rank were generally smart people, and they would never choose to be here if they thought they could get fiftieth place at most!

The older ones who were close enough to hit the 100 year age limit were especially noteworthy.

"Michael Arven Emistes." Ves recited the name of the oldest of the bunch.

At 99 years old, this Journeyman from the galactic rim must have gone through a lot! Even without studying his record, Ves was able to gain the vague impression that Michael was stable, steady and quietly confident in his own abilities.

Nonetheless, he didn't carry himself like a champion unlike some of the other participants.

When Ves finally consulted the galactic net, he understood that Mr. Emistes was actually a relatively less talented mech designer.

He broke through to his current rank at the age of 56, which was not too old but certainly not very remarkable.

The fact that he hadn't broken through to Senior after 43 years suggested that Emistes wasn't a late bloomer at all. He was just a mediocre mech designer who proceeded at his own pace.

That didn't mean he was a good-for-nothing. He published plenty of decent mech designs, many of which excelled in defense.

That turned Michael Emistes into an interesting recruitment prospect. The Larkinson Clan urgently needed a defensive specialist in order to design better and more functional defensive mechs!

One of the reasons why Ves was so eager to enter into mech design tournaments was to get in touch with people like Mr. Emistes.

Yet... despite the man's attractive specialization, Ves didn't think about approaching him. Not only was he relatively old and set in his ways, he was also registered under another pioneering organization.

Though poaching was definitely possible, Ves did not want to make any unnecessary enemies. It wasn't worth it to go through all of this trouble just to get an older Journeyman.

As for the younger contestants, each of them were generally more remarkable than Mr. Emistes. Ves didn't linger too long on any of them because they were all committed to other pioneers.

It made sense since these young but accomplished mech designers were prized talents. There was no way that their organizations would let them go so easily.

Ves only managed to find a few unaligned Journeymen among the middle-aged contestants. He didn't know the reason why they weren't attached to any pioneering organizations at this time, but they might be fishing for an attractive job offer by showcasing their skills in this tournament.

"Well, we'll see how they perform later."

Only a few Journeymen took the initiative to approach and talk to each other. They were generally familiar with each other or came from the same region back in the old galaxy.

It was unfortunate that Ves saw no one who came from the Yeina Star Cluster and the other ones that his fleet had traveled through. Human space in the Milky Way was simply too big so the odds of encountering anyone here who came from a familiar location was minimal.

Time passed by until almost an hour had passed. Soon enough, one of the announcers formally commenced the short tournament!

[Welcome to the High Tide Tournament, an event that is sponsored by Hysphalin Industries, the number one provider of convenience in the factory!]

The announcers and commentators proceeded to warm up the crowd with the usual spiel. Soon enough, Ves and the other contestants received the signal to move onto the main stage.

"Good luck, teacher!" Maikel called.

"Thanks. Keep a hold of Lucky for me, will you? Don't let him get into any trouble."

"Meow!"

While attendants brought the followers to the VIP seats of the venue, Ves and many other Journeymen walked or floated up to the front stage.

Bright spotlights shone down on them from above as the audience

[Today, 94 up-and-coming Journeyman Mech Designers shall display their ability to design entire mechs in a single session and realize it with unprecedented ease and speed with Hysphalin's latest superfab model that excels at second-class mech production, the Korok Alpha KA-35!]

A large cube-shaped metal machine emerged from the floor of the space in front of the Journeymen. All of the spotlights moved to the superfab, causing everyone to shift their focus towards this clean and modern-looking industrial machine.

[The latest product developed by the galaxy-class research and development team at Hysphalin, the newest version of our Korok Alpha series is updated with even greater ease of use and automation than before. We guarantee that any Journeyman or qualified fabricator can single-handedly produce entire mechs within hours. Best of all, the quality of these mechs will not be any less than machines produced using more traditional production machines.]

The lead announcer spent several minutes espousing the many features of the Korok Alpha KA-35.

Despite not having touched any Superfabs in his life, Ves was quite familiar with the KA-35. He had spent a lot of hours reading the manual and familiarizing himself with its operation in simulations.

He also learned more about how superfabs worked in general and what was special about the Korok Alpha series.

According to his research, Hysphalin Industries was an up-and-coming production equipment manufacturer that had already spread in many different star clusters in the old galaxy.

Now, this large company was attempting to spread its reach into the Red Ocean, hoping to capture a generous market share among the arriving mech designers who were all potential customers.

As its motto already indicated, Hysphalin put a great focus on making it as easy as possible to use its machines. Its production equipment featured some of the lowest learning curves in the market. It accomplished this through heavy automation and a high priority towards delivering consistent output.

Ves had to admit that the Korok Alpha series was the best introduction to superfabs for mech designers unfamiliar with this type of production machine. There were many other superfab models that were ten or even a hundred times more difficult to operate!

That didn't mean that the Korok Alpha KA-35 was the best for everyone. Hysphalin Industries did an admirable job in simplifying the incredibly powerful production

capabilities of a single first-class supermachine, but all of that came at the cost of control.

The machines didn't allow for as much manual control. Even if someone insisted on taking the reins, it was quite frustrating to exert fine control over the individual operations of the KA-35.

In short, it was the tricycle of the superfab world. It was an excellent beginner machine for people to get started on a better production method, but the Korok Alpha series would never win any serious races!

[...For just 39,999 MTA credits, we will deliver you a Korok Alpha KA-35 to your doorstep within a week. We guarantee that you will be able to start producing mechs with incredible ease and convenience the next day!]

And that was the other downside of the Korok Alpha KA-35. It was a luxurious beginner superfab model but was priced as a midrange product. Its production speed and quality ceiling were ultimately too disappointing to justify paying the equivalent of a pair of capital ships for a single machine!

Once the announcers were done advertising Hysphalin's newest market offering, they quickly moved on to the main event.

The tournament had to end within a day, so they couldn't afford to waste too much time on distractions.

After a brief routine, Ves and his competitors approached a huge center hall where many different semi-open workshops had been prepared.

In fact, the workshops were quite minimal in their arrangement. They only consisted of a single desk terminal along with a Korok Alpha KA-35. The mech designers were expected to employ nothing else to design and make their competition mechs.

"I can work with this." Ves shrugged.

Although there were no solid barriers between the workshops, only the spectators were able to enjoy an uninterrupted view of everything.

When Ves swept his gaze past his own workshop, he encountered nothing but hazy energy screens. None of the Journeymen would be able to peek at their rivals.

He stopped putting any thought on what his rivals might be cooking up and focused on his own work. He quickly approached the desk terminal and sat down on the floating chair.

"Now, let's see the exact conditions of this contest before I decide on my plan." Ves muttered.

He had already prepared several different plans that broadly outlined his design approach... He had yet to make up his mind, but would quickly have to do so once he learned what he had to work with today.

Chapter 3453: Short Burst Mech

At the start of the High Tide Tournament, all 94 competing Journeymen called up a document that precisely explained the conditions they had to work in. The lengthy pages outlined what they were allowed to design, what they needed to avoid in their work, what materials and components they could employ and what specific technical requirements they needed to meet.

Ves quickly noticed that the tournament organizers didn't set any unusual or overly limiting conditions.

Sure, he had to work with a set of completely unfamiliar materials. He also wasn't familiar with any of the component designs in the catalog. However, a good mech designer didn't need to know all of these elements in advance to design a working mech.

"I can still design many different kinds of mechs under these conditions."

The High Tide Tournament evidently wanted to showcase a lot of variety. The greater point behind this was to show to the audience that the Korok Alpha KA-35 could easily produce many different machines.

After he understood all of the specific parameters his competition mech had to meet, he cast his thoughts on his most important decision.

"Which plan should I adopt?"

He developed several different plans, each of which was based on a specific mech type and a design concept.

Personally, he wanted to design a hero mech. A machine that was equally capable in ranged and melee combat could perform well no matter what opponent it faced during the fighting phase.

"This is a mistake, though."

The tournament format didn't provide the best conditions for hero mechs. An all-round performance meant that a hero mech would never lose quickly, but also needed to fight hard in order to achieve a victory.

This was rather iffy to Ves. What if the hero mech lost all three matches because the hero mech didn't possess any pronounced strengths?

Sure, hero mechs were versatile and adaptable, but in an arena setting like this, it was too easy for more specialized mechs to showcase their power.

Ves recalled one very important detail in the tournament rules.

"Every competition mech must fight against three random opponents. The scores of the two best performances will be added up in order to form a final score. As a consequence, the results of the worst match will not be taken into consideration."

The implication of this scoring method was that it was okay if a competition mech lost in a terrible fashion!

Such situations usually occurred when mechs were matched up against other ones that just happened to counter them. For example, a light mech would have an awful time if it had to fight against a striker mech.

"With the way the rules are set up, I don't have to be too afraid of taking a gamble. I can afford to lose one without suffering any consequences."

The downside was that his competitors also enjoyed the same advantage!

He believed that they too understood how to game the rules in order to maximize their chances of winning. They shouldn't be stupid enough to design balanced, versatile mechs in this setting.

It was much wiser to design a specialized mech that clearly excelled in a single mode of combat!

This way, the competition mech would have the tools it needed to gain the upper hand in even matchups.

"Besides, a hero mech is also more complex to design and build."

Ves only had 12 hours to design and fabricate a competition mech. Even if a superfab worked faster than any of his own production machines, he still needed to reserve at least two hours for this task, so his effective design time amounted to just 10 hours!

With so little time at his disposal, how could he have the courage to design a complicated mech? He should be going for simplicity instead!

"The simpler the mech, the greater I can elevate its overall quality and performance."

With that in mind, Ves silently discarded his plan to design a hero mech and considered his remaining choices.

"I can design either a landbound or aerial mech. Regardless, it will have to fight in a decently-sized arena with no distinct features and a moderate height limit."

If Ves wanted to avoid his mechs getting countered too easily, then he should design a mech that was able to retaliate against aerial opponents.

That meant he should either design a ranged mech or a melee mech with flight capabilities.

However, neither choice sounded optimal.

A ranged mech was good at taking out targets from any range, but they were basically dead if any melee mech managed to get into point-blank range.

The key to designing a good ranged mech in tournaments like these was to design a machine with a big gun.

A very big gun.

An enormous gun.

The goal was to output the highest amount of damage in a brief time interval.

Anything that could damage, hinder or cripple an enemy mech right away could deliver an easy victory before the first minute had passed!

"If I was a ranged mech specialist, I could confidently design a mech armed with a formidable gun."

The problem was that he didn't excel in this area. Sure, he was proficient in designing luminar crystal rifles, but there were several problems with designing a competition mech armed with this exotic weapon system.

He was completely unfamiliar with the materials provided by the tournament. While Ves could rely on existing theory and prior experience to come up with a new formula for a luminar crystal, he would have to waste an hour or more to come up with an acceptable solution.

Could Ves afford to invest so much time in just a single aspect of his entire mech design?

"Probably not." He shook his head. "Besides, luminar crystal weapons are energy weapons. It's too difficult for me to amplify their damage output."

Energy weapons were generally known for being able to inflict reliable and accurate damage over time. They were not that optimal for short duration fights such as one-on-one mech duels.

Of course, just because this was the standard didn't necessarily mean that energy weapons were unable to unleash a big wallop right out of the gate.

There were energy weapons that could unleash an overpowering torrent of energy right away. While they weren't sustainable, as long as the other mech collapsed, it didn't matter!

"It's too bad I don't have any experience with designing overpowering energy weapons."

Sure, he could theoretically design such an energy weapon. He was quite proficient in the theory behind energy weapons due to acquiring numerous related System Sub-Skills.

However, he never designed a mech with such an extreme weapon. They were great in mech duels but quite terrible in real battles. Ves would be stupid to equip any of his Larkinson mechs or commercial mechs with such a stupid weapon system.

He ultimately lacked the confidence to design a powerful energy weapon for a ranged mech.

One of the alternatives he could choose from was to design a ranged mech with a physical weapon. It was a lot easier to develop a gauss cannon or other kinetic weapon system that could deliver a big punch right away.

Yet Ves didn't enjoy any advantages in this area either. The Eternal Redemption was the last mech he designed that was armed with a powerful physical ranged weapon, but the cannoneer mech model was awful in mech duels.

"Ah, forget about it. I'll just settle for a simple melee mech."

This was much less complicated. There were only a limited number of mech types and mech configurations that he was proficient with. Thinking back on his existing mech designs, he was particularly impressed by the Valkyrie Redeemer.

While it was technically a marauder mech, it was able to function like a lighter version of a lancer mech.

Ves was quite attracted to the notion of designing a lancer mech in this tournament.

It was one of the biggest gambles he could make for this tournament. Either it would succeed in its charge and impale an opponent within the first minute, or it would fail abjectly and get beaten up by a mech that was able to cope with lancer mechs.

"If it succeeds, it will definitely make a powerful and domineering impression. If it fails... well, at least its suffering will end quickly."

He could choose other melee mech types if he wished. He wasn't in the mood to design them, though.

While he was fairly confident in his ability to design a swordsman mech, he would always be burdened with the truth that Ketis would always be able to do better.

It was a silly and unproductive thought, but Ves couldn't get rid of it. Each time he thought about designing any swordsman mech, he would always compare himself to Ketis. It was a psychological weakness that he needed to get rid of but couldn't do so at the moment.

What else could he design? An axeman mech? A hammer-wielding mech?

"I don't know anything about axes or hammers."

What about a knight mech?

"I'm not a defensive specialist. I won't be able to do a knight mech justice."

Specializations mattered a lot at the Journeyman level. High-ranking mech designers who excelled at defense could design machines that were much more resilient than whatever Ves could come up with! Man-machine symbiosis was strong in several areas, but it could not make a mech tougher!

Perhaps average Journeymen weren't much of a threat, but the High Tide Tournament attracted a lot of skilled and renowned mech designers. Ves could not take any of his competition lightly. If he wanted to secure a victory against them, then he needed to play to his strong points.

To Ves, adapting the concept of the Valkyrie Redeemer to a competition mech sounded like a workable approach.

Sure, it wasn't an original idea, but Ves wasn't obligated to innovate in every design setting.

Sometimes, it is better to stick with familiar territory!

"While I definitely want to make progress in this tournament, it can't come at the expense of obtaining combat carriers."

Only the top 3 contestants of the High Tide Tournament were eligible to receive these coveted vessels!

Ves couldn't afford to play around!

Although designing a lancer mech was far from the only viable choice he could make, right now he just felt like it. Besides, his competition mech would not be a close imitation of the Valkyrie Redeemer.

The tournament rules and the arena setting turned that into a bad idea.

Instead, he needed to adapt his lancer mech configuration to perform well under the current circumstances.

Ves created a list of traits that his lancer mech should possess.

"It has to possess high acceleration. It doesn't have to be able to sustain it or possess a small turning radius, but it absolutely must be able to charge forward without an excessively long lead time."

Juliet Stameross would easily be able to design a powerful flight system that could produce a powerful impulse, but Ves believed he could make a decent attempt.

"My competition mech must be able to destroy or at least cripple a target with a single charge."

Lancer mechs generally rarely enjoyed second chances if they failed a charge in a duel setting. If Ves wanted to minimize his chances of failure, then he needed to make sure his competition mech possessed the capital to finish the job in a single run!

Speed and momentum were huge factors in determining the damage potential of a lancer mech, but Ves needed to pay attention to other areas as well.

"My lancer mech must be able to survive and maintain as much functionality as possible until it is able to complete its charge."

This meant that his work had to possess at least some defensive capabilities. This translated into a larger, heavier and tougher mech.

The problem with this was that it was a lot harder to develop a lancer mech that got up to speed quickly if it was a lot more massive.

"Another problem is maneuverability." Ves frowned. "A sluggish mech doesn't have a good turning radius. This makes it hard for a lancer mech to hit fast and elusive targets."

A light mech was the nemesis of a lancer mech!

Chapter 3454: The Superiority of Centrists

The High Tide Tournament entered a long and quiet phase as 94 different Journeymen all drafted their initial designs according to their ideas.

The various limitations and requirements set by the tournament this time forced them to come up with adaptations to their normal work methods. This was annoying, but also ensured their work remained fresh and unique to this occasion.

Outside, the announcers and knowledgeable mech designers hired as commentators kept the audience interested by narrating the silent decisions made by the contestants.

[Look at Mr. Veirsen's draft. It barely took him eight minutes for him to determine his plan. As a mech designer who excels in large caliber kinetic firearms, I expected him to design a short-ranged harasser mech that relies on strafing and constant bursts of fire to wear down its opponents. Instead, he has opted to design a sturdier striker mech that is armed with a powerful shotgun. Light mechs will surely suffer bad luck when they are matched against this shotgunner!]

[That is indeed an interesting choice, but how will he fare against better armored opponents? Surely his striker mech will not concede so easily against such opponents.]

[Ah, with the materials available this time, it should be possible for Mr. Veirsen to adapt the shotgun weapon system against different opponents. Although it is time-consuming for him to expand the functionality of the shotgun to accommodate alternate firing modes and different types of projectiles, as long as he does not add any other optional modules to his striker mech, I can see how it can become a threat against armored foes.]

Since Veirsen's striker mech was just in the drafting stage, there wasn't much to talk about. The commentators soon moved on to examining another Journeyman's draft.

[Miss Esophe will be sure to challenge Mr. Veirsen's striker mech with her knight mech. Though its speed is a major constraint, it is well-armored from each side. That is an unusual choice to make for a defensive mech, but it ensures the knight mech will not fall so easily against maneuverable opponents that manage to circle around and strike its rear.]

[How will this defensive mech be able to defeat the enemy mech if it can't catch up to most of them?] A female commentator asked.

[The draft for this knight mech isn't detailed enough to reveal Miss Esophe's strategy, but I can make a number of educated guesses based on her published mech designs. She has designed numerous knight mechs with offensive solutions. Her favorite method is to deploy gun drones that can put pressure on distant opponents.]

[I cannot see anyone employing drones for this tournament. It is too easy to take them out. Even if they are left alone, their firepower is too limited to defeat a mech by themselves.]

[That is correct, but given the arena environment, Miss Esophe can solve many of the constraints by developing a deployable ground turret. This is a risky strategy as it forces the knight mech to remain rooted in one location in order to protect the turrets, but it can be a compelling method to achieve victory against lighter-armed opponents. I have no doubt that her knight mech will feature additional surprises as well.]

With the help of the commentary, even non-mech designers and less-technically-inclined spectators were able to understand the gist of what the contestants were working on. It was quite fascinating to see how every mech designer started off with a relatively normal base but quickly added their own creative elements to increase their winning odds.

The four Larkinson seeds stood in the front rows alongside the followers of other contestants.

Now that they had already studied the basic courses related to mech design, they had gained enough vision and acumen to understand the intricacies of many design choices made by the people practicing their craft in front of everyone.

Seeing these Journeymen design entire mechs from scratch in a short amount of time was much more impressive when they knew how much skill and effort it took to achieve such rapid progress!

"They're all so fast." Maikel said as he held Lucky in his hands.

"Meow." The cat patted his paw against Maikel's idle hand.

"Oh, here you go, buddy."

Lucky soon squinted his eyes in pleasure as Maikel stroked his metallic back.

The other three mech design students continued to pay attention to the work of other Journeymen.

Each of them spent a lot of time in the design lab. They had seen how lots of assistant mech designers approached their work. They regularly witnessed the four Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan become engrossed in their design sessions.

Yet at this time, the Larkinson seeds became completely dazzled by numerous foreign Journeymen! Compared to Ves, these strangers were clearly faster and made much more progress in the same amount of time!

"Those six are leagues ahead of others!" Maisie Ann gasped. "How can they be so much better when many of them don't that old?"

"Maybe they're older than they look."

Zanthar shook his head. "No. It's the implants that are making the difference. Haven't you noticed that they come from the galactic center? It's not without reason why everyone thinks that those who come from the galactic center are better than anyone else. Just the powerful augmentations alone put these people ahead!"

This was indeed the case. Journeymen were respected in the galactic center as well, and it was relatively easy for them to obtain high-quality cranial implants that provide incredible boosts to their mech design productivity. Each of them possessed the equivalent of supercomputers in their minds that provided them with formidable assistance. Compared to working with external processors, these potent implants that bonded directly with the brain exhibited much lower friction and delays.

As time went by, the differences became even larger. Whereas the other 88 mech designers were still polishing their drafts, the six Journeymen from the galactic center had already moved on to the next design phase!

"Just because they're fast doesn't mean they're good." Maikel said as he drew on his own expertise. "Raw processing power is wasted if the controller doesn't know what to do with it. These pampered centrists should still be beatable."

Although he was theoretically correct, how could these Journeymen who enjoyed much better upbringing than almost anyone else in the tournament possess such obvious shortcomings?

According to their draft designs, the centrist Journeymen each took advantage of their significantly greater productivity by designing more elaborate and feature-rich competition mechs!

Rennie Larkinson pointed at a woman that she had been admiring for a while.

"You're giving them way too little credit, Maikel. Look at what Miss Katien Tievos is working on. Her light marauder mech doesn't look formidable at first, but she's completely disregarding the alloy formulas provided by the tournament and is instead developing a stronger one with the materials available to her. If her plan succeeds, her competition mech will be both fast and tough!"

That was indeed a scary prospect!

This was one of the ways in which the contestants could distinguish themselves in tournaments like these. The rules did not prohibit anyone from developing component

designs or alloy formulas by themselves. They could even borrow an existing design or other relevant information from their implants if they were applicable.

This enabled mech designers to leverage their specializations to a greater degree and to make the differences between them more clear.

The greater variety of tech and solutions introduced by the contestants also allowed the new Korok Alpha KA-35 superfabs to demonstrate their versatility. No matter what the Journeymen came up with, the latest product released by Hysphalin Industries could do it all with ease!

From what it looked like, all six Journeymen from the galactic center knew exactly what they were doing. With the powerful and comprehensive production capabilities of a superfab, they did not have to be afraid of getting constrained by the equipment they had at their disposal.

"There are other impressive mech designers as well aside from those six." Zanthar commented. "Look at the oldest guy. He's not as fast as the centrists but his work makes it clear he hasn't wasted all of his years."

Michael Arven Emistes, the 99-year old Journeymen from the galactic rim, showcased how age and experience provided their own advantages.

Though his measured design pace made it clear that he did not possess a powerful cranial implant like the centrists, his design approach was clean, efficient and devoid of many common errors.

"This old guy is designing a hybrid mech! That's a bold decision."

Mr. Emistes had drafted a hybrid mech. It featured substantial armor with several energy weapon systems mounted on its frame. It was also armed with a relatively light axe and a sturdy shield.

On the surface, Emistes chose to realize a hybrid mech that possessed rounded capabilities. However, nobody thought his competition mech was that simple.

"What is this Journeyman planning?" Maikel wondered.

The man had yet to unveil any trump cards that should convey his hybrid mech with a powerful advantage.

With the way the tournament rules were set, this was practically a necessity. Winning a match did not necessarily convey a high score. If any mech struggled to gain upper hand against an opponent and only reluctantly squeezed out a win, its score for this match would not be impressive even if it remained standing.

For this reason, a lot of mechs designed by the tournament participants tended to possess at least one clear strength. Whether it was offensive, defense or mobility, any clear advantages in these aspects could allow these mechs to achieve clear and obvious victories and thereby obtain higher scores.

"Wait, what is our teacher working on?" Zanthar asked as he finally directed his attention towards his clan patriarch.

The other three Larkinson seeds remembered whose side they were supposed to be rooting for. They turned their heads and examined the draft design of the only Larkinson at the competition field.

"Is that... a lancer mech?"

All four of them became astonished at Ves' extreme choice for mech type.

Lancer mechs generally performed a lot better in actual battlefields than in an arena setting. This was the common sense that all of them had learned in their mech design studies.

The reason for this was that battlefields did not impose a lot of terrain restrictions. Lancer mechs not only had a lot more room to build up their momentum, but could also take advantage of cover, complex terrain features and the assistance of other mechs to successfully pull off a charge.

None of those helpful elements would be present in the upcoming fighting phase of the tournament!

Although the enemy mechs wouldn't be able to make use of any obstructions to shield them from any charges, the lack of space made it incredibly difficult for lancer mechs to build up sufficient speed and impact power.

This was a fatal shortcoming.

If lancer mechs weren't able to close in on their targets fast enough, then their attacks wouldn't hit anything.

If these same machines did manage to hit their foes, only to fail to inflict serious damage, then the stalled lancer mechs would become incredibly vulnerable to counterattacks!

"Our teacher should have a reason to go for a lancer mech. Maybe he's thinking about designing a simplified version of the Valkyrie Redeemer." Maikel speculated.

"That's a stretch. The Valkyrie Redeemer is a great mech, but will its glow really work against the well-trained pilots employed by Hysphalin Industries?"

That was seriously doubtful. Hysphalin Industries was an emerging trans-galactic industrial equipment manufacturer with branches in many different star sectors. It should have no trouble hiring decent first-class mech pilots, let alone a lot of excellent second-class mech pilots.

Maikel remained absolutely confident in the clan patriarch's work. "Don't count him out just yet. He has competed in multiple competitions and design duels... He should know what he is doing. If he thinks a lancer mech will give him the best shot at winning, then it must definitely have a surprise!"

Chapter 3455: An Inevitable Choice

When Ves chose to design a lancer mech for the High Tide Tournament, he knew he would be riding a powerful shuttle that was barely under control.

If he made just a single mistake, his ride could instantly crash into a structure!

"I certainly haven't made things easy for myself." He muttered.

However, the added pressure on his shoulders motivated him to work harder. He became determined to turn his unusual interpretation for a competition mech into a success!

This was not an easy task. Lancer mechs possessed clear strengths but also a number of very obvious shortcomings.

Aside from their difficulty to nail down fast and elusive light mechs, their fighting style was also too monotonous. They usually weren't good at anything else outside of launching devastating charges.

The main reason for that was because of the configuration of their mech frames. Due to all of the armoring, cushioning and compensation systems loaded onto their physical forms, there was hardly any space for design elements that increased their agility, their reaction speeds and other traits relevant to close-ranged brawling.

What this meant in practice was that lancer mechs usually got their butts kicked by offensive mechs such as light skirmishers, swordsman mechs or spearman mechs!

As long as the opposition was able to dodge or mitigate a charge, their superior dueling capabilities allowed them to quickly dismantle a lumbering lancer mech that had lost its momentum!

For these reasons, Ves was very clear about the win condition of his lancer mech.

"First, it has to hit its opponent. Second, it has to make sure this hit is damaging enough to finish the deed."

If he specialized in designing lancer mechs, he could probably implement numerous clever systems and solutions that could straightforwardly improve these aspects.

The big problem he faced at the moment was that he didn't possess any relevant technological advantages that could amplify the performance of a lancer mech!

Ves never really minded this absence before, but ever since he worked alongside Ketis, he understood how powerful a relevant specialty could strengthen a mech design in so many ways.

Ves was certain his competitors were in the process of translating their advantages into mech designs with increased battle power, so Ves could not remain behind!

"The solution is to leverage my own specialty into a more effective mech design."

He already planned to do so by turning his lancer mech into a living machine that should interface a lot better with its mech pilot. Yet Ves found it difficult to imagine that these added features could deliver a significant boost in effective performance.

He knew quite well that the greatest advantage of living mechs was that they grew over time and adapted themselves better to their mech pilots. All of this required months or years of continuous use, something which was obviously impossible to realize in a mech design tournament that only lasted a single day!

Ves had to leverage his design philosophy in a different way in order to provide his competition mech with an immediate combat boost.

"I have to implement the right glow." He concluded.

Aside from making a third order living mech, which was virtually impossible for him to do in this challenging setting, only glows were able to make the difference.

The support of the right design spirit not only helped put the mech pilot into a better mindset, but could manipulate various other variables that could shift the course of a battle.

Ves briefly ran his thoughts through all of his available design spirits.

The most obvious option would be to employ the Superior Mother. The Valkyrie Redeemer already proved that it was able to make good use of the female ancestral spirit's death aspect.

Yet was it truly the best solution in this context?

He had serious doubts about that. On one hand, the mech pilots in the Red Ocean shouldn't be familiar with his glows. When subjected to a new and sudden mental

influence, they should definitely become affected, enough for a lancer mech to take advantage of a short opening!

However, there were two reasons why Ves did not have much confidence that this would work this time.

"The mech pilots employed by a company as powerful as Hysphalin Industries shouldn't be too shabby. Their mental resilience might not match up against the military mech pilots of powerful states, but they shouldn't be much worse."

Any negative mental pressure could already impose a significant burden to their performance, but frankly speaking Ves was not sure if it was enough to make a crucial difference.

Rather than gambling on his competition mech's ability to mess with the mind of an opponent, Ves would rather resort to the more reliable option of boosting the performance of his own mech pilot.

As long as the pilot trusted the lancer mech, then he or she would surely fight more effectively.

Ves just had to pick the right glow for this situation.

First, he ruled out the Golden Cat. Technically, he could convince her to temporarily help out a stranger, but it was not the best use of her capabilities. She worked so much better with other Larkinson mech pilots.

More generic design spirits such as the Solemn Guardian, Qilanxo, the Illustrious One or Bravo weren't suitable either. Each of them were quite helpful in their own ways, but none of them provided any solid and concrete benefits to lancer mechs.

Part of this was because the glow of his competition mech wouldn't be that strong. Though Ves had improved his ability to design living mechs by a lot since he initially broke through to Journeymen, there was only so much he could do for a mech that he had to rush to completion in just 12 hours.

The spiritual foundation of such a hastily-developed mech simply couldn't match up against a project that Ves had been working on for several months.

"What glow is strong enough to make a real difference under all of these limitations?"

In fact, he already had an answer in his heart. He just avoided it because he didn't really like it. He was desperately trying to come up with alternatives in order to evade this obvious solution.

I was too bad he failed in his attempt.

"Trisk might help a mech pilot perform better when moving quickly, but this is too vague of a boost." Ves muttered as he thought about employing the new avian design spirit.

The young speed-oriented design spirit was also too young and underdeveloped for Ves to have confidence in her ability.

He planned to solve that when he designed the second light mech for the Flagrant Vandals, but that would take a couple of months.

For now, he had to opt for a more reliable solution.

In the end, he reluctantly turned his attention back to the only design spirit that possessed a much higher reliability in boosting effective combat performance.

"Ylvaine..." He hissed.

He hated to be reminded about it, but what the so-called Living Prophet told him before he died still rang clear.

James Ylvaine claimed that Ves would definitely design an Ylvainan lancer mech in the future.

At the time, Ves did not see why he would ever do so. The Transcendent Punisher concept showed that the Ylvainans could become the best ranged specialists of the Larkinson Clan. Their ability to borrow Ylvaine's guidance provided them with unparalleled accuracy and judgment, thereby ensuring that each of their attacks landed in the right places!

Though Ves still thought that the Eye of Ylvaine should become a ranged mech legion, the idea of adding lancer mechs to its mech roster sounded increasingly more compelling over time.

Ever since James initially planted the idea in his mind, Ves simply couldn't ignore the great potential of such a lancer mech.

As a mech designer, he knew that the effectiveness of a lancer mech was actually quite variable. Even against slower and more heavily armored mechs, these powerful charging machines could still botch their singular attack attempts if they happened to drive their lances through the wrong sections of opposing mechs!

Every mech design was different from each other. They featured varied armor layouts and possessed different damage mitigation properties.

For example, a mech that might not feature the thickest armor may possess a high degree of redundancy and compartmentalization. Even if a spear was driving straight

through its abdomen, the damaged mech would still retain enough functionality to launch counterattacks!

There were also many instances where lancer mechs inflicted glancing blows. For example, instead of striking the torso and destroying a number of critical systems, a lancer mech might drive its spear through an arm or a leg.

While a mech certainly lost a lot of strength if it lost a limb, it was not necessarily down for the count!

Lancer mechs weren't the only ones who had to pay close attention to where they landed their strikes.

Ranged mechs could down a target a lot faster if they struck the weak points. If that wasn't possible, then they should at least be able to gain the upper hand by ensuring that none of their attacks missed and that every blow avoided the strongest and most resilient surfaces of their opponents.

It didn't matter if a ranged mech misplaced their hits. They could easily fire their weapons multiple times, so they just had to adjust their aim and make sure the next pull of the trigger dealt more effective damage!

"Lancer mechs rarely enjoy second chances." Ves muttered.

They invested most of their efforts on their first and sometimes only charge.

Perhaps lancer mechs were able to perform subsequent charges in actual battlefields, but in an arena setting there were a lot more constraints!

All of this meant that Ves had to maximize the success rate of its initial charge, and there was no better design spirit for the job than Ylvaine!

Of course, there was no way that the mech pilot provided by Hysphalin System would be a faithful believer of the Great Prophet, but this was not an insurmountable problem. Ves just had to negotiate a quick deal with the intelligent design spirit.

With no better option available to him at the moment, Ves had no choice but to settle for Ylvaine as his competition mech's principal design spirit. The only other way he could settle for a different design spirit was if he abandoned his intention to design a lancer mech.

"That's not acceptable."

Ves didn't think he could design a stronger mech for this specific tournament. A lancer mech was a risky choice, but also a powerful one as long as it was able to succeed in its charge attacks!

Once he embraced this design direction, he began to work with gusto. He no longer entertained any doubts and became fully invested in developing a lancer mech that received guidance from a predictive design spirit.

He browsed the component library and selected a number of appropriate parts. He paid special attention to maintaining a delicate relation between acceleration, defense, impact power and agility.

He had to make a lot of painful tradeoffs in order to increase the ability for his lancer mech to build up momentum in a short amount of time. However, that didn't mean that he was willing to design a mech that wasn't even able to shift its direction while building up a charge!

Since the High Tide Tournament allowed the contestants to design either a landbound or aerial mech, his lancer mech had to possess a flight system as well.

"Otherwise, how can my competition mech possibly win against a mech that is hovering above its head?"

Although the addition of a flight system took up a lot of capacity, the increase in thrust provided a lot of advantages to a lancer mech.

Ves had to make a careful selection of flight systems.

"It doesn't have to be efficient or long-lasting. As long as it can give my lancer mech a powerful shove forward, that is all I need!"

Chapter 3456 - Virtus Forza AX34 X

The High Tide Tournament provided Ves with his first proper introduction to more advanced human technology.

The tech and systems that were available to mech designers heavily depended on the environment.

In a place as sparse, underdeveloped and resource poor as the galactic rim, the tech that companies offered to users was relatively basic.

In general, the parts that mech designers sought after were affordable, efficient and easy to build and maintain.

While there were plenty of component developers who offered better and higher-performing technological products, they were too expensive or onerous to market.

There was little point in adopting an energy rifle developed in the galactic heartland even if it was easy to obtain the design parameters from the galactic net.

The first problem was that its material requirements were too harsh. The materials needed to build the energy rifle were either unavailable or way too expensive.

The second problem was the much greater complexity and sophistication of an advanced energy rifle. The equivalent weapon models of the galactic rim had to be simple enough for local manufacturers to be able to produce them in great numbers.

This was difficult to accomplish if their production machines were too rudimentary and if the production crews were not competent enough!

In short, even if a mech designer from the galactic rim was able to obtain component designs from the galactic heartland or the galactic center, they could only be applied to a couple of mechs at most.

It was different in the Red Ocean.

Even though a lot of materials were still unavailable to many people, a lot of companies imported huge quantities of exotics and rare materials that were common in the more prosperous parts of the old galaxy.

That made it possible for powerful organizations such as Hysphalin Industries to provide a lot of powerful materials for occasions such as these.

When Ves looked into a handful of the component designs available to him, he noticed that the majority originated from the galactic heartland. This was a good balance that avoided the excessive power and complexity of parts from the galactic center while also avoiding the rather unspectacular performance of parts developed in the galactic rim.

On average, the parts developed for the galactic heartland market were comprehensively more powerful. They were also more diverse as a number of them possessed new and unusual features derived from more potent exotics that were not as prevalent in the galactic rim.

"There are also downsides, though."

The heartland parts were more miniaturized, more technology-intensive and less efficient. Ves would have difficulty producing them in his personal workshop aboard the Spirit of Bentheim because his ELKINE production line was too limited.

He also had to work his mind a lot harder because these parts were more intricate. Some of them even contained high technology that only specialists or highly knowledgeable mech designers were able to utilize properly!

Though Ves had picked up a lot of System Skills and Sub-Skills over the years, he was unaccustomed to working with this kind of tech.

Although he was confident he could adapt quickly to this more advanced tech, he did not think it was wise to push his limits at this time.

"I need to keep my design under my control. It does me little good to play around with forces that I cannot fully harness."

This was especially critical when it came to designing lancer mechs!

These machines were so extreme and so dependent on short, critical bursts of power that a single unstable factor could easily botch their results!

He eventually settled for a fairly normal flight system developed by a company called Shockblast Labs.

As its name suggested, Shockblast Labs was a component developer that preferred to release products that were powerful, impactful or kinetic.

There were no gentle products in its catalog!

The Virtus Forza AX34-X was a flight system model that ticked most of the boxes. It was a beefy flight system that featured a robust construction and was capable of enduring the high stresses generated by its oversized thrusters.

Due to its size, the Virtus Forza was able to guarantee a formidable degree of acceleration for even larger and more massive mechs.

Of course, its size also made it impossible to mount it on smaller and lighter mechs. They simply required too much space and a sufficient degree of mass in order to support its placement.

"That's not a problem."

As Ves delved deeper into the Virtus Forza flight system, he soon found out that it wasn't a coincidence his search ended up with this powerful system. Shockblast Labs specifically designed it for lancer mechs employed in duels or short skirmishes.

Due to its extreme configuration, the Virtus Forza was not suitable for extended engagements.

The main reason for that was that it generated its powerful thrust by burning an extremely powerful proprietary fuel type. Shockblast Labs specifically developed a special propellant formula that burned quickly and released a huge amount of energy in an instant.

Ves became shocked as he read through the parameters of this special propellant. "This stuff is more powerful than anything I've handled before!"

Although the fuel used to power the Virtus Forza flight system fully met his requirements, it came with one huge weakness.

It was incredibly inefficient!

A bucket of propellant only lasted for a fraction of a second!

That was not enough to push an entire lancer mech towards an opposing mech!

In order to propel a massive machine across a sufficient distance, Ves had to load his mech with a lot of fuel. This took up precious capacity that could have been used to reinforce the structure or increase the dogfighting capabilities of his machine.

"It's worth it, though."

So what if he added a large fuel tank to his lancer mech? With how fast this propellant burned and how much impulse it could generate, his competition mech didn't need to circle around for a long amount of time in order to build up speed!

Ves quickly performed a number of calculations.

According to the results, his proposed lancer mech would only be able to accelerate forward at maximum power for just 25 seconds in total.

"If the mech pilot of my lancer mech can't put these 25 seconds to good use, he might as well forfeit the match!"

The lancer mech still possessed a couple of legs, but Ves did not intend to place much emphasis on them. It took too much time and too many design resources to turn his lancer mech into a sprinter as well as a flier.

His answer would be different if he could take his time on designing his lancer mech. For now, he needed to budget his time and sacrifice any elements that weren't vital to accomplishing victory.

With all of the mass he loaded onto the mech design, it was inevitable for his lancer mech to turn into a lumbering beast on land.

With the powerful and demanding Virtus Forza as the base, Ves selected numerous other parts that accommodated or complemented his chosen flight system.

He then proceeded to integrate them into the framework of his lancer mech design.

This was a familiar process to Ves. He soon entered the zone and set aside all irrelevant distractions in order to quickly build up his mech design.

He estimated he needed to allocate three hours to fabricating his lancer mech with the Korok Alpha superfab at his disposal.

To be honest, a proficient fabricator should be able to finish it at least 30 minutes faster because the production machine was that fast.

"This is my first real time working with a superfab, though. I shouldn't overestimate my capabilities."

Although the Korok Alpha was arguably the easiest superfab model for sale in the Red Ocean, it still demanded a huge amount of expertise in order to make proper use of its capabilities!

It was true that Ves already got in a fair amount of simulation practice, but he did not dare to assume he could seamlessly translate his results into reality. He felt it was prudent to give him an additional hour of fabrication time. This way, he enjoyed a generous margin for error!

Aside from being able to redo any failed production tasks, Ves also wanted to take his time with fabricating his mech. Crafting mechs was one of his strengths and he was certain he could produce a high-quality competition mech if he devoted a proper amount of time.

"The issue is that a high-quality copy of a low-quality mech design isn't actually that strong."

If he had a choice, Ves would have preferred to develop a high-quality mech design. This way, the base parameters of his competition mech would be significantly higher. Even if he rushed its production, its performance would still be able to reach an impressive level!

Ves was sure that many of his current competitors were pursuing this particular strategy. Designing mechs was their strong point, and the strongest among them were probably further ahead of him in this regard.

"If I try to match their design prowess, I'll just get a middling result."

The right way to approach this competition was to lean on his strengths rather than compensate for his weaknesses.

That said, Ves was not a slouch when it came to technical mech design. His basics were solids and he possessed plenty of design experience. Even the use of more complex and advanced mech parts such as the Virtus Forza flight system didn't hinder him too much.

He also possessed an additional advantage. Although he never really needed to make use of it in his collaboration projects, he hadn't forgotten about Gloriana's dormant spiritual fragment that he had parked in his mind.

Ves briefly touched his wedding ring as he lightly connected with an aspect of his wife.

The boost he gained wasn't anything too drastic. He merely gained an increased sensitivity and perception towards flaws and inefficient implementations.

In fact, he knew that if he immersed himself deeper into Gloriana's perspective, he would likely get disgusted with his rushed design work!

That would do more harm than good. Ves merely wanted to spot and quickly address the easier flaws. As long as fixing them didn't require a lot of time, he was fine with smoothing out light mistakes.

Hours went by as his lancer mech slowly took shape. Compared to the other 93 competitors, Ves did not attract attention from the crowd.

Even the commentators didn't observe anything remarkable from his work.

[Mr. Ves Larkinson has chosen to design a short-lasting but impactful lancer mech. It is a powerful machine that can deliver a quick and overwhelming victory if it works.]

[You don't sound particularly impressed.]

[True. While this lancer mech design is certainly sound, Mr. Larkinson isn't working fast enough. There is only so much he can do to lift the performance of his lancer mech. While his work can easily overpower the work of weaker competitors, if his lancer mech is matched against the machines designed by his stronger rivals, it is too easy to mitigate its short-lasting attacks.]

[So how do you rank his lancer mech based on everyone's current progress?]

[His lancer mech is fairly basic, but it is remarkably solid and free of sloppy design solutions. It should definitely secure its place in the middle, but it is difficult to climb any higher. The mechs designed by many of Mr. Larkinson's other competitors are simply more impressive. As long as they survive the initial attack run, they can easily clean up the spent lancer mech.]

[So there you have it, folks. Mr. Larkinson's lancer mech is a bold and powerful machine, but it is too basic and one-dimensional to win against more formidable opponents.]

It was good that none of the contestants were able to hear the commentary, because he would surely protest against the judgment of the ignorant analysts!

There was more to his lancer mech than a solid base.. Even as he fleshed out its mech frame, Ves also began to work on its spiritual design.

Chapter 3457: Submit to Mech

Now that he decided to design a lancer mech that was oriented around Ylvaine, Ves made an earnest effort to translate this idea into a workable competition mech.

Designing a competition mech was a lot different from designing a proper mass market mech. Ves had to change his approach in so many different ways in order to adapt his work to the tournament setting.

For example, his lancer mech did not have to last a long time in the field. Duels generally didn't last a long time and the extreme fighting mode of his particular machine meant that Ves could forgo designing for longevity.

There was also another variable that caused him to deviate from his regular design approach. The fact that his lancer mech would be repaired after every match meant that it could be pushed beyond its limits.

As long as the mech didn't go too overboard, it was fine if it overloaded its systems for a dozen seconds or so! It would all be fixed after the match anyway, so Ves did not have to worry about excessive stress creating accumulated cracks and other damage to the internal systems.

He could easily increase the effective performance of his lancer mech by 20 percent if he disregarded its longevity and pursued the greatest possible short-term gains!

"Even if the repair systems can't fix every consequence of accelerated wear and tear, it shouldn't matter too much. My lancer mech only has to fight three short matches before it has served its purpose. There is absolutely no reason to account for any further use after today."

Ves believed that every other mech designer in the tournament opted to design their competition mechs in the same way as well. It would be stupid of them to forgo all that potential power just so that they could design their mechs as normal.

A good mech designer always adapted his work to the situation. That was a lesson that he had learned in many different instances. Working alongside Gloriana who paid a lot of attention to this aspect allowed him to fully realize how much of a difference it made.

For this reason, Ves had to fight against his habits and drop his usual insistence on designing a durable, long-lasting mech.

Although he designed such mechs before in past competitions, it had been a long time since he truly let himself go like this. He had to put more effort into making design

choices that deliberately shortened the lifespan of his lancer mech in order to obtain modest boosts in several different performance parameters.

After several hours of design work, the divergence between his normal products and this competition mech became increasingly more clear.

A part of him felt pained for designing a living mech that was only meant to last a single day. This dayfly would barely have the opportunity to enjoy what it was like to exercise its prodigious power!

Ves wasn't sure what would happen after the competition mechs had served their use. He hadn't heard any mention of it in the rules. In general, they were usually broken down again so that the materials they were made of could be recycled and put to use in another competition.

However, there were also instances where the mechs would remain intact. Strictly speaking, the tournament organizers owned the mechs. It was up to them to decide whether they wanted to keep the machines for themselves or give them to the participants as extra gifts.

"There's little point for me to keep this mech, though."

Space aboard his fleet was limited. Taking up one extra mech slot just to hold a lancer mech that was completely impractical in real battles sounded like a vain and stupid decision.

"Well, if no one else wants it, then so be it. You'll just have to be content to shine brighter than any other mech in the short time that you're alive."

His lancer mech was like a supernova.

In cosmic terms, supernovae or exploding stars were incredibly powerful. They were not only capable of wiping out planets, but could also affect other star systems in the vicinity!

The downside was that they lasted only for an instant relative to the history of a galaxy. Still, their impact on the environment was huge despite lasting such a short time.

With these thoughts in mind, Ves embraced this metaphor as one of the themes of his mech design.

Working with themes was a recent addition to his design approach. Starting from the Bulwark Project, Ves sought to imitate the higher-level design methods that he had derived from his observations of the Olympus Mons.

The Shield of Samar and the Everchanger were the first two beneficiaries of his deliberate incorporation of themes into their designs.

The results were quite good. Not only did working with themes cause the living mechs to focus their strength and power in the desired directions, they also helped the expert pilots channel the various resonance abilities of their powerful machines with greater effect.

This was the first time he applied a design method to a standard mech, though.

Themes became more relevant when the mechs and mech pilots became more powerful and remarkable. They deeply influenced the performance of an ace mech and also could also play a role in concentrating the strengths of expert mechs.

What about normal mechs? How would themes affect a mech that did not possess any prime or resonating materials and would only be piloted by an ordinary person? Was it even worthwhile to bother with themes if there was no basis in power for them to act upon?

"No." Ves shook his head. "It's not useless. My last two expert mechs have already shown me how themes can affect my own work."

Living mechs were inherently complicated and multi-dimensional. Any form of intelligent life was complex to a degree. By designing them according to certain themes, Ves was basically influencing the way these complex lives expressed themselves.

It was not a particularly new technique, but working around the framework of themes helped turn it into a fixed method that could become a regular staple in his expanding toolbox.

As Ves worked the supernova concept into his lancer mech, he did not have the impression that his efforts were useless or counter-productive.

Instead, he could feel the life that he was shaping with his design efforts embrace and shape itself according to this theme.

What interested Ves a lot was that the supernova theme was not well-defined. Compared to other concepts such as hammers, physical force and so on, a supernova could not be linked to any aspect of his lancer mech's performance.

The connection would have been more obvious if he designed a mech armed with an energy weapon. However, the only obvious energy elements his mech contained was the power reactor and the flight system.

"I'm not sure if something as abstract as a theme can even affect the performance of these systems in any way."

Ves was basically flying blind in this regard.

What he did know was that his themes were definitely influencing the character of the living mech. His lancer mech's spiritual foundation became more extreme as it veered into a specific direction.

The supernova theme was only a part of the equation.

As a mech that was meant to rely on an external factor to guide its attacks, Ves also incorporated Ylvaine as a theme!

To be more precise, he split it into two different forms in order to finetune the character of his living mech even further.

Divine Guidance was a relatively straightforward transplantation of the Guided Aim ability of the Transcendent Punisher.

Unlike with his heavy artillery mech, Prophetic Guidance was more than just a triggered ability. His lancer mech embodied this concept down to its very roots!

Even without actively channeling this ability, his lancer mech should still convey at least some hints from Ylvaine. This was mainly meant as a backup solution if the mech pilot resisted Ylvaine's presence.

The relationship between the mech pilot and his competition mech was a persistent concern to Ves. How well would they be able to get along? How open-minded was the mech pilot towards religion and towards Ylvaine in particular?

If he had the bad luck of getting paired with a militant atheist, or worse, a strong believer in a different faith, then the two might object to each other to such a strong degree that they created anti-synergy!

"I have to mitigate this risk as much as possible!"

His solution? Design his competition mech in a way that did its best to appeal to the mech pilot!

Perhaps in another context, what Ves was attempting to accomplish might be construed as brainwashing, but he didn't think he was doing anything of the sort. He merely sought to facilitate a friendly exchange between a strongly-opinionated mech and the mech pilot it was interfacing.

If the mech pilot wasn't receptive towards the gospel conveyed by the mech, then he or she could block it whenever he wished.

Ves didn't want that to happen, though.

"The more the mech and mech pilot diverge from each other, the harder it is for them to cooperate in battle."

In order to encourage a mech pilot who was completely unfamiliar with the Great Prophet to embrace this holy figure, Ves adopted a third theme that was completely geared towards addressing this priority.

He called it Submission to Ylvaine. It was a rather clunky and unpleasant-sounding label for a theme, but Ves couldn't come up with anything better.

Submission to Ylvaine certainly described what a part of his lancer mech was all about.

It wasn't only about exerting as much power in an instant as possible.

It wasn't only about guiding its lance to the right target either.

The third theme that affected the character of his competition mech centered about converting strangers to the Ylvainan Faith!

By embracing it as a core theme, Ves not only made sure that it became a strong influence on the mech pilot of his competition entry, but also tried to expand it so that it could affect others!

More specifically, he wanted to turn Submission to Ylvaine into a detrimental influence towards the opponent of his mech.

"It's like a suppressive glow."

To be honest, Ves didn't think it would work. It was impossible to convert a mech pilot to a faith that was wordlessly being espoused by an enemy mech!

What Ves was actually aiming for was disturbing the opposing mech pilot's mental balance.

Just like how constant nagging could disrupt someone's concentration, Ves hoped that the proselytizing glow of his lancer mech would act as a negative influence on his opponents!

"It certainly works on me, so why can't it work on other people?" Ves chuckled.

If the annoying Ylvainan glow caused an enemy mech pilot to perform just 1 percent worse than normal, then it was already worth the effort of incorporating this theme into his lancer mech design!

Slowly but surely, his lancer mech's spiritual design gained definition. The interplay between the three different themes produced a spiritual character that was a lot more complex than any single theme.

Ves deliberately didn't exert much control on how they blended together. He felt it was better to let them find a balance on their own. He did this to retain the organic nature of his living mech.

Soon enough, his design neared completion. Ves glanced at the clock and saw that he was still on schedule.

"I need to finalize this mech quickly."

He wanted to take one additional step before he moved on to the fabrication stage.

He looked down to his side, only to observe an empty tool belt.

"Of course."

Just like any other contestant, he wasn't allowed to bring any weapons or gadgets onto the competition stage.

There was no way he could pass his Hammer of Brilliance through the security checks, so he simply passed it and the rest of his gear to Nitaa for safekeeping.

Nonetheless, Ves still began to smirk.

"I don't actually need a hammer."

He concentrated on his permanent spiritual connection to Vulcan and drew onto his power!

He slowly raised his fist, which faintly began to glow to bronze.

Without thinking about how silly he would look, Ves decisively punched his own head!

Chapter 3458: Wild Stallion

Ves misjudged his own strength. He accidentally launched a stronger punch than he intended. The brief spike of pain that resulted from his ill-advised action temporarily scattered his concentration and scrambled his thoughts.

Still, he didn't punch himself that hard. He quickly regained his wits as the spike of pain quickly faded into the background.

"Right. My mech design is almost complete! I just need to put the finishing touches on it before I can proceed to the next phase."

The false inspired state that he had managed to induce on himself was a little different this time.

Part of it was because he didn't make use of his regular tool this time. The Hammer of Brilliance was specifically designed to accommodate and channel Vulcan's strength.

His own fist on the other hand was just a regular human organ. It wasn't geared towards channeling spiritual phenomena at all. Was it any surprise that his false inspired state was weaker and less focused this time?

Another reason why it was weaker was because he had used it too often lately. After he had completed the Everchanger, he did not engage in any further significant design work.

Sure, he learned and gained a lot of inspiration from observing many new mechs in the Red Ocean. His visit to the Chance Bay Masterwork Gallery was especially fruitful.

It was a pity that these harvests weren't as good as practicing his own craft.

If it was that easy to become good at something by watching other people's work, then Ves could have easily learned how to play a musical instrument by attending a concert!

"I shouldn't complain." He muttered to himself. "I don't need to depend on this to deliver a good competition mech."

He just wanted to add extra icing on the cake.

Ves disregarded his relative lack of accumulation and focused on spending the remainder of his time on more productive matters.

When he looked at the results of his efforts up to this point, he was quite proud of himself. He managed to piece together a completely serviceable lancer mech design that was already quite sound despite spending so little time on it. The design also acquired a respectable spiritual character.

Though Ves could do little about the relative lack of strength, he made sure to pour as much of his passion, enthusiasm and effort into his work. This at least enabled him to pass on as much strength to his mech design as he could in the allotted time.

"Using themes to focus my work in a specific direction also helps. There is less wasted or dormant potential."

Theoretically, this might not be entirely good.

The parts of a living mech that weren't usable might slowly turn into a new aspect after a living mech experienced a round of growth.

He could be wrong, though. It might be that wasted potential remained this way no matter how much a living mech grew.

Ves hadn't observed enough living mechs that had grown significantly from their starting points to have a definite answer.

"Regardless, I don't think this is the wrong choice for this situation. My mech won't be relevant long enough for growth to matter. What I should be really doing is converting every bit of free potential into useful elements."

The result of this deliberate strategy was that his competition mech should already possess a fairly strong and defined personality right out of the gate.

"Anyway, let's focus on the areas that I can still improve in the short time I have left."

His false inspired state didn't last forever, and slowly tapered off in strength over time. Its effect was strongest in the beginning, which meant that Ves could not afford to remain idle!

As he quickly swept the other aspects of his design, he identified a lot of sub-optimal implementations that could clearly be improved.

He already identified most of them because he was conscious about what he had done to his design. It was painful for him to apply a solution that he knew was bad, but he didn't have any other choice. All of the better solutions required him to invest a lot of hours or even days to come up with a proper implementation.

Putting himself in a false inspired state didn't change much in this regard. Brilliance was no substitute to honest work. At most, Ves suddenly connected a few dots and came up with a couple of easy solutions that had eluded him earlier.

He quickly adjusted his mech design in order to apply these quick and elegant fixes.

Once he picked the few low-hanging fruit available to him, he no longer identified any further areas that he could improve with the time that he had available.

The more he became constrained by the time limit, the more he chafed at this restriction.

"It's so frustrating to see so many shortcomings but not being able to do anything about them!" He complained.

It must be a lot worse for Gloriana. He understood a lot better why his wife avoided design duels and design competitions like the plague.

Still, Ves wasn't as sensitive as her, so he was able to cope with this condition. He suppressed his dislike as much as possible and tried to immerse himself in the variables that he could still affect under the current conditions.

After tweaking his mech design here and there, Ves finally chose to finalize his mech design even though it was far from optimized.

"It'll have to do." He muttered.

Was he satisfied? Not really.

Was he confident it was good enough? Yes.

"It's not as if everyone else has more time than me. We're all subject to this dreadfully short time limit!"

Reminding himself of this made him feel a bit better. As long as everyone else suffered as much as him, there was no reason for him to feel as if he was being tormented!

After making one last check to make sure that he didn't miss any egregious faults, he stood up from his chair and approached the nearby superfab.

As a modern, state-of-the-art production machine that was powerful enough to produce an entire mech within a span of a couple of hours, the machine was huge.

Each superfab was larger than a mech and the Korok Alpha KA-35 could comfortably envelop an entire heavy mech!

Billions of complicated parts and systems hid behind its smooth surface. Each of them were capable of working in tandem to perform all of the intensive production tasks that were ordinarily performed by standalone production machines. The way in which the developers managed to stuff all of these functions into a single, all-encompassing object was a marvelous feat of engineering!

Ves would have felt quite nervous about handling this powerful piece of equipment. This was the first time he handled such a device for real.

During his simulation practice, he generally managed to tame its powerful production processes. Its high consistency combined with lots of automation granted Ves a huge margin for error.

Even if he screwed up in some way, the watchful AI of the superfab would automatically catch his mistake before it resulted in a botched production result!

The issue was that Ves did not feel content with staying within the safety rails.

He wanted to achieve more. When he produced his other mechs, he was used to falling back on manual control in order to improve his output beyond a normal range.

This was a delicate operation that required a lot of skill and experience to perform properly.

The effort was worth it as long as he had the skill to back it up. Though Gloriana was even better at using manual control to improve the quality of a product, Ves was no slouch in this regard!

He already gained enough proficiency with the production machines of his personal workshop for this operation to become second nature.

The same could not be said for a superfab.

It was like comparing a docile pony to a wild stallion. The latter was clearly stronger and faster in every measure, but the rider was only one mistake away from losing control and getting launched out of his saddle!

It did not help that the products of Hysphalin Industries were notorious for making it difficult to exert manual control. Automation and fault prevention was baked into the Korok Aalph's design from the ground up. It wasn't optimized for situations where the person controlling the superfab wanted to override the judgment of the controlling AI.

Ves learned first-hand what could go wrong during the many instances he screwed up during simulation training.

At best, only a single part under production had to be scrapped.

At worst, explosions erupted inside the machine as a cascade of mistakes broke the mech under construction and also unleashed powerful energies that destroyed the superfab from the inside!

Just the thought about ruining a machine with a list price of 39,999 MTA credits sent palpitations through his heart!

An ordinary mech designer would have gotten the message and accepted the reality that the Korok Alpha KA-35 simply shouldn't be used in this fashion.

Ves was not an ordinary mech designer.

He needed to leverage as many advantages as possible in order to produce a strong competition mech. Sure, leaving all of the heavy lifting to the superfab guaranteed a

workable result, but the output could be so much better if he took charge in certain instances!

This was why Ves decided to take the risk of riding this wild stallion.

He was not being reckless. He was taking a calculated risk.

There were two reasons why he was confident that it would work out this time.

First, he intended to restrain himself whenever he took manual control. This was also why he felt it was important to reserve an extra hour of fabrication time for himself.

He acted differently during his simulation training. He not only worked faster, but deliberately pushed the limits of the Korok Alpha at the time! He learned a lot of ways of how the production process could go wrong through triggering repeated disasters. He would be stupid if he repeated those exact same mistakes!

The second reason why he was confident that he could succeed without making any mistakes was because he had the backing of Vulcan.

Craftsmanship was one of his incarnation's core domains, and borrowing this aspect granted Ves a more intuitive sense in any production-related matters.

It did not matter that Ves was new to superfabs. He had done his homework, which meant that Vulcan also learned how they work. That was enough for the design spirit to assist Ves in various ways.

In combination, these two factors should safely allow Ves to exert a measure of manual control over the superfab and substantially elevate the quality of his competition mech!

"Well, this is it. No more delays."

Ve took a deep breath as he stood before the massive Korok Alpha. He steadily approached the primary console and began to inspect the condition of the machine.

The Korok Alpha was already warmed up and ready to go. After confirming that the superfab wasn't suffering from any faults, he started up the first operations of his production run.

The projected information panels and technical diagrams showed that the first parts of his lancer mech were being formed in a matter of seconds!

"So fast!"

Although Ves clearly knew that superfabs were insanely fast, he was still impressed by the power he had at his disposal.

He deeply wanted to bring back a superfab to the Spirit of Bentheim!

With just a single of these devices, he could easily fabricate mechs and exercise his craftsmanship without investing an excessive amount of time!

The difference between a couple of hours and a week of production time was massive! If Ves had full access to his own superfab, then many different options opened up to him. He no longer had to wait for months before he had a good reason to fabricate another mech!

Chapter 3459: Superfab Proficiency

Operating the Korok Alpha was much more impressive in reality than in a simulation.

Although the attempts to create a mech in a virtual setting allowed Ves to quickly get up to speed on how to operate a superfab, it simply wasn't physical enough for his liking.

To someone who designed and made mechs for a living, it was like playing a video game rather than doing the actual thing. Nothing could compare to harnessing the actual power of production!

It was only now that he truly felt he had become properly introduced to superfabs. The monstrous all-in-one machine was so much better than his old production lines that it was hard for him to imagine going back to them after today.

Initially, he became frightened at the powerful forces generated by the superfab.

That quickly made way for wonder and fascination. Possessing a superfab was such a game changer to mech designers that it was impossible for Ves to remain unmoved by its powerful capabilities.

The Korok Alpha KA-35 eased his adaptation to this powerful tech enormously as it was able to perform most tasks without any meaningful input from the mech designer. Hysphalin Industries might be bad at giving its customers the ability to operate its machines manually, but it excelled at developing AIs and automated production methods.

The best, confident and most skilled mech designers might opt to purchase a product from a different brand, but that didn't matter too much.

Hysphalin Industries had built up a respectable market share in the lower end of the superfab market, where its easy-to-use machines was particularly beloved among plant managers who could only rely on regular production personnel to produce mechs en masse.

Though Ves was not within the target segment of the Korok Alpha series, every superfab was powerful beyond anything he had worked with. The machine that was humming and buzzing right in front of him completed hours of work in a matter of minutes. He still couldn't quite wrap his mind around how much of a leap this represented!

The more he appreciated superfabs and the tech around it, the more enthused he became at using the Korok Alpha to shape his lancer mech.

He invested all of his focus and attention on doing justice to his recently-completed mech design.

Although he cut a lot of corners and left a lot of aspects unoptimized, the base of his lancer mech design should still be sound. He knew it was powerful enough to achieve victory in the next phase of the tournament. He just had to make sure that he did his best in translating his abstract design into a real and physical mech.

"I can't leave this device on autopilot. I need to take over control at some point, if only to impart my competition mech with my personal touch."

Once the production process reached a point where Ves saw an opportunity to do a better job, he cautiously interrupted an automated task and began to control the powerful and complicated internal production modules with deliberate intent.

Ves did not use his hands to manipulate any control devices. Instead, he placed his palm onto a special surface. This forged an electronic connection between the Korok Alpha and his implant.

This was the only way for him to take effective control over such a fast production machine. His prior practice sessions had taught him that he could only respond effectively to changing circumstances if he minimized his reaction time.

"If all goes well, I shouldn't have to rely on this measure to succeed."

Though Ves was eager to control every fine aspect by himself, he consciously reined himself in and stuck with his plan.

The Korok Alpha worked much faster when its automated systems were left to work by themselves. Humans were much slower, so everytime Ves took over manual control, he was taking at least ten times longer to complete a production task than before.

As for smaller tasks such as fabricating generating bolts or assembling ordinary fuel cells, there was little he could do that could measurably improve the performance of his finished mech. He just left most of it up to the Korok Alpha to do most of this tedious work.

"It's impractical for me to control everything from beginning to end. It will take days to finish a mech, thereby negating one of the biggest benefits of using superfabs."

The fact that he would exceed the time limit of the High Tide Tournament was also an important reason.

Ves had to choose his interventions carefully. He only took over when the production process had reached the truly important moments where he could make a difference.

"Heh, this is quite fun, actually!"

Sure, the Korok Alpha was stupendously powerful and could easily run out of control if he made a mistake, but he worked cautiously enough to minimize the risks.

In addition, Vulcan's influence on his mind was still strong enough for him to possess a considerably more intuitive grasp on craftsmanship.

Ves faintly suspected that Vulcan had improved a bit in this aspect after absorbing a tiny amount of high-end metal energy.

Although his incarnation clearly hadn't fully absorbed and mastered the prickly metal energy, just having it and getting exposed to it every day provided Vulcan with significant gains!

One of the consequences of this dynamic was that Ves actually gained a faint connection to the Korok Alpha, for a lack of a better word. He understood it a little bit better on an intuitive level and became a bit better at judging when he was pushing it to a dangerous level.

Ves couldn't fully explain it. The best way he could describe it was that this phenomenon reminded him of his ability to understand the ins and outs of mechs on an intuitive level.

The Korok Alpha was a giant machine that was predominantly made of metal, so it made sense that he was able to bond with it to a minor degree.

Though he wasn't able to create any wonders with this advantage, it was quite helpful in making sure he did not botch any of his manual processes.

Ves devoted his remaining attention on adjusting and in some cases improving the parts that were taking shape inside the superfab. He had to make good use of Vulcan's boost while it lasted.

Outside of his isolated bubble, his confident work approach attracted a fair amount of appreciation from the expert commentators.

[That is a daring mech designer. Mr. Ves Larkinson is using the Korok Alpha KA-35 outside of its recommended use. He must be a demanding person or possess a bold personality to take such risks.]

[Is it working out for him, do you think?]

[It is too early to tell, but his control is stable and he is being smart about taking his chances. If he keeps this up, his competition mech will turn out fine. It is questionable whether the difference in output is ultimately great enough to justify all of this extra effort.]

[Indeed. The Korok Alpha KA-35 excels in producing stable and consistent parts. No human can surpass the generations of research and development that Hysphalin Industries has put into improving the automation of superfab machinery.]

[Mr. Larkinson isn't the only Journeyman in the competition stage who has decided to take matters into his own hands. Let's take a look at the work of Mr. Roland Sevenser. Unlike the previous mech designer, Mr. Sevenser is clearly in over his head...]

"Damn, those expert commentators don't appreciate what our teacher can do!" Zanthar complained.

The four Larkinson seeds had each settled into their VIP seats for almost half a day. They only left their seats in order to bring some life back to their legs, but other than that they remained rooted in place in order to catch every glimpse of their teacher at work.

They didn't even need to visit the bathroom because their high-tech seats took care of business. If they ever became hungry or thirsty, they just had to input a command and their order would appear from the floor.

Each of them felt it was worth it to observe their patriarch from beginning to end. Seeing him complete an entire design project by himself at such an exaggerated pace showcased his strengths in a clearer way from before.

Even from this distance, the four future Larkinson mech designers could feel the life that was brewing inside the superfab.

Though Maisie Ann and Rennie admired Gloriana's work more, they still acknowledged that Ves was also impressive in his own way. No other Journeymen participating in this tournament was able to match him in terms of making their mechs alive!

That didn't mean that they were weak. It was the opposite in many cases. The strength and exquisiteness of their designs were clearly better!

"Look at that light skirmisher." Rennie gazed at one of the six powerful centrists. "Katien Tievos is considerably younger than our patriarch, but her design is much more intricate despite being smaller and lighter. She's not doing bad in operating the superfab either."

Maikel snorted. "Of course she's good at it. She practically grew up with these powerful production machines."

"Meow." Lucky huffed as well.

The cat was hovering lazily above Maikel's head. All of this mech design stuff might excite the Larkinson seeds for many hours, but a simple cat like him was utterly bored.

If not for the fact that the MTA kept track of everything that went on in the Vulit Central Star Node, he would have long phased out of this boring place and explored more exciting places!

"Is she better than Ves, though?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know enough about producing mechs to say who is doing a better job. Personally, I'm rooting for my own side, though."

Katien Tievos indeed possessed a lot of proficiency and experience in operating superfabs. She too possessed the confidence of taking over manual control in order to specifically improve the quality of some of the parts of her machine.

Since her light skirmisher was so small but packed with miniaturized components, she had many ways to improve the performance of her work!

Numerous other mech designers displayed similar degrees of proficiency. Each of them originally came from the wealthier regions of the old galaxy.

Ves was the only mech designer from the galactic rim that had the guts to take manual control over a production machine that he had only become familiar with a day ago! The others were so intimidated by the prospect of overriding the AI that they simply left the superfab its own devices!

In any case, there was virtually no risk in letting the Korok Alpha behave like an entire production line and production crew rolled into a single package. Not a single task completed by the AI systems produced any botched or disappointing results!

The incredible degree of reliability and consistency even won over certain members of the crowd. They planned to inquire about purchasing these new superfabs so that they could also produce mechs on easy mode.

There were moments when Ves also thought about buying a superfab. Though he didn't like all of the limitations of the Korok Alpha, he was open to purchasing a more suitable

superfab that possessed less automation but provided much more support for artisanal workmanship.

Hysphalin Industries was far from the only company that developed and sold superfabs. It was an upstart compared to the many huge conglomerates that dominated this market category for decades or centuries!

Though the Larkinson Clan's finances weren't strong enough for Ves to buy a superfab at this time, he was confident that the circumstances would be different in a couple of years.

Ves believed he would truly become a part of the industrial crowd of the Red Ocean once he owned and operated a superfab himself. Until then, he would always feel like a pauper who relied on shabby, outdated production equipment to earn a living.

"I'm too poor!"

Chapter 3460: The Well-Oiled Machine

While Ves was close to finishing his new competition mech, his wife sat down in a lounge that was far away from the tournament venue.

Gloriana showed no concern at all for her husband's performance. She detested any event where mech designers had to compress weeks or months of work into an interval of just a few days or less.

There was no way a mech designer could develop a proper mech in such a tiny timespan!

Though she fully understood the argument that working under severe limitations enabled mech designers to exercise their design abilities in a different way, she never felt the need to resort to such a clunky method to advance her own skills.

She briefly checked up on Aurelia, who was sleeping peacefully in her floating stroller.

"Miaow."

Clixie was close at hand, of course. The cat had been circling protectively around the baby carriage to make sure no one would ever think about disturbing the baby.

The neck ornament that Ves had provided to the cat glinted softly in the gentle light of the club. Its lustrous jewel reflected the light in multiple colors, which Clixie absolutely adored.

In order to make sure the jewel remained pristine and shiny, Clixie regularly licked her paw before rubbing her limb against the surface of her gem. She was proud to carry such a pretty object!

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, Mrs. Wodin-Larkinson." An older woman who clearly wasn't a mech designer but carried herself with power eased into the lounge.

"It is of no consequence." Gloriana calmly responded as she stood up from her seat.

"I am Dorma Tenze Vilasoen, the managing director of this club and an outer member of the Mech Supremacist Faction. I've also been assigned to handle your application. We had to look into your exploits a little further. It is not every day we meet with a Journeyman who possesses so many masterwork certificates under her belt."

"I have received this reaction multiple times. To be honest, I owe much to Master Willix. She is the true mech designer responsible for helping me obtain my masterwork certificates."

"You do not have to be modest around here." The woman smiled as she shook the new mother's hand. "Here at the Well-Oiled Machine, we recognize ability, not status. If the Mech Trade Association sees fit to bestow you with a masterwork certificate, then your contribution to the creation of an excellent machine is not trivial. To other mech designers, it is not that easy to obtain official recognition."

Gloriana smiled back. She already liked it here. She was afraid that her relatively modest origin and background would cause her to be looked down upon, but her fears were overblown.

"That is great to hear. It appears that I have come to the right place."

The Well-Oiled Machine had made a good impression so far. The private club was one of several meeting places owned and operated by the Mech Supremacist Faction in Chance Bay.

The clean, metallic decor mixed with elegant luxury provided the guests with an environment that was conducive for both business and relaxation. Everything was so exquisite that Gloriana truly felt comfortable.

Once they sat down again, Dorma called up a projection in order to go through the process of inducting Gloriana into the Mech Supremacist Faction.

This was not a difficult process, especially if the applicant possessed interesting qualities to the Mech Supremacist Faction.

The fact that Gloriana held five masterwork certificates to her name was not that remarkable at first, but the story was completely different once it became clear that she

was just a Journeyman and a young one at that! Not even her peers from the galactic center of the Milky Way could equal her in this regard!

Although this remarkable feat did not guarantee that Gloriana would become a brilliant Master in the future, the Mech Supremacist Faction was willing to take in a potentially promising candidate.

In any case, even if Gloriana no longer made any significant achievements in the future, the faction would hardly lose anything.

What was more important was that bringing her into the fold would deny her to the other factions of the MTA. There was no way the Mech Supremacists wanted to give its rivals a bargain!

Over the course of half an hour, Director Dorma Tenze Vilasoen proceeded to fill out various forms while asking numerous questions to her latest guest.

None of the questions were particularly uncomfortable. The Mech Supremacist Faction just wanted to know more about this promising Journeyman who seemingly emerged out of nowhere.

Considering how the galactic rim generally didn't hold much interest to the Mech Supremacist Faction, this description was not much of an exaggeration!

"What mechs do you seek to design once you have become an accomplished Master?" Dorma asked in the middle of the interview session.

"I have always dedicated myself to designing the perfect vessels for individual mech pilots and that hasn't changed." She answered. "I always intended to design mechs for the most excellent mech pilots. Ideally, I would like to devote myself to designing expert mechs and ace mechs. I've already had a taste of what it was like to design a high-end, high-ranking mech and I know it is where my strengths can truly play a significant role."

"I see. That is a good ambition. What about designing lower-end mechs? Are you still open to designing more modest mechs for less wealthy or capable customers?"

"Tch." Gloriana did not bother to hide her disdain. "My efforts are wasted here. I don't look down on mass market models and the customers who are happy with them, but they do not match my inclinations. I specialize in designing excellent mechs for the most discerning mech pilots and I make no apologies for that. In any case, my husband and many other mech designers are more than willing to fulfill this need."

The director twitched a smile. "Indeed. Our civilization's mech industry is enormous. There are so many Master Mech Designers active now that there is an abundance of choice for every customer. It is good that you do not force yourself to branch out into areas which discomfit you. That said, our research into your prior work has revealed

that you have contributed significantly to the design of many mass market mech models. Does this work not contradict your design philosophy?"

"You may have a point." Gloriana admitted. "It's not easy for me to go against my instincts and training and try to avoid making my mechs specific to any single customer, but I found a way to work around it. My husband usually takes charge of these projects, so I can often take a step back and approach these projects as a contributing mech designer."

"I see. I have witnessed many mech designer couples, and they do produce excellent works in collaboration."

"I can hear a but..."

"These pairings usually don't work out in the long term. The most common cause of that is because the progress of each mech designer diverges from each other. If one of you manages to become a highly-accomplished Master while the other is stagnating as a Senior, the differences and contradictions between the two of you will exacerbate. It becomes impossible to work alongside each other as equals again."

Gloriana did not look too worried. "I don't think that will happen between us. Both Ves and myself are quite talented, if I might say so myself. Even if one of us advances sooner than the other, we will wait for each other. Besides, outside of our work, Ves is still my husband. We already have a baby and there will be more on the way. I would never want to hurt my children by ruining my relationship with their father."

She directed a loving gaze at Aurelia as she said that. She gently reached out and tickled her baby's belly.

"It is good that you feel this way towards your spouse. I hope the both of you will maintain this attitude after a century."

Obviously, Director Dorma wasn't as optimistic as Gloriana. She had witnessed way too many fairytale relationships between young and optimistic mech designers crashing into planets as the years went by. Only one thing had to go wrong in order to ruin a perfect marriage!

People changed over time, and mech designers tended to live a lot longer than normal people. People like Gloriana and Ves wouldn't be able to recognize their current selves after a century or two of growth and change!

Broken relationships and ugly breakups was the source of a lot of drama within the Mech Supremacist Faction. Dorma had witnessed this happening so many times that she stopped recommending that mech designers should enter into relationships with each other.

She had seen how relationships between mech designers and other people had a much higher chance of surviving in the long term!

The absence of any direct comparisons prevented a mech designer from growing envious or resentful at their partner's greater progress.

Since high-ranking mech designers were incredibly ambitious and competitive by nature, it was rarely a good idea for them to be reminded of their inferiority so clearly every day.

Personally, Director Dorma hoped that her warning would sink in to the young mother. It was still possible for relationships between two mech designers to withstand the test of time, but both sides had to work for it in order to last beyond a century.

The interview soon came to an end after Director Dorma collected all of the answers she needed to give the Mech Supremacist Faction a good idea of this up-and-coming mech designer.

"Congratulations, Miss Wodin-Larkinson." Dorma warmly smiled. "One of our senior members has just approved your formal application after I've submitted your information. From today onwards, you have become a formal associate of the Mech Supremacist Faction."

"Thank you. I'm glad to be here. I'm not entirely clear what your faction does, but from what I have been able to learn, I think I shall feel at home in your circle."

The managing director nodded. "The Well-Oiled Machine is merely a meeting place for the members and associates of our faction. You have come at a quiet time right now so there are not too many Mech Supremacists you can exchange with at the moment. However, I can refer you to other sites in Chance Bay that will likely be of interest to you. We maintain closed mech workshops, exclusive stores, a private exchange hall, an internal library and more."

"Do you have any recommendations?"

"One of the highlights that should be interesting to you are our masterclasses. Our more accomplished and distinguished members regularly hold teaching sessions aimed towards professionals such as yourself. They are not only an opportunity for you to learn and exchange high-level knowledge and insights, but also help you get in touch with your fellow Mech Supremacists. No matter where we come from or who we work for, we all appreciate good mechs. You will find no person who doesn't love mechs within our faction."

"Shouldn't this apply to all of the other factions as well?" Gloriana voiced one of her doubts. "I mean, the other factions that I've heard of are all part of the Mech Trade

Association. I think that this should be enough to ensure that everyone is a proponent of mechs."

"That's correct. There are hardly any people within our Association who do not favor mechs." Director Dorma admitted. "However, our faction still exists for a reason. We are the firmest, most dedicated supporters of the existence of mechs. We believe that its value is eternal and that it should become the only weapon system that human civilization should rely upon to defend upon. Mechs are already popular at the moment, but they could be so much more. We need mech designers such as yourself to help humanity embrace mechs in their totality. Are you willing to do that?"

Gloriana answered with a brilliant grin... "I would be more than happy to assist your cause."