

## Mech 3491

### *Chapter 3491: Rare Command Ability*

The Larkinson Clan gained another expert pilot!

The news spread throughout the clan and beyond. The whole Golden Skull Alliance had begun to boil. Even the Glory Seekers and Crossers were happy to welcome a new expert pilot in their allied fleet!

Congratulatory messages poured in from every direction. It was as if a countless number of people and organizations had shown up at Casella's birthday party.

It was simple to explain where all of this attention came from. The breakthrough not only happened in public, but also during a highly popular arena match. The extremely advanced recording equipment faithfully captured the entire breakthrough moment and transmitted the footage to the homes of over a trillion viewers throughout two separate galaxies!

Commander Casella practically became famous overnight! Much more people recognized her name than the clan she was a part of! Much of it had to do with the inclusion of her breakthrough event in many general news reports.

Many citizens back in the old galaxy developed an interest in following everything related to the Red Ocean. They never had the chance to pass through a beyonder gate in their lives, but that was not a big problem. They could still live vicariously through following the news of their favorite pioneers and adventurers!

In addition, there were plenty of people in the Red Ocean who had an interest in tracking these developments as well. Whether it was trying to scope out their rivals or finding potential business partners, it was always useful to know more about the pioneering organizations in the new frontier.

However, most of the congratulatory messages came from the mech pilots that all felt as if they benefited from witnessing her breakthrough. Though only the live spectators who attended the arena matches in person had felt the force of Casella breakthrough, that still amounted to over a million people, many of whom had a professional interest in what had happened!

There were many hopeful mech pilots who were still trying to grope their way forward. None of them were resigned to live out an average life as a mortal.

Although witnessing the breakthroughs did not directly benefit mech pilots who watched from the side, it was still a profoundly special moment that could serve as a potential source of inspiration or encouragement to those who wished to do the same.

Of all of the mech pilots that felt that they had gained something from this remarkable arena match, no one had come closer to understanding what Casella had been going through than the Bright Warriors who had still been in the fight at that moment!

It was rare for other mech pilots to gain so much from the breakthrough of someone else, but Casella was different from many other expert pilots.

The manifestation of her power already revealed that her strength leaned towards empowering her subordinates rather than maximizing her own personal abilities.

If she was paired with the right expert mech that allowed her to make full play of her individual advantages, then it was conceivable that she could one day repeat the phenomenon where she was able to elevate the strength of all of her fellow mech pilots!

The value of such an expert pilot was great! The Larkinson Clan was absolutely blessed to have gained the services of a transcendent mech pilot that could amplify a lot of other mech pilots.

Perhaps her rare ability wouldn't have much effect in a small-scale duel or skirmish, but it was a completely different story on a large-scale battlefield!

When hundreds or thousands of mechs began to collide against each other, the ability to boost the coordination and piloting skills of a proportion of them could absolutely shift the course of a mech battle!

The larger the battle and the greater the expert pilot's reach, the more influence she could exert!

If Commander Casella continued to develop her powers and became a much more formidable expert pilot, then perhaps she might be able to elevate every single Larkinson mech pilot on the battlefield at once!

Many Larkinson leaders such as General Verle practically drooled when they thought about what Casella could bring to the Larkinson Army. An expert pilot with a force multiplier capability was a dream for every mech force!

After the match had ended, the entire Larkinsons celebrated their good fortune. While there were plenty of clansmen who were happy with reaching the finals and guaranteeing a haul of 20 combat carriers, they were readily willing to sacrifice this prize if it ensured they gained another expert pilot!

A festive mood had broken backstage as the Larkinsons personally congratulated Commander Casella for her breakthrough.

"Make way, everyone! We need to bring her to the infirmary! She's just completed a breakthrough and needs to undergo examinations in order to make sure there is nothing wrong with her health. You can give her your appreciation later!"

A group of Larkinsons carefully brought Casella's body out of the Quint and quickly moved her to the state-of-the-art medical facilities of the Fortas Major Arena.

Many Larkinsons watched the new expert pilot leave while lying on a floating stretcher.

Though she did not look that strong at the moment, her willpower was still palpable. Reminiscent of the various spiritual networks utilized by the Larkinsons, Commander Casella seemed to have gained the ability to reach out and connect to her fellow Larkinsons. This was absolutely remarkable and caused many clansmen to have more hopes for the future.

A group of close friends and family looked happy and envious at her success.

"Did you expect your sister to break through in this tournament?" Vincent asked his buddy.

Imon Ingvar shrugged and shook his head. "Not really. The chance always exists, but I never thought she would get ahead of me so quickly."

"She's piloting the Quint, right?"

"Yeah, but from what I know of her, my sister is only slightly ahead of me. She shouldn't have been able to make so much progress."

"It's the Quint, then. The mech helped her become an expert pilot."

"I... don't know about that." Imon hesitated. "She told me multiple times that the Quint was working against her. They're too different from each other to get along, though I don't know if that is the case right now. Her breakthrough might have changed her mech's opinion."

"The Quint..." Director Raella trailed as she gazed at the living mech. It had become even more powerful to her senses, though it was hard to tell from this distance. "You know, now that Commander Casella has become the latest expert pilot of our clan, she's no longer eligible to fight in the G-Aena League. She can't compete in any tournament in Chance Bay for that matter."

The expressions of the two men dropped. Commander Casella served as a pillar for the Larkinson Battalion. She had proven her ability by winning four matches and propelling her comrades to the finals.

To fight the final match against the strongest opponent in the tournament without the main person responsible for getting them this far was a big regret!

"Can't we find a way to keep her in the tournament?" Imon asked. "Casella wasn't an expert pilot when the tournament started. She doesn't even have her own expert mech!"

"The rules don't take any of that into account. They only look at the current status of our mech pilots. According to the tournament's perspective, Casella is too strong now. It's not fair for her to bully lesser mech pilots with her new level of strength. Even if she is confined to piloting the Quint, she can probably defeat any expert candidate in a duel. There is hardly any meaning to the competition if she is allowed to fight in the next match."

There were other reasons why Casella shouldn't participate any further. She might not be able to control her new strength and inadvertently produce accidents. Her life was much more valuable now and should never be thrown in an arena where the safety systems might not be able to rescue her in time.

"So who will take her place?" Imon asked.

Both Raella and Vincent looked pointedly at him. Their expectation was obvious.

"Wait, me? I'm not ready to lead the Larkinson Battalion!"

Raella smirked and patted her hand against Imon's shoulder. "Don't worry about that. The other mech officers will take care of that. You should just focus on doing your best against the Zpoezers in the finals."

"Why me? Why not you, Vincent?"

The man hastily raised his palms. "Hey, I know my limits! I'm not going to do well if I'm forced to take part in the upcoming match. Besides, do you know how many people will be watching the finals? I don't want to embarrass myself and the rest of the clan by getting my butt kicked by the pussies."

"Then what makes you think I would fare any better?"

"Hey, you're a strong duelist, Imon. You'll probably lose against our final opponent in the tournament, but at least you'll go down fighting."

"I can't pilot the Quint." Imon brought up another argument. "I already tried. The mech moved on to my sister."

"Maybe the living mech changed its mind. Maybe it sees more promise in you Ingvars."

"I doubt it." Imon pressed his lips.

Raella stopped this discussion before it could go any further.

"I've just consulted with General Verle and we have made a decision. We won't be fielding the Quint in our next battle."

"What?! Then how are we supposed to win?"

"We'll try our best. We don't need to rely on any particular mech to win our battles. Even if the Quint can make a difference, we shouldn't risk it anymore. If the Zpoezers win the next match as we expect, then our priceless masterwork mech will come under great risk. We don't know if it will stay the same or if it will remain as strong as now if it is cut into half or blown into pieces. We were willing to throw it into battles against opponents that we are reasonably confident about beating, but risks are greater for our final match."

The clan had already made a decision. After several glorious deployments, the Quint would be sent back to the Larkinson fleet where it would be serviced and paired with another expert candidate.

There were still plenty of other expert candidates in the clan that might be able to break through with the living mech's help. The Quint had already set a precedent in this regard.

Right now, the most important priority concerning the Quint was to inspect it thoroughly and repair any faults.

Every breakthrough event was a violent process. The manifestation of forced resonance temporarily elevated a regular mech to the level of an expert mech. While this sounded great in battle, it nonetheless put a huge amount of strain on the affected machine.

It was not uncommon to see these mechs fall apart after an expert pilot pretended to pilot an expert mech!

Fortunately, the Quint was not an average mech. Its frame was reinforced and its entire structure also received numerous upgrades in order to make it sturdier for moments like these.

The mech still incurred a decent amount of cracks and other faults. The Larkinsons quickly needed to bring it to a workshop in order to bring it back to its peak condition.

As the Larkinsons all saw the Quint being hauled away, Raella suddenly chortled.

"What's so funny, babe?" Vincent asked.

"I just realized that Ves will probably be angry or annoyed at this development." Raella tried to stifle a laugh. "He's already swamped with work and now he has to design yet another expert mech!"

"That does sound difficult."

Most Larkinsons didn't care about that. They just wanted Venerable Casella to receive her expert mech quickly so that she could fully contribute to the defense of the Larkinson Clan!

The Larkinsons taking part in the tournament kept celebrating the joyous occasion until the arena staff forced them to take their party elsewhere.

You can also listen on

*Chapter 3492: An Exception to the Rules*

The semifinals produced such an explosive outcome that the Larkinsons almost forgot about the remainder of the G-Aena League.

When both the Larkinson Battalion and the mysterious Zpoeze Battalion advanced to the finals, everyone expected to witness a thrilling final match.

A fleet carrier was at stake for the climax of the 2-week tournament! Whoever managed to beat their opponent one more time would be able to gain a powerful new carrier that not only possessed an abundant amount of mech capacity, but was also filled with modern systems and components!

Yet when the Larkinson Battalion finally entered the field, the Zpoeze Battalion steadily gained superiority without any unexpected incidents.

Imon Ingvar entered the field with a modified Bright Warrior. Though he was deeply familiar with his current mech, it was no Quint!

The duel against the Zpoezer expert candidate ended like all of the other duels he fought in Chance Bay. His superior opponent straightforwardly outfought him and eliminated him from the battle.

Once that happened, the enemy expert candidate became fully unleashed and rampaged through the Larkinson ranks.

[The Zpoeze Battalion has won the finals and have become the champions of the G-Aena League!]

What happened in the end was bittersweet for the Larkinsons. They were happy with reaching second-place and securing a sumptuous prize of 20 whole combat carriers,

but the ease in which the Zpoezers thrashed them exposed even further shortcomings in the combat readiness of the Larkinson Clan.

Once the Larkinsons left the arena with a trophy and a bunch of other prizes, certain leaders entered into a discussion on what they should do from this point onwards.

General Verle began with a bombshell.

"Every expert pilot that has joined or emerged from our ranks will ordinarily be transferred to the Hall of Heroes. We still intend to do so for Commander Casella Ingvar, but at the same time we shall allow her to keep her current command."

"What?!"

The other mech commanders looked surprised!

"Aren't expert pilots supposed to detach themselves from their units in order to prevent them from becoming too powerful or influential?" Commander Melkor asked.

"That's correct, but Commander Casella's case is special. Though we still need to confirm whether our ideas about her strengths are accurate, she is probably a lot more useful to us when she is working closely with other Larkinsons. We cannot make the best use of her capabilities if she is alienated from her fellow soldiers."

The case was relatively clear. From what they had seen and from what they had heard from the Larkinson mech pilots that had fought alongside her, Commander Casella thrived when she was able to reach out to others.

In this kind of situation, it made sense to further cultivate her bonds with the rest of the Larkinson Army. Not only would many other mech pilots benefit further from what Casella had to offer, but commanding troops in battle might also be pivotal to her own advancement.

It was common sense in the piloting community that expert pilots had to continue doing what they did best in order to advance. Those that went against their own nature usually didn't do that well in the long run.

Just this single argument was enough for the Larkinson Army to carve out an exception for Commander Casella!

"Will it look bad for us that we're giving Casella more favors than the other expert pilots?" Melkor continued to ask. "I mean, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise had to give up leading the Vandals and Swordmaidens respectively. Won't they feel upset if their latest peer didn't have to follow suit?"

"It's okay. I can't say for Venerable Dise, but Venerable Orfan has long gotten over it." Commander Abis Firelight of the Flagrant Vandals replied. "I'm not afraid to say that Venerable Orfan is not the best mech officer in the clan. She's far behind Commander Casella when it comes to taking charge and making the right decisions, both on and off the battlefield. It was better for every Vandal if she moved on to doing what she did best while we took care of our own affairs."

"Same." Commander Sendra said. "Venerable Dise was an adequate leader and we were proud to serve under her. However, she took over us Swordmaidens after the abrupt death of Commander Lydia a long time ago. She was able to take charge because she was the strongest and could beat us all in a fight. While we still value martial prowess, as our Swordmaidens got bigger and bigger, we've learned that leadership isn't as simple as wielding the biggest fist."

The Swordmaidens started off as a pirate gang, but that was hard to believe nowadays. The character of the elite female swordsman mech pilots did not change as much, but the mech legion had become a lot more professional over the years.

The scale, scope and responsibilities of the Swordmaidens had risen explosively. It was no longer possible for individual Swordmaidens to screw around or rely solely on personal prestige to get things done. They instead established a proper chain of command as well as a more professional support staff so that they remained effective even if they grew a hundred times larger.

Though Commander Sendra quietly admitted that she wasn't comparable to Commander Casella in either leadership ability or piloting ability, she was at least able to keep up with the growing demands of the job.

That was important because the Swordmaidens must continue to be led by their own ranks. None of them would accept an outsider taking over command of their mech legion!

The discussion about Casella Ingvar's new status continued to rage, but there was only ever one viable solution.

"If it makes you feel better, I mostly intend for Commander Casella to remain in charge of the Living Sentinels and no one else." General Verle stated. "The other mech legions each have their strong points and their sources of pride, but the Living Sentinels don't have anything else aside from their leader. Letting Commander Casella continue to lead them in this new age will definitely keep their morale high while giving them additional reasons to fight at their best."

"Are you sure about that, sir?" Melkor asked. "What if the Sentinels become so dependent on Commander Casella that they can't properly function without her leadership?"

Though he hated to be the contrarian here, the question needed to be asked. Concentrating too much power on any person was dangerous. If Casella went bonkers one day and made a lot of crazy decisions, no one would have the guts to stop her from ruining the clan!

Of course, Ves arguably held too much power already. The same fears surrounding Casella also applied to him as well, but his identity was a little more special.

Ves was the founder of the clan. Many Larkinsons held great trust in him as he had been the main driver of its stupendous rise.

General Verle offered a blunt reply to Melkor. "I'm aware of the dangers of building another cult of personality in the clan, but this is a risk we have to take. At the very least, the 'damage' will be limited to the Living Sentinels. If it comes down to it, we can always phase this mech legion out and put another one in its place. That is one of the advantages of our diversity."

The Larkinson Army followed a model that was used by many different military organizations, most notably the Bright Republic's Mech Corps.

The Avatars, Sentinels, Vandals and so on were given a wide latitude to make their own choices.

If they did something right, they could share some of their best practices to the other mech legions.

If they did something wrong, then their failures would serve as cautionary lessons to the rest.

Right now, General Verle seemed content with sticking to this modus operandi. He even looked forward to how much stronger the Living Sentinels might become when Commander Casella continued to take charge over them for many years to come.

Perhaps the Sentinels would even be able to give all of the Larkinsons a pleasant surprise when they showed what they were capable of in the next big battle!

"I think this is probably the right choice to make." Commander Sendra said. "We all know that the Living Sentinels are the sick men of the Larkinson Army. Aside from Commander Casella, the rest of the Sentinels are too average. The fact that almost none of them have been allowed to retain their mechs after we downsized our mech roster says it all. They're simply not as good and that will never change."

"Hey, don't talk down on them so much! The Sentinels have bled and died for the clan! They're our militia when it comes down to it. It's unfair to expect anything more out of them given their recruitment standards."

"I'm sure our enemy will be happy that a part of our mechs are piloted by nine-to-fivers who are more suited to work as security guards than soldiers!"

"Enough!" General Verle interrupted the legion commanders. "Your arguments illustrate why Commander Casella is so important for the Living Sentinels. Their current ability to contribute to a battle is limited, and that cannot easily be changed. This is bad because we are subject to the greatest peril in the early years of our stay in the Red Ocean. What we need is to grasp any possible opportunity to strengthen our forces in the short-term, and this is one of them. Perhaps later on we might make a different arrangement, but for now the Sentinels will become Casella's closest comrades in battle."

Commander Firelight expressed a doubt. "We've got tens of thousands of mech pilots but not enough room to give them all mechs. We're already about to receive a lot of combat carriers from winning different tournaments, but we need way more to field 20,000 mech pilots in total."

"What is your point, commander?"

"Shouldn't we prioritize the allocation of those combat carriers to our strongest forces first? No offense to the Living Sentinels, but they ought to be waiting in the back of the line."

It was good that Commander Casella wasn't present in this meeting, because she would surely explode if she heard this argument!

General Verle had to speak up in her stead.

"I understand this dynamic, but no mech legion should remain idle for too long. The Living Sentinels will rapidly deteriorate if they continue to remain a paper force. According to my current plan, I intend to divide the combat carriers evenly to each mech legion. None of you are getting more carrier vessels than the rest."

That was an absolutely fair decision, but not necessarily the most optimal one. The Swordmaidens and the Penitent Sisters were definitely stronger than the other mech legions, so the clan would arguably be safer if they received additional carriers.

However, that didn't mean the other mech legions were useless. The Avatars were already bounding back while the Flagrant Vandals and the Battle Criers were each developing their respective specialties.

Only the Eye of Ylvaine remained relatively unconcerned. So far, they only fielded Transcendent Punishers, and every starship had a couple of bunkers that offered room for the Ylvainan artillery mechs.

Although not everyone was happy with the decision to split the combat carriers fairly, the commanders didn't object too strongly. No one felt especially slighted by this decision. This was the effect of an unlikable but adequate compromise.

Seeing that no one raised any issues anymore, General Verle ended the meeting.

"Everything is set, then. Commander Casella shall keep her command and the Living Sentinels shall soon be able field mechs once we provide them with a handful of combat carriers. We'll consider this as an experiment for now. We'll continue to monitor the situation and will make additional adjustments if needed. I am confident that she will do right by our clan."

A new age had dawned in the Larkinson Clan. This was the first time one of its expert pilots received special treatment. Perhaps it might not be the last.

Commander Melkor quietly sighed as he left the meeting room. The more he thought about his colleague's explosive rise, the more he envied her accomplishments.

While Commander Casella was on her way to become a powerful expert pilot as well as one of the most respected legion commanders in the clan, Melkor was still stuck in his current position.

The differences between him and Casella grew wider every day.

"Will I ever be able to reach her level?" He wondered.

In his heart, he already knew the answer.

You can also listen on

*Chapter 3493: Hoenbach Bag*

At the time when the G-Aena League was just starting, another tournament was about to kick off in another part of Chance Bay.

In the morning before Ves competed in his second design tournament, he enjoyed breakfast with his lovely wife and his cute daughter.

The cats were also having a good time during this private family moment.

"Meow~" Lucky blissfully crunched the minerals that Ves had put in his food bowl.

"Miaow." Clixie ate her meal in a more elegant manner.

Maow.

...Miew...

Alexandria insisted on feeding Mana even though Aurelia's companion spirit didn't even need the sustenance.

While all of this went on, Ves began to think about his plan for his next big performance.

His recent third-place finish in the High Tide Tournament put him in a lukewarm mood. Although anyone would become impressed if they learned that he managed to achieve a better result than 91 other Journeyman Mech Designers, Ves just felt as if he missed an opportunity.

The only significant prize he received for all of that effort was one combat carrier!

Though Ves was actually quite happy with the quality and specs of the Solstice Runner, the fact that the best mech designer and the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan only won a single vessel was quite a letdown!

"I need to boost my reputation."

He looked forward to making another attempt at winning a tournament. He was a bit more optimistic about his chances this time.

Though collaborating with other mech designers under pressure was risky, Ves had a lot of faith in his upcoming design partner!

The Wild Brawl Bowl was an excellent stage for Ketis to unveil her design ability in public for the first time. Not only did she possess the right specialization, she was also a fighter herself!

The only downsides were her lack of experience and her incomplete foundation. This would be the first time she participated in a mech design tournament and she might stumble into a pitfall as a result.

"That's where I come in." Ves briefly grinned.

He had a sufficient amount of experience and could fill in most of his former student's gaps. They collaborated with each other enough times on various different mech design projects that they had already established a good system of cooperation.

Sure, a design tournament would test their system and force them to adapt to the insane time constraints, but that was what made them fun and exciting.

It was too bad that his wife didn't plan to go at all, and that also meant his baby Auralia wouldn't be going either.

"What do you plan to do for the next couple of days?" He idly asked as he took another bite out of his croissant.

The hotel had prepared an extremely sumptuous meal for them all. The ingredients were apparently made out of local alien specialty ingredients that had either been tested or modified to ensure they were safe for human consumption.

Regardless, it was quite a mind-bending experience to eat a pastry that tasted like folded meat and drink a cup of juice that briefly made his stomach glow through his belly!

"I've made a few new acquaintances during our short time here." She said. "The Mech Supremacist Faction has been welcoming me into the fold. I plan to befriend and chat with fellow associates later today. After that I intend to go shopping. You can't believe how many galaxy-renowned designer brands have settled on Chance Bay. I can't let this opportunity go to waste. Some of the most exclusive goods simply don't show up in any of the listings on the galactic net. I've heard that the Hoenbach flagship store on this moon has begun to sell a variation of its signature two-toned Giarna handbag collection! The leather is rumored to be made out of puelmer skin!"

Ves looked disgusted. The puelmers were a race of child-sized balls with limbs sticking out of their surface. Perhaps the qualities of their skin might make them attractive in the luxury designer goods market, but there was just something wrong about the whole idea!

Even if the puelmers were aliens, they were still thinking and intelligent beings. Though humanity was set on breaking their civilization and wiping out their whole race, the puelmers at least deserved to be treated with some dignity.

Gloriana showed no conflicting thoughts as all. She only focused on the excellent qualities of the leather made out of the finest puelmer skin. Apparently, it was hard to find other naturally-sourced materials that were as thick, bouncy and durable.

The leather also had a distinct texture and a lot of character due to all of the bumps and scrapes it accumulated when it rolled around in rough terrain.

"How much does this bag cost?"

"I'm not certain, but based on the prices of previous limited edition bags, I think it will probably cost around 120 MTA credits."

"WHAT?!"

"...Guguuhaha?..."

"Keep your voice down, Ves!" His wife hissed as she gently stroked and soothed their baby. "Don't startle our little daughter."

Ves was still focused on the insane price tag that Gloriana mentioned.

120 MTA credits did not sound like a huge sum, but it represented a huge amount of purchasing power!

He already agonized over the price he had to pay to enter the Masterwork Gallery, but this was insane! At least he was able to get a lot of use out of his museum visit!

"Do you think our clan can throw that kind of money around at will? You're talking about buying a bag that costs around 23 billion hex credits! Back in the old galaxy, we could have bought a couple combat carriers with that money! Even if that's not possible in the Red Ocean, there are still countless necessities that we need to buy such as anti-teleportation countermeasures and anti-voribug solutions! We're already piling up a lot of debt in order to get ready for our first proper expedition into the new frontier."

Despite his words, Gloriana looked unconcerned.

"Oh, Ves. You know nothing. I'm not just buying a handbag to satisfy my vanity. If you haven't already noticed, I am trying to enter certain social circles that contain people that might be of use to us. These wealthy and powerful socialites are not easy to get close to, but if I dress and act the part, I might be able to achieve a result in the short time we are in this central star node. Just because I am not engaging in any of the circuses you call tournaments around here doesn't mean I am doing nothing. This is the best way for me to contribute to our clan."

Her argument made Ves a little less upset. He was fine with her actions as long as she could help the clan gain access to a distribution network or gain a favorable relationship with a commercial shipyard company.

He just found it difficult to accept that Gloriana would only be able to succeed if she wore an overpriced handbag!

"Can't you just make your own bag? We're both craftsmen, you know. It's easy enough for us to learn the basic design and handcrafting knowledge needed to make a single bag."

Gloriana looked at Ves as if he was stupid. "I know how to make a bag, Ves, but you are looking down on these galaxy-famed designers. There's a reason why they're in charge of much of the product development at these design houses! Their expertise and style has propelled brands like Hoenbach into a fashion icon across many states in the Milky Way! How dare you think that our homemade efforts can trump their work!? There is no way we can top their product design, their material sources, their traditional craftsmanship and above all else the value of their brand!"

"Not even if we make a masterwork bag?"

"Even then!"

Ves simply couldn't understand his wife's perspective. It still sounded ridiculous to spend so much to purchase a bag when he could make a similar product at a significantly higher quality and a fraction of the cost in his workshop!

He briefly wondered whether there were any vendors in Chance Bay that sold puelmer leather. With all of the apparent hype surrounding this luxury material, he was already thinking about using it to upholster his main office chair.

He was sitting on it so many times that it might be worth it to upgrade to a better model. Though he could act like his wife and buy a new chair from some pretentious furniture store in Chance Bay, he preferred to make his products himself if it wasn't too impractical. He trusted his own work and there was no one else that could make his products alive.

An interesting idea came up. What if he branched out into the luxury goods market as well? What if he designed a bag made out of affordable materials and pretended it was worth a thousand times more? The profit margins would be insane!

"No. That's stupid idea. There's way more to building up a luxury brand than designing a few bags!"

The reason why companies such as Hoenbach managed to become so renowned was because they reinvested most of their earnings into building up their brands.

From sponsoring tournaments to hiring celebrities to advertise their products, the marketing side of this sector vastly exceeded anything that Ves and his clan had ever dealt with! The intense competition and the frequent change in trends already took up a huge amount of energy!

How could he possibly think about entering this cutthroat industry when his clan didn't even possess a foundation in this sector? The Larkinsons should just stick to its core business of designing and selling mechs for the time being.

An hour passed by as the family finished breakfast and spent a bit of time together. Ves just loved to cuddle and play with his daughter.

Though she was still relatively young, Ves found that Aurelia was growing brighter and more playful by the day. Though she was still a long way off from speaking her first word, he was so happy to see her becoming so lively with each passing day!

"Daddy has to go win a few starships now." He gently told his baby. "I'll be gone for a few days. I hope you won't forget about me when I return!"

"Guu...guguw..."

"Clixie here will keep a close eye on you, isn't that right?"

"Miaow!"

After bidding farewell to his child, Ves took Lucky and his honor guard out of the hotel. His group quickly boarded a private transit shuttle that brought them straight to the venue where the Wild Brawl Bowl was about to kick off in a few hours.

Ves could hear the event before he could see it. Loud music blasted through the enormous speakers that had been placed outside the large arena and convention center.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors had already descended upon the site. Many of them tended to be soldiers, warriors or anyone else with a combat background.

[The Wild Brawl Bowl is sponsored by Antarix Mech Armaments — Feel Special, Kill Special. Visit our boutique and get 5 percent off any purchase greater than 5 MTA credits, only for today!]

Antarix Mech Armaments was a relatively medium-sized galactic mech weapon manufacturer. The company mainly sold mid-range mech weapon systems that were attractive due to its good price to performance ratio.

Its products were also famous or rather infamous due to their quirky nature. Antarix frequently engaged in innovation and came up with strange new gimmicks or employed an unconventional combination of materials to stand out from the market.

More often than not, Antarix's more radical products failed to live up to the hype, but its bold and fearless attempts to come up with the next great weapon system attracted a considerable following over the years.

Ves admired the company's approach. The LMC partially followed Antarix's route, though his mech company wasn't nearly as large or prolific.

"Maybe one day the LMC will catch up to the likes of these trans-galactic enterprises."

*Chapter 3494: Favorites*

The Wild Brawl Bowl was more than just a mech design competition. The Wild Fighter Association that had recently expanded into the Red Ocean wanted to make its mark in a big way, and it did so by organizing a range of activities.

Many of the guests had come for one of these many spectacles. The Wild Fighter Association expected that millions more visitors would come to view the brutal bloodsport tournament that was scheduled to start a few days later.

Antarix Mech Armaments, the main sponsor of the Wild Brawl Bowl, also attracted a lot of interest by unveiling the latest series of weapon models that the weapon manufacturer had developed in cooperation with the Wild Fighter Association.

The people here were much different than the ones that attended the High Tide Tournament. There were more men than women and there weren't as many mech designers among the crowd.

The main halls were filled with loud talking, spilled drinks that bots were straining to clean up and wild music blasting from every corner!

All of this activity led to a boisterous atmosphere that made Ves feel as if he had entered a folk celebration rather than a mech design tournament.

Fortunately for Ves, he and his entourage didn't need to press through the drunk and loud crowd of visitors in order to reach his destination.

A bot quickly arrived in front of him and led his group to a special elevator that brought them all underground.

After navigating through a maze of underground corridors, they eventually reached a checkpoint. Though the guards weren't allowed to proceed, Ves and his cat made it through without much issue after he confirmed his identity.

"We're almost there. I can already sense her." He said.

"Meow."

After taking another elevator and passing through a few more corridors, he entered a private reception hall that was filled with over a hundred distinguished guests and members of the Wild Fighter Association.

Despite the wide open windows that gave them all an excellent view of the activities taking place at ground level, the noise from the venue hardly penetrated into the reception hall.

Ves did not have to gaze around in order to find the person he wanted to meet up first. Her presence was so sharp and powerful that he could seek her out with his eyes closed!

What surprised him quite a bit was that a second strong presence had come as well. As he neared the center of the hall, it became increasingly clear that the two Larkinsons had arrived earlier were at the center of attention!

"Hey, Ketis."

"Ves! You're here now!"

"Meow."

"Oh, I missed you too, Lucky." Ketis grinned as Lucky jumped into her arms.

"I didn't expect you to come as well, Venerable Dise."

The older woman smiled. "I want to support Ketis and I'm quite interested in this festival. A lot of Swordmaidens and Heavensworders have already come to cheer Ketis on and enjoy what else the Wild Fighter Association is offering."

Expert pilots were prohibited from participating in any tournaments in the Vulit Central Star Node, so Venerable Dise was quite free during this time. Her presence in a place like this already attracted a lot of attention from the surrounding mech designers and Wild Fighter officials!

In fact, Ketis attracted just as much attention. Her palpable strength and her sheathed greatsword made it hard for people believe that she was a mech designer!

A group of important-looking Wild Fighters had actually been engaging the two Swordmaidens in conversation before Ves appeared.

Now, their leader greeted Ves with an enthusiastic expression. The man immediately walked up and took Ves' hand.

"Patriarch Larkinson! What a pleasure to meet you! I am Thaprim Kadar, the Regional Director of the Wild Fighter Association at this branch. Welcome to our party! We are so glad that you and your remarkable partner have chosen to participate in our tournament."

Director Kadar was a tall and burly man who kept up his strength even as age took a toll on his body. He held himself like a quintessential fighter who could still throw a mean punch if he wished.

When Ves quietly used his implant to look up the director, he found out that Thaprim Kadar was a retired axeman mech pilot.

His mech piloting days were long over, but he was still fit enough to rank high in various different tournaments. He even managed to become the runner-up of an axe-throwing competition!

Why was a high-ranking official directing so much attention to him? He never received this treatment back when he participated in the previous tournament. He only met with attendants and other lower-level officials at the time.

Ves raised his eyebrows. "We're happy to be here. Why are you so pleased to meet me, if I might ask?"

"We've managed to increase our ticket sales by 30 percent in the last few days after hyping up your team! Who could ever imagine that a swordmaster could also be a Journeyman? Miss Ketis is an immense inspiration to many people! Who says that fighters like us are all stupid? Her existence proves all of the naysayers wrong!"

Ves wasn't so sure about that, but he refrained from voicing his doubts.

"Ketis is definitely an interesting mech designer. This is her first design tournament, so I hope you can accommodate her. I want her first time to be pleasant and memorable."

"We cannot bend the rules for any single person. We are still obliged to hold a fair tournament. However, I think that you and Miss Ketis will find yourself at a considerable advantage once the Wild Brawl Bowl finally starts. With the understanding of a swordmaster and the design prowess of the third-place winner of the High Tide Tournament, I believe in your team's prospects. It's becoming increasingly more clear that your team is the one to beat."

Huh?

"We're... the favorites?"

The director of the local branch of the Wild Fighter Association grinned and clapped his meaty hand against his shoulder. "Don't act so modest! I've studied the mechs you've designed. I have a feeling that a lot of my members will want to get their hands on your work. There's just something deep and primal about them that makes me want to come out of retirement. Has your clan already begun to sell its products in this market?"

"Not yet. We've just arrived and we're still in the process of setting up the logistics and sales channels of our mech company."

"I wish you good luck in that. If you and your fellow colleague are able to meet everyone's expectations in the Wild Brawl Bowl, then I might be able to connect you with two or three of our business partners."

"You would do that for us?" Ves asked with a touch of surprise in his tone.

"A talent like Miss Ketis shouldn't be buried. As long as she is able to prove to all of us that she has what it takes to be a great swordsman mech designer, our association is more than happy to facilitate her work. Yours as well, of course. A few of our board members even wish to arrange a trading contract with you on the spot, but let's not be too hasty. It's better for us all to see in person whether your team deserves to be the favorites to win the Wild Brawl Bowl."

The two chatted a bit further but Ves still remained bewildered. He expected to be treated as a marginal figure from the galactic rim again, but Ketis completely changed the equation!

Perhaps she might not have attracted so much attention if she took part in a more 'normal' event such as the High Tide Tournament.

However, the competition organized by the Wild Fighter Association was all about designing and building melee mechs!

Although a sufficient number of talented Journeymen who were less than fifty years old had signed up, they could only be so good due to their limited age.

Any extra advantage could make a huge difference in this competition, and a mech designer who possessed much better swordsmanship than practically any fighter in the venue was an absolute treasure!

Though the jubilant director wanted to spend more time with Ves and Ketis, he had other duties to attend to. He soon left the reception hall in order to prepare for the start of the Wild Brawl Bowl.

Ves was left wondering whether Director Kadar was sincere about facilitating valuable new connections with crucial business.

No one was willing to work for free.

In addition, there was always a greater game at play when people offered to put their network at someone else's disposal.

Perhaps the man wanted to steer the Larkinson Clan into the sphere of influence of the Wild Fighter Association. By binding the Larkinsons to its fixed business partners, they became inextricably tied to the Wild Fighters?

Still, Ves was not in a position to refuse this potential help. The Larkinson Clan truly needed to gain the favor of crucial business partners in order to obtain raw materials and commission additional starships.

The stakes of the tournament just went higher. Ves had to make sure he and Ketis entered into the top ranks!

He directed his attention towards his competitors. Due to the entry requirements, none of them were old, so their spiritual strengths all fell within a certain range.

The mech designers came from all across the old galaxy, so their bearing and clothes differed considerably.

There was one team that looked to be a pair of siblings. It was rare for a single family to produce two Journeymen.

The brother and sister happened to notice Ves glancing at them and smiled back as they approached.

"Good morning, Mr. Larkinson."

Since Ves and Ketis were apparently the favorites in this tournament, their names were already known by others.

"Good morning. Who might you be?" Ves asked politely.

"Sara Voiken." The slightly younger woman introduced.

"Dulo Voiken. We're brothers and sisters, if you haven't already guessed. We come from a lineage of mech designers from the galactic heartland. We grew up learning the same lessons and attended the same mech university as we took our family's profession."

Ves looked quite impressed. "How many mech designers are there in your family?"

"Hundreds." Sara shrugged.

"How many of them are Journeymen or higher?"

Dula smirked. "All of them. We don't take Novices and Apprentices into considering. They can't inherit and continue our true traditions."

Hearing that the Voikens possessed over a hundreds high-ranking mech designers caused Ves to take them a lot more seriously!

He already had an inkling that Sara and Dulo Voiken might become one of his most challenging opponents in the Wild Brawl Bowl.

"Who is your..."

"Our ancestor is a Master Mech Designer." Sara answered Ves' question before he could finish voicing it. "He's over 300 years old and managed to rise up while mechs became increasingly more mature. We've learned quite a few lessons from him. He

takes care of all of us so that we can make the Voiken Family stronger and potentially take over from him one day."

The Voiken Family sounded like something Ves wanted to establish in the future. How nice would it be to tutor so many talented descendants who had all followed in his footsteps as a mech designer?

"I imagine the two of you have quite the surprise in store for this tournament." Ves remarked.

Dulo Voiken smirked. "We do have to rely on a couple of tricks in order to beat your team. There is much at stake and I do not intend to give up on the fleet carrier."

"Well, good luck then. I look forward to comparing our works in this tournament."

The two of them were competitors, but they also maintained respect for each other... Each of them wanted to beat the others by relying on superior design ability. Only a fair competition would allow them to compare each other's strength in a fair manner!

#### *Chapter 3495: Diverse Pairings*

Ves continued to chat with various other teams. He managed to get acquainted with many different mech designers in the short period of time before the start of the tournament.

Each of them were talented, capable, confident or well-prepared. They had to be in order to have the guts to compete in this kind of tournament.

The relatively low age restriction of the Wild Brawl Bowl did not attract as many weaklings as Ves initially thought. Even if the mech designers didn't have to compete against 99-year old Journeymen with many decades of experience under his belt, they still swore off in fear of ending at the bottom of the rankings.

None of the competitors could fall back on the excuse that they were only beaten because they had to confront mech designers who were three times older than themselves!

Although everyone who signed up for the Wild Brawl Bowl essentially belonged to the same generation, Ves still found it interesting to note the diversity of the teams.

Some of them consisted of family members. The Voikan Team was a good example. Ves expected them to display an impressive degree of cooperation in the tournament.

Others were apparently strangers who were forced to team up because they couldn't compete alone. Their coordination might not be up to standard but their skills were never in question.

Mech designers at this level didn't need to be familiar with each other to design a good mech. They just had to define each other's responsibilities beforehand so they could do their best without stepping on each other's toes.

As the main competition hall began to fill up, the Wild Brawl Bowl finally commenced!

[LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! GET READY TO WITNESS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FINEST AND MOST BRUTAL MECHS IN CHANCE BAY!]

The opening ceremony was more festive and elaborate this time. Several notable bands stepped onto the stage and began to pump up the crowd with their high tempo music.

Ves had the illusion that he had mistakenly entered a rock concert rather than a mech design tournament.

If that wasn't enough, the Wild Fighter Association held an impromptu cage match tournament where numerous fighters entered a cage and began to beat each other up with great violence!

Although the violence and brutality of these cage matches were over-the-top, the risks to the fighters weren't actually great. As professional athletes, they underwent heavy, targeted augmentation that massively reinforced their heads and vital organs.

Concussions, bone fractures and organ failure were not a particularly great concern to them. Even if they screwed up, the Wild Fighter Association employed the same kind of protection system that ensured that mech duels remained death-free.

As a result, the fighters freely spilled a lot of blood! They not only knew how to fight, but also excelled at making their fight as spectacular as possible!

Once the audience enjoyed a good show, the main event of the Wild Brawl Bowl was about to start.

[Now that we've shown what we hope the upcoming competition mechs will display, let us introduce the 32 teams that shall be fighting to win our much-coveted bowl! First up is Team Blackspot!]

The pairs of mech designers went up the stage one by one. The announcers spent a considerable amount of effort into hyping them up. It helped that many of the mech designers were all notable in their own ways.

Several teams stood out to Ves. They were serious contenders who could easily produce a formidable competition mech.

[Team Voiken consists of Sara and Dulo Voiken! Hailing from the renowned mech designer family of the same name, both of them have grown up alongside many other

passionate mech designers for their entire lives. The sister specializes in defensive systems while the brother excels in designing spearman mechs. Whatever mech they are about to design will probably be difficult to take down!]

Ves already experienced how annoying it was to fight against mechs with superior defenses. The ability to resist fatal blows and tank a lot more damage than their opponents gave them additional chances to win their matches.

However, it remained to be seen whether the presumed defensive focus of Team Voiken's mech still performed well in other aspects. A spearman mech needed to be at least decently fast and maneuverable in order to make full play of their strength in a dueling setting.

[Team Destiny is made up of a pair of best friends forever who have decided to see if they have what it takes to beat all of their peers! Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone are not only close friends, but also the direct disciples of a prominent Master Mech Designer back in the galactic rim of the old galaxy. The two of them have made the bold decision to leave their familiar pastures in order to find their own opportunities in the Red Ocean. Miss Pellier and Miss Coslone both excel at designing mechanically strong mechs.]

The combination between Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone followed a different pattern from many of the other teams.

Instead of pairing two different mech designers together, both members of the team possessed near-identical specialties.

Although they probably weren't able to attain the same degree of synergy as Team Voiken, they were probably so similar and familiar with each other that they were effectively the same mech designer!

Ves could already imagine the dynamic within their team. As students from the same teacher, they weren't capable of producing greater variety, but they were able to concentrate much more on their shared specialty!

"Perhaps the combination of their teamwork will produce a result that is similar to a single mech designer with twice as much time to design a mech."

Besides, who said that their design philosophies were completely identical? Every Journeyman had to find their own way. They would never be able to achieve greater success if they continued to rely on another mech designer's accomplishments.

[Team Hammerfall features the only dwarven mech designers in our lovely competition! Rondal Crenstin and his wife Gisella Crenstin have left the galactic heartland and come to our tournament to prove that heavy gravity variant humans can design a mean mech as well! Mrs. Crenstin specialization is no surprise. She excels in designing the typically dwarven hammerman mechs. What is more interesting is that Mr. Rondal Crenstin

specializes in mobility systems! I suspect they will become their specialty to produce remarkably faster hammer-wielding mechs than usual!]

Ves ordinarily had no reason to pay attention to this random team, but the short and stocky statures of this husband and wife duo were absolutely unusual.

He hadn't seen any dwarves in Chance Bay up until now. Dwarves were much rarer than normal humans, but that didn't explain why there were so few in a busy star system like the Vulit Central Star Node.

Where did all of the dwarves go once they entered the Red Ocean? Had they already fallen under the sway of the Iron Emperor?

He shook his head. That was way too fast. Rion Aaden could not possibly command every dwarf in the entirety of human space so soon!

Both Rondal and Gisella had already noticed Ves and Ketis. Their expressions grew grave and their eyes became filled with hatred as they stared daggers at the Larkinsons!

Ves ignored their challenging stares. If they were offended by him, then the only way they could retaliate was to design a better mech.

He was not afraid of competition.

The teams kept getting announced until only a single one was left. The fact that the announcer left Ves and Ketis for last said a lot about the Wild Fighter Association's evaluation of their design abilities!

[Now, to cap off this introduction, Team Larkinson has come to prove that they are the definite authority on swordsman mechs in this tournament! This team consists of a superstar duo with a whole list of accomplishments, some of which they have earned in battle! Both of them have fought and spilled more blood than the majority of our members. In fact, if you count the amount of deaths that the Larkinsons have indirectly caused because of their decisions, then the body count of their prominent patriarch and founder of the clan has reached the billions!]

Ves repeatedly twitched as the announcer highlighted his bloody track record!

What was strange was that instead of generating disgust, the audience all cheered as if causing the deaths of billions of people was something to be celebrated!

It helped that a bloody series of cage matches had just taken place. The target audience of the Wild Brawl Bowl were considerably more tolerant of indiscriminate bloodshed than other people!

[However, the highlight of this team is not its male half. Though Patriarch Ves Larkinson has become a legendary figure in his home star sector, the female half of the team is much closer to our hearts! Ketis Larkinson is the first swordmaster that has also become a Journeyman! She is the smartest fighter that we will ever meet. She can wield her enormous blade with unmatched fluency! She can handedly defeat nearly all of our renowned fighters who have gathered in this competition hall! She has even managed to fabricate a masterwork mech sword for one of the Larkinson Clan's expert mechs! If she is not regarded as the embodiment of talent, then no is! Please wish her good luck as she participates in her first design tournament!]

The crowd already stood up and roared before the announcer had finished his spiel.

It turned out that the Wild Fighter Association already promoted all of Ketis' many feats before this point!

Ves didn't even know how they managed to find out some of the more obscure details about Ketis. The Wild Fighter Association acted as if Ketis was already one of their figureheads!

Fortunately, this excessive introduction finally had to make way for the next phase of the tournament.

Once the audience were introduced to all 32 teams, the tournament moved on to one of the most important steps and one that could make or break the mech designers!

The lights darkened as hundreds of mech pilots descended from above like falling stars. Each of them were consummate Wild Fighters who had volunteered to pilot the mechs.

A random selection of 20 mech pilots lit up. The first team had the privilege of selecting the mech pilot who had the honor of representing the mech designers in battle.

In order to facilitate the decision, several information panels appeared in the air that provided crucial information about the mech pilots.

[Team Youngbuck! You have the honor of making the first selection. Choose well.]

Team Youngbuck consisted of a pair of 28-year old lovers. Despite their lack of experience, the principal reason why Gerxer Dardan and Olivander Peese had the guts to compete in the Wild Brawl Bowl was because they originated from the galactic center!

What Ves found troublesome was that Mr. Dardan specialized in swordsman mechs while Mr. Peese specialized in energy swords.

Though he wasn't afraid of comparing his work against theirs, the problem was that Team Youngbuck was able to claim the best swordsman mech pilot in the tournament!

The pilot selection process was set up in a way that presented the best mech pilots among the Wild Fighters first. The ones that stepped up afterwards were usually not as good as the ones that had already been picked.

Dardan and Peese shared a single glance before the former announced their choice.

"We have chosen Giles Harnacher!"

Giles Harnacher! Ves instantly became upset as Team Youngbuck successfully reeled in the swordsman mech pilot with the best accomplishments among his peers.

"It's okay, Ves." Ketis whispered to him as she continued to tickle Lucky's head. "Giles Harnacher is good, but he's not a pure swordsman. There are other swordsman mech pilots in the pool that are much more dedicated to the sword than Mr. Harnacher."

"Does that even matter?"

"It does. You'll see. Just allow me to select the right mech pilot."

"Okay. I trust you, but I hope you make a careful choice."

It didn't take long for Team Larkinson to come up. Both Ves and Ketis were on the younger side compared to most of the Journeymen in the tournament.

[Team Larkinson! Your time has come! Please step up and select your mech pilot from these twenty fine lads. Which swordsman mech pilot among them has earned your confidence?]

Though not all twenty eligible mech pilots specialized in swordsman mechs, at least five of them were proficient in controlling them. As far as everyone was concerned, the other fifteen mech pilots were irrelevant in this selection.

Only true swordsmen fell into Ketis' considerations!

#### *Chapter 3496: High Expectations*

A critical moment had come. Ves and Ketis had to work together to design a competition mech, but they couldn't win the Wild Brawl Bowl without a mech pilot.

Twenty mech pilots came forth at this time to make themselves available for selection. According to their profiles, five of them specialized in piloting swordsman mechs.

The other fifteen pilots probably trained in the basics of swordsmanship but were actually excellent in piloting other melee mechs.

There were those who mastered the use of axes, spears, hammers, warpicks, shields and other equipment.

These pilots only became relevant if Team Larkinson wanted to compete with an unexpected mech. For now, Ketis did not take a serious look at them. She knew what she was good at and had no intention of straying from her specialty.

That meant picking one of the five swordsman mech pilots.

Team Youngbuck already picked out the most obvious choice. Giles Harnacher possessed the more comprehensively strong record out of all of the mech pilots among the Wild Fighters. His ranking, his experience and his skills were just a notch above the others.

Ves found that the differences in strength between the mech pilots available in the Wild Brawl Bowl diverged significantly more than those available in the High Tide Tournament.

This was a clear way to provide a handicap to those who had less time to progress their design philosophies.

Though the best had already been taken, the other five swordsman mech specialists were still quite good in their own ways. Each of them were sufficiently different from each other in order to provide Team Larkinson with a lot of choice...

The swordmaster first gazed at the women.

Celaine Traxer was the most standard and balanced option. She was a disciplined, controlled fighter who could wield different types of swords, but excelled the most in one-handed swordsmanship.

She paired best with a mech equipped with a sword as well as a light shield. Such a swordsman mech could partially function like a knight mech and were very suitable in duels against other melee mechs.

Ketis shook her head. "Traxer is a good pilot, but she's not committed to a style. She has skill but she still needs to explore her own heart."

This was something that the records didn't explain. They only contained objective, verifiable facts. Only a proficient swordswoman like Ketis was able to peer deeper.

She moved on to the next mech pilot.

Maida Siferan specialized in wielding dual swords. This was an unusual specialty not only because it was difficult to become proficient in wielding two swords at once, but

also because it was challenging to design a mech that could fully express this fighting approach.

A swordsman mech wielding two blades at once was another classic mech duel staple. It was always tricky to defeat one if it was piloted by a skilled individual.

Still, it wasn't as popular in actual battlefields as the cost and effort to train the mech pilots and field the right mechs was too burdensome.

Ketis liked this mech pilot a lot more. "Maida Siferan is a lot more dedicated to her swordsmanship. She has to be in order to become a dual sword wielder. It's just that designing the right mech for her is difficult. I don't think I should make everything harder for myself."

"Wise choice." Ves said.

The Wild Brawl Bowl allotted just three days for every team to produce a competition mech. That was a lot more time in his previous tournament, but there was no need to make their lives more difficult for themselves.

In events like these, it was crucial to simplify a mech design as much as possible. Each and every added complication not only introduced more points of failure, but also consumed a significant amount of time that could have been spent on more essential aspects of a design.

Though Ketis the swordmaster valued Maida Siferan a lot, Ketis the mech designer was aware that she should not be too adventurous in her first design tournament.

She sighed and quickly moved on to the other three mech pilots, who all happened to be male.

Dzinke Vosfer preferred to pilot heavier mechs with plenty of heft and strength at their disposal. He was proficient in wielding all manner of large swords and he excelled at maximizing the damage of his own attacks while making his mech last as long as possible. This was another fighting approach that was tailored to the arena.

"He's not it." Ketis shook her head.

This was a shame, because Mr. Vosfer was the only one of the five who was skillfully able to wield a greatsword. The problem was that his fighting style was too different from that of the Swordmaidens.

Such a destructive and wasteful combat approach would have long bankrupted or annihilated the Swordmaidens!

Ernest Artoc was a more refined mech pilot. He was a speed-oriented mech pilot who preferred to pilot light mechs armed with thin swords. He was a consummate mech duelist who seriously loved to challenge other swordsman mech pilots in a contest of blades.

Ketis looked intrigued when she considered Dzinke Vosfer. She could sense a competitive spirit in him. Vosfer reminded him a lot of the passionate citizens of the Heavensword Association.

She was not quite ready to design a light swordsman mech, though. Though light mech designs were easier and faster to complete, the lack of space seriously challenged a mech designer's ability to work under serious space constraints. She already had a sense of how difficult it was to design a good light mech when she took part in the design of the Dark Zephyr.

That left the remaining mech pilot. Lyain Kepper was known as a steady practitioner who already built up his own style. The odd part about his swordsmanship was that he preferred to wield a sword that was attached to a chain.

This allowed him to throw or swing his sword across a larger distance, which was very helpful in fighting against other melee mechs.

Ves had seen another mech employ a chained sword before. Venerable Linda Cross of the Cross Clan was famed for piloting a space knight armed with this weapon system.

However, the difference between Lyain Kepper and Linda Cross was that the latter was able to leverage resonating materials to add a lot more force behind her extended sword attacks.

Each time the Amphis struck out with its sword, the weapon collided against its target as if the blow was at least five times stronger!

This solution solved a significant weakness of this weapon system and made wielding chainswords viable in duels against other expert mechs.

What worked for expert mechs didn't necessarily work for normal mechs. A chainsword was much less threatening when it wasn't enhanced with additional power.

Still, Ketis saw something in Mr. Kepper. Perhaps his swordsmanship might not actually be the best, but he was earnest about turning it into an advantage. He sacrificed a lot of progress in other areas in order to become proficient in all kinds of moves with the chainsword.

"Team Larkinson chooses Mr. Lyain Kepper as its mech pilot." Ketis announced as soon as she had made her decision.

[Swordmaster Ketis has spoken! Of the five available swordsman mech pilots, she has settled on Lyian Kepper as the Wild Fighter of her choice! Whether he is up to the task of meeting this prodigal daughter's high standards remains to be seen, but he will undoubtedly enjoy the honor of piloting one of her personal works!]

The pilot selection process moved on as there were at least two-dozen other teams waiting to make their choices out of the increasingly worsening pool of candidates.

In the meantime, Lyian Kepper slowly floated over to Team Larkinson. The man looked to be around his forties and already conveyed a mature and experienced air. While he clearly looked pleased to be working with someone who knew much more about swordsmanship than himself, he possessed enough self-control to maintain his decorum.

"Lyian Kepper, at your disposal." He bowed in front of Ketis and belatedly to Ves. "I am honored to act as your champion in this tournament. I will do my best to live up to your expectations."

He mostly spoke those words to Ketis. Though she never displayed her martial skill and transcendent swordsmanship directly in front of the current crowd, no one doubted her superiority over nearly every other swordsman. Just her restrained aura was enough to convince warriors that she was the real deal!

Ketis was already accustomed to others showing deference to her. She was much more interested in moving onto business.

"You specialize in piloting mechs armed with chained swords, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." The older man replied as if he was a lowly grunt reporting to a superior officer. "My record should have filled you in on much of what you need to know about my combat effectiveness. I am accustomed to piloting medium swordsman mechs that aren't too light or heavy. I like to move quickly but I also need enough heft and power to penetrate through armor."

"I'll test your swordsmanship in person once we begin the design phase, Mr. Kepper. I already have an idea of how you fight, but I can only truly determine your skills and your other traits when I am able to test your moves up close. The more I understand your fighting style, the more I can embody its essence in your swordsman mech."

She had already displayed numerous different methods to facilitate different sword styles in her previous work. The First Sword, the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger both benefited from different innovations based around her design philosophy.

"What do you think, Ves?" She asked.

"A swordsman mech with a slight variation such as a chainsword adds a bit of complexity, but it is still within an acceptable range." Ves judged. "Of course, that depends on what kind of features you want to include in your design. On one hand, it's best to focus on making the basics as solid as possible. On the other hand, our chances of winning the tournament won't be as high if we keep avoiding risks."

She understood his point. "In your last tournament, you took a large risk by basing your competition entry around a lancer mech."

"It worked out that time, but I could have easily ended up a lot lower in the rankings, Ketis. I took a calculated gamble with the thought that even if I made the wrong mistake, all I would lose was a bit of reputation and a single day of my time. Our circumstances are different this time. The downside of being recognized as the favorites to win the Wild Brawl Bowl is that everyone's expectations of us are insanely high."

"You're afraid of disappointing everyone?"

Ves nodded. "I am. The fighting phase of this tournament is based around a single elimination bracket. We cannot afford to suffer a single loss until we reach the semifinals. If we lose in the earlier rounds, the audience will immediately turn on us and negate much of the reputation that we have gained. That will ultimately cause us to become a lot less attractive to potential business partners. Our clan has a real stake in our tournament performance this time."

This was the cost of becoming such a high-profile tournament participant. Ves had no illusion that Ketis would get a pass because she was a swordmaster.

She had not yet built up a strong relationship with all of her new 'fans'. Rather than support her in a time of difficulty, they would become inclined to turn on her and conclude that she was overhyped!

Despite all of these dangers, Ves was not undeterred. He came into this tournament with a lot of confidence... The competition was more manageable this time as there weren't any older Journeymen taking part this time. There was no excuse for Team Larkinson to perform badly considering the caliber of its two mech designers!

*Chapter 3497: Lyain Kepper*

Once the 32 teams all picked out their mech pilots, the much-awaited design phase finally commenced!

Every mech designer along with their chosen mech pilots moved into the large hall that had been changed into 32 different workshops.

The arrangement of these semi-closed workshops was similar to how the High Tide Tournament and many other design tournaments set up these sites.

The only difference was that the Wild Brawl Bowl used a different superfab model from a different industrial equipment company.

Fortunately, both Ves and Ketis had already practiced working with this specific superfab model after spending a couple of hours in simulation training.

Ves already had a decent amount of experience with superfabs. In addition, the difference between the Korok Alpha KA-35 and the model utilized by the Wild Brawl Bowl was not that large. Certain parameters were different but the machines all worked in the same way.

Ketis had never touched a superfab in reality, so she was bound to make mistakes when she operated a powerful machine for the first time.

It was good that the Wild Fighter Association did not make use of any extravagantly powerful and complicated superfabs this time. The superfab model that everyone had to work on provided plenty of accommodations to newer and less experienced operators.

Fabricating the swordsman mech was not a concern at the moment. First, the two Larkinsons needed to design the best mech.

Though Ves and Ketis had already discussed their basic ideas beforehand, they weren't able to set too many design choices in advance due to the variable nature of design competitions and the lack of information about their mech pilot.

Due to the way the Wild Brawl Bowl assigned its mech pilots to the mech designer teams, people like Ves and Ketis had to tailor their competition mech to the individual in order to maximize their chances of winning.

This was different from the High Tide Tournament where Ves only got a mech pilot after he finished his competition mech.

Right now, it was of great importance for Ves and Ketis to know as much relevant information they needed to design a mech that fit Lyain Kepper as best as possible. Gloriana had taught them many times that a good fit could have a major influence on a mech and mech pilot's combined performance!

Ketis did not hesitate to unsheathe her Bloodsinger. The remarkable weapon might not be a masterwork, but Sharpie had constantly inhabited it. This constant exposure was slowly changing the Unending alloy greatsword into something greater than its initial form, though Ves had a hard time guessing its evolution trajectory.

From the moment she unsheathed her greatsword, much of the audience gasped, not that any of the teams heard it due to the sound isolation barriers.

[What an impressive sword! I can't exactly describe it, but this greatsword is more than what it seems on the surface.]

[This is truly a weapon that is fit for a swordmaster. You can just sense how much Swordmaster Ketis has cared for it. She even made it herself according to certain sources!]

Bloodsinger's appearance immediately induced a lot of pressure onto Mr. Kepper. Though the mech pilot was no stranger to challenging strong opponents, he had never sparred against someone who was the equivalent of expert pilot!

"Uhm, excuse me for asking this, but shouldn't we put on protective equipment?"

Ketis vigorously shook her head. "It's unnecessary and will only waste precious time. Fight me at your full strength. I can handle it. I'll make sure that no one gets hurt."

"The arena's pilot rescue systems should also be active at this time." Ves added. "Even if Ketis makes a mistake, an energy shield will appear before she can cut off your limb."

Lyain Kepper finally received assurances to show what he could do in a fight. Although he was fighting in person instead of with a mech this time, this was not a problem for Ketis.

"Come, Lyain!"

Instead of closing in on Ketis, Lyain instead stepped forward just enough for him to launch his chainsword at the swordmaster!

Clang!

Ketis easily deflected the incoming threat with a minimal amount of effort, but when the chain attached to the pommel of the sword grew taut, Lyain had already run to the side and attempted to swing his weapon back around in order to cut or entangle his opponent!

How could Ketis not know of his intentions? She allowed him to display this move but easily bounced the chainsword aside.

For the next few minutes, Lyain began to show different techniques. His sword was sufficiently light enough that he was able to swing and pull the chain attached to it with sufficient ease. His augmentations also helped with exerting this intensive fighting style further.

"Enough!" Ketis barked as her Bloodsinger batted the chainsword almost straight back to its owner! "You'll never be able to defeat a competent swordsman by swinging it like a flail. Let me experience your core swordsmanship."

Lyain held onto his grip of his blade and did not launch it forward any longer. He dashed towards Ketis and attempted to leverage his charge to deliver a powerful blow that Ketis easily deflected once again.

The two began to exchange sword strikes with remarkable speed.

Lyain might be inferior to Ketis in pretty much every way, but this was not a mech duel. His opponent sought to explore as much of his swordsmanship as possible, so he received just enough pressure to stimulate his fighting mood but not to the point where he would feel suffocated.

Ves was no swordsman, but he designed enough sword-wielding mechs to know a thing or two about sword fighting.

In his amateur eyes, Lyain was quite a steady warrior up close. He probably fought better than the typical Avatar mech pilot and even equalled the Heavensworders in many aspects.

"I've seen enough." Ketis said as she parried Lyain's next attack with such power and skill that the mech pilot immediately lost his grip on his weapon!

While Lyain and the crowd admired the way that Ketis easily dealt with the mech pilot, the two Larkinson mech designers came together in order to decide their plan.

"I think we need to design a swordsman mech that emphasizes physical might." Ketis immediately began.

Ves look surprised. "Are you sure? From what I've seen of Lyain's fighting style, he is quite dependent on moving around and controlling his spacing in order to fight effectively."

"That's true, and I don't intend to turn our competition into a fortress or anything. What I've noticed about Mr. Lyain's fighting style is that his combat responses and his ability to read movements in advance are quite good. While piloting a lighter and more agile mech might provide him with a greater safety margin, he doesn't necessarily need the buffer. He's good enough to fight more directly, similar to a Swordmaiden. He can become a lot more deadly if he is able to harness greater power in his attacks."

"Won't that make it more difficult for him to employ his chain sword when he is piloting our mech?"

From what Ves had seen, Lyain depended a lot on movement to manipulate his chain sword. He was a lot less effective at it if he had to stand in one place.

"That's true, but I think the emphasis should be placed on wielding the sword as it is meant to be." She replied. "Lyain can still make use of the chain in different situations, but it should be regarded as an additional option, not the core of his fighting strategy."

Evidently, she didn't have enough faith in Lyain Kepper's ability to defeat opponents by maintaining his distance from them. To be honest, Ves thought the same way.

Once they made this decision, they began to formulate the overall concept of their competition mech. They referenced the rules and conditions that they needed to abide by in order to make sure their work remained valid.

"Lyain, you can take part in the discussion if you want." Ketis told their mech pilot. "You will be piloting our mech in battle, so you need to be comfortable with what we are trying to make. Do you have any objections to our current vision?"

"Uhm, it's all good. You just continue your discussion."

Lyain Kepper didn't understand any of the discussion that became too technical or filled with jargon. He was only able to understand the gist of the decisions being made about his competition mech.

Even if he had an opinion, he kept it to himself. He was too much in awe of Ketis to contradict her. He completely trusted her decisions as if she was a Master Mech Designer.

This was not necessarily bad. A mech design tournament centered around the decisions made by the mech designers. It was their choice whether to accommodate a mech pilot or force him to adjust to their will.

In any case, mech pilots were accustomed to adapting to different mechs. Most of them never had an opportunity to pilot a custom mech.

It took a few hours for Ves and Ketis to start off with a basic mech concept and end up with a fairly complete and detailed draft design.

What was interesting about their cooperation was that neither of them took the lead. They worked as equal collaborators who were both able to pull their weight in this project.

The two of them had already worked together in enough prior design projects that they didn't experience any of the friction exhibited by the other mech designer teams.

[Team Larkinson is quite a sight to behold. As a fellow mech designer, I recognize the great amount of trust and familiarity they hold towards each other. Their cooperation is not that much worse between blood relatives. Although their design work isn't too

refined, there is enough raw ability there that makes me hopeful about their mech design.]

[Team Larkinson may be the ones to beat in the Wild Brawl Bowl, but the competition isn't doing too shabby either. Team Voiken and Team Destiny display an even greater degree of teamwork. The latter is particularly a sight to behold. Their work truly shows that Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone both learned from the same Master Mech Designer.]

While most duos expended a significant amount of time to discuss and figure out how to combine their respective specialties, Team Destiny just went straight ahead without slowing down.

The two might not be as close to each other as actual relatives, but they understood each other's professional qualities to a great degree.

The result was that they truly progressed a lot faster, as many knowledgeable people already expected.

[If Team Destiny goes on like this, their mech will truly reach the quality of one that is designed in six days!]

[I wouldn't celebrate too soon if I were you. Being faster is not necessarily a winning combination. The lack of diversity in Miss Pellier and Miss Coslone's design philosophies will severely limit the power expression of their mech. I anticipate that their work will be considerably less rounded at the end of the design phase. Whether that will drag down their chances in the fighting phase of the Wild Brawl Bowl is still in question, but I would not be surprised if their mech is taken down due to a pronounced weakness that a different combination of Journeymen would have avoided.]

Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone entered the tournament knowing that their combination came at a disadvantage. They were still serious about winning so they invested all of their focus on their work and nothing else. They wanted to prove all of the doubters wrong and show that their similar design philosophies were strong enough to overcome all opposition!

Not even a fancy swordmaster and the patriarch of a clan could dampen their confidence!

"Let's show these Wild Fighters the power of our Master's design philosophy." Janassa Pellier grinned.

"Just because we come from the galactic rim doesn't mean that we're weak!" Tifi Coslone echoed.

*Chapter 3498: A Fitting Design Spirit*

All 32 mech designer pairs worked intensely to design and fabricate a mech in 3 days.

To Ves, the Wild Brawl Bowl's design phase was almost like a vacation. Though he still experienced considerable pressure, it was practically a massage compared to the pressure he endured when he competed in the High Tide Tournament.

The biggest complication was that he needed to work together with another mech designer.

Though Ketis was a highly-regarded swordmaster in the personal combat community, she was not a stellar mech designer.

If anyone only looked at her meager design accomplishments, she was by far the worst Journeyman in the competition!

Every other mech designer published a lot more mech designs and participated in many more design duels or design tournaments. Their knowledge bases were often broader and more comprehensive.

To be fair, Ketis was also a lot younger than the majority of the competitors. This was one of the reasons why she was able to gain the services of a mech pilot as good as Lyain Kepper.

When Team Larkinson began to design their mech in earnest, they chose to focus on realizing a fairly restrained machine.

It was quite difficult to design a more adventurous mech this time. Despite the longer time limit, the availability of materials and component designs were not as good as those in the High Tide Tournament.

Ves understood that the Wild Fighter Association wanted the mech designers to win by relying on their ability to design a solid fighter mech.

The restrictive conditions left less room for gimmicks and solutions derived from high technology. Hardly any mech designer would be able to develop a mech that was absolutely superior to any other machine in the tournament.

In theory, every competition mech should be able to defeat any other machine in the tournament. The materials and component designs were simpler and easier to work with, but that also meant that it was hard to leverage too much power from them. Even the most ingenious mech designer could only accomplish so much when he could only make use of low-grade exotics at most.

Ves could already imagine the kind of mechs that would result from everyone's efforts. The relatively low-budget competition mechs they would produce at the end would probably resemble third-class mechs in many ways.

As someone who used to be a third-class mech designer himself, he only needed a short moment of adjustment to get back in the mindset of someone who had to design a mech under so many constraints.

Third-class mech designers were a lot more basic and less varied because there simply wasn't enough room for advanced solutions.

While the circumstances for the Wild Brawl Bowl diverged in numerous ways, the similarities were still great. This was why Ves favored a more conservative approach that focused on designing a mech with good basic parameters and enough reliability to remain in peak condition for half-a-dozen mech duels.

Of course, that wasn't enough to win the tournament. Many other design teams were probably designing their mechs along the same lines.

What would truly distinguish the competition mechs from each other were the specialties that the mech designers incorporated in their design.

Ves and Ketis both emphasized their respective specialties from the beginning of the design phase.

Their swordsman mech was not only going to be alive, but also put together in a way that also amplified Lyain Kepper's swordsmanship!

Ves didn't think his contributions would be able to exceed that of Ketis this time. Though he could still add a couple of useful functions related to living mechs to his work, his design partner was the definite authority when it came to swordsman mechs in the clan!

That didn't mean he was content to play second fiddle, though.

Based on his performance in the High Tide Tournament, Ves was still able to affect the success of his competition mech by emphasizing the short-term advantages of his design philosophy.

He had two ways to do that. The first one was to focus on improving the man-machine relationship. This was fairly standard for Ves, but what was different from last time was that he knew the mech pilot in advance.

This made his job a lot easier this time. Together with adopting some of Gloriana's design methods, he was able to align the technical and spiritual design of his competition much more closely to its user this time!

"The mech you'll be piloting in the next phase of this tournament will be a lot more different from what you are accustomed to." Ves already began to explain his distinctive work to Lyain. "It will be hard for me to explain all of the nuances about my living mechs without letting you have a chance to pilot them first, but you'll just have to take my word for it. Some of what I'll say will be hard for you to believe, but know that millions of mech pilots have already sworn by my products."

Ketis added her support for her mentor. "Ves doesn't lie when it comes to his work. I know he'll say stuff that will make you think he's gone mad, but living mechs are truly special."

It was quite helpful for Ves to explain the essence of his work and how it affected the interfacing experience to the mech pilot in advance.

Previously, Ves only met up with his mech pilot after he designed his mech. The highly compressed timetable hardly left any time for him to explain the qualities of a living mech to Gregory Haloscar before the pilot had to fight his first match.

Although Gregory eventually managed to get into tune with the Pontifical Lance and its design spirit, that was only after he lost one match and barely managed to overcome the last and most difficult opponent in the High Tide Tournament.

With all of that hardship in mind, Ves was determined to lower the learning curve and prep Lyain Kepper as much as possible!

It was extremely helpful for Lyain to witness the process of designing his swordsman mech from the ground up. Already he had built up a good idea of what he was about to pilot in a couple of days.

Hopefully, all of this exposure would make Lyain so prepared that he would immediately be able to leverage most of the qualities of his swordsman mech at the start of his first match!

Ves cared a lot about his mech pilot starting off on a stronger footing this time because there was no safety cushion in the fighting phase.

If Lyain Kepper failed to win his first match due to lack of adaptation, then Team Larkinson would immediately have to say goodbye to their tournament run!

"We can't lose the first match like I did in the last tournament." Ves insisted. "This time, we can do better!"

He was already confident that the other mech designer teams were trying to accommodate their chosen mech pilots in their own ways. It would be stupid for him to ignore this factor.

At the same time he was trying to deepen the man-machine relationship between Lyain and his swordsman mech, Ves also worked towards leveraging a design spirit in his work.

He didn't intend to rely on Ylvaine this time. Prediction and forewarning were less useful in intensive melee matches. Even if the mech pilot received a hint, the pace of a fight was so fast that a mech was too slow to make the right response!

When Ves considered the other design spirits at his disposal, he lamented once again that his collection was not diverse enough. He lacked a strong offensive choice that was fit to be paired with his upcoming swordsman mech.

Zeigra would have been a great choice if Ketis did not insist in designing a mech that also emphasized control. She wanted Mr. Kepper to be in full control over the mech at all times. This was the key to performing deliberate sword moves and techniques.

It was a lot harder for a mech pilot to channel powerful sword moves when he was impaired!

If Mr. Kepper was a more emotional and enthusiastic mech pilot, then it might be more viable for Ves to employ Zeigra.

The mech pilot's rookie days were long past, though. He had already reached an age where he had to think more about having kids and accepting an easier assignment.

While Ves was able to sense that Lyain Kepper still managed to maintain his fire, the mech pilot probably relied more on brain rather than brawn in order to defeat his opponents.

This considerably limited the design spirits that Ves could call upon. There were too many viable choices even after Ves ruled out the usual suspects such as the Superior Mother.

"Damn, I really need to expand my collection when I get back to my ship." He muttered under his breath.

He already collected three impressive spiritual fragments from a number of masterwork mechs. He had refrained from creating any new design spirits because he didn't want to work on something so sensitive in one of the strongholds of the Big Two.

Ketis already had an opinion about this matter.

"Go for Bravo."

"What?"

"You heard me." She said. "I know you don't like Bravo very much, but he is truly what Lyain needs."

"But..."

"It doesn't matter if Bravo isn't as strong. In fact, I prefer it that way. A swordsman mech pilot like Mr. Kepper shouldn't rely too much on external assistance. He must achieve victory in the arena by relying on his mech and his skills. Everything else shouldn't get in the way of that. Bravo is just right in that aspect."

Ves still found it difficult to accept her proposal. "Bravo doesn't have a lot of extra qualities compared to some of the alternatives. The glow of the mech won't do much aside from giving Lyain a shot of manly courage."

"That's already sufficient. Don't forget that I am contributing to the mech as well. I'll give Lyain plenty to think about when my work takes effect."

In the end, he followed her lead. Bravo might not be a powerful or versatile design spirit, but he was good morale and confidence booster to certain mech pilots.

Lyain Kepper was a lot different from Vincent Ricklin, though. Ves was afraid that Bravo's exaggerated persona might rub the mech pilot the wrong way.

He had a potential solution for that, though. He quickly stopped by the superfab in order to fabricate a rudimentary statuette based on Bravo.

"What's this, sir?"

"This is a representation of what you might encounter in your mech. I suggest you familiarize yourself and find a way to get along with it. The more comfortable you are in its presence, the more you'll be able to sync with your upcoming mech."

The mech pilot didn't fully understand what Ves was talking about, but he did what he was told.

Lyain slowly attempted to build up a rapport with Bravo through the little totem. Even if his progress was slow and halting, he still had several days to develop a more intimate relationship with the design spirit.

The more Lyain became comfortable with the statuette, the more Ves began to accept Ketis' judgment.

While the mech pilot did not need any help when it came to enhancing his masculinity, Bravo was able to stimulate his competitive drive!

Not only did Lyain become more eager than ever to win the upcoming matches, he also rekindled his love for swordsmanship. He spontaneously pulled out his chainsword and began to practice his moves again.

Ves found out that he was wrong about Bravo. There was more to the masculine design spirit than he thought. Just because Vincent was its greatest influence didn't mean that the entity was just as useless!

He even became more eager to align his mech design with Bravo! Perhaps he might be able to deliver a surprising result!

#### *Chapter 3499: Born to be Wild*

While the design phase plodded on, an audience of millions of spectators leisurely observed the Journeymen developing their competition mechs step-by-step down below.

A lot more people had bought tickets than the Wild Fighter Association initially expected due to the participation of a swordmaster as one of the competing designers.

Though Ketis hadn't displayed anything exciting aside from her brief spar with Lyain Kepper, even this little bout already exposed a lot about her personal combat ability!

There were lots of soldiers, martial artists and bloodsport fighters in the stands. Each of them possessed the vision to spot a strong warrior, and the way that Ketis easily managed to keep a trained mech pilot and warrior under her complete control was a masterful feat!

This made the audience even more convinced that her mech might become a special machine. Though there was little empirical proof that being good at fighting translated into designing a much more powerful mech, all of these fighters who did not know anything about engineering had temporarily turned into ardent mech design enthusiasts!

In fact, it did not matter if their technical knowledge was too shallow to understand the nuances of mech design. The generous array of expert commentators clarified everything for the spectators so nobody would get lost after looking at all of the complicated math and engineering diagrams.

[Team Larkinson is still taking a restrained approach towards their competition mech. There are hardly any exciting elements in their mech design aside from the fact that it is wielding a chainsword. What are they relying on to win the matches in the fighting stage? If they want to become the champions, then their swordsman mech needs to win five successive rounds.]

[Neither Ves nor Ketis Larkinson possess conventional specialties. We've already said enough about Patriarch Ves Larkinson's living mechs in our earlier discussions, but

Miss Ketis Larkinson's specialty is still not well-understood. However, do remember that she is credited with participating in the design of several mechs, including expert mechs. You can find footage of them in battle on the galactic net. Although it is not clear how much Miss Ketis has contributed to the power of an expert mech such as the First Sword, if this machine is any indication, she should definitely have more in store for us all. The technical diagrams don't show everything. Even if they do, we might not fully understand her ingenuity until later.]

There was only so much the commentators could talk about the favorites of the tournament. Since Team Larkinson's mech design didn't contain a lot of interesting clues, they delved into the history of Ves and Ketis as well as the trajectory of the Larkinson Clan.

This was a much more interesting topic to the audience! A large number of spectators became enthralled as they listened to a narration of some of the dangerous and dramatic events that the Larkinsons got caught up in over the years.

The Wild Fighters became increasingly more interested in the Larkinson Clan as they heard how it got caught up in a battle against an illegal warship and fought against the militaries of several second-rate states!

Some even began to inquire whether it was possible for them to work for this exciting clan!

[It's clear that neither Patriarch Ves Larkinson nor his protege Miss Ketis Larkinson are stereotypical mech designers. Both of them have handled themselves in fights. This should give them a greater understanding of the rigors that mech pilots have to go through when they sortie with their machines. I am looking forward to seeing if we can notice this influence when we compare their finished mech to the works of other mech designer teams.]

The expectations that people held towards Team Larkinson kept growing more exaggerated due to all of this talk. While this gave the Larkinson Clan a lot of publicity, it could easily backfire in the wrong circumstances.

The uncertainty and lack of clues of how Team Larkinson's mech would actually turn out fueled a lot of speculation. Betting platforms gained a lot of new customers and analysts who weren't involved in the Wild Brawl Bowl started to publish their expert commentaries.

The Larkinsons continued to gain more prominence in the regional community. It was hard for people not to notice all of the Larkinsons showing up in different tournaments as of late.

Though not every member of the Larkinson Clan performed well, there were already a couple of standouts that compelled people to take the Larkinsons more seriously.

Director Thaprim Kadar was one of them. He learned about the Larkinsons a little earlier, but he was already impressed with their violent but successful track record. The Larkinson Clan was a scrappy young organization with a lot of promise if they managed to live through their vulnerable period.

With that in mind, he began to make slight overtures to one of its prominent members.

"Your Larkinson Clan has several sub-populations that would fit right in our organization." The older man said. "We could offer a lot to you as well. While we Wild Fighters aren't the top dogs in the Red Ocean, we are well-connected and can call upon many favors. If you join our association, we would be honored to integrate you into our community in the Red Ocean. Are you interested in discussing this matter further?"

Venerable Dise directed most of her attention to Ketis down below. She did not exhibit that much interest in Director Kadar's overture.

"I am not the right Larkinson to talk about this. I don't have the right to make decisions for my clan. There are other individuals in our clan who you should talk to instead. You can speak to our patriarch who is currently there or make contact with Foreign Minister Shederin Purnesse."

The regional director scoffed. "I'm a Wild Fighter. I hate talking to politicians. They only know how to make promises that they will do their best to renege at the first possible opportunity. I would rather speak plainly to an honorable expert pilot such as yourself."

"I am a soldier. You can talk to me, but that doesn't mean I am obliged to reciprocate."

"I understand, but surely you and your fellow Swordmaidens must have a voice in your clan. Our Wild Fighter Association is not a sovereign organization that seeks to build an empire. It is an interest group that stands up for people like you. Becoming a part of our member roles will give you instant access to our extensive contacts, and you don't even have to give up your current loyalties to do so. You hardly have to pay any price to enter our dynamic community."

Venerable Dise directed a pointed glance at Director Kadar. She even utilized a portion of her will to convey her displeasure.

"There is always a price. Joining your camp means excluding ourselves from other organizations and powers. It also means taking a side in a rivalry that the Larkinson Clan shouldn't have a stake in. It means getting pulled into a vortex that isn't of interest to us in the first place. I cannot say what our clan leaders will decide, but as far as I'm concerned we have grown tired of being treated as pawns."

She had a lot of personal experience with that. The Swordmaidens had long acted as a cat's paw for another power and never got rewarded for all of their sacrifices.

One of the reasons why she and her fellow sisters were content in the Larkinson Clan was because its leaders tried to keep it independent. After a long time of working for others, it was refreshing for the Swordmaidens to answer to no one but themselves. Dise did not want to go back to becoming the instrument of other interests.

Seeing that Director Kadar had pushed a bit too far, the man quickly pedaled back.

"Ah, my apologies. I am accustomed to meeting with guests who are already quite eager to become a part of our growing circle."

"It is of no concern." Dise said as she relaxed her posture. "As far as I know, while our Larkinson Clan is mainly invested in the Golden Skull Alliance that we have founded, we are still open to friendly exchanges."

"That is good to hear." The director looked down at the tournament participants again. "Our representatives might get in touch with your clan after we have concluded our festival. We have already heard much about the mechs of the Living Mech Corporation. If your two Journeymen are able to develop a swordsman mech that hits the right notes to our members, we may be interested in commissioning a mech for us. We might even be open to obtaining the rights to produce and sell your mechs to our members."

Though Venerable Dise did not have power to discuss such major issues, even she couldn't help but feel tempted by this offer. She was vaguely aware that the LMC was desperate to get its footing in the Red Ocean's mech market.

These days, the Larkinson Clan was buying up a lot of expensive and frankly overpriced toys. The clan's mech legions such as the Swordmaidens truly needed all of the advanced tech in order to catch up to the higher standards of the Red Ocean, but it seemed there was never enough money to get everything on their wishlist.

"I think that our patriarch would be very happy to hold this discussion." She said frankly. "Just keep in mind that any commitment we make will take a while for us to fulfill."

"I expect nothing less. It always takes time to design a good mech. We have access to plenty of good mech models. We are not in an urgent need for a replacement for our current stock. What we are rather interested in is a mech that can truly embody what the Wild Fighters are all about. We want to pilot a mech that can make us fight like animals rather than civilized people."

Venerable Dise looked questioningly at Director Kadar. "I imagine that an organization as large and prosperous as yours has cultivated plenty of relationships with mech designers, including Seniors and Masters. Have they not been able to fulfill your demands?"

"They have. We are not unhappy with the mechs that they have painstakingly developed with our input. It is just that when I read about your clan's mechs from

different sources, I get the impression that our mechs lack a crucial ingredient that can truly unlock the beasts caged within our hearts. We aren't interested in fighting in neat formations and straight formations. We want to pounce on our enemies like wolves! We believe that true combat should be as simple and unstrained as possible. We humans are born to be wild!"

If Director Kadar thought that these ideals would appeal to a Swordmaiden like Venerable Dise, then he was wrong.

The Swordmaidens were ferocious but disciplined. Control was just as important as bloodlust to them. Too many of their fellow sisters would just get killed if they adopted the ideology of the Wild Fighters.

That said, if the members of this club wanted to devolve into beasts in battle, then that was their business.

"I will pass this on to the clan." Venerable Dise said. "I'm sure the folk over there will be interested in holding preliminary discussions about cooperation. That said, the final decision rests with our patriarch. He is not only our highest decision maker, but also our best mech designer. Nothing will happen if your proposal doesn't gain his support."

She was sure that Ves would drive a hard bargain if the Wild Fighter Association expressed enough desire.

However, the Wild Fighters would only become desperate for living mechs if Ves and Ketis managed to wow the entire crowd with their work.

Though it was still far too early to determine whether Team Larkinson was capable of meeting everyone's expectations, Venerable Dise never held any doubts about the Larkinson duo.

She was the pilot of the First Sword... She experienced first-hand what wonders Ves and Ketis could produce.

#### *Chapter 3500: Light a Fire*

When Ketis proposed Bravo as the design spirit for their current mech design, Ves initially thought she was joking.

Then he thought she wanted to minimize the influence of a design spirit on their work as much as possible.

Now, he began to see that his assumptions or rather prejudices about Bravo were mostly inaccurate.

He still recalled the process of creating this spiritual product for a custom mech called the Adonis Colossus a long time ago. He just wanted to form a macho design spirit that fully complimented a macho mech.

Of course, Ves hadn't been entirely earnest when he brought Bravo into existence. He not only implanted his own exaggerated ideas about masculinity in Bravo's design, but also threw in Gloriana's notions about 'men' into the mix!

For a long time, Ves labeled Bravo as a vainglorious design spirit that only had a limited purpose. While he entertained several ideas on integrating him into several possible mech designs, he had yet to realize any of them up until this point.

Now that he finally made use of Bravo in earnest, he found that there was a surprising amount of depth to the design spirit.

Where did all of these facets come from? Ves did not remember putting in all of these extra dimensions in one of his simpler design spirits.

"Did Bravo develop like this with the help of his connection to Vincent Ricklin?" He briefly wondered.

That was absurd! Vincent was a dunce as far as he could tell. Even if the man managed to become an expert candidate, he was still an idiot who obsessed way too much about protecting his manhood than his clan!

Ves suspected that he was missing a part of the story here. Either he put a lot more into Bravo's creation than he thought or the design spirit went through a unique experience that caused it to grow in an unexpected direction.

Regardless, Ves was pleasantly surprised by the unexpected positive traits that Bravo brought to the table.

What impressed him the most was the more benign form of competitive drive that Bravo was able to evoke.

"Now that I think about it, Bravo is always competitive by nature."

The whole point about emphasizing masculinity was to prove one's superiority over other peers. Contests just happened to be all about that. There was no better design spirit than Bravo when it came to amping up the need to perform better than any other competitor!

Though Ves was able to tell that Bravo also possessed all of its original traits that he was not enamored with, it was easy enough to manipulate how the entity was expressed in a mech design.

A mech design could channel a design spirit in its entirety or make use of a filter to block out certain elements.

Ves had already implemented this solution in three out of four of his Four Aspects of Lufa.

The Aspect of Tranquility conveyed Lufa's glow in its entirety while the Aspects of Healing, Rationality and Transcendence all channeled the angelic design spirit's glow through different filters.

This was how Ves was able to come up with three extra substantially-different glows from the same design spirit!

Though Ves saw no reason to make heavy use of this new capability in his previous mech designs, this time was different.

Bravo might possess a few more favorable traits than expected but he was still a mixed bag at best. Yet as long as he had redeeming factors, Ves could still work with that. He just had to block the way of Bravo's less desirable traits so that only his virtues came through.

As the hours went by, the effect this made on the mech design became increasingly more obvious.

Though most of the audience still didn't notice anything, Ves and Ketis could already feel that Bravo was exerting a significantly positive influence on the mech.

Though Bravo still didn't instill any special abilities such as Ylvaine's prediction abilities, neither of the two mech designers minded that. Just the way that this influence was able to stimulate the desire to win to any mech pilot was already a valuable ability in itself!

The addition of Bravo helped shape and strengthen the three main themes of their swordsman mech design.

The first theme revolved around swordsmanship. Ketis was mainly in charge of this aspect as she had extensively analyzed and deconstructed Lyain Kepper's sword style.

She not only gave Lyain tips on how to fix his flaws and bad habits, she also taught him a couple of new techniques. The mech pilot was avidly training them even now while his mech was slowly coming together.

"Normally, a swordsman who isn't training in an existing sword style should be relying on his own efforts to develop his own fighting approach." She explained to Ves. "That is a process that can take years or decades, though. We don't have the time to wait until Lyain has found his stride. We can quickly boost his combat effectiveness by guiding his swordsmanship."

Different from the other mech designers taking part in the Wild Brawl Bowl, Ketis was a much better warrior than the mech pilots!

This granted her a massive advantage. She was not only able to instruct Team Larkinson's mech pilot as if she was his drill instructor, she also had the opportunity to shape and configure her swordsman mech to optimize its ability to fight according to a specific sword style!

Ketis had already made a lot of profound design choices that Ves would never think about. He simply couldn't come close to her deep and profound understanding of swordsmanship and how it translated to mech combat. Not even going on a hundred Mastery experiences would change that because he wasn't a professional fighter!

Other people in the audience were able to detect her brilliance in this area as well as the mech design became more and more defined. The more details she filled in, the more that other mech designers, particularly those who specialized in melee mechs, recognized the difficulty of reaching her level!

[The configuration that Miss Ketis is trying to implement in her mech design is anything but standard. Although it might look no different from other swordsman mech designs, if you take note of a couple of non-standard design parameters such as the lengths of the limbs and the center of mass of the mech frame, you can see that they diverge substantially from the norm. It is extremely risky to diverge from the standard norms for these parameters because any radical changes can completely disrupt the mech pilot's fighting rhythm. Imagine what it would be like to dance with legs that are twice as long as normal.]

[Is this not standard treatment for every custom mech? What makes this instance of personalization different?]

[While it is true that any mech designer can tweak these far-reaching variables to a degree in order to align a mech more closely to a mech design, think about who has to make the decision. Obviously, the mech pilot himself cannot randomly come up and say that he wants the right arm to be 20 percent longer. He may be an excellent fighter, but he understands nothing about the science and engineering behind mechs. That job is left to the mech designer, but then you have the opposite problem. What does a mech designer know about fighting?]

[Hasn't there ever been mech pilots who have studied mech design? Surely there must be more mech designers who are champion-level fighters.]

[There are geniuses among mech pilots who are probably able to school many Novice and Apprentice Mech Designers, but it is hard to get any further in both careers. The same goes for mech designers who have trained in martial arts. High-ranking mech designers cannot invest all of their energies in other occupations. This is why Miss Ketis Larkinson is such an anomaly and why she is able to make her swordsman mech so...

sublime. Excuse me for employing such a vague word, but it is difficult to describe the extent to which she is shaping her swordsman mech's combat performance by making all of these changes.]

As time continued to pass, more and more mech designers understood how the work of Team Larkinson truly embodied a specific sword style. Lyain Kepper would probably never be able to pilot a mech that was more complementary to his fighting style than this upcoming machine!

When most of the details became clear, the onlooking mech designers even figured out how the swordsman mech was supposed to fight.

[Team Larkinson's swordsman mech is filled with power. Its mass and physical force exertion is higher than usual, and its defense is quite respectable.]

[That sounds interesting, but do note that these advantages come at the detriment of speed. Swordsman mechs tend to be fairly fast and agile in their movements, and that is for a good reason. They are mechs that rely much more on skill expression to defeat an opponent. It is unusual for them to be designed in a way that puts more emphasis on raw strength rather than technique.]

[What does that mean, exactly?]

[A swordsman mech that is physically powerful but lacking in mobility is ordinarily assigned to mech pilots of lesser skill. They don't need to be good. They just have to be good enough to entangle an enemy mech.]

[You're describing cannon fodder.]

[Exactly. Isn't it interesting that a swordmaster such as Ketis decided to take this route despite all of the downsides and stigma surrounding this configuration?]

[Maybe she has a greater plan in mind. What if Mr. Kepper, their chosen mech pilot, can actually fight better with a slower but more powerful mech?]

[I personally find that hard to accept, but who am I to naysay a swordmaster? We shall see in another day whether Swordmaster Ketis has misjudged.]

Though even Ves had doubts at times, he did his best to press them down. Ketis was a much greater authority on swordsman mechs than him, and he trusted her to make the right decisions.

He helped as much as possible to orient the mech design around its deliberate swordsmanship. The mech might not be fast, but as long as it was controlled by a clever and skilled mech pilot, it could still outfight plenty of melee mechs!

Orienting the mech design around this theme caused its character to become more solid and stable. Perhaps too solid and stable. A swordsman who was completely calm and deliberate in his thoughts might be able to outwit an opponent, but there were times when heated passion could play a crucial role in defeating a stronger opponent!

This was where the second theme came in. The competitive drive that derived from Bravo imparted the mech design with a fire that could easily run hot as a fight grew more intense!

Ves had programmed and fine-tuned the glow and character of the swordsman mech to induce a strong desire to win and defeat the opponent.

Perhaps he was going too far with this again, but he couldn't afford to hold back and risk a loss. He was aiming for the top prize this time and would not be satisfied unless he was able to come home with a fleet carrier in his possession this time!

With such high stakes, Ves had no qualms of manipulating Lyain Kepper personality so that he would fight harder and more vigorously than usual. A highly-motivated mech pilot who desired to win at all costs was a powerful advantage in any tournament, and Ves would be a fool to miss this chance to produce one through artificial means!

Ves initially thought that Deliberate Swordsmanship and Competitive Drive were the only two themes that mattered for their swordsman mech. He couldn't really think of adding a third theme to the mech design considering that the aforementioned concepts already covered the key advantages of his work.

Ketis was not quite satisfied, though. She suggested that they expand the scope of their mech design and implement a third theme.

"What is our mech missing?"

"That... depends." Ketis said in a vague manner. She gestured towards the diagram showing the chainsword design... "There is still room to add something special to the main weapon of our swordsman mech."