

Mech 3461

Chapter 3461: Pilot Matching

Back at the High Tide Tournament, Ves let out a deep breath as he neared the end of his productive fabrication session.

None of his fears came true in the last three hours. Despite operating a powerful superfab in reality for the first time, the preparations he made and the strategy he adopted ultimately minimized the risk of failure.

The assistance he obtained from Vulcan was greater than he expected. He did not expect his incarnation to help him gain a more intuitive understanding of the high-tech production machine he was using to fabricate his lancer mech.

With this unexpected boost, Ves did not grow arrogant and tried to push against the limits of the Korok Alpha. He stuck to his current strategy and made sure to keep his output stable and free from any undesirable variance.

As a result, the lancer mech that was being finalized inside the Korok Alpha was quite respectable in terms of quality. Despite the rushed and imperfect design, Ves could have hardly delivered a better result under the circumstances.

Overall, Ves was happy with the realization of this copy. Though it hadn't become anything as outrageous as a masterwork mech, he bet that the craftsmanship that he displayed probably ranked at the top among his competitors. If nothing else, that should be enough for him to stand out from the crowd.

A few more minutes passed before his work finally emerged from the superfab.

The people in the audience who had been paying attention to his work all gasped as they admired the surprisingly pretty lancer mech that Ves had managed to develop in 12 hours.

There was hardly anything unrefined about its aesthetics. Ves had deliberately invested a bit of time to decorate its exterior.

With its gleaming white exterior, the mech already sported a holy and pristine look. Instead of using gold, Ves opted to apply a subtle green shade to the decorative flourishes on the exterior.

Since it was technically an Ylvainan mech, Ves added abstract iconography that resembled Ylvainan symbolism to strengthen its identity. Those familiar with his other Ylvainan mechs such as the Holy Soldier and the Transcendent Punisher should instantly be able to recognize the connection.

The difference between his previous Ylvainan mechs and his current competition entry was that the latter was not as exclusionary.

With the cooperation of a design spirit that had already acquiesced to his demands before he even uttered them, the lancer mech turned into a rare religious-themed mech that was not exclusive towards worshippers.

The lancer mech was essentially the missionary version of an Ylvainan mech. It put on a friendly coat towards non-believers and welcomed any mech pilot in its cockpit.

The hope was that the mech pilot's direct exposure to Ylvaine's blessings might cause this person to grow closer to the Ylvainan Faith.

The lancer mech was not obligated to convert the beliefs of its mech pilot, but the two should at least develop a mutual understanding with each other.

The greater they aligned with each other, the more Ylvaine was able to provide guidance to the mech pilot!

This was key to achieving success in the mech arena. In the short period of time when the lancer mech charged towards its opponent, the decisions made by the pilot could make or break a victory!

As Ves inspected the mech with his own eyes, he became happier and happier with how it turned out. Sure, the design still had many imperfections and suboptimal design elements, but that was already a given considering how little time he spent on designing it. The rougher elements didn't matter. As long as the mech's physical construction was sound, it would hold its own in battle!

"I'm not sure whether it will last after a dozen bouts, but that's irrelevant. It only needs to show up three times in total before it has served its purpose."

Three opportunities to win. Three opportunities to bond with its mech pilots. Three opportunities to spread the Ylvainan gospel.

As the time limit of the design and build phase of the tournament came to an end, a loud buzzer rang throughout the entire competition stage.

[Time is up! All of your equipment is locked down at the moment. Please follow the projected guide to the side where we will proceed to match up your newly-produced mechs with our candidate mech pilots.]

Every participants moved away from the center while a large amount of heavy equipment was being moved.

All of the desk terminals along with the Korok Alpha superfabs simultaneously sunk underneath the floor.

Bots emerged from above in order to clean up any miscellaneous materials and other junk that some of the mech designers produced for whatever reason.

Meanwhile, all of the competition mechs began to hover in the air. They slowly gathered together until they were all placed in several rows before the main presentation stage.

At this time, numerous mech pilots stepped forward. One of the most important moments of the High Tide Tournament had come.

A mech was nothing without a mech pilot. It was essential to pair the newly-made competition mechs with the appropriate people.

Hysphalin Industries supplied all of the mech pilots for its own tournament. It employed a lot of mech pilots, so it was not that difficult to bring a couple of hundred of them to this event.

There were more mech pilots than mechs. This was because not every mech pilot was suitable for every machine. The tournament organizer had to bring in plenty of spares in order to prevent an unfortunate mismatch between piloting specializations and mech types.

Even then, not every mech pilot was the same. Even if Hysphalin Industries tried its best to select those of equal strength, their skills, their combat experience, their habits, their faults and other variables differed remarkably from person to person.

For this reason, the tournament adopted a matching process that accounted for this inherent inequality.

Every mech pilot was ranked by comprehensive strength. Those who ranked higher could make their selection first. Of course, if they didn't like any of the competition mechs, they were allowed to step back and let others pick a mech.

Fairness could not be guaranteed, so this step was meant to reward the contestants who worked harder and put more effort into their work.

After a short delay where the announcers and commentators hyped up this momentous occasion, the first mech pilot finally stepped up in order to announce his choice!

[Hestinia Claes is the top-ranked mech pilot among this gathering. With twenty years of experience, she has fought numerous skirmishes and is a veteran in both the arena and the competition stage. She is a rare all-rounder who is highly proficient in piloting most mech types, though she possesses a general preference for well-armored machines.

Now, let us hear which of the 94 competition mechs that our contestants have produced today has earned her favor.]

Just like the hundreds of other mech pilots, the uniformed woman had observed the design and build phase from beginning to end. Though she did not possess a technical background, she could still figure out which competition mech was stronger and what kind of properties they possessed.

"I choose the Dominant, the mech designed by Ereben Seinlin." She announced.

The crowd did not react with too much surprise at her choice.

[As expected! The work of Ereben Seinlin is one of the best mechs produced in this tournament. The Dominant possesses numerous appealing properties. Its theoretical performance is excellent. It is an offensive knight mech that possesses both superb defense and surprisingly strong mobility for its mech type. Its design is elaborate and incorporates many additional features that are lacking in other competition mechs such as secondary ranged weapon systems. The other knight mechs developed by Mr. Seinlin's rivals may be strong in their own ways, but they aren't as multi-dimensional as the Dominant!]

Ves and many of his other competitors regarded Ereben Seinlin with a great amount of dread. It would be supremely unlucky for them if their own works got matched against the Dominant!

"What a strong mech."

Even though Ves had been absorbed in his own work for a long time, it did not take an extended inspection to recognize that the Dominant was truly deserving of its name!

Its design was highly advanced and looked as if a Journeyman had spent twenty or thirty hours on it! It was not only more refined, but also incorporated powerful systems that were difficult to integrate in a mech design in a short amount of time.

Ves directed his glance towards Ereben Seinlin. The man was clearly a centrist, someone who grew up in the most prosperous region of human space.

Although people were regularly befuddled why second-rate states even existed in such a hotspot, there were slums and run-down areas in every part of space. If mansions could exist alongside slums, relatively downtrodden states could also exist next to the borders of the Greater United Terran Confederation or the New Rubarth Empire!

Sometimes, these states were based in relatively resource-poor regions that did not have the potential to support a first-class population.

Other times, these weaker states served as buffer territories that put a healthy amount of separation between multiple first-rate states.

However, just because people like Ereben Seinlin didn't grow up in a first-rate state didn't mean he was as poor as a second-rater in the galactic rim!

"This guy's augmentations is probably at least three times more capable than mine!" Ves muttered.

He was envious towards these mech designers who possessed a better starting point. Ereben Seinlin was much more productive than others due to his powerful augmentations.

Once Hestinia Claes confirmed her choice and moved to a preparation area in order to familiarize herself with her selection, the second-ranked mech pilot announced his choice.

Ves and many other contestants grew uncomfortable as the best mech pilots all chose mechs designed by their most formidable rivals.

The competition mechs made by centrists such as Ereben Seinlin and Katien Tievos were selected nearly right away. The next batch of mech pilots mostly opted for the strongest-looking mechs designed by the Journeymen with the brightest prospects.

For example, the 9th ranked mech pilot settled for the Hell Raider designed by Michael Arven Emistes.

[The Hell Raider is a fine mech that exemplifies the experience of its maker. Though it is not the most brilliant mech, its design is highly refined and incorporates numerous elegant design solutions. This hybrid mech will do no wrong regardless of the opponent it matches up against!]

If any of the contestants had reached 99 years old like Mr. Emistes, they could have easily designed a similar machine!

As Ves feared that all of the better mech pilots would settle for the works of heartlanders, the 16th ranked mech pilot finally stepped forward.

"I choose the Pontifical Lance, the mech designed Ves Larkinson."

What?!

[What a surprising choice.] A commentator remarked. [There are four lancer mechs in this tournament, and the Pontifical Lance is not an obvious first choice. It is the only lancer mech designed by a mech designer from the galactic rim, but it appears that Gregory Haloscar sees more in this fine-looking machine.]

Gregory Haloscar was indeed a lancer mech specialist, so he surely knew what to do with the Pontifical Lance. It was just that he could have easily selected three other lancer mechs, none of whom looked weak.

Ves was happy that he managed to hook a fairly strong mech pilot. The guy might not have reached the top 10 among the gathered mech pilots, but he was definitely the strongest lancer mech pilot!

"It looks like I did a good job at making my mech more attractive." He grinned.

One of the openings of this selection process was that the mech designers didn't necessarily have to choose the strongest mechs.

They might have preferences for specific configurations that did not show up in the mechs designed by the favorites of the tournament.

They may be more attracted to better-looking mechs as opposed to the machines that looked like semi-finished lumps of metals.

The glow of the Pontifical Lance may have already played a role in winning over a stronger lancer mech pilot.

Whatever the case, Ves was a lot more optimistic about his chances. The Pontifical Lance was in the right hands as far as he was concerned!

Chapter 3462: Friendly Reminder

The pilot matching process did not last a long time. Once all 94 competition mechs received their respective pilots, a short break ensued in order to prepare for the next phase of the tournament.

This gave the mech pilots at least half an hour of time to familiarize themselves with the machines that had won their favor.

During this time, the Journeymen were allowed to meet with the pilots in order to explain how their mechs worked and how to maximize their advantages.

After all, it wouldn't do for the mechs to trip on their feet or misfire their weapons in mid-battle.

As Ves moved to the backstage area where all of the mechs and mech pilots were temporarily placed, he briefly studied the profile of the fellow who picked his lancer mech over the three other ones.

The difference in strength between all of the mech pilots wasn't that big, but Ves already took a liking for Gregory Haloscar.

The man was 37 years old. Though he was younger than many other strong mech pilots, he possessed a sufficient amount of experience and training to propel him to the forefront among his colleagues in the tournament.

The man originally grew up from the galactic heartland and lived there for most of his life. After graduating from his mech academy, he immediately got accepted into one of the security companies that operated under the umbrella of Hysphalin Industries.

After years of loyal service, he was randomly invited to become a part of the huge migration wave to the Red Ocean. That was how he ended up in the new frontier.

Though Gregory Haloscar was merely a company grunt, he was still a diligent mech pilot who took his training seriously and kept polishing his skills every day. Though lancer mech specialists like him didn't have many opportunities to put their abilities to use in actual battles, he had volunteered to take part in numerous mech duels and competitive events like these. He recognized that it was important for him to confront real mechs piloted by actual humans in order to keep his fighting instincts sharp!

This was especially important to lancer mech pilots who were expected to charge straight into the enemy! If they became more hesitant or grew rusty, then they were no good anymore with lancer mechs!

Once Ves understood the background of Gregory Haloscar, he floated upwards and approached the cockpit of his newly-made mech.

Like any enthusiastic mech pilot, Gregory had immediately entered the cockpit of his chosen mech at the first possible opportunity.

"Hello, Mr. Haloscar."

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson. You've built a fine mech." The man generously praised. "I have to admit that I originally had my eye on a lancer mech developed by another tournament participant, but this lancer mech... now that I've come close to it, I was glad I listened to my instincts. Why is this mech making me feel so strange and welcome?!"

"That's what I call a glow. It's one of the auxiliary features of my living mechs."

"Pardon? What did you just say?"

It figured that Gregory would respond like this. There was no reason for a random stranger from the galactic heartland to know anything about glows and living mechs.

Ves proceeded to give the bewildered mech pilot a crash course on living mechs and glows. He tried to condense his explanations as much as possible, but Gregory still had a lot of questions.

"I still don't know why an object like a mech could be alive as you and I." The man scratched his head. "And what do glows have to do with this, anyway?"

The continued lack of understanding prompted Ves to smack his palm against his face.

"Just interface with your mech and feel it for yourself. I designed the Pontifical Lance with newcomers to living mechs like you in mind. I've added numerous accommodations to this mech that should help you get up to speed on its most important features. Remember that you must treat your mech with respect and that you should be open to its message. I can promise you that you'll be able to show much greater strength in battle as long as you are in sync with your mech."

"Is that truly the case?"

Ves grinned. "Just trust me on this. My design specialization is metaphysical man-machine symbiosis. I know more than any other mech designer in this tournament on how to bring mech pilots closer to their mechs."

Despite Gregory's obvious skepticism, he was willing to give it a shot. In any case, he settled for this specific mech over alternatives because he felt good about it in some indescribable way. A part of him just felt that this machine could give him the recognition that he craved.

Company personnel like him generally lived stable and boring lives. Compared to going mercenary or entering into the military, working for the security department of a normal company was a low-risk career.

While the probability of dying was much lower to Gregory, the lack of combat and the long days of boring training and guard duty could grind down any mech pilot. It took a great amount of effort for company mech pilots to stay motivated and push their strength further.

If they stopped improving after a point, they would probably retire without accomplishing anything significant in their careers!

This was why Ves did not have to worry that Gregory would only do a perfunctory job. Every mech pilot in this event wanted to do their best to stand out and receive greater attention from their superiors!

Soon enough, the Pontifical Lance came online. The company mech pilot began to receive his first proper introduction to living mechs.

This was an incredibly magical experience to someone who had never been exposed to Ves' work before.

"Wow. I couldn't imagine how a mech can be alive when it isn't a biomech, but now I'm convinced!"

Ves floated backwards as he sensed his mech reaching out to Gregory Haloscar. The two made tentative contact. The lancer mech did not overwhelm its mech pilot with everything right away, but instead conveyed its distinctive features one step at a time.

This was a fitting approach for a mech designed with the theme of Prophetic Guidance in mind. The Pontifical Lance was developed with the need to provide active assistance to the mech pilot.

"So far, so good."

Ves could sense that Gregory Haloscar did not reject the entreaties of his own mech. Even though everything he experienced was all new and unexpected, he did not exhibit any serious rejection.

"Good."

As long as there was an opening, any living mech could build a rapport with its own mech pilot! This was a pattern that Ves had witnessed too many times to count.

Out of all of his living mechs, the Pontifical Lance was the best at winning over strangers!

Ves originally wanted to call his competition mech the Friendly Reminder, but he rejected it because it sounded too cuddly unrelated to battle.

If he wanted to attract a strong mech pilot and put him in the right mindset, he needed to give his mech a more ostentatious name that conveyed a certain degree of power.

Though Ves was sure he could have come up with something better than 'Pontifical Lance', it met all of his requirements. Not only did it sound stately and powerful, it also alluded to its religious undertones.

As Gregory and many other mech pilots quickly learned what their chosen mechs were capable of, the High Tide Tournament finally entered its most exciting phase!

The first mechs were being called to enter the transformed arena that had been especially prepared to host multiple matches at the same time.

In order to make sure that the High Tide Tournament ended in a single day, it was necessary to hold multiple matches at once.

One of the consequences of this decision was that the effective space for each duel was a lot less than it could have been. This explained why only four of the competition

entries were lancer mechs. The relatively cramped arena spaces were just too limiting towards this mech type.

Ves and his other competitors all moved to a special elevated spectating platform in order to see all of the competition mechs in action.

Four different duels started at the same time. At first glance, most of the competition mechs were fairly good in their own way. Ves was not sure if his lancer mech was able to come out on top against three of them. One was another lancer mech that possessed thicker armor while the other one was a powerful kinetic gunner that was able to fire strong, obstructive nets.

Only one of them caused Ves to feel so much dread that he knew his lancer mech couldn't stand a chance against this monster.

[Just look at the Phazeon dance! This light marauder mech is making a complete mockery of the opposing light skirmisher! Although the Zima Fang does possess a surprising amount of mobility for its weight class, the Phazeon is just a bit faster and more agile.]

[That's not the strongest aspect of the Phazeon. Have you noticed how the Zima Fang has attempted to perform risky maneuvers in order to trade blow for blow? While I admire the guts of its mech pilot, each time the Zima Fang's daggers strike against the surface of the Phazeon, the weapons just sink halfway into the surprisingly flexible armor plating before going no further!]

[As expected of a machine designed by Katien Tievos. Although it might not be obvious due to her decision to develop a light mech, she is actually a defensive specialist. Her expertise in designing semi-fluid armor systems is being put to good use here. While ordinary light mechs are vulnerable against any form of attacks from mechs, the Phazeon is a clear exception! Against any opposing machine without a strong form of attack, this resilient light marauder mech is practically assured of victory!]

Ves and many other mech designers threw a glance at one of the six mech designers standing at the front of this spectating platform.

As a centrist, Katien Tievos possessed a lot more advantages than many of the other Journeymen. Ves could already see from the Phazeon that its design was simply more refined than his own work.

However, he was glad to see that its construction was actually rather unremarkable. Though Miss Tievos certainly possessed a great amount of skill in fabrication, she was not as abnormal as Ves when it came to producing a high-quality mech.

"Does it actually matter?"

A better design conveyed a lot more obvious strengths to a mech than a good construction. At this level of competition, it was impossible for someone like Katien Tievos to produce an awful mech. As long as it worked as intended, that was already enough!

The first round of matches ended fairly quickly. As expected, there was no suspense in the outcome between the Phazeon and the Zima Fang.

Ves sympathized with the designer of the latter. The Zima Fang not only had the bad luck to match against a mech designed by a centrist, but also happened to fight against another light mech!

Confrontations between light mechs often devolved into a contest between speed and other performance parameters. There were very few ways the Zima Fang could have come out on top against such an excellent opponent.

If the mech pilot of the Zima Fang was a lot better than the mech pilot of the Phazeon, then the match might have ended differently.

It was too bad that the opposite was the case. The stronger competition mechs were generally paired with the stronger mech pilots! This resulted in a clearer division between the weak and the strong.

The High Tide Tournament was set up in a way that made it less likely for the former to overcome the latter!

This was definitely concerning to Ves. He deeply hoped his Pontifical Lance wouldn't get matched up against another strong opponent.

Once the partitioned arenas were cleaned up, the next round of matches were announced.

Ves suddenly jerked when he heard the name of his own mech.

[In the third arena, Ves Larkinson's Pontifical Lance shall duel against Ereben Seinlin's Dominant!]

"Noo!"

Chapter 3463: The Dominant

Of all of the opponents Ves could match up against, pitting his Pontifical Lance against the Dominant was the worst-case scenario.

He possessed plenty of awareness that he was probably not the absolute best mech designer in this tournament. He was too young and his work was too unrefined and low-tech to compete against the better mechs.

However, he still held hope that his design philosophy along with his unique methods could make a difference.

He recognized that the key to winning against stronger opponents was to substantially increase the relationship between his own mech and its mech pilot.

As long as Gregory Haloscar developed a deeper bond with the Pontifical Lance and drew out more of its power, then it was not impossible for the two to defeat another combination that was stronger on paper!

"All of this requires time, though!"

If Ves matched up against one of the six dreaded centrist mech designers in the third round of mech duels, then he would have possessed a lot more confidence.

Gregory would have piloted the Pontifical Lance in battle two times by then. Each deployment was an extremely valuable experience that would quickly allow him to understand and deepen his trust in his living mech.

To start his first match against the equivalent of the main boss of this tournament was extremely unfortunate for both Ves and Gregory!

"Damnit! Why is my luck so awful again?" Ves cursed under his breath.

It was hard not to feel frustrated at the outcome of the random draw. He briefly suspected that it was rigged.

After all, there was a 1.075 percent chance that his mech would be pitted against the Dominance. There was a 6.452 percent chance that his work would be matched against the work of another powerful mech designer from the galactic center of the Milky Way.

Sadly, not everyone was able to avoid calamity. The centrists had to prove their work in some way, and a few unfortunate contestants needed to play the foil. Ves happened to 'win' the lottery this time.

"Oh well, at least I can afford a single ugly loss."

Ves grew a little less frustrated, but not entirely. He was banking on this scoring rule to build up a buffer for himself. He stood a much better chance of winning this tournament if he had three victories under his belt. In that case, his highest two scores would count, thereby ignoring any lower score due to an unconvincing win.

Now, his margin of error was pretty much wiped out. With one certain loss under his belt, he could only hope that Gregory Haloscar would be able to deliver a much better performance against his subsequent two opponents.

As eight new competition mechs entered their respective arenas, Ves took a close look at his own mech.

The Pontifical Lance already attracted a lot of appreciation from the audience. It might not be the strongest mech, but it was definitely the most aesthetically-pleasing mech.

Its pure white coating gave it a sense of purity and holiness that seemed more appropriate for a ceremonial mech or a display model than a fighting machine. The interesting addition of green flourishes that vaguely harkened back to ancient religious symbolism reinforced the impression that this lancer mech was a holy relic rather than an ordinary competition mech.

The excellent craftsmanship of this hastily-produced mech further enhanced its visual impact. Although laymen weren't able to explain the difference, the mech insiders could clearly tell that it was made by someone who was highly adept with mech fabrication.

[What a beautiful mech!] One of the analysts praised the white-and-green lancer mech. [I already appreciated its refined construction before, but Ves Larkinson's work truly stands out when compared to the Dominant. Although the latter's design is considerably more advanced, Mr. Larkinson can at least take pride in his ability to fabricate a higher-quality mech than Mr. Seinlin.]

The praise was enough to prompt Ereben Seinlin to turn around and exchange glances with Ves.

Although they only met eyes for a couple of seconds, Ves already experienced a lot of pressure.

"Strong!"

The way Mr. Seinlin carried himself and the potent spiritual strength he contained in his mind made it clear to Ves that this fellow was truly something else among the rest of the gathered Journeyman! It was not a coincidence that his Dominant managed to attract the strongest mech pilot.

"He's close to advancing to Senior."

When Ves compared Seinlin's spiritual development to that of various Seniors, the gap between them was surprisingly small. Perhaps Seinlin only needed to find a way to push through one final bottleneck before his design philosophy evolved to a new height. Becoming a Senior around the fifties was not record-breaking, but still impressive and indicative of great potential.

The Dominant certainly reflected the work of a highly-accomplished mech designer. The offensive knight mech was not only well-armored, but possessed a powerful and sophisticated flight system that gave it the speed to match faster mechs.

What was even more impressive was that the Dominant also carried a pair of shoulder-mounted positron cannons.

Unlike regular energy cannons, these ones were miniaturized. Their short lengths and relatively low profile meant that the Dominant did not become too clunky while carrying them. They also consumed less energy although that also came at the cost of limiting their firepower.

"It doesn't matter that much."

Ves pretty much understood the design concept of the Dominant. Ereben Seinlin envisioned a knight mech that could overwhelm any mech up close through superior defense and mobility.

Against opponents that were fast enough to stay out of its reach and attacked at range, the Dominant could grind them down by firing steady salvos of positron beams while relying on its formidable defenses to win battles of attrition.

This was an excellent winning formula, but one that was difficult to pull off. Only someone as formidable as Seinlin could stuff all of the requirements in a single mech in such a short amount of time.

"As for my own mech..."

Ordinarily, lancer mechs countered heavily-armored targets. As long as they built up enough speed, they could punch through any shield or armor plating!

Yet the Dominant was not a regular knight mech. It was not only maneuverable enough to evade attacks, but also performed well enough in other parameters. Paired with Hestinia Claes, the overall best mech pilot in the tournament, the mech would certainly make good use of its capabilities!

[The matches will commence in thirty seconds. Get ready!]

As the timer counted down, Ves turned his attention back to his own machine. Its lively glow and Ylvaine's influence continued to affect Gregory Haloscar as time went by. It was a pity that the mech pilot simply didn't have enough time to fully embrace the less obvious features of his living mech.

"Trust in your mech. The only hope of achieving a favorable outcome is if you fully submit yourself to its influence!"

Though Ves gave Gregory numerous reminders, it was always a bit difficult to believe in something without seeing or experiencing it beforehand.

Ves just hoped that Gregory was open-minded enough to accept Ylvaine's guidance.

"Everything will be clear within a dozen seconds."

Perhaps the Pontifical Lance might be able to perform another charge after its first one failed to do the job, but the Dominant was too powerful to get away with that. This was why Ves did not think he should bother to maintain any expectations after the first charge.

[3...2...1... Fight!]

Eight different mechs moved into action! While the three other mech duels were doubtlessly compelling in their own right, Ves only looked at his own work.

As a dedicated lancer mech specialist, Gregory Haloscar might be confused about the unique properties of a living mech, but he was not ignorant when it came to piloting lancer mechs.

The professional mech pilot quickly set aside all of his doubts and focused on piloting the Pontifical Lance like any other lancer mech!

"Accelerate forward!"

The powerful and oversized thrusters of the Virtus Forza AX34-X flight system blasted into life, causing Pontifical Lance to release two enormous jet plumes behind its back!

A huge force instantly propelled the lancer mech forward! If not for the fact that Gregory already performed these maneuvers thousands of times in his career, he might have lost control over his mech, causing it to veer off course or collapse into the floor.

Though Gregory did not expect his mech to blast off with so much force, he instantly adjusted his mentality and sought to steer his mech in the right direction.

His machine already held and braced its lance in anticipation of driving its extremely tough length right through the armored layers of the Dominant.

Though Gregory recognized that his opponent was extremely tough, he still invested his confidence in his own skills. His training took over as he rid himself of irrelevant thoughts and focused on the few variables that mattered.

"My only goal is to drive my lance through your armor!"

A lancer mech pilot must never have any doubts during a charge!

A lancer mech pilot must never let the tip of its lance waver!

A lancer mech pilot must never slow down!

The distance between the two mechs narrowed rapidly!

While the Pontifical Lance sought to build up as much momentum as possible, the Dominant made a different response.

Hestinia Claes possessed two decades worth of piloting experience and did not panic in the face of a potentially-devastating charge.

It was extremely intimidating for any mech pilot to become the target of a charging lancer mech. Depending on the mech she piloted, Hestinia knew there were only a few correct ways to respond to this acute threat.

As a knight mech, the Dominant's most obvious response was to rely on its formidable defenses and mitigate the incoming attack as much as possible. This was not really a good solution, and mech pilots only resorted to it when they had no other choice.

The Dominant was not an average knight mech, though. It was partially a hybrid mech and also possessed a lot more mobility than other comparable machines.

Hestinia grinned inside the cockpit. "I'm sorry, Gregory, but you've messed with the wrong mech!"

She only had a short interval of time to make her move due to the Pontifical Lance's extremely fast approach. Upon hearing the starting signal, she raised the Dominant in the air, its own powerful flight system allowing it to blast off from the floor in an instant.

Meeting a charge in the air was always better than doing so on the ground. There was an extra direction for her mech to evade the incoming attack.

Of course, the Dominant also lost its footing as a response, which made it more difficult for it to push itself in another direction.

Hestinia thought it was fine. As an aerial mech, the Dominant's flight capabilities were considerably powerful.

As the distance between the two mechs rapidly shrunk to nothing, both mech pilots made their final moves in a split second!

The Dominant abruptly evaded the incoming spear by flying up and to its left!

Though it could have moved away faster if it dropped altitude and let gravity help it out, Hestinia bet that her chosen direction would help shake off her opponent's prediction!

The only complication she experienced was when the enemy mech somehow caused her to feel a disturbance as it came close. Though the mental interruption briefly threw her off, she was too well-trained to allow this kind of distraction to halt her current moves.

Just as Hestinia thought that her mech would be able to evade the incoming charge attack entirely, the lance that was growing larger in the Dominant's sensors continued to stay on track to impale its target!

"What?!"

It turned out that the Pontifical Lance had actually adjusted its lance and flight course in the same direction before the Dominant even shifted its course!

Hestinia only had enough time to briefly adjust the angle of her knight mech's shield before the Pontifical Lance struck its thunderous blow!

Chapter 3464: Quick Response

Gregory Haloscar piloted many different lancer mechs in his career.

During his time with Hysphalin Industries, he bounced from assignment to assignment. Each time, he arrived at different locations and piloted whatever lancer mech the site had in stock at the moment.

Since Hysphalin Industries was mainly in the business of selling large-scale industrial production equipment, it did not really care about sticking to a single brand or mech designer. Every security department of every local branch of the company maintained a different mech roster.

Furthermore, Gregory also polished his skills in simulation training. Though some people treated it as a game, professionals like him piloted virtual mechs as if they were truly real. They fought as if they could only afford a single death in order to make the practice sessions as accurate as possible.

He must have piloted over a hundred different lancer mech models in these virtual simulations. Many of them were substantially different from the lancer mechs he was accustomed to piloting. He found it enjoyable to explore radically different interpretations on lancer mechs. He had already piloted so many strange lancer mechs that it took a lot for him to get caught off guard by a new machine.

In addition to this, Gregory Haloscar also volunteered himself for events like these. This was not his first time piloting a brand-new competition mech on short notice. He was used to learning the traits of new mechs on the fly and dealing with all of the usual quirks and imperfections that hastily-designed and hastily-built mechs tended to possess.

In truth, it took a certain amount of courage for mech pilots to volunteer in mech design tournaments. They were practically playing the role of test pilots for mechs that were likely the shabbiest machines that their makers had ever developed.

"At least it's exciting! Mech designers are always able to come up with something new!"

The Pontifical Lance did not incorporate any extreme concepts that radically altered the formula of a lancer mech, but it was still one of the weirdest mechs he ever piloted.

It was only when his lancer mech took action that Gregory began to have a better idea on what a living mech was actually capable of. Even as he focused his mind on what was important, he could feel his mech was much more responsive than usual.

Although the mech didn't overwhelm him with a flood of irrelevant input, he quickly noticed that it was more attentive to the current situation and more accommodating to his current needs.

What surprised him a lot was how smart it was. It was as if the mech was driven by a particularly clever AI.

Yet unlike the automated systems that he had interacted with in the past, the intelligence of the Pontifical Lance was less harsh and less rigid when it came to sticking with its pre-programmed logic.

The mech's responsive intelligence felt a lot more vague but also more... organic.

Even as his mech rapidly advanced towards the Dominant, Gregory Haloscar was pleasantly surprised at how much better it was to pilot the Pontifical Lance.

Not only did he feel as if his mech was a willing and eager partner in battle, but there was also something greater inside the mech as well.

When this great but distant influence started to nudge Gregory to adjust his attack run upwards and to the side, he only had a brief moment of time to decide whether he should actually follow suit.

He originally intended to wait until the Dominant made a move before he altered the direction of the Pontifical Lance.

However, this was not a good plan against more maneuverable opponents. Faster mechs were able to displace themselves so quickly that any response that Gregory could make would likely be too late to catch up with his opposition.

Therefore, if he knew the evasion pattern of his opponent in advance, he would surely be able to inflict a more telling blow!

There was no time for him to consider his choice. Lancer mech pilots were trained to make decisions with as few delays as possible because they simply didn't have time to consider all of their choices.

It was at this time that he remembered the words of the designer of the Pontifical Lance.

Gregory decided to take a leap of faith and listen to the hint provided by his mech!

Even before the Pontifical Lance finished adjusting its course, Gregory already realized that he had made the right decision!

Hestinia Claes opted to avoid the incoming charge attack by propelling the Dominant in an atypical direction!

At this moment, there was no more time left for either side to maneuver in any other direction. The huge momentums of their mechs could not be diverted so easily, so they were essentially locked in their respective tracks.

The only actions they could still make in this brief instant was to adjust the equipment that they carried.

Hestinia opted to change the angle of the shield carried by the Dominant. By orienting it at a certain angle, the shield effectively gained additional thickness against an attack coming from a single direction.

As for Gregory, he could do little except to slightly change the angle of the spear held by his lancer mech in order to lessen the chance of a deflection.

CRASH!

The huge collision shocked everyone in the audience as loud crunching noises and various pieces of metal exploded from the point of impact!

As everyone became curious how the work of arguably the best mech designer in the tournament fared against an overpowering charge.

Ves clenched his hands as he waited for both mechs to appear in view again. Once the spray of loose debris had scattered, his heart lifted.

[The Dominant... is wounded!]

Despite Hestinia's best efforts, her knight mech had not been able to avoid the charge attack entirely.

Her opponent's correct prediction of her actions meant that she failed to turn the devastating strike into either a glancing blow or a missed attack.

That said, the defensive strength of the Dominant along with her last actions allowed Hestinia to avoid a fatal outcome.

The lance first struck the shield of the Dominant at an angle. While the sloping was not as extreme as it could be, the failure of the lance to strike the shield at a perpendicular angle caused it to encounter more obstruction than usual.

Not only that, but the forward motion of the lance also changed in direction! It veered slightly upwards, which meant that as soon as the lance drilled through the shield, it struck the Dominant in the shoulder instead of the chest!

The consequences of the blow were still huge. The shoulder section collapsed in its entirety, which not only caused the Dominant to lose control of the arm holding its partially-ruined shield, but also destroyed the positron cannon mounted on that very same shoulder.

The visual spectacle of seeing such a huge chunk of a mech blast into ruined pieces was great. The audience certainly feasted on the sight of seeing such a strong knight mech lose a significant amount of mass in an instant!

However, the Pontifical Lance did not come out of the attack unscathed.

Lancer mechs constantly challenged their limits on how much physical force they could endure. Although they were designed in a way that allowed them to withstand a lot of kinetic energy from the front, the Pontifical Lance's arm and other sections still cracked and deformed due to withstanding a portion of the powerful collision!

The only reason why the Pontifical Lance didn't lose its arm entirely was because the lance snapped off at the base when the force became too great. This was a protective measure that Ves had implemented in the weapon design in order to prevent a charge attack from becoming suicidal.

Now that it had lost its primary weapon, the Pontifical Lance threw away the long but useless hilt and drew out a smaller and shorter spear that was previously mounted on its back.

With its remaining forward momentum, the lancer mech urgently circled around before it collided against the energy shield that confined the mechs in the battle arena.

However, even as the lancer mech sluggishly turned around, the Dominant was already closing in from behind!

Though the Dominant suffered serious damage that would have crippled many other mechs, it was a knight mech that featured a highly robust construction. The damage it suffered to its shoulder was largely confined to this side. As long as its other systems remained intact, it was still in a battle-ready shape!

As Hestinia Claes recovered quickly from the serious blow and caused the Dominant to go after its attacker, the knight mech only displayed a small loss in mobility as the damage to its upper shoulder only inflicted slight damage to its powerful and well-protected flight system.

Seeing that the Dominant would never allow the Pontifical Lance to set up another charge attack, Gregory stopped attempting to build up distance. Instead, he instructed his mech to turn around and clash directly against the opposing knight mech.

"You're a lot more vulnerable without your shield!"

His chances of outdueling the Dominant was much better than before. The knight mech not only lost its shield and a limb, but also suffered a major breach in its torso armor.

As long as the Pontifical Lance was able to drive its short spear through this damaged section, the blow would likely cripple the Dominant even further!

However, as the two mechs finally closed in and began to exchange blows, the Dominant displayed a degree of agility and fluency that almost fully enabled Hestinia Claes to demonstrate her one-handed swordsmanship skills!

The Dominant's still retained enough maneuverability to slowly circle around the much more sluggish Pontifical Lance. While Gregory Haloscar was not a slouch with the spear, his lancer mech simply wasn't built for this mode of combat!

"Too slow!"

After just a dozen seconds, the damaged Dominant managed to fend off the initial barrage of stabs long enough to circle around the rear of the less-maneuverable lancer mech.

With just a few well-placed thrusts, the Dominant forcibly disabled the Pontifical Lance's flight system!

Not only that, the Dominant also inflicted serious internal damage to the lancer mech as it lost control and lost altitude.

Moments before the Pontifical Lance crashed onto the arena floor, a strong field took hold of the mech.

The safety systems had engaged, marking the end of this match.

[The Dominant has secured a victory as expected, but Hestinia Claes certainly had to work for it. The Pontifical Lance and Gregory Haloscar have fought brilliantly if I might say so myself. Ves Larkinson may have lost this match, but he has definitely earned my appreciation!]

[Ereben Seinlin might have suffered an unlikely loss if Hestinia Claes did not angle the shield of her mech in time. This short but intensive bout shows that the favorites of the High Tide Tournament should not rest on their laurels.]

[If the Pontifical Lance is this strong against the Dominant, how will it fare against the other competition mechs in this tournament? Not every mech can handle a charge attack from such an explosive lancer mech as calmly as the Dominant!]

As the commentators praised the performance of the Dominant and the Pontifical Lance, Ves slowly let out a deep breath.

In the end, his mech failed to overcome the opposition.

While this was the expected outcome, it still hurt a lot to see his lancer mech getting defeated with such ease. The Dominant was simply too strong.

"At least I should get a good amount of points."

Ves had taken a look at the scoring system used by the High Tide Tournament. The complex formulas took a lot of different variables into account.

For example, the stronger the opposition, the higher the score.

"My mech also inflicted a lot of damage before it went down."

The serious blow inflicted on the Dominant should deliver Ves a hefty amount of points.

Yet Ves did not think it was enough. The best way for a competition mech to score a lot of points was to secure a win!

Chapter 3465: Lighthouse Keeper

In order to keep the competition fair, the mech designers weren't allowed to go backstage and attend to their damaged mechs right away.

They all had to stay in the same spectating platform until all 94 mechs had their turn.

Soon enough, 47 different mech duels came to a conclusion.

Many mechs earned their moment of glory in the field. Many mech pilots began to blame themselves for failing to overcome their opponents. Many mech designers tempered their emotions after they reminded themselves their work still had to go through two more matches.

Once the announcer finally declared a break, the mech designers quickly moved to the rear in order to supervise the repair work and confer with their designated mech pilots.

When Ves finally arrived in front of his Pontifical Lance, he noticed that it was almost restored to its previous condition. Hysphalin Industries sold more than superfabs. The company also developed a diverse array of repair devices and restoration systems that could quickly bring any damaged frame back to a fully functional state.

Of course, not everything could be returned back to peak condition. Certain phenomena such as fatigue and other forms of wear and tear were notoriously difficult to fix. It was completely unnecessary for Hysphalin Industries to bring out the big guns and expend an enormous amount of money just to repair a bunch of short-lived competition mechs.

Besides, how well these machines were able to pick themselves back up after suffering heavy damage was one of the ways mech designers distinguished themselves from each other.

The design of the mech, the choice in materials and how well it was put together all influenced the repairability of a machine.

The Pontifical Lance performed well in this regard. Although Ves observed numerous faults caused by inflexible programming, he could still iron out most of the wrinkles before the next round commenced.

While he began to take over manual control over these sophisticated repair systems, the mech pilot of the Pontifical Lance approached with a somber expression.

"You don't have to feel sorry about your loss." Ves calmly replied before the man could explain his defeat. "Both of us have gone through our fair share of duels and competitions. Losing is part of the game. I have little fault in how you fought against the Dominant. That mech is just so strong that it still retained most of its battle effectiveness after losing its entire shoulder."

His preemptive words put Gregory Haloscar at ease. The mech pilot had encountered mech designers who responded to losses in a much more ugly fashion. When a lot of pride and winnings were at stake, it was quite possible for people to lose their cool.

Fortunately, despite his relatively young age, Ves was able to accept the reality of this outcome without a fuss. That spoke well for their future chances.

Since they didn't have to go through the complicated dance of moving past their earlier loss, Gregory quickly reoriented his thoughts towards his next bout. "You've seen me pilot your mech earlier. What did I do right and what do I need to change?"

"I'm quite satisfied with the way you handled yourself." Ves responded with a smile even as he continued to fix his work. "You're a skilled and seasoned lancer mech pilot and that is what I need the most. At its base, the Pontifical Lance doesn't attempt to reinvent the concept of a lancer mech. Just piloting it like the other machines you are familiar

with is already good. The only issue that I want you to work upon is to actively cooperate with your living mech."

"Uhm, explain, please."

"You've already piloted the Pontifical Lance so you should know it is more than a cold, logic-driven machine. From what I've been able to see, you accepted a suggestion from your mech. Has that decision paid off for you, Gregory?"

The man nodded. "I kept your words in mind and took the hint seriously, even if I can't figure out whether it is actually right. Although I can't say I'm completely convinced, I'm willing to put my trust in my mech again in the next match."

Ves briefly paused his repair work in order to turn around and face the mech pilot in the eyes.

"You need to do more than passively accept the input of your lancer mech. You need to work as an actual team. Think about all of the times you fought alongside fellow battle comrades. It's rarely the case that one of you takes the lead while the rest simply does nothing except when receiving explicit instructions. The Pontifical Lance still has untapped potential. What is limiting it from displaying its full capabilities is your lack of initiative. Embrace your mech. Open yourself up to it. Trust in its guidance, and it shall lead you to victory. Do you understand?"

"I... think so. I'll do better. I will not taste defeat again!"

"That's the spirit. Now hop back in your cockpit. Your mech is almost ready for the second round."

Once the break was over, the mech designers all moved back to the spectating platform again. The second round commenced with four fresh duels.

Though Ves appreciated the sight of all of these unique competition mechs showing off their distinctive features, he was mostly waiting for his work to enter the arena again.

He didn't have to wait too long. After the arenas were all cleaned up after hosting a couple of thrilling bouts, the announcer finally mentioned a familiar name.

[In the fourth arena, will Ves Larkinson's Pontifical Lance succeed in demolishing its foe in a single charge or will Marik Esophe's Lighthouse Keeper be able to hold its ground?]

Ves widened his eyes.

The Lighthouse Keeper was another knight mech!

However, unlike the Dominant, the Lighthouse Keeper adopted a radically different battle approach.

Part of it was because Marik Esophe wasn't as good as Ereben Seinlin.

There was only so much Marik could put into his Lighthouse Keeper, so he made a difficult choice to forgo integrating a flight system in the design.

By skipping this demanding element, the Lighthouse Keeper was actually considerably more resilient than the Dominant. Even if its design wasn't as sophisticated, all of that extra capacity went into strengthening its defenses even further.

In order to make sure that the Lighthouse Keeper was able to defeat opponents that could easily evade its sword, Marik Esophe opted to pair his knight mech with deployable turrets.

"Is that even allowed?" Ves briefly wondered.

If Mr. Esophe broke the rules, then the Lighthouse Keeper would have never been allowed to fight in the first round. Evidently there was no problem with pairing a knight mech with detachable systems.

Still, it was not as if these turrets came without a cost. Their existence ate into the design budget of the Lighthouse Keeper, making it so that Esophe could not stuff the frame of the mech with as much high-quality goodies.

In order to compensate for this shortcoming, Esophe chose to cover his Lighthouse Keeper with thicker and heavier layers of more affordable armor plating.

The downside was that the Lighthouse Keeper was so fat and heavy that it could barely jog on the ground! Its mobility was so terrible that it could not win any matches without relying on its turrets to force the enemy into action!

Ves couldn't hold in his grin. One knight mech was different from another knight mech. While the Dominant was so advanced that it broke the conventional rules, the Lighthouse Keeper embraced its archetype to an even greater degree!

Sure, it performed well when it was matched up against an opponent that couldn't handle its strategy.

He recalled that the Lighthouse Keeper fought against a rifleman mech in the first round.

Even though the ranged mech was much faster and possessed serious firepower, its powerful kinetic rifle experienced considerable difficulties in penetrating the shield and armor of the Lighthouse Keeper.

Meanwhile, Arnos Gullivan took over manual control over the 3 anchored ground turrets. While his marksmanship was not fantastic, he was still able to wear down the rifleman mech a lot faster!

"In short, the Lighthouse Keeper fares best against ranged mechs and lighter mechs."

Unfortunately, a lancer mech loved to attack large and relatively immobile targets! The Lighthouse Keeper definitely qualified!

"I've finally received compensation for my earlier matchup!" Ves sighed.

He couldn't relax completely though. As the Pontifical Lance and the Lighthouse Keeper took their places, Ves analyzed the ways in which the latter could hold its own against the current threat.

"The Lighthouse Keeper is as slow as a turtle but also as tough as one. It's not an offensive knight mech like the Dominant, so it should be able to endure a charge attack fairly well depending on where the lance strikes the mech."

The gun turrets were another source of concern. While their caliber weren't especially great, the two kinetic turrets and single energy turret were able to spit out constant attacks that could damage the Pontifical Lance's numerous systems.

Although Ves made sure to reinforce the frontal armor of the Pontifical Lance as much as he could get away with, its side and rear protection were quite inadequate!

"My lancer mech has to take out its target in a single strike!"

If the Pontifical Lance only managed to strike a glancing blow, then the turrets could easily capitalize on the situation by firing its guns at the unprotected rear of the retreating lancer mech.

Due to the Pontifical Lance's remaining momentum from its charge, it would definitely experience a lot of difficulty in turning itself around. As long as it exposed its vulnerable rear to turrets for a significant amount of time, its large flight system could easily suffer serious damage!

The only way to prevent this potential disaster was to finish off the Lighthouse Keeper in a single charge.

"Trust in your mech." Ves whispered.

As the countdown almost reached zero, Gregory Haloscar had adopted a different attitude towards his mech.

He knew a bit better on what to expect from the Pontifical Lance. Although it still made him feel strange in several ways, he was more willing to accept its oddities despite his initial reluctance to do so. His trust in it had already been rewarded once, so he saw little harm in doing it again.

"Please work with me. Help me find a way to nail this knight mech."

A subtle form of communication ensued. Gregory's willingness to open himself up to his mech caused the latter to reciprocate.

The relationship between the two deepened, especially when Gregory also opened himself up to the attitudes of the Ylvainan Faith.

The matches finally commenced, the Pontifical Lance surged forth with even greater certainty and decisiveness than before!

Immediately, the advancing lancer mech endured a torrent of fire. The Lighthouse Keeper had already deployed its three turrets. Though their calibers weren't particularly great, they still hit hard enough for the Pontifical Lance's frontal armor to endure moderate pressure.

Ves knew it was a dream to expect his lancer mech to go down that easily!

Gregory did not sway his flight that much, partially because he accelerated too fast for him to perform any true evasive maneuvers but mostly because it was unnecessary to defend himself in this way.

With the speed of the Pontifical Lance, the turrets could never down it before it completed its attack run!

"Almost there!"

As the lancer mech rapidly closed in on the bracing Lighthouse Keeper, it faintly adjusted its course a second before impact.

Though Gregory thought he didn't need to rely on any guidance to hit a stationary knight mech that was rooted to the floor, he accepted the suggestions from his mech anyway and did so without displaying any reticence.

As a consequence, his lance struck the center of the Lighthouse Keeper's angled shield!

Even though this was the strongest and most solid portion of the knight mech's defensive equipment, the momentum of the Pontifical Lance was just too great!

Not only did its lance pierce right through this thick barrier like a hot knife through butter, it also went on to pierce through the arm holding the shield before driving straight into the abdomen that was just below the upper chest!

The lance just happened to avoid the thickest chest armor of the Lighthouse Keeper and instead drove through a relatively thinner and lighter portion of the knight mech's frontal armor. It continued to spear through until it smashed through numerous important systems, the most serious of which were the energy conduits that provided power to the mech engine!

Not only did the charge attack manage to sever the main energy channel, it also inflicted enough damage to both of the backup channels, thereby negating the redundancy that Marik Esophe had added to his hefty knight mech!

Once the lance finally broke off and the Pontifical Lance rapidly drifted past, the heavily-damaged Lighthouse Keeper stepped backwards due to the enormous force it endured before it began to trip as its legs no longer received any power!

The arena's safety systems soon engaged in order to prevent the Lighthouse Keeper and Arnos Gullivan, its shaken mech pilot, from suffering any further damage.

As for the Pontifical Lance, the mech only suffered a single volley of attacks on its vulnerable rear before the turrets were forcibly shut down before they could fire again.

The match had already concluded at that time!

[Victory for Ves Larkinson and the Pontifical Lance! This time, its weapon has struck true!]

Chapter 3466: First Spotlight

The Pontifical Lance finally displayed its great might!

In its previous battle against the Dominant, it had already shown great promise by inflicting serious damage against a superior mech.

The fact that the repaired Dominant went on to utterly crush its opponent in the second round shone an even brighter light on the Pontifical Lance!

This time, the lancer mech designed by a previously-inconspicuous mech designer from the galactic rim utterly crushed its foe within a dozen seconds.

Although this display lasted too short compared to other spectacular battles, the way in which the Pontifical Lance pierced straight through the defenses of the Lighthouse Keeper was still impressive in its own right!

The more knowledgeable and technical-minded audience truly appreciated the Pontifical Lance at this time.

Although conventional wisdom stated that a lancer mech should easily be able to take out a knight mech, this rule generally applied on the battlefield.

A different set of rules applied to arena settings. In a fairly cramped space like this, it was absolutely difficult for a lancer mech to build up enough momentum. There simply wasn't enough space within the arena boundaries for mechs to accelerate for a longer period of time. This was also why mech designers rarely chose to design a lancer mech in these situations.

This was what made the Pontifical Lance so remarkable to those who understood mechs. Ves had taken a huge gamble and designed a mech that maximized the strength of its first strike.

If the Pontifical Lance missed or botched its charge attack, it was practically dead!

This was such an extreme approach that not many mech designers would have been willing to take the same route. Ves earned a lot of respect for being one of the few people in the tournament to not only choose this strategy but succeed in making it work.

Now that Ves truly entered the spotlight, the expert commentators finally bothered to access his profile.

What they discovered was fairly impressive.

[What is this!?!]

[What's the matter?]

[Mr. Ves Larkinson actually has a colorful record! I won't say much about his battle exploits, but his design accomplishments alone are impressive. He is not only a technological contributor, if only a minor one, but also has five masterwork certificates under his name!]

Shocked sounds spread throughout the audience when they heard this. A lot of people, especially those who bought tickets to the High Tide Tournament, understood the magnitude of having masterwork certificates.

[Did you access the right record? Perhaps you've mistakenly stumbled upon the record of a Master Mech Designer with the same name.]

It was stupid to question the earlier statement. People at this level would never mistake someone's identity. The woman who expressed her doubt was mainly playing an act.

[The record comes directly from the MTA's database, and I have confirmed multiple times that it is tied to the designer of the Pontifical Lance. There should be no doubt.]

The records maintained by the MTA were always completely accurate. Good and truthful recordkeeping had always been one of the customs that humanity relied upon to remain enlightened and prevent lies and distortions from taking over the narrative.

Once the people accepted that the record was true, a brief discussion ensued about how Ves was able to make this accomplishment.

[If you dig a little deeper, you will notice that Mr. Larkinson has collaborated closely with a Master Mech Designer of MTA. That is the likely explanation why he, his wife and his fellow colleagues have managed to collect so many masterwork certificates at a young age. Master Willix must be a generous mentor to them if she is willing to pave the way for them to gain this accomplishment at the Journeyman-level.]

There was a note of condescension in the older man's voice. Obviously, he smelled something fishy about this arrangement. It was beneath a Master to handhold a bunch of Journeymen to such an extent that she even engineered a couple of design projects to create fake masterwork mech designers!

This deliberately incendiary remark received a strong rebuke from the other commentators!

[The Mech Trade Association has established a rigid set of rules when it comes to recognizing a mech designer's contributions to the formation of a masterwork mech. While I am not allowed to get into this topic too deeply, powerful mech designers have a way of understanding the truth of how a mech is made.]

[Not only that, but masterwork mechs are never inspected by a single person. Multiple people always come and study them up close precisely to avoid the appearance of favoritism. Any judgment that is good enough to be put on record is reliable beyond doubt.]

[That said, it is still unlikely for Mr. Larkinson and his fellow work partners to be able to fabricate a masterwork mech by themselves. This Master Willix must have still given them a pivotal boost. I estimate that she did at least 90 percent of the heavy lifting, leaving leeches like Mr. Larkinson to take care of the remaining 10 percent. That should barely earn him a masterwork certificate.]

[Then why is her name not credited for any of the masterwork mechs that Mr. Larkinson has made? Surely a Master of her stature would never deliberately engage in deceptive practices. Besides, if you read up on his earlier masterwork certificates, you will realize that he and his partner have managed to create masterwork mechs purely based on their designs.]

[I think the truth is obvious to us now. Mr. Larkinson possesses an excellent talent in craftsmanship. Just look at the Pontifical Lance. Despite his lack of experience with working with superfabs and the short amount of time allotted to him, he has managed to fabricate a high-quality mech based on a flawed and rushed design. No other mech designer in this tournament has been able to equal him, though Mr. Emistes has also shown a respectable amount of skill.]

[Michael Arven Emistes is almost three times older than Ves Larkinson. Many mech designers are able to polish their craftsmanship to this extent with that much time on their hands. Even then, Mr. Larkinson is still able to exceed this older gentleman!]

The controversial discussion continued on for a couple of minutes. The commentators completely forgot about the other tournament participants for a moment as Ves' remarkable record had temporarily stolen the show!

Ves merely smiled as this went on. No matter whether people believed his abilities or not, all of this exposure directed a lot of attention towards him. No matter what else happened in this tournament, he already fulfilled one of his objectives!

The attitudes of the other mech designers around him had changed. Though they were all confident in their own design capabilities, they had to admit they could not even come close to amassing five masterwork certificates, especially at his relatively young age!

Although Ves didn't like to attract unwelcome attention towards him, he also recognized the benefits of fame. He relied on it extensively to open doors and make people listen back in the galactic rim.

Now that he had relocated to the Red Ocean, his fame and notoriety had plummeted to zero. Ves knew he had to start building up his reputation again, but it was much harder to do so when the new frontier attracted so many notable talents!

Fortunately, Ves could at least transfer a few of his older accomplishments over to this new locale. Masterwork certificates were universally recognized due to the prestige of the MTA.

Ves actually wanted to be known for his living mechs, but that was a bit harder to accomplish under the current circumstances. He would take what he could get, and showing off his masterwork certificates was the easiest way to get the mech community to take him seriously.

Ereben Seinlin even took the initiative to approach Ves. The middle-aged mech designer stretched out his hand.

"I did not realize your fabrication accomplishments exceed your design feats."

"It's not that big of a deal. We are mech designers, not factory workers. Your Dominant design is a true masterpiece in my eyes." Ves responded as he reached out with his own arm.

The two briefly shook hands.

"You don't need to be modest, Mr. Larkinson." The centrist said. "My mentor has taught me that the best mech designers cannot go far if they become too detached to the art of making mechs. You are already a few steps ahead of the rest of us and you're still so young. As long as your design ability catches up to my current level, I have no doubt that my Dominant will stand no chance against your exquisite mech."

Ves chuckled. "That's a future matter. Right now, I am still in the process of tempering my design philosophy."

"How did you manage to create so many masterwork certificates?"

"I can't really explain it, Mr. Seinlin. People say that I have a talent for it. I guess this is true. I have always been passionate about the practical side of mechs. This is especially the case when my life and my future depends on how well my mechs are able to defeat the opposition."

Half of what Ves said was nonsense. There was no way that he was willing to share any secrets, particularly those related to Vulcan.

Still, he did not blow Mr. Seinlin off but acted friendly and generous enough to leave a friendly impression.

Not just Seinlin, but many other mech designers on the same spectating platform revised their opinions on this previously-unremarkable mech designer from the galactic rim.

Aware of the attention that he was getting, Ves deliberately ramped up his charm, not hesitating to employ a couple of spiritual tricks to make himself appear more friendly and approachable.

After Seinlin tentatively satisfied his curiosity, he soon returned to his own circle. The man didn't seem interested in deepening his relationship with Ves, but that was fine.

Time passed by until the second round of tournaments had concluded. Ves put his thoughts about making new contacts aside and turned his attention back to maximizing his chances for the third and final round of the fighting phase.

No matter what, Ves had to make sure his Pontifical Lance won the next match and in such an overwhelming fashion that he was guaranteed a high score!

"I still have a chance of getting into the top 3!"

He did not intend to return home without obtaining at least a single combat carrier. Unfortunately, he had to climb over at least 91 other tournament participants in order to complete this goal!

"As long as my Pontifical Lance matches up against the right mech, this can still be done. Not even the centrists can necessarily make it to the top."

Although the six mech designers from the galactic center were the clear favorites this time, even their mechs experienced difficulties in defeating other tough opponents.

For example, when the Dominant managed to defeat the Pontifical Lance, the fact that it sustained severe damage in the match took away a lot of points. Its victory was less convincing than it could have been.

"I can't rely solely on the stumbles of other people. I need to make sure my Pontifical Lance is absolutely able to smash its third opponent."

When Ves reached the backstage, he met with Gregory Haloscar again.

This time, the lancer mech pilot looked a lot more contemplative towards the Pontifical Lance.

"Good job, Gregory."

"Thank you, sir. I truly wished to showcase your work in a better light. Both my mech and I have managed to pull it off this time."

"It's good that you recognize the Pontifical Lance as an equal partner. The mech will respond more readily to you as you deepen your trust in it. For your last match, I hope you can deepen your connection with your mech even further."

"How can I do that? I've already gone as deep as I can in the last match. I can't even imagine how I can go deeper."

Ves smirked... "I have a few ideas."

Chapter 3467: Pumping Up

Before this point, Ves had been trying to ease Gregory Haloscar into the world of living mechs.

As someone who had gone through multiple Mastery experiences and interacted with lots of mech pilots throughout his career, Ves knew that their capacity to embrace new concepts was limited.

Mech pilots were rather contradictory creatures in his eyes.

On one hand, the well-trained and more experienced individuals among them were able to cope with various difficult and unexpected situations on the battlefield. Whether it was fighting while outnumbered or responding to a sudden ambush, as long as they were willing to do their duty, they could put up a stiff resistance regardless of the odds!

On the other hand, mech pilots often experienced difficulties in getting used to changes outside the battlefield. They were especially sensitive towards anything that had to do with the mechs they piloted. Since they entrusted their lives and future to their machines, they often had a tendency to stick with what worked.

Even if radical innovations promised to increase their battle effectiveness by a huge margin, they still reacted with wariness and hesitation towards any changes outside of their understanding.

Though Ves didn't think that Gregory was a close-minded mech pilot, there was no need to push him to his breaking point.

However, after fighting two matches with the Pontifical Lance, Gregory should have made significant progress in adapting to his living mech. The man's performance against the Lighthouse Keeper showed that he had already surpassed a certain threshold.

This gave Ves the confidence to implement additional measures.

"I'm not sure if the last mech you will have to fight against will be close to the Dominant or the Lighthouse Keeper in strength, but we need to make sure that you are equipped to defeat any opponent." Ves told the mech pilot. "This is why I want to take the opportunity to strengthen the Pontifical Lance even further."

"Is that even possible, sir? You don't have access to a Korok Alpha KA-35 this time. It's too late to fabricate additional parts."

"What I want to do won't require any physical modifications." Ves shook his head. "Just wait. The first step won't take long."

He approached his Pontifical Lance that had only suffered light damage that was easily repairable this time. He placed his palm against the exterior of the lancer mech and began to enhance its spiritual foundation with Ylvaine's assistance.

The design spirit was doing better these days but the spiritual feedback he received was still on the lower end. That said, Ylvaine did not hesitate to donate a portion of his strength to enhance the Pontifical Lance in a vague and indescribable fashion.

Since the Pontifical Lance did not incorporate any prime materials, it could not be pumped with an excessive amount of spiritual energy. Ves didn't even want to go that far because it was way too attention-grabbing and exerted too much strain on low-ranking mech pilots.

He briefly glanced towards Gregory and confirmed that he was a typical spiritually dim mech pilot.

Although Gregory possessed no talent as far as spirituality went, that also meant he was relatively insensitive towards spiritual pressure.

Ves chose to continue pumping up the Pontifical Lance until its spiritual foundation had reached a degree that people like Gregory could somewhat tolerate. That corresponded to around 50 Ves, which was enough to be discomforting if the relationship between mech and mech pilot wasn't good.

Although Ves could technically make his mech more powerful, it was too risky to do so. Any mistake could easily lead the mech to dealing serious mental damage to Gregory, and that would pretty much ruin everything. There was no better way for a mech designer to turn himself into a pariah by harming his own clients!

In any case, Gregory Haloscar was still a novice when it came to dealing with living mechs, so piloting a mech with 50 Ves was more than enough for his needs at the moment!

Even though the mech pilot lacked spiritual sensitivity, he was able to feel that the mech he piloted had changed in some way.

"What did you do?" He asked when Ves was done with this step.

"Nothing much. I just fine-tuned its most distinctive trait. Once you pilot your mech again, you will find out that your partner has grown much stronger than before. Don't be afraid. The mech is your friend and can lend you even greater strength than before."

Enhancing the spiritual foundation of the Pontifical Lance mainly provided it with greater growth potential, but this was a relatively useless benefit in this context.

What Ves mainly cared about was boosting its overall living qualities even further. Ylvaine was able to channel his strength through the mech to a stronger degree, especially when he was the source of the strengthening.

Ves continued to tweak the Pontifical Lance's spiritual design in the time that he had left. He did not make any drastic changes or add any new features. Instead, he worked on altering or improving several details.

"The Pontifical Lance has become stronger now, so it is absolutely essential that you remain in sync with it." He explained to Gregory. "The consequences of clashing with your own machine are much greater this time. The lancer mech may be a little more overbearing this time, but remember that its main goal is to seek a path towards victory. You must trust its judgment. It's best if you surrender to it entirely."

That was all he could say before the third round was about to commence. Ves and the other mech designers moved to the familiar spectating platform.

The third and final round would decide everything. A good win could propel them into the top 10 while a defeat might sink their chances.

It was already clear that a few contestants did not care too much about this round at all. Their mechs had already achieved two easy wins. A third victory might grant them a better score, but this was merely icing on the cake.

There were also mech designers whose works lost twice. The weakness of their machines couldn't be hidden and there was no way they could break into the upper ranks with only one good score.

The people who were most nervous about this stage of the tournament were mech designers like Ves. With one victory and one defeat in their name, they had no buffer to fall back upon if their mech lost another match.

"I can't lose again!"

Surprisingly enough, most of the audience were still present. Although a proportion of them had left because they were unable or unwilling to witness an event for so many hours, there were still plenty of people who wanted to witness the final outcome of this tournament.

Maikel yawned.

"I'm excited to see the Pontifical Lance in action one more time, but I wished we didn't have to wait so long."

"Meow."

Lucky yawned with him as well as the cat rested on the young man's lap.

Rennie shook her head at Maikel. "I'm the opposite from you. I haven't seen enough at all. Our clan patriarch only designed his mech in 9 hours. That's way too short."

"There are other brilliant mech designers here who have taught a few lessons as well." Maisie Ann concurred. "We should attend a longer design tournament next time."

"Which mech will the Pontifical Lance fight against next?" Zanthar asked.

"I don't know. We'll find out soon enough, I guess. Let's keep track of every good mech that enters the arena. If they show up before the Pontifical Lance, that means they're not going to be a threat."

The four Larkinson seeds kept note of the mechs that entered the arena in batches of 8. They all felt a little more relieved when powerful machines such as those designed by the centrists or particularly old mech designers like Michael Arven Emistes fought their third matches.

Previously, the Pontifical Lance didn't have to wait long before it was called to the arena.

That didn't happen this time. More than half of the competition mechs had fought their third bouts, but the lancer mech still had to wait in the back.

It was only until there were about two-dozen competition mechs left that the Pontifical Lance was finally called to demonstrate its might for the last time!

[And now, in the first arena, the magnificent Pontifical Lance designed by Ves Larkinson shall face its greatest challenge yet! The swift and tough Phazeon designed by Katien Tievos must do its best to avoid getting impaled!]

"What?!" Ves blurted out!

How could this happen?! The odds that he would match up against a centrist was already small. He never expected that he would have to pit his work against the mech developed by another powerful mech designer from the galactic center!

This random draw was ridiculous. Ves briefly suspected that the matching procedure had been rigged, but he quickly dismissed this ridiculous idea.

The Mech Trade Association governed every tournament that took place in the Vulit Central Star Node. Their presence was ubiquitous and there was no way the mechers would ever sully the sanctity of a design tournament by tampering with the algorithms that determined the matchups.

Besides, if Ves voiced this stupid notion in public, he would quickly get on the bad side of a lot of people.

"This matchup has already been announced, so it's useless for me to linger over it. There is nothing I can do that can make this better."

He just suffered a spell of bad luck, that was all. Just because the chance of facing off against two centrists was almost zero didn't mean it was nonexistent!

"I need to learn some of Jovy's mojo. He probably has a way of avoiding low-probability events like these." Ves muttered under his breath.

Some of the mech designers around him were already shaking their heads in sympathy.

Against a big and sluggish mech, the Pontifical Lance only had to drive its lance forward as hard as possible.

Against a light skirmisher, it was seriously doubtful whether the lancer mech could even come close to such an agile machine!

What was worse was that the Phazeon was unquestionably the best light mech in the tournament. Just like the Dominant, it was strong in multiple aspects.

First, its mobility ranked close to the top. Where there was an even faster light mech in the tournament, the Phazeon possessed an additional crucial advantage.

Katien Tievos wasn't actually a light mech specialist. Instead, she excelled in defensive systems. She adopted a special armor system to the Phazeon that caused its exterior to exhibit some of the properties of non-Newtonian fluids.

To put it simply, the Phazeon's armor resembled glue. It was lightweight but responded remarkably effectively against different damage types.

By combining superior mobility with superior defense, the Phazeon turned into a marauder mech that could easily outlast most opponents without ever incurring any greater risks!

The Phazeon already won two crushing victories, but that didn't mean that its mech pilot was willing to take it easy. There was still a chance for Katien to reach a higher ranking by exceeding one of her existing scores!

It just so happened that light mechs were natural counters to lancer mechs. As long as the Phazeon took advantage of this dynamic, it could easily achieve a crushing victory!

That said, the Pontifical Lance was still a formidable machine in its own right. If the Phazeon made one mistake, the lancer mech could capitalize on it with devastating effectiveness.

Due to the earlier spotline that had shone on Ves, the female mech designer briefly spoke with her rival.

"May the best mech win."

"May the best mech and mech pilot win." Ves politely responded.

Two different mechs gathered in the first arena. The contrast between the two machines attracted a lot of attention from the audience.

The Pontifical Lance was hefty and looked as if it contained a lot of raw might.

The Phazeon was light and airy in a way that made it seem untouchable.

Soon enough, one would eliminate the other.

Chapter 3468: Who Is The Pilot?

Gregory Haloscar felt as if he piloted a different mech this time.

Though the Pontifical Lance was still recognizable to him, the mech had become a lot stronger than he was able to conceive.

"Is this what a true living mech is like?" He wondered.

Piloting it was truly a unique and unforgettable experience. He could not even begin to explain how a mech designer was able to transform a simple mech into something so counterintuitive.

Whereas the previous Pontifical Lance was mostly a mech with a slightly intelligent personality, the current incarnation was a machine that possessed a second influence that was driven towards achieving both victory and mutual understanding!

Now that the Pontifical Lance had grown stronger, it began to push at Gregory with greater strength. He began to receive vague notions about prophecies, aliens and ascension.

Although much of it was too convoluted for him to understand, he managed to get the gist of what his mech expected from him. It was trying to convert him to some strange faith.

A part of him rejected this impulse. He was a secularist and never turned to faith in his life.

However, after piloting the Pontifical Lance several times, he became a little more open-minded towards the ideas of his mech. Since it had already proven itself worthy of trust several times, was it worthwhile for him to embrace what the mech was selling to him right now?

As Gregory struggled with this question, he soon received word of his next opponent.

"The Phazeon!"

He had paid plenty of attention to the other mechs in the tournament, particularly those that everyone bet upon. The Phazeon was one of the six mechs developed by the tournament favorites and it showed.

Although Gregory did not know anything about the weird armor system of the Phazeon, he at least found out that it was a lot harder to inflict damage onto this light mech than normal.

"No armor system is invincible. There should be limits to how tough a second-class mech can be." He quickly corrected his mindset. "A good lance should still pierce through this stuff."

As a mech pilot, he was familiar with the concept that a thin and sharp object could puncture through a lot of hard substances. Even if the latter looked formidable, much of its considerable mass and features simply didn't play much of a role when all of the damage was concentrated on a single point.

Lancer mechs excel at delivering a sharp and penetrating attack!

"The only issue is actually getting my lance to hit the Phazeon!"

The commentators held the same thoughts as well.

[What a pity. The Pontifical Lance already struggled with the Dominant, but now it has to face the mech it least wishes to confront.]

[This duel is already over before it has started. Perhaps the Pontifical Lance can still grasp a chance of victory against a knight mech, but a light mech is something else. The Phazeon will never give the lancer mech a chance to run it down.]

[Ilos Naduxe may not rank higher than Hestinia Claes, but he is a mech pilot of the same caliber. With an excellent light mech specialist such as Mr. Naduxe at the helm, the Phazeon will certainly adopt the wisest strategy by forgoing its sword and instead rely on its carbine to whittle down the Pontifical Lance from a distance.]

Anyone with a basic understanding of mechs could see how this matchup would probably end. The Pontifical Lance would blast forward with great power at the start, only to miss the Phazeon as the latter easily swept far to the side.

Once the initial charge failed, the Phazeon would never give the Pontifical Lance a second attempt. It would likely utilize its superior mobility to stick behind the lancer mech and pepper its vulnerable rear with constant shots from its carbine.

Even if the weapon was fairly weak and light, it was still able to inflict enough damage to clip the Pontifical Lance's wings!

The Phazeon did not even need to rely on its unorthodox armor system to defeat a lancer mech in this case!

If most of the audience could figure out this sequence of events, so did Gregory.

As the mech pilot mechanically moved the Pontifical Lance in position, he already began to imagine his defeat.

"This isn't fair!"

The Dominant was arguably the most powerful mech in the tournament and the Phazeon was not that far behind.

Not only that, but he also knew the opposing mech pilot quite well. Ilos Naduxe was the best light mech pilot out of their group and was known to be quite steady.

The countdown started. Time was running out and Gregory quickly had to come up with a means to find an opportunity to avoid his near-certain defeat.

It was at this time that the Pontifical Lance pressed upon him a lot harder than before!

"Agh!"

Though his living mech had already grown considerably stronger, it had mostly stuck to its friendly posture.

All of that had abruptly changed.

Now that it became clear that the Pontifical Lance was facing the toughest opponent in the tournament, it became a lot more insistent about gaining Gregory's complete cooperation for their third bout!

Though Gregory did not experience excruciating strain, he still became distracted by the considerable pressure exerted by his own mech!

"What do you want?! Why are you doing this?!" He asked.

The answer quickly became clear. The lancer mech was no longer content with being patient. It did not just seek his cooperation.

It wanted his submission!

"Surrender...?"

A part of Gregory Haloscar was frightened and repelled by the thought. Just like any mech pilot, he heard plenty of horror stories of how improperly-designed and built

mechs somehow ruined the lives of their users as soon as they gained dominance in a fashion.

Whether it was insidious brainwashing or destructive overloads, mech pilots always needed to be wary about any mech they interfaced. As long as they crossed a certain line, it simply wasn't worth it to pilot them anymore!

Yet... even as the Pontifical Lance became more pushy about obtaining Gregory's complete submission, he could sense that it did not have any ill intent in mind.

The mech just wanted to achieve victory, just like him. The Pontifical Lance just thought that it needed Gregory to become completely open to the mech's input.

The words from the mech designer repeated in his mind.

Should Gregory ignore conventional wisdom and put his faith in his mech?

Though he was initially resistant to this idea, when he looked at the Phazeon that was just raring to defeat the Pontifical Lance, he became unwilling to hand himself on platter.

Ilos Naduxe wanted to win so that he could earn greater rewards and promotion opportunities from Hysphalin Industries.

So did Gregory Haloscar. Ever since he was lucky enough to be randomly assigned to Red Ocean, he became aware that he gained an opportunity to transform his previously lackluster career.

As long as he performed brilliantly enough today, he could finally obtain greater opportunities!

Still, how could he do so while relying on his own abilities? Just one look at the Phazeon was enough to dispel his hope.

"If that's the case... maybe my mech has a solution."

The Pontifical Lance certainly thought that it had an opportunity. The mech radiated a sense of certainty that was so absolute that Gregory couldn't help but regain some hope.

Even though it was not smart of him to depend so much on his mech, there was no better solution in sight.

"Alright. You win. I'll trust you again since you're so good."

As the clock continued to count down, Gregory put down his entire guard and embraced his mech even deeper than before.

The mech thrust so much of itself into his mind that he couldn't really make sense of it all. That obviously didn't bother the Pontifical Lance. Whatever it was doing, the bond between them continued to grow stronger.

At this stage, Gregory was no longer sober enough to pilot his mech with full control. There was so much jumbled data in his mind that he could barely maintain awareness of his current situation!

"The match will begin in five seconds!"

Yet the powerful living mech never wavered. As soon as the count reached zero, both Gregory and the Pontifical Lance willed themselves forward at the same time!

All of Gregory's doubts abruptly disappeared this time. He suddenly noticed that he had entered an abnormal state of mind where he was the mech and the mech was him. The boundaries between them had blurred to an extent, yet what he was experiencing right now was absolutely wonderful.

Normally, whenever mech pilots interfaced with their machines, the former definitely held dominion over the latter.

This was a long-standing paradigm in the mech industry. One of the fundamental principles of humanity was that it must always be in control over their tech, not the other way around. Any mech designer that veered from it eventually suffered a backlash.

This was why a situation such as this was rare! Right now, it didn't feel as if Gregory was piloting his mech at all. He was not the main controller nor did he make all of the major decisions that decided how the mech should move and utilize its various systems.

Instead, he felt as if he was piloting a twisted version of a mech that was designed to make use of humans to address its shortcomings!

The Pontifical Lance was alive and intelligent, but it was not capable of controlling a mech on its own. It also lacked certain elements such as the combat expertise that only a well-trained mech pilot possessed.

Therefore, the mech straightforwardly took over a willing Gregory and invaded his mind in order to take what it needed to control itself in the best manner possible!

It was a profoundly surreal experience that would have freaked Gregory out if he wasn't able to feel the Pontifical Lance's purpose and sincerity through their connection.

Right now, both of them had one thing in mind.

"Impale the Phazeon!"

Even though a revolution took place in his mind, Gregory was still able to keep track of the battle. The Pontifical Lance had already accelerated forward at its greatest possible extent. Its arm was already bracing its lance in an attempt to pierce its sharp and long tip through the strange armor of the opposing light marauder mech!

The Phazeon in the meantime already began to whizz around from side to side. It had holstered its short sword and instead held a small shield and carbine. The latter was already spitting out energy beams that scorched and burned the lancer mech's front.

Although this damage meant nothing for now, the story would likely be different once the Phazeon was able to stick itself to the Pontifical Lance's rear!

"We can't let this light mech have its way!" Gregory gritted his teeth even as his mech continued to accelerate forward.

Yet how could a lancer mech possibly nail an elusive light mech?

Moments before the two mechs potentially collided against each other, the Pontifical Lance did not bother to convey any predictions to Gregory but directly forced him to fly to the lower right side.

Yet even as the Pontifical Lance headed in the right direction of the Phazeon's original evasion direction, Ilos Naduxe was extremely sharp and immediately recognized the danger!

Due to the Phazeon's insane reaction speed, the light mech instantly shifted its course, causing it to easily move out of the range of the incoming lance!

"Noo!"

Light mechs were just too damn fast! When paired with a mech pilot that excelled at rapid responses and maneuvering, they were nearly impossible to hit to melee mechs!

Yet even as the two mechs were about to fly past each other, the Pontifical Lance had already begun to make an unorthodox move.

It launched its lance at a strange angle even though the mech wasn't designed to throw its weapon!

Gregory felt a lot more strain on his mind than before during this moment, but he struggled hard in order to track the haphazardly thrown lance.

Due to the fact that the Pontifical Lance was not optimized for throwing at all, the lance quickly wobbled and followed a strange trajectory.

Yet even as this was happening, the Phazeon had abruptly changed direction at the last moment.

It turned out that Ilos Naduxe was wary of any tricks from the Pontifical Lance and sought to make the Phazeon's flight more unpredictable by juking another time!

In most situations, the Phazeon should have easily been able to dodge any attack from a boar-like lancer mech that was only good at charging straight ahead.

It was different this time!

Ilos Naduxe only had enough time to widen his eyes and activate an emergency damage mitigation measure as the lance struck straight onto the Phazeon's chest!

With the momentum borrowed from the Pontifical Lance's charge, the long and sharp projectile almost speared straight through the light mech's structure!

[Impossible!]

[What kind of lancer mech throws its weapon?!]

Chapter 3469: Second Dance

Two different mechs flew apart from each other!

The Pontifical Lance had just launched its primary weapon and continued to thunder forward with great speed!

Due to the fact that the mech hadn't actually hit any target, its monstrous momentum had not abated. This was quite dangerous as the lancer mech could easily collide against the energy shield up ahead!

Both Gregory and the mech tried their best to prevent this from happening. They both tried their best to turn the Pontifical Lance around and bleed as much speed as possible.

In the end, the lancer mech managed to skirt the energy shield without hitting it. The machine continued to divert its momentum so that it was able to gain more control over flight.

As soon as Gregory confirmed that his mech successfully survived its own messy attack run, he finally took a glimpse at his opponent.

"It's still functional!" Gregory gasped!

The Phazeon clearly wasn't in good shape. The lance thrown at its chest had sunk almost straight through its thin chest area.

Since the lance had been thrown, its strike hadn't been driven by the weight of a charging lancer mech. That had severely lessened the damage potential of the throw attack and gave the Phazeon a chance to survive the blow.

Even so, the lance was still a hefty weapon in itself. After the Pontifical Lance had haphazardly thrown it forward, the weapon soared towards the Phazeon with all of the added speed of the lancer mech's charge.

The distance between the two mechs back then was so close that air resistance barely slowed the lance down at the time!

In the end, the lance retained enough kinetic energy to pierce through the Phazeon's unusual semi-fluid armor system. Although the unorthodox tech made the Phazeon considerably more resistant against damage than normal, its properties were considerably less effective against a powerful piercing attack such as a lance driving directly through its surface!

Still, the armor at least did its job by bleeding away a lot of the energy from the initial blow. This meant that the lance only transferred a moderate amount of destructive power to the internal systems in its vicinity.

Most light mechs would have still become crippled after suffering such a serious attack, but the Phazeon was different!

As a defensive specialist, Katien Tievos designed a surprisingly robust internal architecture for the Phazeon. Despite the serious damage to its internals, the lance failed to disable the power reactor or breach the cockpit, both of which could have spelled the end of this match.

Instead, aside from damaging the structural integrity and weakening the energy transmission system, the Phazeon's essential functions were still in working condition!

[What an amazing mech! The Phazeon proves that it is more than a light mech by surviving a piercing blow with most of its functionality intact!]

[It is easy to design a tough mech when it is big and has a lot of room inside its frame. It is ten times harder to increase the structural integrity of a mech when there is much less space to work around with. Miss Tievos has not only managed to implement various damage mitigation elements inside her light mech, but she did so with less than half a day's worth of design time!]

Although the Pontifical Lance's triumphant blow was worthy of celebration, to the commentators it was merely an incredibly lucky occurrence.

After all, anyone familiar with mechs could tell that the lancer mech had never been designed to throw its weapons. At the moment when the Pontifical Lance launched its weapon, it had to throw it forward in an awkward way because it lacked the speed and range of motion to release its lance in a more proper fashion.

The unstable flight path of the lance only reinforced the impression that it had gone out of control. If Ilos Naduxe didn't try to be clever and inadvertently jerk the Phazeon in the path of the lance, the light mech would have been able to evade the thrown weapon entirely!

Therefore, even if the Pontifical Lance won the first exchange of blows, all of the spotlight had gathered on the loser instead of the winner.

The audience all knew that the light marauder mech could easily gain the upper hand in this match as long as it retained enough mobility.

After temporarily losing control over its own flight, the Phazeon finally reasserted itself. The light marauder mech not only stabilized its trajectory, but also managed to pull out the large lance that had thrust into its frame.

The lance fell and clattered onto the arena floor.

Without this heavy and ungainly weapon sticking out of its chest, the Phazeon had regained much of its maneuverability. It accelerated forward and experimentally moved from side to side.

[The damage to the Phazeon's energy transmission systems has reduced the light mech's ability to move in the air by around 20 percent, but that is not enough to cripple it entirely. As long as the damage to its systems do not deteriorate any further, the Phazeon can regain the upper hand!]

The supporters of the Pontifical Lance groaned as they saw that the Phazeon was still able to put up a fight.

However, Gregory and his mech weren't willing to give up at this point!

"The Phazeon is damaged! With that hole through the chest, our target is liable to suffer more damage as long as the mech endures further stress. Rapid maneuvers will continue to exacerbate its internal damage and finally cause the mech to collapse on its own. We just need to survive long enough for that to happen!"

Of course, if Gregory had a choice, he would rather finish what he started!

To that end, the Pontifical Lance drew out its short spear and initiated a second charge.

However, in the time that the sluggish lancer mech had finally turned around, the Phazeon had already circled around its back.

The worst-case scenario had occurred!

Lancer mechs were extreme threats to any opponent as long as the latter was in front.

Once the opposing mechs reached the rear, the story became completely different!

Even though the Pontifical Lance tried to turn around on its axis, its powerful Virtus Forza flight system was only really good at accelerating straight ahead.

When it came to turning around the mech it was mounted upon, it performed much more terribly than other flight system models!

Although the Phazeon obviously exhibited a bit of strain in trying to keep out of the charging angle of the Pontifical Lance, Ilos Naduxe made the most of the light mech's current capabilities and successfully used the least amount of effort to make sure his light mech stuck to the back of the lancer mech!

The Phazeon even threw away its sword and its backup shield in order to lessen its weight and increase its maneuverability by another notch. Naduxe judged that the Phazeon could still win by solely relying on its carbine.

Energy beam after energy beam struck the Pontifical Lance's vulnerable flight system. Even though it was resistant against heat and energy, the flight system wouldn't be able to last forever when hit by repeated concentrated attacks!

"We need to do something!" Gregory told his mech.

Though he understood that the Phazeon couldn't keep up the pressure for long, the damage it dealt to the Pontifical Lance's exposed rear was not light! It was too risky to bet that the lancer mech would be able to last longer than its opponent.

The only way for Gregory to finish off his opponent once and for all was to launch a second attack!

Unfortunately, the Pontifical Lance simply couldn't gain a good enough angle to throw its spear. Even as it continued to spin around, the Phazeon was just a touch faster and managed to circle around faster despite needing to traverse a lot more distance!

When the lancer mech attempted to spoil the Phazeon's game by flying right up to the side of the energy barrier, the light mech simply opened up a bit of distance and incessantly fired its gun.

Even though the Pontifical Lance had gained the right angle to perform another charge, the Phazeon was just close enough to evade and circle behind the lancer mech that still had to build up enough speed!

What was even more frustrating was that the Phazeon always remained far enough to prevent itself from getting hit by a thrown spear

Without building up enough momentum, any thrown weapon would quickly lose strength and drop onto the arena floor without achieving anything meaningful.

"Arrgh!"

Gregory became frustrated as every little trick failed to give the Pontifical Lance an opportunity to launch a second attack.

Regular means weren't enough to defeat the Phazeon and he didn't think that outlasting it would work.

There had to be a better way to defeat the light mech.

The constant certainty conveyed by his mech made him feel that hope was not lost. However, despite its predictive powers, the Pontifical Lance didn't see any opportunity to finish off its opponent at the moment.

"We need to wait." Gregory concluded as he put his trust in his mech once again.

The duel between the two mechs turned into a drawn-out affair. Though the Phazeon definitely held the upper hand, its light carbine lacked the punching power to destroy the Pontifical Lance right away.

Meanwhile, the Pontifical Lance's constant circling and maneuvering made it hard for the light mech to stick to the rear.

This pattern dragged on for several minutes. The Pontifical Lance incurred more and more damage to its rear armor and flight system. It even lost a bit of flight maneuverability after the Phazeon's energy attacks finally disabled an important subcomponent!

Yet throughout this dance, Gregory and his mech continued to bide their time.

When the Phazeon attempted to make a sharper turn that put added stress on its frame, something inside of it broke.

Half of the energy channeling into the light mech's flight system abruptly disappeared. Though Ilos Naduxe hastily moved to fix the problem, the Pontifical Lance had already

launched its long-awaited counterattack a second before the Phazeon exhibited problems!

Since the Pontifical Lance acted in advance, it had already begun to charge towards the Phazeon!

Though Ilos Naduxe became a lot more concerned, he quickly managed to reroute additional power through other channels and managed to restore much of the Phazeon's mobility. The light mech was already moving to evade the charge attack!

At the same time, the mech pilot also remained on guard against another throw attack!

"I'm not going to get hit by another javelin this time!" Naduxe vowed.

Due to the Phazeon's quick recovery, the Pontifical Lance was no longer in a position to nail the Phazeon with a single charge.

The only other way to strike the distancing light mech was to throw the spear, but the problem was that Ilos Naduxe knew what to expect and raised his guard to the greatest possible extent!

Gregory and his mech were both unwilling to let this precious opportunity slip!

"We can still win!"

At this desperate moment that would decide whether he would win or lose, Gregory completely threw himself onto his mech!

He not only surrendered to the influences of machine, but also embraced the beliefs that it had conveyed to him before!

A single name escaped his lips.

"Ylvaine."

The Pontifical Lance glowed brightly as a holy presence descended upon it! The entire mech seemed to have transformed into a conduit of a powerful, transcendent presence!

Even though the phenomenon only lasted a second, the sudden descent not only guided Gregory and the mech into throwing the spear, but also concentrated its glow into a second spear that jabbed straight into the cockpit of the Phazeon!

"Ahh! What is this?!" Ilos Naduxe cried out as he momentarily became disoriented by the powerful glow.

Even though the effect wasn't all that strong, he still lost awareness for a single instant.

Aware that the Pontifical Lance would definitely capitalize on his distraction, Ilos blindly decided to juke the Phazeon down and to the right!

Unfortunately, the light mech's course change just so happened to put it right on the trajectory of the thrown spear!

Though the soaring weapon didn't contain much force, it coincidentally slipped right into the existing hole in its chest!

"What?!"

"This has to be a coincidence!"

"Lightning doesn't strike the same spot twice!"

The spear, which hadn't lost any energy by boring through the Phazeon's armor layer, pierced through the crucial systems in its path and finally managed to sever the light mech's energy transmission systems entirely!

To the shock of the entire audience, the Phazeon finally lost power and began to fall for real!

Chapter 3470: Announcing the Ranking

A lot of people who had been observing this tense and ultimately thrilling duel had turned speechless.

At the final sequence, the Pontifical Lance not only turned into some kind of a divine vestige, but also happened to throw its spear right into the earlier wound inflicted by its thrown lance!

Although it was theoretically possible for another thrown weapon to bypass all of the armor of the Phazeon and instead slip right through the only opening in its front, no ordinary mech or mech pilot could accomplish such a feat in the middle of a maneuvering game!

Perhaps it was not that hard for a lancer mech to drive a spear through a vulnerable weak point when the opponent was stationary, but the Phazeon had performed another evasive maneuver by the time the spear had struck its mark!

"Who is Gregory Haloscar?!"

"Forget piloting mechs! Mr. Haloscar should be taking part in the Galactic Olympic Games for javelin throwing!"

"What if it's not the mech pilot, but the mech that's responsible for putting that spear through the hole in the Phazeon's armor?"

"Don't be daft! Only skill and luck can yield this kind of result!"

"Did you forget about that moment when the Pontifical Lance glowed all of a sudden? I swear a god had showed up to bless the mech!"

While a lot of controversy erupted among the crowd, the commentators sounded just as befuddled!

[This result is probabilistically impossible!] An older man sounded as if he was losing his sanity! [Gregory Haloscar had to make multiple correct predictions in order to achieve this perfect attack. First, he needed to guess the evasion direction of the Phazeon. Second, the spear launched by the Pontifical Lance had to be aimed precisely along the right trajectory for it to pass through the Phazeon's only wound. The odds of getting the first correct is small but still reasonable. The odds of accomplishing the second is too miniscule, especially when you consider that the Pontifical Lance is not a mech designed for throwing. If you look at the slow-motion playback of its second throw, you can clearly see that the spear did not fly straight!]

[You're denying reality, old friend. Why can't you accept that the cosmos we live in is more wondrous than we can imagine!]

[I can accept a machine breaking the rules if it is an expert mech paired with an expert pilot, but this is just an ordinary competition mech! We have all seen how Mr. Larkinson designed and built it in front of our eyes! He did not slip any abnormal exotics inside the mech nor employed any arcane production methods to create a monstrosity. The Pontifical Lance is just a lancer mech!]

[You're wrong. You're completely ignoring its additional properties. Their effects may be unclear but they are clearly not trivial. What happened at the final instance is an especially clear sign that there is a lot more to this mech than what is apparent on the surface!]

The sheer amount of coincidences surrounding the Pontifical Lance were so improbable that the debates still raged on well after the current matches had ended and the next four duels commenced.

Though the commentators soon turned back to discussing the features of the mechs on display, a lot of people still thought back on that incredible moment when the Pontifical Lance seemingly turned into a divine avatar and struck with unnatural precision.

Up at the special spectating platform, many of the contestants took Ves a lot more seriously than before.

The Pontifical Lance's performance against the Dominant already showed that Ves was a lot better than he appeared on the surface. Despite that, a loss was still a loss.

A victory was much more convincing.

Though the Lighthouse Keeper was too average to display the full potential of the Pontifical Lance, the Phazeon successfully pushed the lancer mech as well as its mech pilot to their limits!

No matter what, the Phazeon fell while the Pontifical Lance remained upright.

Despite suffering a dramatic and unexpected loss, Katien Tievos did not look distressed. Others might claim that the Phazeon should have won this favorable matchup, but she knew exactly what her mech was capable of. The fact that a lancer mech managed to overcome all of its disadvantages was not a matter of luck, but skill.

The woman calmly accepted the outcome of this match. She certainly had a lot to think about after today. The mech industry was a lot more weird and diverse than she thought, and not even mech designers from the galactic rim should be dismissed.

The young woman turned around and approached Ves with a friendly expression on her face.

"Good match. Your mech is... unexpectedly strong."

Ves shook Katien's hand. He noted that the woman's skin was even more smooth and delicate than that of his wife.

"Thank you. Your Phazeon certainly made my lancer mech work for its victory. I don't think it's wrong to say that your light mech should have been able to secure victory in 99 out of a 100 iterations of this duel."

Katien's lips twitched into a resigned smile. "Yet that is not what happened. Instead, your lancer mech defied the odds and proved everyone's predictions wrong. Even I did not expect your mech to be capable of grasping such minute opportunities of victory. It is especially interesting how Ilos Naduxe momentarily lost control of his mech at a crucial moment."

"That's something of a specialty of mine." Ves grinned. "If you study my work, you'll find that millions of other mech pilots have fallen victim to this effect."

"I see. I shall study it well and make sure my work is better prepared to resist this effect."

"Good luck with that."

Although the exchange was brief, it was enough to cement Ves as one of the foremost mech designers in the tournament.

What happened next was completely out of Ves' hands. Neither he nor any of the other mech designers had any way of influencing their scores and rankings any further.

As the final matches were quickly being played out, Ves wondered whether the Pontifical Lance performed well enough to propel him to the top 3. Only getting first, second or third place would allow him to return to his clan with a brand-new combat carrier in his possession!

Fortunately for all of the contestants, they didn't have to wait for long for the results to be revealed. The match between the Pontifical Lance and the Phazeon was already close to the end of the fighting phase, so the much-anticipated conclusion of the High Tide Tournament soon commenced!

The mech designers all moved from the spectator platform and onto the main stage.

They also were joined by their mechs, which had all been automatically repaired in order to return them to their proper appearances.

Finally, the mech pilots that had shown off the capabilities of the competition mechs arrived last. Although they didn't attract as much attention as the mech designers in this specific event, their efforts were crucial in determining the final placement of the contestants.

Ves met with Gregory Haloscar once again, and immediately noticed something different about the man.

There was a peculiar look on the mech pilot's face that reminded Ves about something unpleasant.

"Mr. Haloscar?"

"Oh. Hello again, Mr. Larkinson. I was... reliving that final crucial moment. Even though this was just a single arena match, I felt more alive and great than I ever did in my life. Your mech... is truly something else, sir. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to pilot such an unforgettable machine."

"You're welcome." Ves smiled. "Do you know what will happen to our mechs once this tournament is over?"

"The mechs built by the top 3 contestants will enter a place of honor in one of Hysphalin Industries display halls." Gregory explained based on what he knew. "I don't think it is possible for you to redeem the machine, but the company usually treats them well. The rest are recycled in order to save on costs."

"I see. That's a pity."

"Hysphalin Industries doesn't want anyone to parade any bad mechs produced with the help of its production equipment. Personally, I think this rule is stupid, but I'm not in charge."

The two soon stopped chatting as the results were finally unveiled.

[Thank you for your patience. It has been a long day today. We hope that you have all enjoyed the tournament so far. We have witnessed our 94 participating Journeymen deliver the finest works they can offer in a single day with the help of our newly-released Korok Alpha KA-35. The ease of which our contestants have realized their designs into solid mechs truly exemplifies that anyone can operate the latest edition of our Korok Alpha line.]

After another minute of praising the virtues of the Korok Alpha KA-35 superfab, the announcer finally moved back on topic.

[Now, onto the unveiling! As you are all aware, the final ranking of the Journeymen is based on the sum of scores of the two best performances. The formulas that set these scores take many different variables into account. No factor is left out in order to ensure that only the most deserving tournament participant will win. If you have any further doubts about the fairness of our tournament, then let me inform you that an MTA inspector is personally presiding over this event and has manually verified the final scores.]

With that out of the way, a giant projected list appeared into view. As expected, the unveiling of the scores and ranking started at the bottom.

[At the 94th place, please give a round of applause for Mr. Velroyce Sivance! His Yindar Merth may have failed to achieve a single victory, but his work has given its opposition plenty of opportunities to display their strengths!]

Naturally, Mr. Sivance didn't look good at all. His face had turned red as his worst fears came true. He already had a feeling that his ranking was close to the bottom due to all of the ugly losses his mech had suffered, but to hear official confirmation that his work was the worst was excruciating!

Nobody cared about his feelings, though. The announcer had to go through 93 more tournament participants and quickly moved on to the next names.

Ves didn't know any of them so he basically tuned this boring part out. He only paid attention again when he heard a familiar name.

[Mr. Marik Esophe has earned 53th place for the respectable showing of his Lighthouse Keeper...]

"That should be pretty accurate."

The Lighthouse Keeper won the first match but lost the second one against the Pontifical Lance. It then went on to narrowly lose against its third opponent.

The announcer slowed down his pace when the ranking went higher and higher.

[Mr. Michael Arven Emistes has achieved a respectable 14th ranking. As the oldest Journeyman in this tournament, his work is remarkably clean and refined. His hybrid mech shows that he has not spent all of his years in vain.]

At this time, Ves hadn't heard his name yet. That was a good sign! With two victories under his belt including one against a powerful opponent, there was still a chance for him to win an actual prize.

Soon enough, the announcer unveiled the fourth place winner.

[Miss Katien Tievos is one of the youngest mech designers to take part in this tournament, but already she has shown great promise. Despite her defensive specialization, she made the bold decision to apply her specialty to a light mech, thereby producing an uncommonly tough light mech. The Phazeon has won two brilliant victories that are only marred by the time it has taken for it to wear through its opponents defenses. With the potential that this young lady has shown, I can foresee that she will definitely be able to win the top prize in a subsequent tournament in the future!]

The entire audience stood up to give the centrist mech designer a standing ovation. The strength of the mech that she had managed to make under these limiting circumstances had certainly won everyone's appreciation. The Phazeon was truly the strongest light mech in this tournament!

Now, the most exciting part of the tournament had come. Ves was already incredibly happy because the announcer had yet to call his name!

"C'mon. Leave my name for last." He whispered as he clenched his fists.

[The next Journeyman is a man that no one has expected to make it this far. This dark horse has stayed under everyone's radar during the design and fabrication stage and only managed to reveal his true potential during the fighting stage. I am happy to announce that the third place winner of the High Tide Tournament is Mr. Ves Larkinson! His Pontifical Lance has shown us a side of mechs that none of us have ever witnessed! Although not even our expert commentators can explain what has happened in its third and most spectacular match against the Phazeon, it is undeniable that only a mech designer as unique as Mr. Larkinson can develop such a machine!]

Ves didn't know whether to be happy or sad at this announcement. Even as the entire audience and all of his fellow contestants clapped at his accomplishment, he felt mixed about the fact that all of his efforts only caused him to win the equivalent of a bronze medal.

"Well, at least I got a ship."