

Chapter 581 Underground Arena

Huge crowds of humans from every corner of the Komodo Star Sector occupied the seats of the underground arena. Right now, over eighty percent of the seats of the boisterous fighting venue was filled. No matter where anyone bumped into, they would sit next to a Reinaldan or a tourist.

The chaotic crowd cheered their favorite athletes on as the brutal battle in the center entered a heated phase. The frames of both mechs started to show cracks. Some portions broke off entirely, exposing deadly weak points that could lead to instant defeat if struck.

The underground mech athletes pulled back some of their aggression at that point. Both mechs slowed down their pace, and the battle entered a strategic phase where both sides carefully tried to feint and fool their opponents.

Ves and the group of Vandals sat at a random stretch of empty seats. It took a bit of jostling and pushing to get others to make some room for themselves, but their air of savagery and intimidation easily frightened the tourists.

"So this is an underground arena?" Ves questioned. "Besides the aggressive fighting style, I don't see the difference yet."

"That's because both of the athletes on the stage are pussies." Trian Earls explained. Their resident mech pilot nodded contemptuously at the mechs trying to probe each other. The lack of excitement caused some of the audience members to boo. "Those mech pilots have skill, but they don't have the heart. Besides executing their moves, they have no clue what to do. They're probably thrill seekers looking to have some fun while they're visiting Harkensen."

"You mean anyone can go up on stage and compete?"

"It wouldn't be an underground arena otherwise." The Vandal mech pilot grinned. "Unlike the sanctioned mech games, there are no rules involved with the underground arena. Mech pilots don't have to go through a strict selection process and undergo special training. Neither do they need to set up an organization to manage their team. People come and go whenever they want. They might be a pirate one day, an underground duelist the next, then back to a pirate after they have their fill."

"So the underground arena is a place for mech pilots to vent?"

"Exactly. As long as your skill level and ability isn't too shabby, the arena operators will give you a chance. The only thing you need to keep in mind is that you have to bear all the damages yourself. You need to bring your own mech and be responsible for your own life."

In order to constantly attract new competitors, the underground arena also rewards them with a cut of the earnings. Every day, the arena earned a good amount of money in ticket sales, but this was not sufficient to keep up with the cost of running the arena.

The true money lay in gambling.

"Look at the people around you." Trian jerked his head towards the audience members. Occasionally, they raised their comm and entered a sum. "They're all connected to the arena's internal network. As long as you want, you can bet any sum of credits, sovies, marks or whatever."

Ves opened up his own comm and connected to the internal network. He immediately encountered a sophisticated gambling interface that allowed him to make a bet on the five matches ahead. Betting on the current match was not allowed unless he paid for a VIP ticket, and even then it came with so many fees that even if he won the bet, he would hardly gain anything.

"I see. Any mech pilot can compete and become rich overnight as long as they draw lots of bets to themselves. Probably the only way for mech pilots to earn more is to make a name for yourself. Once you become a famous athlete, you'll have thousands betting on your name."

The ones fumbling around on stage only comprised of the lowest tier of underground duelists. Perhaps spurred on by the many boos, the mech duelists heated up their battle. One of them finally made a mistake and left their leg vulnerable. This allowed their opponent to jab at it with their weapon, causing the leg to fail completely.

The stricken mech lost its balance, and that proved fatal as its opponent hacked off the leg and caused the damaged mech to collapse. The winner slammed its leg against the body of the fallen mech and took on a winning pose, causing the crowd to regain their cheer.

"No fatality this time." Ves said.

Underground mech athletes cherished their lives as well. Ves investigated their survival rate after finding out that his cousin Raella had joined their ranks. Though killings weren't prohibited in the underground arena, he felt relieved that mech pilots didn't kill each other regularly.

The nature of killings in the underground dueling scene was complex. Some people believed that the threat of death was necessary to provide the ultimate thrill to both the fighters and the audience members. The people who felt drawn to the underground arenas explicitly rejected the tradition-heavy, rule-bound mech games that played out in the open.

The hardcore mech enthusiasts thought that the current incarnation of the mech games had gone overboard in terms of prioritizing safety. The current makeup of the rules had turned what used to be a battle with people's lives on the line to a broadcast-friendly sporting occasion.

As new mechs poured into the dueling grounds, Ves witnessed many different mechs battling it out with each other. The mechs varied from cheap light mechs to premium aerial rifleman mechs. Both sides hit each other with a lot more daring than at the mech games.

Deaths hadn't fallen yet, but the mech pilots hadn't shied away at aiming their attacks on their opponent's cockpits. This was a big taboo in legal mech duels, but here it was used as a viable tactic to put pressure on the opponent.

The underground duelists usually admitted defeat before their opponents managed to succeed in puncturing their cockpits. If they lacked the time to do so, they immediately ejected from their mechs.

Ves therefore surmised that unless an underground duelist was stupid, they wouldn't easily die on the dueling grounds.

"I can see the appeal now, in a way." He nodded. "Competing here is the ultimate way to polish your ability to pilot mechs. The real threat of death is an incredible stimulant to the underground mech athletes. It's realer than simulation battles and you don't have to go through the trouble of finding a worthy fight in the wild."

Life and death was in the mech athlete's hands. They bore all the responsibility to themselves. To some, this was an incredibly scary burden. To others, they craved nothing more than to reach new heights by putting their own lives at stake.

Ves figured that mech pilots deep in debt might resort to competing in the underground arenas to climb out of their hopeless situation. As long as they succeeded in winning a couple of matches, they could easily pay back old debts and start anew.

His spiritual sense tasted the desperation in some of the mech pilots that competed on the stage. The flavors came mostly from the shabbier-looking

mechs. Ves figured they must be former members of disbanded outfits or survivors of a losing battle.

One battle happened to pit two of them in a single match.

The announcer gleefully introduced the competitors as they entered the killing field. "We've got some special duelists here for you tonight! On the west side is Broken Claw! He's a Reinaldan veteran that fought for several mercenary corps for over twenty years! Though he's encountered numerous disasters in his life, his ability to sustain his life is second-to-none!"

A worn-out medium bestial mech in the shape of a giant tiger stepped forth from the west gate. The mech was coated in blue marked with black tiger stripes. Besides its fearsome looking claws and jaws, the mech also featured weapons mounts to its side. Two kinetic weapon barrels extended out from the flanks, though one of them was broken.

"On the east side is Avid Serpent! An intrepid Vesian mech pilot, she deserted the Vesian Mech Legion and made a name for herself in Reinaldan space! Her medium axeman mech is the ultimate shield breaker, but will she be able to cope with Broken Claw's mobility?"

Speculation ran rife among the crowd. Even the group of Vandals that Ves was with started to discuss the merits of each mech pilot. They even opened their comms and prepared to bid on one of the two duelists on the field.

It was a custom in the underground arenas to use pseudonyms to refer to the participants. The real identities of many duelists was rather sensitive, so it was better for everyone if nobody knew their actual names. Both the mech pilots and underground arena operators abided by this custom.

This also made it harder to determine which mech pilot would be a good choice to bet upon. Unless they became a professional underground mech athlete like Raella, the crowd practically bet their money away at random.

"Broken Claw is a battle-tested veteran." Trian spoke. He obviously favored the pilot of the tiger mech over the axeman mech. "Even if he's a mercenary like the announcer has claimed, a twenty-year mercenary veteran that has mixed up in Reinaldan space has surely experienced a lot of chaos. I wouldn't be surprised if he joined an outfit that pretended to be pirates and raided Vesian space a few times."

"Who do you favor, Tiss?" Ves asked.

"Hmm, I think I'll put my money on Avid Serpent. She's a woman, and girls like us need to stick together."

Nolsen Feray chose to bet a thousand marks on Broken Claw, which was the biggest bet in their group so far. "Avid Serpent is absolutely not a simple mech pilot. You can tell from the marks of her mech that she's gone through hell and survived."

"Then why did you bet on Broken Claw?"

"Avid Serpent is restrained by her mech type. Between an axeman mech and a tiger mech, I would put my money on the latter anytime. Besides, Broken Claw's mech still has an intact ranged weapon. That will give him an immediate advantage."

Ves did not think the matchup would be so simple. He felt as if the underground arena organizers deliberately presented what appeared to be a lopsided matchup. The words they used painted a rosier picture for Broken Claw. As for Avid Serpent, they not only painted her with a dishonorable label of deserter, they also reminded the crowd that axeman mechs specialised in tearing down low-mobility knights.

He witnessed enough mech battles to know that mech types didn't dictate which mech would win. The quality of the mechs and the skill and disposition of the mech pilots also mattered a lot.

Thus, he used his own judgement to analyze the odds of winning.

He couldn't tell much about the mech pilots. At this distance and in the middle of a crowd of thousands, he could hardly distinguish the nuances of the man-machine connections in the middle. Probing their strength via spirituality wouldn't work.

He could only rely on his judgement as a mech designer.

"Broken Claw's tiger mech is a formidable machine, but it bears the sign of sloppy, jury-rigged repairs. You can see some discoloration on some of the portions of the frame. That's a strong sign that the mech is patchworked with inferior armor. Don't look at the bestial mech as if it's a strong machine. In truth, it is riddled with holes."

"What about Avid Serpent's mech?"

"Her axeman mech is in better shape, but her mech model is of an inferior grade. Its overall build is cheaper and the amount of strength it can exert is lower. However, the axeman mech is taller. Everyone knows that bestial mechs aren't very good at defending from attacks from above. I think her mech is nimble enough to dodge most attacks from Broken Claw."

Weighing the properties of the two mechs against each other, he chose to bet 500 marks on Avid Serpent. Of course, this amount of money hardly mattered to him, but he didn't have access to his main accounts right now. Besides, he was only placing a bet for fun.

"Let's see if my judgement is accurate."

Chapter 582 Humanoid vs Beas

As soon as the signal blared, Avid Serpent's axeman mech sprinted towards Broken Claw's tiger mech. The sand pit that made up the underground arena's soil provided some challenges to the running motions of both mechs. This slowed down the speed of any mechs that ran across the arena.

Avid Serpent appeared to be caught off-guard of her mech's unstable footing. She was forced to pull back on the throttle, giving her opponent a little more time to respond.

BOOM!

Broken Claw's only intact kinetic weapon mount shot out a solid slug that accurately impacted Avid Serpent's mech! Her axemen mech dodged at the last moment, causing the slug to hit its sides rather than its abdomen. The hard slug managed to dig a shallow groove in the sides of the mech. It went through several layers of armor plating!

"Give it up, girlie!" A Reinaldan-accented voice boomed from the tiger mech as it stepped back to put more distance between them. The voice went through a warbler that prevented the crowd from matching a name to the voice. "I've fought over fifty battles and survived! There's nothing you can do that can baffle me! I suggest you bow down before you damage your precious mech!"

The axeman mech didn't take it lying down and began to accelerate abruptly. Though its footing was a little sketchy, Avid Serpent appeared to be adjusting quickly.

One hand of her mech raised its axe to the air, as if it was ready to split the heavens and earth. While most of the crowd followed the rise of the axe, Avid Serpent's mech abruptly pulled out a holdout pistol from a hidden compartment from behind and shot at the tiger mech!

"Two can play this game!" The warbled voice of Avid Serpent arose from her own mech.

The underground arena deliberately amplified and spread out their dialogue to ensure the entire crowd followed their words.

Though the axeman mech wasn't a hero mech, its humanoid form and articulated arms didn't prevent it from wielding other weapons!

Laser beams scorched the tiger mech. Though the beams didn't possess a lot of power, Avid Serpent cleverly tried to hit the main sensors mounted on the face of the tiger mech. She was attempting to cripple its eyes!

Broken Claw growled in anger. "Now you've pissed me off!"

The tiger mech unleashed another kinetic projectile from its side barrel. Broken Claw's aim was remarkably good! However, Avid Serpent's reaction didn't fall behind, and she pulled her mech aside at the last moment.

This time, the axeman mech suffered a shallower graze.

Throughout its dash, the axeman mech continued to pelt the tiger mech with laser beams.

Though Broken Claw's mech only suffered superficial damage, the laser beams fell dangerously close to its vulnerable sensors. The possibility of letting his mech's eyes be blinded was a huge shame to him. The tiger mech stopped retreated but instead started to advance.

"They're going at it for real this time!"

At some time, Avid Serpent retrieved the pistol and focused instead on her footwork. The axeman mech gained enough proficiency in navigating through the sand that it even started displaying a special dodging technique.

The next kinetic projectile missed entirely!

There was no more time for Broken Claw to unleash another kinetic projectile. The two mechs almost reached each other. When they were just a few seconds from colliding against each other, they each unleashed their separate moves!

Broken Claw opted to make the best use of his mech's momentum, and threw his bestial mech into a leap while immediately putting both claws forward!

Perhaps anticipating her opponent's attack, Avid Serpent chose to make away. Her axeman mech dashed against the sand and pushed it to the left, putting the mech barely out of the trajectory of the tiger mech's immense bulk.

Her mech successfully dodged the first attack!

The axemen mech not only dodged the tiger mech's leap, it also chopped down with its axe, seeking to breach the spine of the tiger mech as it whooshed past its target!

The air seemed to woosh around the scarred but sturdy axe. Just before the blade of the axe managed to connect to the tiger mech, the latter mech's rear paws abruptly lashed out to the side with a handful of claws drawn out!

Broken Claw not only used the chest of the axeman mech as a springboard, he also left some awful claw marks behind!

The crowd went wild at that moment! Supporters of Avid Serpent groaned as her mech stumbled backwards from the attack.

"Come on, Avid Serpent! Show the old geezer what girls can do!"

"You almost got him! You can do better next time!"

Meanwhile, those who put their chips on Broken Claw boosted him on. "Claw her to death! Show these foreigners how Reinaldians fight!"

"Don't let Reinald down!"

The two mechs quickly readjusted and clashed again. This time, the tiger mech barely fended off the heavy axe chop from Avid Serpent. Though the axeman mech was a little lighter, its axe strikes shouldn't be belittled. A dozen more strikes like that would certainly break the tiger mech's claws!

"Worthy of a shield breaker! That axe chop is so powerful!"

"Humanoid mechs are better than animal mechs! Only the human form allows you to utilize all kinds of techniques!"

The difference between humanoid mechs and bestial mechs came to the fore. Humans knew humanoid mechs the best, and developed or adapted all kinds of exquisite techniques to best leverage its power.

It could be said that the complexity surrounding humanoid mechs was one of the principal reasons why mech training lasted so many years.

A badly trained pilot would be able to exert only ten to thirty percent of a humanoid mech's strength. Most of its power would likely be wasted by inefficient motions.

On the other hand, a well-trained pilot would easily be able to draw out a hundred percent of the strength of their mech. In addition, the amount of force it could exert could easily reach up to five-hundred percent if it leveraged its weight and momentum behind their attacks!

The battle between Broken Claw and Avid Serpent showcased two opposite approaches to putting more than a hundred percent power behind their attacks.

While humanoid attacks relied on their vertical posture, flexible limbs and sophisticated techniques to drive their attacks, bestial mechs focused on taking advantage of their natural forms. The latter type of mechs might not possess as much variety in their movements and attack motions, but each of its actions were marked with force and speed.

Broken Claw displayed an intimate familiarity with the strengths and limits of a bestial mech. His old tiger mech didn't attempt to fight the axeman mech upfront. Instead, it kept leaping or making flank attacks, preferring sideswipes

over all-in attacks. The mech's powerful movements granted by its four paws gave it a strong advantage in mobility.

"Is that the best a Vesian can do?!" Broken Claw taunted. "Deserters deserve to be buried in interstellar space!"

A roar emerged from Avid Serpent as she drove her mech to a more aggressive attack pattern. "You'll regret those words! A merc like you who never put his life on the line for his state will never understand what it's like to fight in the frontlines!"

The people in the stands cheered and whooped at the drama occurring on the fighting field. Everyone loved to put a story to the names. A colorful background increased their interest in the duelists!

"Tigers need to be put back in their cages!"

The axeman mech seemed to tire of the drive-by attacks of the tiger mech. It abruptly leapt forward, disrupting the tiger mech's timing. Both mechs leapt at each other in a haphazard manner, but the difference was that Avid Serpent's mech spun around its frame!

The extra rotation along with excellent control caused Avid Serpent's axe to dig into one of the tiger mech's paws! The axe pierced through the thin layers of armor and practically savaged the limb!

"Down goes a paw!"

The tiger mech hastily pulled back. Though one of its forepaws ceased to be capable of launching any further attacks, the mech's mobility hadn't been affected too much.

If a humanoid mech lost a leg, it immediately turned into an immobile and very vulnerable machine.

If a bestial mech lost one of their limbs, chances were it would still be able to maintain at least seventy percent of its maximum speed.

Broken Claw's experience showed as he easily adjusted his tiger mech's movement to avoid putting on weight on its damaged limb.

Supporters of Broken Claw cried out in shock or anger. A significant part of the crowd consisted of local Reinaldians. Though they didn't put their bets on their kinsmen all the time, they always acted on their biases to an extent. It wouldn't be surprising to find out that over two-thirds of all of the Reinaldians put their money on Broken Claw.

"Come on, Broken Claw! You can still do it! Smash that Vesian mech apart!"

Despite the damage it incurred, the tiger mech did not let up its aggression. In Broken Claw's perspective, to slow down now would likely widen the gap between his damaged mech and Avid Serpent's relatively intact mech. He desperately needed to equalize the state of their mechs.

Avid Serpent fell in the leeway in the next minute. Broken Claw continued to push his tiger mech onwards in a reckless flurry of attacks. Due to the crippling of one of its forepaws, Broken Claw quickly adjusted and launched more attacks from its rear limbs. Though these kinds of attacks were awkward to pull off, the extra power behind the rear limbs caused Avid Serpent to dread getting hit again. Her axemen mech's chest had lost a lot of integrity from the earlier attack.

"Are you a turtle or an axeman mech?! Show some guts!" Broken Claw yelled out.

"You'll be at the end of your ropes soon enough!" His opponent yelled back.

"Come and peel away my shell if you dare!"

It was obvious that Avid Serpent knew what her opponent was thinking about. She switched from offense to defense the moment Broken Claw sought to

accomplish a breakthrough. When Avid Serpent put her full mind on defense, the advantages of her humanoid mech came to the fore.

Her medium mech possessed enough leg power and overall mobility to dodge the simple attacks of the tiger mech. Though the latter machine's attacks possessed a lot of power, their inherent simplicity made it easy for Avid Serpent to anticipate the possible attacks. Bestial mechs also didn't lend themselves well to feints, so Broken Claw didn't possess too many means of opening up the axeman mech to a critical attack.

The aggressive brawl turned into a contest of patience and endurance. The crowd sat tight while the two mechs competed on which mech would last the most.

Arenas limited the amount of power a mech would be able to bring on the battlefield. This prevented boring battles of attrition that stretched out for hours at a time.

It seemed that underground arenas craved excitement, because the mechs showed signs of winding down after an intensive battle.

"As expected, the tiger mech is faltering." Ves said. "It's slim form and substantial armor doesn't leave much room inside its body. There's no way it can fit a lot of energy cells inside its frame."

Every mech only brought out a percentage of its maximum energy charge to the arena stage. A mech built for endurance would still be able to last a long time even with only twenty percent charge.

On the other hand, a mech built for peak performance might already start to shut down in ten minutes or less at twenty percent charge.

Both of the mechs on stage happened to fall in between. They didn't feature the best endurance, but they could slog it out over a campaign without requiring constant recharges.

The tiger mech critically faltered in its steps due to a sluggish response to one of its other limbs. A critical misstep occurred due to a lack of power being directed to its engine!

"You're finished!" Avid Serpent exulted and spun her mech into a spin that hit the tiger mech's head and split it apart.

The damage jolted the tiger mech, but Broken Claw wasn't resigned to defeat. "Even if I'm going down, I'm bringing you with me, Vesian!"

The tiger mech jerked forward and went all-in, trying to enveloping the entire frame of its opponents into a deadly hug.

However, contrary to her words, Avid Serpent did not follow up on her last attack. Instead, she delayed, causing the tiger mech to grab empty air. Just as the tiger mech landed on the ground, the axeman mech unleashed a simple chop against its back.

CRACK!

This time, the tiger mech's spine suffered crippling damage!

CRACK!

A second chop followed soon after that dug into the cavity opened up by the previous chop. This time, the power reactor suffered a substantial failure that caused it to stutter.

Avid Serpent was well in her rights to deliver another attack. Her axe raised above the air, and Ves could imagine where it would land. Broken Claw's cockpit was vulnerable.

The axe barely started flowing down when the tiger mech's back abruptly exploded. Broken Claw chose to eject!

"Winner, Avid Serpent!"

Chapter 583 Wicked Thieves

Avid Serpent refused to move at the end of the match. Even as a bunch of heavy lifter bots hauled Broken Claw's tiger mech away, the axeman mech remained on the arena grounds.

The audience members stilled as they sensed an unusual spectacle coming.

"Avid Serpent! Avid Serpent! Avid Serpent!" Her new fans repeated her pseudonym like a mantra.

After half a minute of inactivity, her mech finally raised its axe!

"Who said that I was a deserter?! Who said that I'm a coward who values her life over her loyalty? I am a Vesian! That remains true whether I'm part of the Mech Legion or not! I have fought and bled for my state for years, and I will do so once again!"

"Vesia! Vesia! Vesia!"

"Sod off, you Vesians! This is the Reinald Republic!"

"Kick her out already! I wanna see the next duel!"

Ves and the rest of the Vandals looked unsettled. They might have cheered if they shared the same nationality as Avid Serpent, but the fact of the matter was that she fought on behalf of the enemy. No matter how valiant she appeared right now, the enemy was the enemy.

"What do you think she's doing?" Ensign Tiss asked.

"No idea." He shrugged. "Is this even allowed?"

"There are no rules in the arena." Trian explained. Only a mech pilot understood other mech pilots best. "All types of desperate people compete in the underground arena. The operators love a good drama, and winning a match gives the mech pilot the undivided attention of the crowd. You can do a lot with that attention."

Lieutenant Feray nodded. "I've been to a few underground rings. Some mech pilots who compete in these arenas are trying to get hired. Others wish to absolve their mistakes and regain their honor. It sounds like Avid Serpent falls under that category."

The ebullient crowd smelled a good story, and sat in anticipation for the Vesian mech duelist's next words.

"Vesians! I have never forgotten you, nor have I forsaken the stars that I call home! Let me prove my allegiance to you by taking revenge for the shame you have suffered in recent times!"

A large amount of ooh's and aah's ran through the crowd.

"As a Vesian citizen, I've followed the news and I'm as depressed and ashamed as any of you! The shamelessness of the Bright Republic knows no bounds! Their dishonorable Mech Corps sent out their most depraved mech regiment of all, the Flagrant Vandals, to kill and raid our innocent civilians!"

"I love you, Flagrant Vandals!"

"Meh, the Vandals are the mutts of the Mech Corps!"

"Hahaha! The Flagrant Vandals are the pride of the Bright Republic!"

"The Flagrant Vandals are nothing but pirates in disguise!"

"That means they have Reinaldan blood in them!"

The Vesian mech duelist let the crowd simmer a bit before continuing.

"Hearing people's praise of the Flagrant Vandals makes my blood boil to the brim! Shame on you for idolizing this gathering of thieves! From their name alone they actually take pride in their wickedness! Their crimes against the Kingdom are innumerable! From throwing artificial meteorites into a populated city, to capturing one of our revered Venerables without her own expert mech, how low can they go?!"

Her words polarized the crowd. Since the Reinald Republic bordered the Vesia Kingdom, they paid a lot of attention on what went on with their bigger neighbor. The Bright-Vesia Wars became a keen topic of interest in their daily lives.

Recently, nothing caught more attention than the actions of the Flagrant Vandals. The main fleet had inexplicably split in two, with one branch heading towards the Reinald Republic! Practically everyone followed the exploits of the Verle Task Force and its hard-fought victories against some of the best the Vesians threw at them. Each time the Vandals overcame an obstacle, the admiration among the Reinaldians grew.

Due to the fact that the Reinaldians considered the Vesians as an ominous rivals, the success of the Flagrant Vandals was something to be celebrated. By far the overwhelming majority of the Reinald Republic approved of their achievements.

Not only that, most of the foreigners who visited the Harkensen System admired their performance under adversity as well. It took a lot of guts and ingenuity to run the gauntlet from the middle of an entire enemy state! Nobody pitied the Vesians for their failure to stop the task force from escaping their territories when they had countless mechs at their disposal.

Of course, the outsiders only formed their opinions from a narrow perspective. They didn't have access to the full picture. The Vesians were not only hampered by their serious internal division, they also faced many limitations and setbacks by the low-key actions of the rebel groups that acted as a cancer to the Kingdom.

How could patriotic Vesians not stand still as their state received a battering from the public? Foreign bystanders fundamentally misunderstood the odds stacked against the Mech Legion!

"I say no more! No more hero worship for the Flagrant Vandals! Wicked thieves deserve to be scorned rather than worshipped! I may be all alone out here, but the Kingdom lives on within my heart!"

Avid Serpent's axeman mech abruptly threw its axe to the ground. The blade of the axe dug into the sand like a falling executioner's axe! The thud rang through the hall like a drumbeat through everyone's ears.

"On behalf of the stars that I call home, I issue a challenge to the Flagrant Vandals! I know you are here! There is no one here who have missed your triumphant arrival in the Harkensen System! Stand up from the seats and show yourselves!"

The entire crowd fell silent. Those who stood immediately sat down. No bystander wanted to earn the spicy Vesian mech duelist's ire. Avid Serpent's axeman mech slowly turned around to behold the entire audience.

"Where are you, Vandals? I'm right here! Are you brave enough to meet my challenge?"

The arena lights dimmed down until the entire underground space fell into shadows. A series of flood lights illuminated from above. The largest one shone upon Avid Serpent's mech standing with its axe thrown before in an immensely heroic bearing.

The other flood lights shone upon several clumps of people sitting in the stands. One of them happened to land squarely on Ves' group!

Nolsen cursed. "Damn Reinaldans. They're putting us on the spot! Can't we enjoy some privacy?"

None of the Vandals in the group looked pleased at Avid Serpent's naked challenge. Her slanderous words belittled the herculean challenge of fighting their way out of Vesian space. How could they take her words lying down?

Yet her challenge also seemed iffy. Why would she issue a challenge to the Flagrant Vandals out of the blue? Was it because she felt genuinely indignant about the Vesia Kingdom's defeats? Was she grasping at straws in order to win back honor for herself? Or were others instigating this fight from the dark?

No matter how fishy the situation looked, the Flagrant Vandals had been put in the spotlight. Refusing to stand up to Avid Serpent's brazen challenge would tarnish their hard-fought reputation.

The only problem was that the Vandals had all split up in groups of ten and went their separate ways. Even if a lot of groups attended the underground matches, nobody knew whether they were the highest ranking officers on site. Unless Major Verle was present in the flesh, no one dared to speak on behalf of their entire unit.

"I see you, Vandals!" Avid Serpent broadcasted from her mech as it pointed a finger at the people under the spotlight. "Come on! You think you can rest on your laurels? Think again! Are the big bad Vandals cowering from a lone Vesian like me? You craven Brighters! Stand up and face my challenge!"

Every off-duty Vandal had to repress their anger. In order to preserve the dignity of their mech regiment, they rigidly stayed in place and kept their mouths shut. Spouting random words in the glare of the public eye might lead to a devastating outcome. No Vandal wanted to bear the responsibility for staining their unit.

Ves looked at the Vandals sitting next to him and knew that none of them possessed the clout to represent the Vandals when they spoke. The highest ranking officer among them was Lieutenant Nolsen Feray, and he was only a mere security officer. A proper response to Avid Serpent's challenge should be given by a mech officer, but all they had was Trian and another mech pilot. Both of them were relatively junior mech pilots who made up the rank-and-file.

Luckily, one of the other Vandal groups in the audience happened to bring a mech officer. A single figure stood up from the spotlight and a familiar voice rang out. The arena operators already made a move to amplify her voice.

"You want to challenge my mech regiment? What gives you the qualifications to do so!"

Ves widened his eyes. He knew who was speaking out right now, and he had a very mixed history with that particular mech officer.

"I dare because I am a Vesian and I have proved my mettle on this ground! Who are you to question my qualifications?"

"I am Captain Rosa Orfan." The figure on the other side of the stands declared. "I have fought in the heart of the capital city of Detemen IV and have defeated Lord Javier's Loquacious Raphael in person. I have subsequently hunted down and fought a Vesian expert pilot without an expert on my side on Nova Migolatus II! Twice I have taken down a Vesian elite!"

The majority of the crowd swung in Captain Orfan's favor. The encouraging cheers fell upon her head, which swelled it past its limits!

Ves and some of the other Vandals groaned or shook their heads. Captain Orfan was one of their most problematic mech officers, though few dared to confront her about her issues. Right now, she basically inflated her importance while leaving no credit to the rest of the Vandals.

"That woman! Even if she's a captain, she shouldn't talk like that!" Trian complained.

"Big mouth or not, have some respect for the mech captain." Someone else said. "She can beat any of you within a minute in a mech duel. Her skills are the real deal."

"Captain Orfan." Avid Serpent spoke. "Good. Good. I am not afraid of a mech captain! Do you accept my challenge then?"

Fortunately, Captain Orfan wasn't stupid enough to dive into the challenge without some prudence. "Only if we can agree on the terms."

"Fine! As the challenged party, you have the right to propose the terms of our duel. Speak, then!"

"Alright." Orfan said as she fell into thought.

Though they were currently in an underground arena where rules didn't apply, people still attached a lot of importance to the ritual surrounding mech duels. Any terms that flew wildly out of bounds would only make a mockery out of this sacred occasion. Basically, Captain Orfan wouldn't be able to impose any ridiculous terms.

"First, we'll hold our duel in three days. We haven't received any prior notice to this challenge. A fight right now is too sudden for us."

"Agreed." Avid Serpent responded. "If you need to fortify your courage, then be my guest. It's not my fault you are quaking in your boots."

"Hahahaha!"

Some of the crowd erupted into laughter.

"Second term, we fight in our own mechs."

"I do not agree! My axeman mech pales in comparison to your mech. Even though I've never seen your mech before, a mech captain is entitled to pilot the best. Would our duel be fair if your mech is at least thrice as valuable as mine?"

"Fair duel! Fair duel! Fair duel!"

"You idiot, you think a mech captain will choose to pilot a rustbucket?"

Overall, the crowd was swayed by Avid Serpent's response. This was not a duel where mech pilots pitted their individual strength or the capabilities of their mech models. This was purely a contest of honor.

"Fine then! If the arena operators can lend me a spearman mech of the same value as her axeman mech, I'll kick your butt regardless!"

Ves shot forward from his seat. "No! You idiot!"

"AGREED!" Some nameless man's voice thundered from above as if it came from the will of heaven.

Something moved on the arena grounds. A section of the grounds retracted into the ground, then went back up. Surprisingly, the section now bore a partially-damaged lancer mech.

"Property of a deceased competitor. In line to be recycled." The voice spoke again but with less boom this time.

Orfan probably didn't think much of the broken mech, but refusing now would put the arena operators in a bad light. "Adequate, though I'm not sure we can fix it up in time for the duel."

"Make do, then!" The challenger spat. "Are you not without support?"

Eventually, Captain Orfan and Avid Serpent hashed out a detailed agreement for the upcoming duel.

Chapter 584 Honor and Glory

Word of the duel spread through the entire star system the next day. There wasn't a mech enthusiast or professional in Harkensen that hadn't heard of Avid Serpent's challenge to the Flagrant Vandals.

Details of the terms of the upcoming duel proliferated among the public as well. The most noteworthy stipulation elevated the honor duel from a passing curiosity into the talk of the system.

"Fight to the death!"

"Accept no surrender!"

"Disable all escape mechanisms!"

"The winner shall only leave the arena grounds stained in blood!"

Though the public butchered the wording of the terms, they weren't necessarily wrong. In order to prove their worth and uphold their deals, both duelists needed to show their sincerity. To an honor duel, there was nothing more convincing than to put their lives at stake.

The message they were trying to say was that even if they lost, they would rather accept death than dishonor!

How exciting!

Harkensen did nothing to prohibit the news. Why would they? The sensational duel only brought more tourists to their system! Drama like this promoted their cosmopolitan nature. Look at our star system! Only in a place where multiple nationalities and cultures clashed can you witness something as exciting as a duel to the death!

Not everyone approved of the duel, however. A small minority in the Harkensen System and a greater majority of people elsewhere regarded it as a barbaric tradition. A proper mech duel should be a civilized affair where the better of the two gracefully won while showing magnanimity to their opponent.

Fights to the death was as barbaric as two cavemen bashing their heads with a rock in order to determine who had the right to mate with the woman with the widest hips. Though the actual mech duelists were both women this time, that didn't detract from the crude nature of the duel.

Although mech duels happened a lot, the MTA took a very dim view on them when they turned deadly. Still, most people regarded the powerful

organization as a distant nanny and took no note of their rules in this area. The mech duel was sacred, and even the MTA had given up on enforcing the no-deaths rule a couple of hundred years ago.

As long as the participants agreed to the stipulation willingly, neither the government nor the MTA had any reason to step in. If the mech pilots had a deathwish, then so be it. It was no different from driving a shuttle into a star.

In a way, the apathy shown by the highest authorities reflected their helplessness against human nature. As much as the leaders attempted to shape human values, they couldn't have it both ways.

Mech pilots bore the brunt in every war. Though many civilians and servicemen serving in auxiliary units lost their lives as well, by far mech pilots risked the most.

In order to motivate them to fight, the MTA and many states in turn chose to foster a warrior culture among their mech pilots. Honor, pride, glory and adoration were nothing but tools in the hands of the states that drove their mech pilots into deadly situations. Unlike money or material rewards, nebulous concepts such as honor and glory didn't cost much to come into being.

A famous conqueror once said that a soldier would fight long and hard for a colored ribbon.

In the Age of Mechs, trillions of mech pilots fought to make a name for themselves. The MTA's initial attempts at encouraging mech pilots to become the main sacrifice in the constant struggle between states went out of control. The warrior culture had taken a life of its own, and various rituals and customs sprung into being that otherwise seemed anachronistic to a civilization that long transcended its home planet.

Right now, Ves, Captain Orfan and Chief Haine sat in front of a desk in Major Verle's temporary office on Harkensen III. The commanding officer looked sternly at Captain Orfan.

The woman calmly stared back at her superior. Her eyes reflected the strong conviction she held in the righteousness of her case.

Chief Haine sat as if this circus didn't have anything to do with her. Although she was a card-carrying member of the Flagrant Vandals, mech technicians didn't buy into the warrior culture as much. Her only job was to fix the mechs of their fighters. What happened after that was none of the grizzled chief technician's concern.

As for Ves, he refused to waste a single minute of his time. Ever since the duel had been set, he went through some channels and obtained the design specifications of the spearman mech that Captain Orfan would ride into battle. Ves needed to deepen himself in the foreign design before he could come up with the appropriate repairs.

He really hated the short time limit. Couldn't Captain Orfan be more considerate to the mech designers and mech technicians that prepared her battlegear?

"Alright." Major Verle started after giving up on the silent treatment. "Let me begin by asking you, Orfan. What gives you the right represent the honor of the Flagrant Vandals?"

"Sir!" She barked, making a good show at being a prim and proper Vandal. "When the Vesian issued her challenge, nobody spoke up. I felt compelled by my rank to stand up to her. I doubt any Vandal objected to my actions. The odds of another Vandal mech captain being present at that venue was very slim. Since I'm not only a mech captain but also one who specializes in landbound combat, there are only few among the Vandals who can do better."

Major Verle tapped his desk with his finger. "I will give you that. Nonetheless, hasn't it occurred to any of you to contact me or send an emergency signal from your comms? Mr. Larkinson! You're the smartest among the Vandals. Why did you overlook this option?"

"Uh, I have no excuse, sir!" Ves stammered. "I mentally overlooked this option because I'm too used to all the communication restrictions."

"Those restrictions are there to prevent our servicemen from broadcasting our movements and plans to the enemy." Verle spoke. "Right now, everyone and their mother knows our task force has stopped over in the Harkensen System. It makes little sense to maintain a total blackout when we aren't on a mission right now. Use the options that are the most appropriate at hand. What is appropriate or not changes in each different situation. Don't make this kind of oversight again. That goes for the two of you as well!"

"I wasn't present at the underground arena, sir." Chief Haine replied with a touch of complaint.

As for Captain Orfan, she remained recalcitrant. "Sir, asking for instructions from above would paint the wrong picture. Avid Serpent asked for a Vandal who could stand up to her, and I bit the bullet and stood up. If I diverted my attention to my comm while everyone was looking at me, I'd be made into a laughing stock!"

"Your personal reputation doesn't concern me! Not when you hijacked this mech duel to blow your own horn!" His lips curled into a frown. "My intention was to lay low and let everyone's interest in us die down. Obviously, that's shot to hell now. We've become the talk of the town and no amount of hiding will stop everyone from paying attention to us. What a great vacation. This wasn't what I expected when I wanted everyone to take their mind off any battles."

"It's not all bad, sir. Proving our mech regiment's worth before the Reinaldians and the tourists will burnish our reputation! The Mech Corps and the Tally Divisions won't be able to ignore us any longer!"

"I don't care about that, captain!" Major Verle roared again. "Don't presume to know our strategic priorities. You are only a battlefield mech captain. Other Vandal officers are responsible for any greater concerns. We do not need a mech officer who lets her fighting instincts do the thinking for her to take a leading position in our mech regiment."

The major tried to rein in his temper while the other three patiently waited for instructions. No matter what Major Verle thought about the duel, they could only go through with it now that it was set in stone.

"Alright, let's move on to our approach. First, are you fully recovered from battle?"

"Hell, I'm raring to go at that Vesian wench, sir!" Captain Orfan enthusiastically declared.

"Are you even cleared for battle?"

"Hey, the mind doctors only repeated the usual stuff, major. I'm not depressed or hung up over our fallen brothers, if that was what you were worried about. There's nothing wrong with my body, either."

With Orfan's sheer force of personality, it was no wonder why she said so. Ves inwardly scoffed at the captain. In his eyes, she thought so much of herself that she hardly had any empathy left for others.

"Very well, I'll take your word over it for now, but I'll look up your medical reports right after this meeting. If you lied about anything, I'll boot you from this duel and replace you with another captain. The Vesian challenged our entire mech regiment, so I doubt she would object to a shuffle."

Captain Orfan narrowed her eyes at her superior. It was as if she was wary of his intentions. The man ignored her stares and turned to Ves and Chief Haine.

"As for you two, you're going to be responsible for fixing the spearman mech the arena operators dug out of their junk pile. Lay it down on me. How bad is the condition of the mech?"

"The spearman mech is a copy of a fairly popular Reinaldan mech model."

Ves replied. It was his turn to answer Verle's questions. "It's condition isn't as bad as it appears. It's a little old and worn out and has a big hole in its torso, but it won't take too much effort to get it up and running. All of its essential components are still in place, and what damage it suffered to its internals can be fixed up easily enough, sir."

"What's the catch, then?"

"Well, I'm not entirely used to the Reinaldan mech standards. There are a few oddities our mech technicians and I have to get used to. The mech had been getting on in years and shows lots of signs of jury-rigged repairs. It's basically a mass production model that has slowly degraded over the years before meeting its final end in the dueling grounds."

"Will you be able to fix it up in time for the duel?"

Ves grinned. "No question about it, sir. I'm not unaccustomed to working under pressure. I've prepared for several duels like this, and in my eyes, three days is enough for me to transform the mech into something new. Give me Chief Haine and a bunch of mech technicians and I can give you a prize-winning mech."

He held the utmost confidence in his mech design skills. Avid Serpent, perhaps wary of the strong support the Flagrant Vandals could provide to Captain Orfan, proposed detailed terms that limited the amount of work that could be done to their mechs.

While this limited what people and what kind of materials the Flagrant Vandals could employ to upgrade their assigned mech, the same limitations applied to Avid Serpent as well.

There was no way she would be on her own after issuing her challenge. Their mech duel had transcended their personal honor. While Captain Orfan fought for the Flagrant Vandals, Avid Serpent represented the entirety of the Mech Legion.

Any patriotic Vesian present in Harkensen would likely flock to Avid Serpent and lend a hand. If neither side limited the amount of help each side could receive, both duelists may soon be piloting extravagant mechs worth billions of credits. A mech duel that was supposed to revolve around honor would devolve into a contest between who could waste more resources than their counterparts.

The reason why Ves felt smug was because one of the terms that Avid Serpent had insisted upon played to his advantage. The term insisted that only a single mech designer on each side was allowed to assist in the preparation of their mechs, and they had to be Apprentices at most.

Chapter 585 Gabriel Creta

The terms proposed by Avid Serpent revealed that she only possessed a shallow understanding of the Flagrant Vandals. Someone who knew the Vandals intimately wouldn't put so many limitations on how much strength they could utilize to prepare for the upcoming mech duel.

An ordinary mech regiment employed up to a hundred high-ranked mech designers. Though most of them might only consist of talented Apprentices, perhaps a dozen Journeyman and a couple of Seniors sat at the top.

This was a terrifying concentration of mech design strength.

An average medium state-wide mech manufacturer only employed a couple of talented Apprentices or a single average Journeyman.

A large sector-wide mech manufacturer on the other hand may only employ up to fifty mech designers spread into various teams. Only the larger mech manufacturers employed Seniors. The smaller ones usually made do with Journeymen as their lead designers.

So from an outside perspective, employing several Seniors and more than a dozen Journeymen as well as a hundred Apprentices was massive overkill.

"That's exactly the point." Ves had learned after witnessing several different mech regiments in battle.

The two that stood out the most were the two premier mech regiments of the Mech Legion. Both the Calico Dancer Bats and the Frosty Meteors showed indomitable strength. In their battles against the Flagrant Vandals, despite showing up with a fraction of the numbers of the Flagrant Vandals, both Vesian units proved that they could punch above their weight.

Part of it was their centuries-long martial tradition. These famous names had been founded centuries ago, and they evolved from nothing into the elite step-by-step in their own unique style of fighting. This elevated their mech pilots into true soldiers that clearly surpassed the standard of an average mercenary.

Another part of their strength came from a straightforward expression of wealth and capability. Their mechs utilized many expensive materials that only the government could provide. The duchies weren't parsimonious with regard to their elite regiments. This wealth also allowed them to employ all of those high-ranking mech designers.

The Flagrant Vandals lacked that kind of accumulation. Their status within the Mech Corps was awkward, but this was only known from within and by a small

circle of outsiders. To the public, the Flagrant Vandals appeared to be a genuine if eccentric extension of the Bright Republic's military.

This was why Ves felt a little bit more reassured about this challenge. At the moment Avid Serpent issued her challenge, she didn't appear to act as an agent of the Vesians. If the Vesian mech pilot had been an insider, then she wouldn't have been so hasty in ruling out assistance from Journeymen and Senior Mech Designers. She also wouldn't have prohibited external material assistance, though in this area the disparity was smaller.

In short, the terms of the mech duel sought to minimize the influence of outside factors and turn the occasion into a contest of individual strength. If the Reinaldan arena operators hadn't brought out a damaged spearman mech, the mech duel might have commenced right away!

"Avid Serpent has made a big mistake."

Ves knew his strength and considered himself to be highly placed among Apprentices. With his great foundation and his advantages from his Masteries, even after being separated from the System he still possessed capabilities beyond the average Apprentice.

"I don't know who Avid Serpent will turn to for help." He reminded himself.

Each side could employ any single mech designer they wished to enhance their dueling mechs. Both Avid Serpent and Captain Orfan had the right to pick out any Apprentice Mech Designer and a number of mech technicians to assist. They could draw on the underground arena's mech workshops to perform their work and draw upon a limited number of resources from their stockpiles or junkyard.

It was already set in stone that Ves and a number of mech technicians from the Vandals would work on Orfan's spearman mech. Regarding their own side, Ves had no question about their own strength.

As for the kind of help that Avid Serpent could expect, the Flagrant Vandals hadn't been able to find out as of yet. Several agents affiliated with the Bright Republic kept an eye on where Avid Serpent currently resided. They spotted many prominent Vesians entering her room.

Because the mech duel involved the honor of the Vesia Kingdom, there was no question that Avid Serpent could have her pick of Vesian talents. While the Kingdom had a tenuous relationship with the Reinald Republic, officially they were at peace with each other. The Reinaldians didn't prohibit any Vesian visitors, and many did in fact paid a visit to the Harkensen System.

Right now, Ves, Chief Haine, Captain Orfan and a gaggle of mech technicians traveled to the underground arena. Even in the morning, the fighting venue already opened its doors, though only a fourth of the seats were occupied at this time.

"Captain Orfan! Please come this way!" An arena manager called from the side.

The entourage followed the manager to an elevator that brought the Vandals to the lower levels. Once the elevator reached the right floor, they stepped out and walked through a wide mech-sized corridor.

The manager briefly introduced this floor. "This is our workshop area. It consists of thirty halls, each of which has enough space and equipment to service any third-class mech."

"What about second-class mechs?" Ves asked.

"Our apologies, but the variety of mechs that duelists bring to our venue mostly consist of lower-end mechs. There has never been a case where a mech pilot from the Coalition entered the dueling ground with an expensive second-class mech. Mech pilots from second-rate states generally disdain our class of establishments."

The manager spoke those words without any resentment or animosity because it was the bare truth. Having a second-class mech compete in this local underground arena was like putting a warhorse into a pigsty. The disparity was too big, and the consequences of damaging a second-class mech and its mech pilot was dreadful.

"I see." Ves nodded. "Will we have access to a complete suite of mech manufacturing equipment, or do we have to make due with the bare essentials?"

"It's the latter, unfortunately. Compressed armor is too expensive for both our organization and our mech athletes to maintain on a regular basis. It also unnecessarily prolongs the duels, turning them into hitting matches where the side that hits a little harder will win the match."

The underground arena didn't prohibit the use of compressed armor, but the owner of the mechs needed to bear the full cost of repairs by themselves without any assistance from the operators. This could turn out to be very expensive if the mech incurred a lot of damage.

"So neither our captain or Avid Serpent will be able to bring a mech clad in compressed armor to the duel?"

"That's correct. Please be assured that we will endeavor to provide the exact same amount of accommodation to each of you. Let it not be said that we are partial to one side over the other.

Mech arenas relied on a reputation for impartiality to attract a ceaseless amount of audience members and mech athletes. This applied double to underground arenas, as they weren't shackled to any laws. Fudging the outcome of the duels was trivially easy if the arena operators possessed no morals.

Once news of such manipulation leaked out, the mech arena in question lost all of their credibility. In this business, credibility was extremely precious. Once it was lost, it could never be regained.

Thus, the manager went out of his way to explain how fair they set up their preparations. Neither side should have any complaints about favor one side over another.

This suited Ves fine. "If our circumstances are truly as you have described, then I have nothing to say."

After reaching the end of the corridor, they arrived at their assigned workshop. Before everyone entered, they stared at the entrance of the workshop on the opposite side. They weren't the first to reach this location.

"Vandals." A masked and robed woman spat as she beheld the recent arrivals. "Come to prepare for your doom?"

"Hah!" Captain Orfan laughed and stepped forward. "Look who's barking up our legs! What's the matter? Why don't you show us your face? Are you too ugly or something?"

"Hmph!" Avid Serpent huffed and turned her back on the captain. "Engaging in a conversation with a boastful pig like you is a waste of time."

Avid Serpent masked her identity quite well, but her mannerisms revealed peculiar aspects about her personality. When Ves carefully probed her with his spiritual sense, he faintly encountered a strong force of will.

It lacked the sense of realness that Ves had experienced before from an unconscious Venerable Foster, so Ves was pretty sure that Avid Serpent was not an expert. This was good news for all of them. The Vandals dreaded many possibilities, of which one of them was that Avid Serpent played the pig to eat the tiger. His probing ruled out this possibility.

Ves turned his gaze to the people that Avid Serpent had admitted into her circle. The mech technicians looked like a mixed bunch. None of them appeared to be cut from the same cloth, which meant their teamwork should be low, though their individual ability may certainly be better than the average Vandal mech technician.

"Ah, the famous Mr. Larkinson!" A middle-aged man stepped out. "As one mech designer to another one, I hope we can

"You've heard of me." Ves said with a befuddled face.

"How can we not. Word has spread how pivotal you have proven to be in several Vandal battles. Head Designer Larkinson. The only Apprentice Mech Designer to assume a position that only Journeymen should take. How odd for the Vandals to favor you so? Is it because of your family?"

"I have my ways." Ves said cryptically while narrowing his eyes.

Information like that shouldn't have spread to the public. He highly preferred to stay in the background. The less the other side knew about him, the better. Obviously, this hope was shot to hell right now.

"I hope you can showcase your splendor three days from now. I'm eager to see if my work can measure up to the efforts of a head designer."

"You have me at a disadvantage. Would you be so kind to introduce yourself?"

"Ah, where are my manners. My name is Gabriel Creta. I am apprenticed to Master Renona Klaisewist of the Mech University of Loge Imodris."

Ves had never heard of Gabriel Creta, but his eyes widened when the man dropped the names of Renona Klaisewist and the Mech University of Loge Imodris.

Renona Klaisewist was a seasoned Master Mech Designer and lived over two-hundred years according to the public record. She specialized in force application, which meant she designed exquisite mechs that made the most out of their mechanical strength.

Any melee mechs designed from her hand demonstrated extreme destructiveness with every attack!

Ves regarded Mr. Creta without any of his former contempt. Though Ves was unsure of Creta's exact relationship with Master Klaisewist, any apprentice of hers should have inherited some of her best design principles.

In addition, Creta may very well be an alumni of Loge Imodris. The famed Mech University was one of the best in the Kingdom. It enjoyed just as much prestige in the Vesia Kingdom as the Ansel University of Mech Design in the Bright Republic. Both were regularly mentioned in the same sentence.

The status Gabriel Crete enjoyed from both would surely be considerate. Along with his age advantage over Ves, and he may very well prove to be a hard bone to gnaw.

Nevertheless, Ves did not shy away from the challenge.

"I am eager to see what an apprentice of Master Klaisewist can teach me." Ves smiled in a facetious manner.

"Likewise." Mr. Crete nodded back with an unruffled expression. "Master Carmin Olson's sudden rise has disrupted the high end mech landscape in the region. I am eager to see what scraps of knowledge that she has thrown to you."

Chapter 586 Pointed Sentinel

After Captain Orfan and Avid Serpent finished exchanging insults with each other, they both entered their assigned workshops along with their followers.

As soon as they entered, they commanded the massive mech-sized doors to shut. There was no reason to let their opponents gawk at their progress.

"Alright, what's up with you, Mr. Larkinson?" Captain Orfan asked. She hadn't missed his exchange with their rival mech designer.

"Well, this isn't going to be a walk in the park for me." Ves answered as he started searching the man's biography on the galactic net. "I don't know where Avid Serpent has found him, but she picked a good mech designer at the Apprentice-level. The only way she could top her choice was if she accepted the help of a direct disciple of a Master Mech Designer."

Such august figures shouldn't be mucking about in the Harkensen System. They had better things to do with their time than interact with the low-end mechs favored by mercenaries and pirates.

His brief search on Gabriel Creta turned up a lot of pages that confirmed his status. The man was a seasoned mech designer who ran a successful mech business that offered a complete line of mech models in its catalog.

In terms of business, Creta was far ahead of Ves. The man built up his company step-by-step, never ceasing to develop new mech models to round out his company's existing products.

"Is there anything I should know about this fellow?"

Ves thought about it. Though the man ran a larger business than him, the evaluation of his designs showed that his skills hadn't grown as fast. "Mr. Creta is older, but his Master hadn't taught him much. In that regard, we're on a similar level. His specialty is something that we have to be wary of. Though I'm not certain yet of his strengths, he will doubtlessly excel at working with melee mechs. In particular, he should be extremely good at maximizing the force application of his mechs."

Captain Orfan scratched her head. "Can you translate that into normal words?"

"It basically means his mechs hit really hard and their movements will be really powerful. Both the arms and legs are going to be really strong by the time he is done with them. Force application entails more than that, but you don't need to know that."

It would be a joke if a vaunted Master's specialty only resulted in stronger arms and legs. That was a massive oversimplification of what a supreme insight into force application could do for a mech designer.

Fortunately, Ves was fairly certain that Mr. Creta shouldn't have mastered the more abstruse uses of force application. That went well beyond the ability of an Apprentice Mech Designer. This was also why Ves didn't bother to elaborate the concept.

"So this is the mech we have to fix up?" Chief Haine asked as she stepped towards the spearman mech placed in the center of the workshop. "Man, it looks as if the Reinaldans fished it out of a junkyard."

"That's because you're right. This is a rejected piece of scrap that the arena operators planned to recycle at a later date."

Ves already studied the design of the spearman mech in detail. It was an old Reinaldan design called the INSF-8088-CS Pointed Sentinel.

Designed by Ophidian-Wheelax Industries, the mech was a typical low-cost design whose only purpose was to earn a quick buck. OWI was a small player in the Reinaldan mech market, and it had only reached the status of medium mech manufacturer after merging two smaller mech manufacturers.

The Pointed Sentinel was in fact a collaboration between the two joint lead designers of OWI. The pair somehow avoided most of the pitfalls of collaborate design work and managed to fuse both of their strengths into a

single harmonious design. The Pointed Sentinel possessed little flaws and performed adequately at its price point of 40 million marks or around 20 million bright credits.

However, this description already hinted at its fatal flaw. While the design possessed various strengths and weaknesses, the former was very nuanced. Put in a different way, the design didn't excel in anything. It was a bog-standard spearman mech design with mediocre specs and nothing special to write home about.

Ves suspected that this may have been a result of two lead designers trying to push their own conflicting vision for the design. Of neither of them agreed to put one or the other in charge, both of them had to make constant compromises in order to finish the design.

The final result of the Pointed Sentinel showed that putting two mech designers in charge of the same design led to overly conservative design choices. It received a small amount of criticism that mentioned this shortcoming when the design first came out.

The only reason why the design hadn't received more criticism was because the Ophidian-Wheelax Industries was an obscure player in the mech market. Up to now, they never broke through their shackles and experienced any growth. This already showcased their overall level of competence.

To be honest, Ves didn't really put the Pointed Sentinel in his eyes. Compared to the mech designs he worked with before such as the Inheritor, Hellcat and Akkara designs, the Pointed Sentinel was a throwback to his earlier career. It lacked the complexity and optimization of more successful mech models.

Ves briefly explained all of this to Captain Orfan. "To be honest, the Pointed Sentinel can't keep up with your level of skill. You'll constantly be fighting for control and push your machine past its limits. Compared to the mech you're

used to piloting, the Pointed Sentinel's speed, flexibility and reaction time are only half as good."

"So it's literally a piece of junk."

"It.. has its limitations." He conceded. "The only upside is that Avid Serpent's axeman mech falls into the same category as well. They are both meant to be affordable mechs that is supposed to deliver a good price-to-performance ratio. In that, they succeeded, in a sense. It's a decent mech to buy when you only have 40 million credits to spend when it first came out."

Both designs have depreciated over the years, though. Though they were both currentgen mechs, thousands of designs have popped up that directly competed against them in the same market segment.

A mech design that failed to make a splash and quickly fell into obscurity obviously lacked a redeeming quality. They were too generic and too mediocre. A decent price-to-performance ratio wasn't enough to stand out in the market. It needed an advantage that was memorable in order to stand the test of time.

From the start, Ves had always designed his production models with an eye towards long-term appeal. No mech was perfect. While it was true that mech designers inevitably had to make compromises with their design choices, that only applied to situations where their means couldn't catch up to their vision.

For example, wanting to design a mech clad with compressed armor, but lacking an alloy compressor. In such a situation, a mech designer could only take a step back and design a mech with cheaper armor.

What the lead designers of OWI had done was to make too many compromises with the design of the Pointed Sentinel. Defaulting to the safest design choices all the time led to a safe but timid design that never attempted to challenge the competition.

No wonder this design failed from the start. From what Ves had gathered from the galactic net, the Pointed Sentinel barely sold at full price. OWI had to issue regular discounts and conclude various unfavorable deals in order to prevent their mechs from collecting dust in their inventories.

"I've piloted many crappy mechs in my career." Captain Orfan said. "It's a long time ago since I last stepped into a cockpit of a mech as worthless as this. I'll have to shake off some of my rust. There's a simulator pod around here, right?"

"Ves jerked at the pod shoved to the side of the workshop. "It's over there. However, I don't suggest you grow too familiar with the Pointed Sentinel's level of performance. Even as we are going to repair your dueling mech, we'll also going to apply a whole host of upgrades."

"How big of an upgrade are we talking about?"

"It depends, captain. I'll have to look at the materials the arena organizers are willing to part with to be sure. However, my most conservative estimate is that I can likely boost your Pointed Sentinel's performance by fifteen percent."

Captain Orfan whistled at that figure. "Fifteen percent? That's a lot!"

"It's mainly because the Pointed Sentinel is an old and suboptimal design. Though I don't have enough time to remedy every issue, elevating its overall performance by fifteen percent while plugging most of the gaps shouldn't be too much of an issue."

"Good luck, then!"

The mech captain turned out to be an impatient client. Ever since she laid her eyes on the simulator, she never wavered her gaze. She quickly brushed Ves off before he could list a couple of possible upgrade priorities and hopped into the simulator pod.

Ves sighed. "Can you at least answer my questions?"

"Don't worry about it, Ves." Chief Haine stepped closer to him. "I'm familiar with Captain Orfan's preferences. I know what she wants in a mech."

"Thank you. Can you briefly tell me about her piloting style?"

Haine put a finger on her lips. "I don't know how to describe it. For someone like Captain Orfan, her piloting style is a little chaotic."

"How so?"

"Sometimes, I wonder whether she knows what she is doing. The captain isn't incapable foresight. She can plan and write out reports as well as any other mech captain. It's just that when she's on the battlefield, she directly throws out half of her burdens from her brains. Her intelligence basically halves when she fights."

Ves frowned at that. Even if Chief Haine exaggerated her depiction of the mech captain, his personal experiences with the captain didn't allow him to disregard this description entirely.

"How did she ever get promoted to a mech captain then?"

The chief technician shrugged. "That's the Flagrant Vandals for you. We can't be too picky on who we decide to promote. I think that in the past, the brass wanted to promote champions who could fight well to serve as anchors for the mech companies under our command. Captain Orfan may be lacking in some manners, but she's truly one of our better landbound mech pilot. That alone deserves some respect."

Ves inwardly rolled his eyes. "Respect. Yes. Anyway, you haven't described her piloting style in detail. Can you give me something to work with? I need concrete descriptions."

"The captain is capable of being patient when she's on the hunt. Once she finds an opponent her subordinates can't easily solve, she explodes into action. She loves to pressure her opponents with high-intensity combat. Very aggressive, but also very much in control despite lacking much forethought. She's the kind of mech pilot that relies on her instincts rather than her mind to see her through a battle."

"So she's a wild beast in battle, then." Ves palmed his face. "These kind of mech pilots are some of the worst to work with as a mech designer or a mech technician."

Ves had seen many of these kinds of mech pilots among the Vandals and Walter's Whalers. They usually didn't survive long enough to make it to the rank of captain, so it was very surprising for Rosa Orfan to succeed where many others have failed.

Mech pilots like Orfan exhibited strong battle instincts. This was an advantage in terms of high-speed combat where quick thinking could never catch up to pure instinct. However, the downside to relying on instincts was that the mech pilot never paid much attention to the status of their mechs. They outright ignored most of the information displayed in the control panels such as how much heat their mechs built up or how fast they depleted their energy cells.

Basically, they turned out to be some of the most abusive pilots to their own mechs.

Chapter 587 Proportional Strength

Overall, Ves faced a serious challenge of his own. The base design of the Pointed Sentinel truly couldn't catch up with Captain Orfan. Considering her personality, she wouldn't be able to hold herself back too much.

If she piloted the Pointed Sentinel after it received only the most essential repairs, then she would do much more damage to her own mech than her opponent could ever inflict.

"Captain Orfan is her mech's worst enemy."

It sounded like a ludicrous statement, but instances like this happened many times before. Countless stories proliferated on the galactic net on how skilled mech pilots met their own end after transferring from a high-quality mech to a low-quality mech.

This showcased a fundamental truth. There should never be too much disparity between the strength of a mech and the strength of the mech pilot. Why do expert pilots insist on piloting extremely expensive custom mechs? Because they would otherwise break their own mechs!

The newly advanced Venerable Foster obviously struggled with this issue herself. Her old training mech which served her adequately started breaking down as soon as she broke through. Evoking forced resonance only put more pressure on the frame, as her mech's vastly increased power came with a subsequent tradeoff of accelerating the consumption of its lifespan.

It could be said that the quality of a mech determined the upper limit on the skill that mech pilots would be able to display. Those who possessed more ability would inevitably brush against the limits of what their mechs could perform. Therefore, it was vitally important to match the power of a mech with the upper limits of a mech pilot's skill.

Ves keenly understood this point, and so did many others. Why did Walter's Whalers used to buy second-hand trash mech worth 3 million bright credits or less? It was because the average skill of their mech pilots was absolutely abysmal.

Straight-up investing money in better mechs didn't necessarily improve the strength of the Whalers either. If Walter handed over mechs worth 30 million credits to his badly-trained mech pilots, the actual strength they could express may only be equivalent to the power of a mech worth 10 million credits or less.

"The strength of a mech pilot must be proportional to the strength of a mech!"

Of course, this statement wasn't absolute. There were many ways of strengthening a mech without overly burdening the mech pilot. The easiest way to cheat this rule was to strengthen a mech's armor. Many armor formulas shared the same attributes in terms of weight and density, but they differ dramatically in the amount of protection they offered. This was mainly a function of the quantity and quality of exotics they utilized.

This was also the most important point of difference between third-class mechs and second-class mechs and etc. Third-class mechs utilized a much lower standard of armor formulas than second-class mechs. The cost of second-class mechs may easily be tens to hundreds of times more than a third-class mech, but their armor may easily be five to ten times stronger.

Of course, the amplification of strength constantly bumped into the law of diminishing returns. A mech that was twice as expensive may only be ten or so percent stronger in reality.

This made it uneconomical for third-rate states to imitate the standard of mechs employed by the vastly richer second-rate states.

In any case, right now Ves had to work with a third-class low-end mech. In his eyes, every mech that costs less than 30 million credits was a budget mech, and the Pointed Sentinel fell squarely in this category.

The mech industry produced budget mechs en masse. Why not? The private market hungered for them. The skill, training and aptitude of the majority of the mech pilots in the private sector matched well with budget mechs. They would never be able to get their money's worth if they piloted an expensive premium mech such as the LMC's Bleakbeak or Crystal Lord.

Ves explicitly designed his original mech designs towards squad leaders, champions, mercenary commanders and the like. Possessing the ability of an

advanced pilot was the basic qualification to pilot his mechs, because they both came with lots of strength and highly sophisticated control mechanisms that average pilots would never be able to use to their full potential.

This limited his customer base, but Ves had never intended to compete with budget mechs. Due to their low cost, the barrier for entry in that market was far too low. Too many mech designers plunged into that market already.

Though there were lots of risks involved with plunging straight into the premium segment, his ability and his high-quality work had pulled him through. The LMC stood on a firm foundation thanks to his good judgement and previous hard work.

His private sector experience provided him with lots of experience on what skilled advanced pilots demanded out of their mechs.

On the other hand, his experiences with several outfits such as Walter's Whalers and the Flagrant Vandals gave him a better perspective on what basic mech pilots asked out of their mechs.

The gap between basic pilots and advanced pilots was actually fairly wide. A mismatch in mechs and pilots between the two basic categories might prove disastrous.

In the case of Captain Orfan, her instinct-driven piloting style magnified that small possibility into certain catastrophe.

When Ves explained his train of thoughts to Chief Haine, she nodded in understanding. "Can't say I've bumped into this issue a lot, but I've seen some cases like that over the years. The thing is, you're asking us to upgrade a mech from something that is suitable for basic pilots into a machine that can handle the stress outputted by a peak advanced pilot. Even if you are a Journeyman Mech Designer in all but name, we've only got three days to work with before we have to send the Pointed Sentinel onto the arena grounds."

Her skepticism was justified. Even Ves didn't fully believe he could accomplish this ambitious goal in so little time.

"Do you believe in miracles?" Ves asked with a grin.

"There's no such thing as miracles."

"Well, I'll make you a believer in the next three days. There's nothing we can't do as long as we take a clever approach."

"You can't forget about your opponent either." The chief reminded Ves. "You witnessed Avid Serpent's mech in battle, right? That's precious information that you can use to implement countermeasures in your own mech."

"You're right. I was thinking so much about what I can do with the Pointed Sentinel that I haven't considered the other side."

By now, Ves had gathered a basic amount of information about his opponent. He not only knew what Gabriel Creta was capable of, but he also studied the basic background of the mech that Avid Serpent piloted.

Her axeman mech was a slightly more modern Vesian design called the Rogue Breaker. It used to come with a two-handed axe, but Avid Serpent's copy wielded a one-handed axe instead.

The Rogue Breaker happened to be designed by a Hafner mech designer, which strongly indicated that Avid Serpent came from the same territory. This also explained her personal affront to the Flagrant Vandals. Only Imodris and Hafner suffered a drastic drop in reputation due to their actions.

"The Rogue Breaker is an offensive mech." Ves explained to the chief. "It's overall parameters are actually a notch above the Pointed Sentinel. The only areas where our mech possesses an advantage is armor and endurance."

This was not good news to them. According to the Vandal mech pilots that witnessed her in battle, Avid Serpent was definitely an advanced pilot. It was

questionable whether she was an officer-level mech pilot, but in terms of intuition and skills, she wouldn't be much worse than Captain Orfan.

The more important issue was that the Rogue Breaker possessed a higher tolerance for abuse from their own mech pilots. Its internal frame and mechanical structure was more robust, and its overall agility and flexibility enabled it to perform high-speed maneuvers with much less strain on the integrity of the mech.

Put simply, the Rogue Breaker accommodated advanced pilots much better than the Pointed Sentinel. Both of them were budget mechs, but their design principles took completely different directions.

"I don't know how Avid Serpent originally got her hands on the Rogue Breaker, but it certainly fits her well enough." Ves unabashedly praised his opponent. "Mr. Creta doesn't need to overhaul too many systems to draw out the potential of that axeman mech. As for us, we'll have to tear out at least half the Pointed Sentinel's frame before we can do anything more."

Chief Haine possessed a rich experience. When she heard his words, she looked suspiciously at him. "I get the feeling that you're about to do something ambitious."

"Heh, let's visit the inventory and junkyard before I explain."

Ves and the Chief exited the workshop and asked an arena manager to bring them to the places where they could draw their working materials. The manager led them through the huge but largely unadorned corridors until they entered a massive warehouse area.

"This is our main storage hall." The manager explained with pride. "We regularly stockpile the most common materials used by the mech models that we regularly see on the dueling field. As agreed, you are allowed to draw upon a limited quota of materials for your restoration work. The maximum

quota is limited by the cost of materials. For example, you can draw upon tons of plain alloys, but only a handful of junk exotics."

"That's fair enough." Ves nodded. The underground arena didn't operate a charity. "I'm very satisfied with your stockpile."

He could draw upon a great variety of materials from the stockpile, including ones he previously used in his production models. His familiarity with these materials allowed him to apply them to his work without worrying about any complications.

"Do you wish to make use of your quota?"

"I'm not in a hurry. Show me the junkyard."

The three left the underground warehouse and walked a short distance before they arrived at a massive pit. Piles and piles of broken mechs, burned-out husks and separated parts rested in the pit. Heavy-duty cranes, lifters and other machinery enabled the arena organization to quickly dump and retrieve their wrecks.

"That's a lot of mech wrecks." Chief Haine widened her eyes. "All of this is untapped value. Why haven't you sent them to the recyclers?"

"Many of these remains hold unclear providence. Their ownership is rather troublesome." The manager shook his head with regret. "Many mech pilots that compete in our arena don't own the mechs they are piloting. Instead, they use a variety of means to get their hands on a battle machine. Sometimes they rent them from a rental company. Sometimes they ask a friend to borrow their personal mech. If there's a way, someone will doubtlessly make use of it. Ordinarily, there won't be much of an issue of the mech duelist wins, but a loss is more complex."

Those who lost likely had to face massive repair bills. If they didn't own the mech, then they had no reason to foot the bill. As for those who outright died in battle, it might be difficult to track down the actual owners of the mech.

All of these complications forced the organization to hold on to the mechs, whether they were intact or not. The arena stored the mechs in better condition elsewhere. Only the mechs and parts in the worst conditions would be relegated to the junk pile.

"Does the organization mind if we appropriate some of these wrecks and parts?" Ves asked. This was a very important question that directly determined the viability of his plan.

"Our bosses don't care." The manager shrugged. "You can do whatever you want with the junk as long as you're using it reasonably."

"So there's no quota?"

"None."

"Fantastic!"

Ves looked at the piles of mechs placed haphazardly on top of each other as if they were mountains of money. All of these wrecks represented untapped wealth. The manager and Chief Haine looked at Ves as if he had gone crazy. What did he want to do with junk?

Chapter 588 Mix and Match

Chief Haine figured it out first. "You never intended to stick to the Pointed Sentinel's original design!"

"Exactly." Ves confirmed her guess with a perpetual grin. "Even if I designed a variant of the Pointed Sentinel that can make up for some of its weaknesses, its foundation is too weak! Rather than limiting ourselves to the shackles of the base model, why not break it apart and free it from mediocrity?"

"Are you crazy, Mr. Larkinson?! Do you know the immensity of what you are aiming to accomplish? You're too ambitious! I wouldn't be surprised if you chose to go this route if we had a month's worth of time to tackle the problems that crop up slowly, but you only have three days time!"

Ves took her reproach without any sign of relenting. This was going to be one of his most challenging projects to date. In truth, his ambitious was indeed very wild, but his past competition experience already showed him that he could work under pressure.

He planned to take the Pointed Sentinel, disassemble it into pieces, and substitute its lesser parts with those from the junkyard!

A mech that deviated from any known design by a very wide margin wouldn't be called a variant anymore. If Ves intended to go through with his plan to assemble an entirely different machine from parts of different mech models, then he was basically building a frankenstein mech!

Frankenstein mechs went far beyond patchwork mechs. The latter only filled up some of their holes with inadequate replacement parts. The former completely represented a new and divergent mech model that possessed only a vague relationship with the original design.

To design and assemble a frankenstein mech took a lot of guts! Mixing and matching wildly incompatible mech parts took a lot of skill, especially since every mech designer adhered to their own standards. Some commonalities would be shared among mechs from the same state, but beyond that every mech model comprised of its own system.

Rashly combining parts from different mech models would be like trying to push a square block through a round hole. The parts fundamentally couldn't mate with each other. Even if Ves forced a connection through brute force, the

parts all ran on different settings and programming. Trying to harmonize all of those complexities into a coherent whole took a lot of time.

Where would Ves be able to find the time to harmonize the programming?

"You're taking an undue amount of risk for something that might go very bad." The chief warned Ves. "In my judgement, the chance of failure is over ninety percent. That's way too risky to consider this option. We have other alternatives."

"And what are those options? Repairing the Pointed Sentinel? Making minor adjustments? Replacing some of its lesser components with better quality ones?" Ves retorted. "That doesn't go far enough. If you understand the design of the Pointed Sentinel as well as I do, you'll know that it simply can't compete against the Rogue Breaker, especially after Mr. Creta is done with it. Playing it safe will lead to near-certain defeat in my eyes. In a time like this, the riskier option may be the only viable path to victory."

The regular courses of actions didn't cut it to Ves. They didn't go far enough in transforming the Pointed Sentinel from a bargain bin mech into a machine that could fully keep up with Captain Orfan's piloting standard.

Chief Haine didn't look convinced. "Even if you're the head designer, you're not in charge around here. Captain Orfan has put her life on the line for this honor duel, so she should have the final say. I won't agree to something as drastic as building a frankenstein mech without her express approval."

"That's fair enough." Ves acquiesced.

Even though he fully believed his judgement was right, it wasn't his life on the line here. Though he had a limitless amount of plans in his mind, even he sometimes forgot that mech designers ought to serve mech pilots rather than the other way around.

Ves and the Chief returned to the workshop and waited until Captain Orfan paused her simulation battle. She emerged from the pod with an annoyed expression.

"What is it?"

"It's like this."

Both of them explained their intentions to the captain. Chief Haine presented the safer while Ves elaborated on his wild scheme to construct a frankenstein mech.

The captain appeared impassive throughout the explanations. "Look at the results of my simulation battles."

She pressed a button on her half-open pod that summoned a projection of the outcome of the most recent battles. During the time that Ves and Chief Haine explored the inventory and junkyard, she completed over five simulations.

The captain lost in all of the scenarios. Ves read through the readout and saw that she not only tried out the Pointed Sentinel in a dueling environment, but also in large-scale battlefields which the captain was accustomed to. None of those situations ended well for her, and after reading the brief summaries of how her virtual mechs met their ends, he knew why.

"This ain't the time to pussy-foot around." The captain said. "I've been wrangling with this piece of crap in five separate simulations and I barely made any progress. Do you know how difficult it is for me to rein in my power? It's awful!"

"We can make focused improvements into increasing the upper limits of the parts."

"No can't do, chief. That's not good enough for me. A piece of crap is a piece of crap whether you polish it or not. If I knew how bad this stupid Sentinel really performed, I would have asked for another mech!"

"So you approve of my plan then, captain?" Ves looked hopefully at Orfan. He had a decent read on her personality. That was why he felt daring enough to think about building a frankenstein mech. Ordinary mech pilots would never think of piloting such a monstrosity.

"If you can deliver on your promises, then go for it!" The captain grinned.

"Risky or not, I'd rather pilot something completely new than whatever variant of the stupid Sentinel you can come up with. Beating Avid Serpent is going to be impossible if my mech is too sluggish!"

Once Captain Orfan agreed with Ves, Chief Haine knew her arguments didn't stand a chance. What Ves proposed matched her intentions better than a more conservative approach. The two looked as thick as thieves as they hashed out a set of criteria the frankenstein mech had to meet.

"First off, the new mech as to keep up with your movements." Ves repeated.

"This is the first priority on my list."

"I'm not a speed freak, but I need to react fast and fluidly if I face a close-combat maniac like Avid Serpent."

"Noted. I'll prioritize reaction speed and agility over top speed and flexibility."

Reaction speed and agility basically described how fast the limbs of a mech responded to the commands of a mech pilot. Heavy mechs notoriously scored badly in both. It might take several seconds for a heavy mech to lift a single leg forward. This was because the engine of the mech couldn't keep up with the increase in weight of what was being moved.

Light mechs moved faster because the engine needed to do a lot less work in proportion. This was like the difference between swinging around a dagger

and a greatsword. Someone could perform ten swings with a dagger by the time they completed a single slash with a greatsword.

Right now, Captain Orfan didn't care too much about power. Between a dagger and a greatsword, she would rather be wielding a nimble weapon than a more powerful one that could crush an enemy in a single hit.

"Avid Serpent is a slippery pilot." She explained. Orfan hadn't been sleeping during Avid Serpent's duel with Broken Claw. "Her mech and piloting style leans towards power. Getting hit even once by that axe will instantly cripple whatever it hits. Her mech is also somewhat fast and agile for a medium mech."

Ves concurred with her analysis. "Those are my thoughts as well. The Rogue Breaker is fully committed to offense. Its armor isn't bad, but it's definitely compromised in order to increase the axeman mech's offensive power."

"Since Avid Serpent's mech doesn't have a lot of armor, I don't see why my mech needs a lot of power. I can handle a mech with a little less power."

This was a very good tradeoff to make in his eyes. "I'm glad we can agree on this. Now that I've noted down your demands, I'd like to get to work."

"Go ahead, but keep me informed!"

Orfan quickly returned to her simulator while Ves and Chief Haine walked away. The chief shook her head. "I should have expected that."

"Well, her decision is set in stone, so we better get off to work!"

They already wasted some time exploring their options, so Ves was quick to begin his plan. Building the frankenstein mech in three days was going to be a very tall order for him. He couldn't take a conventional approach to its design because it wasted too much time.

He couldn't only attempt to make up the design as he went! Though he already formed a vague vision of his intended outcome, the exact shape of the mech was still beneath a fog.

Ves wasn't used to working on a mech without a concrete vision of the result. Every time he designed a mech, he carved out a solid vision right from the start and never wavered in his attempt to make it come to life.

Still, he believed he was capable enough to adjust his work methods. The X-Factor didn't necessarily rely on a solid vision. It could work just as well on a vaguer premise as long as Ves constructed the appropriate images to override the mixed spirituality embedded in the different parts of the mech.

Ves already knew enough about the Pointed Sentinel's design to know which parts needed replacing. He immediately returned to the junkyard and started dumpster diving for parts.

"Look for a good pair of medium mech legs that emphasizes agility over power." He told the chief. "If I have to do this alone, we'll be stuck here for a while."

Both of them started to scour the wrecks and parts in the junkyard. To determine which parts needed closer consideration, they didn't look at them in the junk pile. They instead sorted through projections of the parts from the control panel installed next to the junkyard. The arena organization hadn't thrown in all that junk without documenting what they dumped. Their record-keeping was meticulous, and they even measured all of the damage that had been incurred due to rough handling.

Ves closely sought for pairs of arms and legs. The two pairs of limbs formed the foundation of his frankenstein mech. As long as he made his selection, he could match them with additional parts that worked best with these limbs.

Within a single hour, Ves salvaged a pair of arms from a Lisvian spearman mech. He also dug up two separate leg parts that came from two different mechs of the same model.

Their condition was very important. While they didn't need to be pristine, they should at least be complete. Ves didn't know how many parts he rejected because were filled with holes and other signs of destruction.

Based on the body of the Pointed Sentinel and the parameters of the newly selected arms and legs, Ves picked up a host of other components. He picked out a new engine, power reactor, a whole pile of internal structure supports, internal frame rods, and more.

The most radical parts he picked up required opening up an entire wreck. He salvaged the complete set of artificial musculature from the insides of another fallen spearman mech!

Chief Haine couldn't believe that Ves was confident enough to transplant artificial musculature optimized for another mech model into his new frankenstein mech! To attempt such a thing was madness!

Chapter 589 Warhorse

Ves and the mech technicians at his disposal began to transform the Pointed Sentinel mech immediately. In order to meet the three-day deadline, Ves had to take an expedited approach to building the new mech.

"Taking a sequential approach takes too much time." Chief Haine said. "Just tell us what we need to do and I'll send enough techs to finish the job."

"Hm." He nodded as he eyed the frame of the Pointed Sentinel and the parts he dug up from the junkyard. "I still need to figure out how to piece together the frankenstein mech, but that doesn't mean you have to wait on me. First, I want you to disassemble the Pointed Sentinel into complete parts, or as much

as you are able to. Make a shallow inspection of all the parts and mark out those with issues."

"What about the junkyard parts? Even if we picked the best that we could find, not all of them are in great condition."

"Allocate some men into prepping them for use. Clean them up and make a more thorough inspection. The integrity of those parts are very important. We can't afford to make use of something that looks pretty on the outside but is rotting from within."

The swarm of mech technicians quickly split up in teams. While each of them was an independent person, right now they acted as an extension of his will. Ves felt some of his Spirituality at work. It left its brand on the parts through the efforts of the mech technicians.

Though it wasn't as good as handling the work by his own hand, this was much more convenient. "Achieving similar results through different means. It's not there yet, but one day I'll be stronger."

The mech technicians only siphoned away a portion of his Spirituality. The more precise his orders, the better the mech technicians grasped his intentions.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to work when I'm stepping away."

If that were true, his mech technicians back in Cloudy Curtain would have been able to substitute for him when fabricating a gold label mech. Certain properties of Spirituality worked regardless of the distance, while other properties required close proximity to be effective. Ves wasn't too alarmed by this fact. Step by step, he was figuring out the rules that governed this metaphysical concept.

What magic? Nothing remained mystical once you successfully derived the theory that explained the phenomenon!

Ves always retained a steadfast stance regarding things he didn't understand. This was a perspective that the Bright Republic and many other secular states had propagated among their people. After all, too much superstition bred chaos, and aliens were known to pose as mystical beings in order to hoodwink humans.

As the mech technicians went to work, Ves figured he had a few hours before they finished their tasks. Until that happened, Ves had to finalize his vision in order to know for certain what he was working towards. It wasn't his style to fumble around with mech parts and cobble them together without any expectation of what might result.

This was the approach of someone who was working with things he didn't understand.

"There's nothing about these low-end mech parts that I can't explain. Nothing about them is hidden from my sight."

Ves sat down in front of one of the control panels of the workshop and started studying the schematics of the parts he dug up. The facility had already scanned the parts from inside-out, and though they were less comprehensive than the official design schematics, the data from the scans was sufficient for him to understand their essence.

"Good. Good. All of these are good parts."

Building a frankenstein mech was exceedingly complex and involved a lot of work. Ves did not commit himself to constructing such a difficult mech on a whim.

His ultimate purpose was to synthesize a mech of a higher grade from an eclectic selection of low-end parts.

In other words, he had to combine the different parts into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts!

A normal mech designer could easily puzzle together parts that amounted to $1 + 1 = 2$.

What separated good mech designers from the bad was that they could achieve a much greater synergy. Achieving $1 + 1 = 4$ would be a cakewalk for most AIs.

However, the reason why humans remained dominant in the mech industry was their ingenuity could reach greater heights! Through a combination of skill, experience and vision, they might possibly achieve heaven-defying results such as $1 + 1 = 10$ or even more!

Of course, this was a very simplistic way of looking at the mech design profession. A more realistic equation involved at least a couple of thousands variables. The complexity of designing a new mech without ripping off an existing one went far beyond most AIs.

Nothing was absolute, though. Ves heard rumors about the creation of super design AIs by some crazies from the New Rubarth Empire. There were always people that believed that everything could be automated by machines and lines of code.

As this endeavor directly threatened the livelihood of every mech designer, those crazies hid themselves well. If they ever leaked out their whereabouts, nothing would stop their annihilation!

"Well, that's not for me to worry about." He shook his head.

He shifted his attention back to his design. He opened a design suite from the control panel and imported all of the parts in a wireframe form. This allowed him to easily modify or remove certain portions from their whole.

An hour went by as he unceasingly fit together the parts. This required a lot of modifications in order to make them fit. Ves had to pay attention to the method as well as the result. If it took too much effort to transform a part into

something compatible to the new frame, then Ves had no choice but to discard it due to lack of time.

He needed to achieve the maximum amount of results from the least amount of work. Only then would he be able to complete the mech within the time limit.

Fortunately, his understanding of all of the parts was high. This enabled him to cut things out or change things up without significantly impacting their performance.

Piecing them onto a single mech was more complex though. Ves needed to complete this improvised design fast, so he inevitably skipped some corners.

"This frankenstein mech must be fit for a champion in the dueling ring."

At the same time he puzzled together his design, he also began to form its spiritual identity. He decided to form a single image this time. While he was very partial to his Triple Division Technique, it worked best when he designed a mech from the ground up. Applying it to a machine composed of parts of existing mechs might not be appropriate.

"A frankenstein mech will certainly possess a fractured identity. The mech won't perform seamlessly in that case."

A vision took shape in his mind as his design came ever-closer to completion. Even though he hadn't finished the final touches, he already completed the final vision in his mind.

"Not a Pointed Sentinel, but something that looks similar to it. A reborn Sentinel that is not a Sentinel. Fast, agile, lots of reach and most importantly sturdy enough to keep up with high-stress movements. This goes far beyond the range of a Sentinel."

His new creation broke the mold of a budget mech and stepped into a higher level. Though it wouldn't be easy to achieve this height, Ves was already on the right track.

"The only downside is that I have to make some steep tradeoffs. Prioritizing speed and internal integrity above all else means that this reformed Sentinel will be rather lacking in terms of offensive and defensive power."

His current ability didn't allow him to plug these gaps. Every choice came with a price. Ves simply didn't have the time to work on the armor. As for the dip in offensive power, Ves wasn't too worried about it because Avid Serpent's Rogue Breaker didn't excel in defense.

Now that he fixed a vision, he could start on shaping its X-Factor. Ves intended for the X-Factor to be the glue that fused the different parts into an entirely new whole.

In constructing the new imagine in his mind, Ves had two choices available. He could choose to build up a primal or a cognitive image. The former comprised of a totem animal that would massively strengthen the instincts of his mech. The latter took the shape of a human myth that provided more sophisticated aid.

"Considering that Captain Orfan already possesses strong instincts, a human myth is more useful to her. However, she doesn't seem like the sort who thinks a lot during battle. If she won't listen to her own brains, then she won't be inclined to listen to someone else's brains."

This left him with the choice of going for a totem animal. Images that fell under this category had the ability to fire up a mech pilot and granted them beastly instincts that could save their lives at crucial moments. Adding the strengths of the totem animal to Captain Orfan would mean that he doubled down on her excellent instincts.

Even Ves didn't know how scary Captain Orfan would become when piloting a mech under such a spell.

"What a champion needs is a steed. A heavenly warhorse."

Ves imagined a godly horse that could sweep an entire plain within seconds. Everywhere it ran, the wake that followed behind it could pull an entire forest from the ground. Fast! The horse had to be fast!

As soon as he came up with the idea, the heavenly warhorse started to spring from his imagination. It came to life in his mind and began to look at the design that Ves worked on with impatience. The liveliness of its behavior astounded Ves.

"Good!"

The stronger his Spirituality, the more real his imaginary creations became. All of this was very abstruse right now, but Ves could definitely tell this heavenly warhorse already started off strong. Usually, his creations needed more accumulation before they reached this point.

With the heavenly warhorse taking shape, its influence started seeping into the design. As Ves finished the rough jobs and started zooming in to perform adjustments, the heavenly warhorse shifted in response. It was as if the design and the image already shared a connection from birth. Before the image took up residence in the design, it underwent ceaseless changes in order to increase its compatibility.

This was a very vital process. Usually, Ves took months to design an original mech, but he only had hours this time.

As the mech technicians completed their tasks one by one, Ves had to put an end to his design work. Though it looked horribly unoptimized in its eyes, its theoretical performance had already reached a higher level than the base

model of the Pointed Sentinel! Optimized or not, even a rough utilization of its strength should be sufficient enough to compete against Avid Serpent!

Once he decided to finalize the design, the heavenly warhorse immediately left his mind and took up residence in the new design. Even though Ves hadn't done justice to the design, the heavenly warhorse appeared very pleased!

"Alright, gather around, everybody! It's time for you to take a look at my design."

Most mech technicians finished their assignments by now. They eagerly sat up and walked towards Ves, who showed off his new design. In order to align them to his thoughts and turn them into channels of his will, it was important for Ves to explain his new mech.

"This is the design I've come up with after selecting all of those parts. Its purpose is to fuse the strengths of all of those separate parts to construct a mid-range mech from low-end parts!"

Though the mech technicians already knew what Ves intended to do, to speak it out like that impacted them nonetheless. It was simply too ambitious for them to comprehend! Wouldn't mid-range mechs require mid-range components?

Chapter 590 Muscle Memory

"What's the name of this design?" A mech technician asked as he admired the technical mastery that Ves had demonstrated in fusing those parts together.

"I call it the New Sentinel. It takes the basic template of the Pointed Sentinel but elevates it to the next degree. The finished product will still resemble the old version, but its actual performance is far from regular."

This was because Ves had picked some of the best parts from the junkyard. Though all of them came from low-end mech that the arena organization didn't

attach much value to, they happened to be best points of their original mech models.

"The New Sentinel is built from heavily modified versions of the parts I've collected. Each of these parts have their merits, and I've taken care to select the strongest parts that will still be able to merge with the frame of the Pointed Sentinel. Compatibility issues will undoubtedly pop up, but I'm confident I can deal with most of the problems."

Each mech model had their good and bad points. Unless a mech designer deliberately screwed around, every design that came from their hands should contain some elements with a competitive level of performance.

In his initial selection process, Ves straight up ignored the trashy bits and took away the best parts. Combining all of them into a single frame meant that the New Sentinel shook off most of the weaknesses of the old design.

Of course, that was easier said than done. They all had a lot of work in store.

"Chief Haine."

"Here."

"I'll hand over the responsibility of modifying the parts and assembling them together over to you and your men. Try and finish the work within two-and-a-half days."

"That's going to be tough." The chief said as she seriously studied the schematics of the new design. "You're asking us to perform a lot of radical changes."

"I've designed this new mech with very loose tolerances. You don't need to be too precise in fashioning the new parts. Just get it done in time."

"I can't promise you we'll meet your target, but I'll work my men like hell to get it done."

Chief Haine immediately issued a set of orders, dividing the work among the men. Every part needed major adjustments in order to make them compatible with the New Sentinel.

By far the largest job consisted of changing out the artificial musculature. Ves was very unsatisfied with the musculature of the old Pointed Sentinel.

Ophidian-Wheelax Industries had plainly cheated out by buying an inferior component license for the muscles of the mech. This was truly infuriating considering that melee mechs depended on a good artificial musculature system to exert their offensive power.

It was the equivalent of equipping a doddering old man with a spear and a set of armor! No matter the quality of the gear, if the underlying foundation was weak, the mech would never be able to surpass a certain level of performance!

This low maximum ceiling of performance directly countered OWI's original intention of designing a mech with a high price-to-performance ratio. With such a low cap on performance, how could the Pointed Sentinel ever be a good bargain for mech pilots with decent skill?

Ves basically butchered the old man and pieced a new body together with the butchered parts of other corpses. The unholy creation that came into being would hopefully be able to match the strength of a warrior at his peak.

"Hahaha! What a great feeling! So this is how it feels like to create a true frankenstein mech!" Ves spontaneously laughed. He felt as if he had gone mad for a moment. "I never knew that breaking so many important rules was fun."

Of course, the rules were there for a reason. Mech design was a profession that was littered with rules that formed a comprehensive list of best practices. If Ves was an ordinary mech designer, he would never dream of building a

frankenstein mech. The only reason why he dared to do so was that he not only possessed a broad foundation, he also made use of the Jury-Rigging Sub-Skill.

The value of this Sub-Skill was inestimable to Ves. It saw very little use when he designed an original mech, but when it came to modifying existing mechs, Jury-Rigging turned into a vital necessity. It would rarely be the case where he would have the ideal set of mech parts at hand. With this Sub-Skill at hand, he could draw on decades of experience in substituting proper parts with less optimal ones.

It was like replacing an amputated leg with a prosthetic. Although the replacement limb would never work as good as the original, it at least did the job of enabling the person to walk again.

While Chief Haine pressed her mech technicians modify the parts in rapid tempo, Ves directed his attention to the most challenging task of all. Unifying the different parts on a software level.

Rashly cutting mech parts from other wrecks and sticking them to another frame never worked unless they came from the same product line. In order to mate these parts together, Ves had to unify them on a hardware and software level.

Ves had already taken care of the former by completing the New Sentinel's design. He could trust Chief Haine to make sure the mech technicians didn't screw up on that front.

The only work he couldn't outsource was working on the software. This was something that only Ves possessed the qualifications to tamper with. "It's a good thing I've shored up my programming skills recently."

Though his Computer Science Skill only reached a Apprentice-level standard, this was already good enough for the vast majority of independent mech

designers to program their own mechs. Ves also learned how to hack into the existing programming of the mech, though he never dug in too deep in that field because it clashed with his design philosophy.

"This is going to hurt."

Ves could take a couple approaches with regard to the software of his new mech. The most optimal approach entailed creating a new software from the ground up. This sucked up a huge amount of time, so he directly skipped to the next option.

The next approach would be to download a standard operating system from the galactic net and work his way into integrating all of the parts into the software system. This was also a time-consuming option, but Ves was confident enough to compress the work within three days if he skipped a lot of steps. The result wouldn't be very pretty, but the mech should roughly be functional without any major compatibility problems.

"Then there's the last option."

The quickest and dirtiest approach entailed retaining the original software of the Pointed Sentinel. This left intact the many peculiarities and optimizations from OWI. Naturally, Ves still needed to incorporate the parameters of the new parts and make sure they would mate with each other.

The last two approaches were in fact very similar. One started off from a fresh install, while the other continued on from an existing configuration.

"It's going to take a lot of time to get the software into a fighting shape if I want to work from a fresh install. On the other hand, retaining the existing software will likely prompt a lot of compatibility problems when I install a lot of strange parts that the operating system has never been programmed to work with. Squashing all of those issues might take even more time."

In the end, Ves decided to wipe out the existing software and install a generic software system for spearman mechs from the galactic net. He chose this option because he could at least foresee how much time he needed to finish the work. With the other option, Ves couldn't predict how many compatibility issues would crop up and how much effort it took into solving them all.

"I've already taken enough gambles as it is right now. I can't keep risking my slim chances of success on sudden failures."

Ves went to work behind the console. Though programming a new software system for the New Sentinel entailed a lot of work, Ves faced a smoother journey than normal because he started off from a good base. The software he downloaded from the galactic net already incorporated all of the basic and vital functions of a spearman mech. Ves merely had to adapt it to the New Sentinel.

Three days quickly went by.

He made a lot of progress in that time. Though the software could never match up to the programming of a mature mech model, Ves believed his work didn't look too shabby.

"According to the simulations, the mech is able to perform all of the basic maneuvers without delay. The frame should only hitch up during the most complex movements."

The importance of the operating system was that a mech designer or a professional programmer could preconfigure many standard mech movements.

To put it simply, it was like adding muscle memory to a mech. A mech pilot would be able to make use of the muscle memory as shortcuts. This lowered the mental burden on the mech pilot and enabled them to make the most efficient movements from a single thought.

Ves unfortunately didn't have enough time to expand upon the programming. The mech he programmed right now possessed the muscle memory of an average civilian with maybe a week's worth of spearmanship training.

With enough time, Ves could increase the strength of the software to match the performance of a trained spearman with more than a decade of dedicated training!

"This is the strength of a good mech programmer!"

Sadly, Ves didn't appear to be fated to excel in this area. Certainly, if he put his mind in this field, he could become fairly proficient in this area. However, it was unlikely that Ves progressed beyond that level.

"Designing a mech is like creating a new life. Programming is essential to ensure the mech can be functional, but too much may not be a good thing."

Mech designers who excelled in programming could accomplish amazing feats. Ves had worked by Alloc's side for a time and he had seen what a Journeyman-level mech designer who specialized in programming could do. In short, they could turn a worthless piece of rock into a shining piece of jade!

The work that Ves had done over the last few days was far from reaching that level, but at least it should do the job.

"Let's see if Chief Haine has upheld her end of the work."

Ves had been wholly absorbed in programming for his new mech. One of his major faults was that when he put his whole mind onto a task, he pretty much tuned out everything else.

He stepped away from the console and entered the assembly area of the workshop. Ves immediately saw the shape of a complete mech. Fixed in place within the workshop's assembly system, a gaggle of mech technicians

climbed all around the frame of the mech to perform the finishing touches by hand.

"Well." He said with some surprise. "The mech is almost finished!"

"It took a few sleepless nights, but we almost got it done." Chief Haine said as she approached from the side. "We had to take in a lot of stimulants in order to work day and night. Hell, my men will probably sleep for two straight days after finishing up the mech."

Skipping sleep was easy. Countless substances enabled humans to push through their desire for sleep. The only problem were practically hard-wired into requiring sleep. Ves could imagine that all of the mech technicians paid a heavy price to work for three straight days.

"Did you push them into this brutal schedule?"

"Nope." The chief technician shook her head with a smile. "We all know that Captain Orfan's life is at stake. What's the worth of our good rest if we aren't willing to put it all to increase the odds of her survival?"

"You're right. We're ultimately trying to make the best mech possible so that Captain Orfan will win her honor duel. None of us should complain about our workload."

Now that the physical construction of the New Sentinel was about to be finished, Ves could finally load in the new software and see for sure whether the mech worked as expected. They didn't have much time left before the duel commenced!