

The Mech 4841

Chapter 4841 Craftiness and Cunning

Ves grimaced for a second once he saw that Lanie had suffered another defeat.

"That's six deaths so far. She isn't having the best luck."

He had tracked the young mech pilot's performance due to his prior experimentation on her. He had reason to believe that she could stand out in this competition on account of her excellent skill and piloting acumen.

While her performance at the beginning was good, Lanie quickly fell victim to the qualifying round's excessive chaos.

There was no way for Lanie to guard against ambushes by multiple mechs!

She could not help it if the environment around her virtual mech shifted in an unfavorable manner.

After getting three times during the qualifying round, her swordsman mech performed only 85 percent as good as before.

This gap in comprehensive performance exceeded the differences between mech generations!

While Lanie had still been able to earn a smattering of points by hunting down weaklings that suffered even more defeats than herself, her luck consistently ran out as her progressively weakened machine painted an increasingly larger target on its back!

After suffering so many deaths, it became unlikely for Lanie to earn any further points. The only way she could still fell opponents was by forming large groups of cannon fodder mechs and hope that her swordsman mech would not get taken out first.

This was a slim hope as many of the undefeated or lightly defeated mechs simply mowed through these mobs of loser mechs without getting stopped!

Lanie was not the only mech pilot who entered into this death spiral. Many other Larkinson mech pilots that Ves had a good impression of had befallen the same fate.

It was a good thing that Lanie and numerous other Larkinson mech pilots still managed to harvest their fair share of points. Their skill at least ensured that they could take a few opposing mechs down as their own machines finally succumbed to the damage.

Ves frowned and rubbed his hairless chin. He glanced down at his two children who appeared to be enjoying the spectacle!

"Hihihi!" Andraste giggled as she held Lucky against her chest. "Look! The gravity in area B13 has reversed. Those landbound mechs are falling upwards!"

"Meow..." The damaged gem cat commented as he tried his best to take a recuperating nap.

Marvaine began to look upset. "Why are our brothers and sisters losing so much? Aren't they better than the others?"

Ves smiled and patted his son's head. "Better is a relative and contextual word. Are our Larkinsons better at piloting living mechs on organized battlefields? That is definitely the case. Are our soldiers better at participating in a free-for-all where teamwork and opportunism is paramount to accruing a

high score? Not necessarily. Our mech pilots are all out of their element. If you studied the real-time statistics closely, you will find that mercenary mech pilots score consistently higher than others. Can you tell me why that is the case?"

His children frowned as they thought about this question from their own perspectives.

"I think the Swordmaidens complained about this a lot when I trained with them." Andraste spoke up. "They say that we Larkinsons are too honorable and gullible for our own good. We haven't met too many scumbags and don't know how to deal with them when they try to trick our soldiers."

Ves tapped his daughter on the head. "Language, young lady! I don't mind it too much if other people have a habit of calling people names, but it is not polite for you to do the same. You are supposed to be better than that. Besides, your mother will punish you if you use foul language."

His naughty daughter's response to that was to stick out her tongue.

Marvaine meanwhile did not understand what was wrong. "Can you explain to me, papa?"

"You're still too young, my boy. Wait until you've grown a little older. All I can say for now is that your sister is right. Our clan and people are honest, honorable and generally nice people. That is good for us but not entirely. The dwarf galaxy we live in is a dangerous place, and nice people don't tend to survive that long. Just look at the virtual matches taking place down below. The mech pilots of our clan aren't doing so well. In fact, it is telling that out of all of our pilots, the Swordmaidens perform the best on average."

The Swordmaidens had split up into many different tournaments, many of which focused purely on melee combat.

Not a lot of mech pilots from this iconic mech legion had actually signed up for the Davute Star Tournaments, but those that did were predominantly old veterans who not only survived the old frontier during their pirate days, but also lived through all of the crazy battles the Larkinson Clan had fought.

Even though these older women from the same generation as Venerable Dise did not possess any special spiritual traits, their skill, experience, resilience and above all their adaptability were top notch!

Ves turned his attention towards the best performing Larkinson in the tournament up to this point.

There was no benefit to earning way more points than the theoretical cut-off threshold, but Georgina Larkinson didn't get the message.

The woman not only managed to collect 36 points, but also managed to gather and lead a mob of 25 melee mechs!

Ves could tell that Georgina had been clever about this. She did not take over an existing group, but recruited lone melee mechs one by one with the force of her personality and her brilliant display of solid swordsmanship skills.

She did not approach any of her peers who only suffered 1 or 2 defeats, but she sought out the more worn mechs that had been beaten down at least 5 times over the span of a couple of hours.

Slowly but surely, she gathered a fluid following which she used to charge at other mech groups and harvest as many points as possible!

"Surrender or die. Either give us your points and weaken your mech by another 5 percent, or join my side and earn more points. It is your choice."

The melees always turned into a confusing brawl, and it was inevitable for many of Georgina's brothers to fall.

However, as long as her target group suffered enough losses, she forcibly instructed her group to stop fighting, sometimes turning the sword of her mech on her own subordinates if necessary!

Her swordsman then pointed at the handful of surviving mechs that earned a much-needed reprieve.

"Surrender or die. Either give us your points and weaken your mech by another 5 percent, or join my side and earn more points. It is your choice."

When faced with such a choice, the surviving losers immediately agreed to join Georgina's warband. Though it had suffered a number of losses, the addition of fresh blood actually resulted in a surplus of 2 mechs at the end!

On and on her warband continued to roam through the chaotic battlefield that constantly changed and shifted.

Mountains rose, uncaring for the mechs that were present in the terrain. Many of the machines that tumbled down became so beat up that they turned into easy meat for other competitors.

An ocean appeared in place. Mechs that previously enjoyed solid footing immediately became submerged in water. This was not instantly fatal if the mechs were fortunate enough to not have too many holes in their armor. The same could not be said for the rest.

The extreme reduction in gravity caused mechs that jumped to keep soaring into the air. These mechs continued to fly without any means of controlling their trajectory. Once they reached a portion of the battlefield where standard gravity reigned, a powerful attracting force caused them to fall down and never stand up again!

The veteran Swordmaiden exhibited extreme wariness towards these fatal terrain changes. Even though she wasn't the most clever mech pilot, she soon learned a basic rule about this virtual battlefield.

Once a region of space experienced a shift, it usually took at least 10 minutes before another transformation occurred!

Of course, there were exceptions to this rule, but these incidents happened so infrequently that it was better to flock to these 'safe spaces'.

Through mastering these rules, the champions of the qualification round accrued more and more points while keeping their deaths to a minimum.

Ves furrowed his brows as he compared Georgina's performance to that of Lanie.

Both of them were highly skilled, but their life experiences and mentalities had made the difference.

Lanie was too young and inexperienced to handle this sort of situation. She might be good in a straightforward mech battle, but she did not possess the leadership skills or cunning to gather a warband out of fellow strangers and take advantage of their relative weakness.

"Hm, maybe our clan truly needs to engage in more independent operations." He murmured under his breath.

The Larkinson Army had already engaged in limited forms of mercenary work during the long break in Davute.

He heard stories about boring protection duties, exciting hunting missions and beating off opportunistic raiders.

Ves bet that veteran mech pilots such as Georgina of the Swordmaidens continued to learn more ways to deal with complicated situations that couldn't be solved by hacking her sword a lot of times.

By the time this lengthy qualification round finally came to an end, both Georgina and Lanie managed to make it to the next round.

The former easily breezed through and managed to attract plenty of attention. The latter ranked at the bottom end of the survivors and had become completely lost in the crowd.

"Alright. That's it for now." Ves stood up and brushed away any non-existent crumbs. "The Davute Star Tournament is over for today. What do you want to watch next?"

"I want to see mech duels!" Marvaine piped up! "Not virtual, but real ones!"

"What about you, Andraste?"

"I want to go to a personal combat tournament. Can we go there instead, papa?"

"There will be plenty of time to see both. Let me check with your mother first."

They spent the rest of the day dropping in and out of various arenas and competition venues. They never stayed too long, but managed to catch the highlights for the day.

With his personal assistant and his staff taking care of all of the tickets and reservations, Ves did not encounter any hindrances.

His children laughed and became amazed at the feats they witnessed today.

They saw Swordmaidens armed with greatswords defeating formidable warriors who came from many different regions of the old galaxy.

They cheered a team of Avatar mech pilots as they fought against an opposing team that belonged to a prominent mercenary company originating from the galactic heartland.

Ves, Andraste and Marvaine even joined up with Gloriana and Aurelia at a singing competition in a fancy dining hall located in the Austere District.

The voices that sung today were so radiant and enchanting that even Ves couldn't forget about it for the rest of the evening.

Gloriana appreciated the performances. She even started to have ideas.

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I think our second cohort of children should focus on the arts and the humanities." She explained her views. "We already have the essentials covered with our current offspring. This is the time for us to diversify our brood and expand our network. What do you think about raising an artist or an actor? With our clan's immense advantages, I think our next sons and daughters have the potential to become famous throughout the galaxies."

Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine all perked up at the mention of more siblings.

"I want another little brother!" Andraste asked as if she was ordering a product from a store.

"Can I have a little sis as well? I'm tired of having only older sisters." Marvaine begged.

Ves smiled embarrassingly at his wife and children. "Let's not talk about this now. I already have my hands full with raising the three of you. Let me think about this further. I'm not sure if this is the right time to have more kids."

Chapter 4842 Competitive Performance

The next few days passed by without incident.

The Davutans continued to put a huge amount of effort into maintaining security.

Kotor City became busier and busier as people continued to forget about the earlier attacks. A lot of tourists and residents did not want to miss the opportunity of a lifetime and eagerly partook in the celebrations!

A lot of Larkinsons participated in the various tournaments and achieved mixed results.

The mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan were highly skilled and possessed plenty of real combat experience.

However, it was far too difficult for them to stand out from the crowd without the benefit of living mechs.

It soon became clear to people like Ves that much of the training and improvements of the Larkinson mech pilot were centered around living mechs.

Without the benefit of the deep partnerships and synergies with their bonded machines, the Larkinson mech pilots weren't actually all that great.

Sure, they were good alright. Many of them easily met the standard of elites.

The problem was that the Red Ocean was filled with talent. The organizations that brought lots of mech pilots to the new frontier always prioritized quality over quantity.

Ultimately, this meant that the Larkinson mech pilots always had a tough fight on their hands as soon as they fought against other elite mech pilots.

The Larkinsons even fought against familiar friends and acquaintances in the mech arenas.

The Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan, the Adelaide Mercenary Company and the Boojay Family all sent their own mech pilots to test their mettle and see where they stood relative to other pioneering organizations.

The personalities and fighting styles of all of these mech pilots diverged considerably, but their overall results were much closer than Ves expected.

In a situation where all of the mechs were equal and where the terrain did not convey any special advantages, it was hard for a mech pilot to defeat equally skilled opponents on a consistent basis.

All Ves learned from observing these matches was that his Larkinson mech pilots were good enough to fight against most but not all elite opponents.

There were certain groups of mech pilots, particularly those that hailed from the most formidable special operations units of the Federal Military, that truly managed to push the generic tournament mech models to their limits!

Their excellent skills, high combat experience and higher-than-average genetic aptitudes easily enabled them to win at least 70 percent of the matches against his Larkinson mech pilots!

This margin of victory was not too overwhelming, but clearly taught Ves and many other overinflated clansmen a lesson.

There were other pioneering groups that had brought over the stars of their respective regions.

There were mech athletes that won numerous championships and knew how to work around the limitations of tournaments better than everyone.

There were grizzled war veterans who had an endless bag of tricks under their sleeves and won impossible matches by relying on their beastly instincts.

There were even rich and privileged scions who hadn't been pampered at all. Instead, each of these wealthy descendants received the best possible training that they could buy, up to and including receiving personal tutoring from expert pilots!

Compared to all of these frighteningly skilled opponents, most of the Larkinson mech pilots still seemed immature and rough around the edges in comparison.

His men still had a long way to go before they could truly outfight any of their peers under completely equal circumstances. It might not even happen as the Larkinson Army did not really focus on training its men to excel in mech competitions.

"Don't feel too bad about the fact that none of our mech pilots have won any tournaments." General Verle consoled Ves during one of those competitions. "I already had an inkling that our men wouldn't be able to go much further. We may have the MSTs, but our strongest rivals have other excellent if prohibitively expensive training methods at their disposal."

Verle dropped by the VIP booth as he happened to be in the neighborhood. He had plenty of reasons to pay close attention to how his men fared against the best of what Davute had to offer.

Ves nodded when he heard his analysis. "Our clan's dependence on living mechs is our greatest strength... and possibly also our greatest weakness."

"There is no need to exaggerate the downsides of our approach, Ves. We both know that if our clansmen can participate in these tournaments with the machines that you have painstakingly designed, our winning percentages would be a lot higher. I dare say our clan can even bring home a few trophies."

Ves shrugged. "It doesn't matter. These tournaments and competitions aren't all that important to us. It would be nice if our clansmen can rank at the top and increase our fame this way, but we have already managed to stand out by winning actual battles. Our mech legions are all geared towards defeating serious enemies on the battlefield. That is what matters. The rules aren't fair either, and that plays to our advantage as we can make a lot more preparations."

Both Ves and General Verle had lived through times where their forces were not as adequately prepared to confront the challenges in their way. This was why they both invested a lot of effort into training and equipping the forces under their command.

The outcomes of the matches in the tournaments were not completely reflective of the strength of their clan. Ves only had to compare the current performance of his mech pilots to how much they accomplished during the initial outbreak of the warbeasts.

The fame and gratitude that the Larkinson Clan earned that day surpassed any of the rewards that they could earn in the tournaments!

That didn't mean that Ves was happy with the situation, though. Deep inside his heart, he wanted his mech pilots to win actual victories. All of these good but not excellent results put him in an awkward mood where he couldn't decide whether he should be happy or upset.

"Fortunately, I hear the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders are making a splash during the personal combat tournaments." Ves relaxed a bit. "I haven't attended any of their matches, but I hear that they are gaining a lot of fans."

General Verle nodded. "Our swordsmen and swordswomen are good enough to rank in the tier 1 category of personal combatants in this zone. Their combat skills are on another level as far as I am concerned. The only reason why they still occasionally lose their matches is because they are being challenged by transhuman supersoldiers with superior augmentations."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "So these supersoldiers are essentially good because their employers invested a lot of money in their upgrades?"

"It is a little more complicated than that, but that is the short version of the story. Highly augmented supersoldiers are the norm in this sector. Their combat skills may not be as sophisticated as our swordsmen, but their consistency is higher. As long as you have the money, you can take any decently talented soldier, apply a standard set of implants and genetic modification templates before teaching him how to make use of his expanded capabilities. The more expedient supersoldier programs can pump out a qualified humanoid monster in as little as three years."

Ves looked impressed! It took a lot longer to train a real Swordmaiden or Heavensworder, and not every boy or girl had the talent or the inclination to keep up with the brutal training regimes.

Still, the results were worth it as far as Ves was concerned.

"I wish good luck to our sword fanatics. I hope they can do their part in increasing the reputation of our clan." he shrugged.

Neither Ves nor General Verle cared too much about these swordsmen and swordswomen. They were living in the Age of Mechs. Infantry could still make a difference in many different situations,

but it was undeniable that these small and weak combatants could never help the Larkinsons win a major battle.

Only mechs and maybe more serious hardware enabled the Larkinson Clan to earn one dazzling victory after another!

Thinking about the lack of accomplishments in the mech department caused Ves to feel a bit conflicted.

His pride and his expectations prompted him to make a decision.

incidents. I am not only ready to show what our clan is capable of, but I feel it is essential for me to demonstrate my skills to Davute!"

"I think I will go through with participating in the upcoming Twin Weapons Tournament." He announced. "It really doesn't sit well with me that there are people who think our mech pilots or mech designers aren't worth that much."

That caught his wife's attention. "Are you sure you want to put yourself in a high-pressure situation again so soon? You have become more relaxed now that you have set aside your duties and taken our children to all of these events."

"I'm not that fragile, honey. A few days of rest is enough for me to recover from the previous incidents. I am not only ready to show what our clan is capable of, but I feel it is essential for me to demonstrate my skills to Davute!"

"Hm... I can see how it may benefit us. The mech community in Davute still have many doubts about your design qualifications. Once we begin to collaborate with the Master Mech Designers of the state to design a series of Davutan mechs, it will become much easier to gain the other party's cooperation if you have proved you can work at this exceedingly high level."

He never said anything about involving Gloriana in his projects. In fact, he wasn't even sure whether that was the best choice for his upcoming mech design commissions. He needed to look into this and see whether there was any room for his fellow Journeymen.

In any case, Ves had his mind set on competing in the Twin Weapons Tournament.

Out of all of the mech design competitions he participated in, this one certainly sounded interesting due to mixing up the format.

Every pair of mech designers needed to combine forces in order to design two mechs in an exceedingly short timeframe. The possible permutations of melee mechs and ranged mechs should produce a lot of interesting and original combinations!

Ves already had a few amusing ideas in mind, but he would have to wait and see how many other surprises the tournament introduced before he could select his final plan with Juliet.

His wife did not look completely fine with letting her husband work together with Juliet.

"You can do better, Ves." She told him. "Juliet is a fine Journeyman mech Designer, but she is not as brilliant as us. I would have preferred you to collaborate with Ketis. She may be younger and less experienced than the others, but even I have to admit that there is no one who can design better swordsman mechs than her. She is also unique in that she can also imbue her works with a part of her swordsmanship. That is an astonishing advantage that can propel your team to the finals."

Ves sighed. "You're right, but... I don't want to win the Twin Weapon Tournament by letting my design partner carry me to victory. Besides, I am sure that whatever stuff that Ketis can pull out of her hat will get her in trouble with the rules arbiters. She already caused tournaments to change their rules in the past. Now that she has become stronger, I am sure she'll cross another line. I don't want to deal with that. I want to test my own skills against other excellent Journeymen without relying on any unreasonable shenanigans. Cheating may help me earn an easy trophy, but it would turn into a tainted prize in my hands."

Too many years had passed since he last competed in a bunch of mech design tournaments back in Chance Bay.

Ves no longer knew where he stood relative to other Journeyman Mech Designers.

He had a strong feeling that he had already reached the threshold to Senior Mech Designer, but that was just a vague description.

His performance during the upcoming mech design tournament would allow him to make a much more concrete measurement of where he stood in his journey.

Chapter 4843 Spencer Hall

"Hihihi! Papa is finally going to compete in person!"

"He's so awesome! He will blast all of the competition!"

"First place is ours!"

"Now now, don't count your chickens before they hatch. Anything can happen in the next few days. Don't assume that I will win. There are plenty of other strong mech designers that have decided to take part."

Though Ves possessed a lot of confidence in his design abilities, he was not so arrogant to assume that he could win the championship without doubt.

Aside from the normal variables concerning mech design tournaments, the Twin Weapons Tournament also made the contest more complex by compelling two mech designers to work on two mech designs at the same time.

It was these additional variables and all of the chaotic possibilities they opened up that attracted Ves to sign up for this event. He had more than enough of competing in standard tournaments that did not really add much variety.

That did not deter Ves at all. He wanted to put his full effort into winning this contest, if only to validate his own strength and capabilities as a mech designer.

He really did not have the confidence of beating any Senior or Master in a mech design contest, but it was not acceptable for him to lose against fellow Journeymen!

Whether his confidence had become inflated or whether he accurately measured his design strength would become clear at the end of the three-day tournament!

Ves and his immediate family hopped inside an armored shuttle and flew towards the Academic District under heavy escort.

Mech design tournaments were different from mech combat tournaments.

The former was more niche and mostly entailed long hours of watching mech designers fiddle with projected design interfaces.

The latter catered to the masses and featured plenty of mech-on-mech action, sometimes non-stop!

Naturally, mech combat tournaments attracted much greater audiences and usually had to be held in the biggest arenas or special combat venues in town.

Mech design tournaments on the other hand did not have to be held in any arenas for at least the design phase portion.

If physical mech combat became a part of the competition rules, then it was possible to hold the matches in a different venue that was rented out for a smaller amount of days.

This cost-saving measure was not necessary in the case of the Twin Weapons Tournament.

This was because the tournament was organized by the Davute University of Technology, the top tech institution of Davute!

The huge university possessed a lavish campus that offered enough room to hold multiple concurrent contests.

The Twin Weapons Tournament may not be the largest one, but it was allocated to the Spencer Hall, which served as an all-purpose exhibition hall, convention center and mech arena.

Its interior was highly modular and adaptable, allowing it to take on any shape to accommodate any event. It could easily house hundreds of thousands of spectators at the greatest, but the attendance rate of mech design tournaments usually wasn't high enough to justify these adaptations.

Surprisingly enough, this time was different.

As the armored shuttle along with the extensive escort of Larkinson mechs touched down a separate landing zone, Ves looked up to observe the arrival of other shuttles and vehicles.

Students as well as many guests arrived well before the event was scheduled to kick off. Ves could even spot the arrival of other shuttles escorted by mechs, which signified that a lot of people of status had chosen to attend as well!

Ves could even spot vehicles and mechs branded by the insignia of the Federal Military of Davute!

"That is way more than I expected."

"Aren't you surprised?" Gloriana said as she ushered their children forward. "A contest such as this normally does not merit too much attention. What makes this different from the other Journeyman-level tournaments is the participation of one special mech designer. They have all come for you. People want to know what the patriarch of one of the most famous and rising clans in Davute is capable of. The price of tickets has multiplied by five times and many people are willing to stay day and night in order to observe everything you are doing."

Ves should have expected this. One of the Larkinson Clan's greatest strengths was its mech business, and no one affected it more than the clan patriarch.

His performance directly affected other people's opinions and behavior towards the Larkinsons. He could not afford to disappoint everyone's expectations.

"The Strange Lands Tournament must be pissed that I decided to withdraw from it." Ves idly remarked.

"That is an understatement, Ves."

Before Ves and children proceeded onwards, they first said goodbye to Gloriana.

"Why won't you come, mama?" Aurelia asked while holding Clixie in her arms.

"Your mother dislikes observing mech design tournaments. My design philosophy centers around perfection, and it is well-known that mechs designed on short notice are anything but exquisite. You can think of it as an allergy, sweetie. As much as I want to support your father and keep you all company, I truly cannot be with you. It is your choice to stay and cheer your father on. I have made sure to assign enough company while you choose to remain."

"Awww..." Marvaine looked sad.

Ves wasn't even 40 years old but already experienced a legendary life!

Much of the tales surrounding his illustrious record was related to his mech design work. He either "Miaow~"

Clixie brushed her body against the young boy. The cats would keep him company!

It was hard for their children to understand why Gloriana couldn't be here, but they loved and admired their father too much to stay away.

Every single child of the Larkinson Clan had grown up listening to the many deeds of its patriarch.

Ves wasn't even 40 years old but already experienced a legendary life!

Much of the tales surrounding his illustrious record was related to his mech design work. He either solved a lot of difficult problems with his unique and innovative works, or provided other talented heroes with the mechs they needed to make a crucial difference.

Many foes had come up and challenged Ves and the growing forces under his command, only to fall beneath his feet!

The public did not have a complete list of all of the enemies that Ves had defeated over his relatively short career. However, the records showed that he had definitely managed to fell pirates, Fridaymen, astral beasts, alien battleships and even phase whales!

These were incredible victories! They were also highly unusual as it was not customary to attribute these glorious accomplishments to mech designers of all people!

In a society where mech designers usually had a reputation for being stereotypical scientists who locked themselves inside their design labs for months on end, the notion of a mech designer proactively taking part in dangerous expeditions sounded highly unusual!

It was completely unnecessary for mech designers to witness the performance of their completed products in the front row of a life-threatening battle, but Ves did it again and again!

His odd atypical behavior and his unusually successful rise had even spurred the emergence of copycats!

Ves applauded their bravery but not their wisdom. He had the sneaking suspicion that all of those overeager mech designers had not correctly weighed the risks of entering the more dangerous regions of the new frontier.

It was none of his business how they chose to spend their time. Perhaps more heroes among mech designers might rise up in the following years.

"I will miss you so much, my son." Gloriana said as she kissed Marvaine on his forehead. "Be a good boy and make sure to listen to Shannon and the others, alright?"

Marvaine cutely nodded his head.

Once Gloriana became reassured that the kids would remain well-behaved, she returned to her shuttle and subsequently left the campus of the Davute University of Technology.

Ves clapped his hands. "Alright! Let's proceed!"

The rest of the group moved towards Spencer Hall. They immediately attracted notice on account of their identity as well as the large and oversized bodyguard detail.

Naturally, Ves did not solely rely on his infantry troopers to safeguard his life. Numerous mechs had taken up positions within the university campus.

This was normally not allowed, but the Larkinson Clan's status was not as trivial as before.

"Wow. What a pretty campus." Aurelia remarked. "Everything is so big and beautiful."

The Davute University of Technology possessed a strong academic atmosphere. The artwork and architecture were refined and spoke of exceedingly thoughtful design.

Although the founding festival caused the university to suspend its classes, Ves could easily imagine many students moving about in order to attend their classes or take part in another activity.

"We are here." Ves announced.

Spencer Hall looked like any other convention center, except bigger. There was plenty of space to accommodate a large crowd and that came in quite handy today.

Ves even spurred on a reaction from the crowd waiting in line to pass through the main entrance.

"Look over there! It is the Larkinson Clan!"

"The patriarch is here! He's shorter than I thought in reality."

"Thank you for saving my brother during the attack!"

Ves smiled and waved at the crowd in a typical PR-friendly fashion. He kept up his polite act until the group passed through the much smaller VIP entrance.

He registered his identity, confirmed his participation in the tournament and handled the rest of the paperwork.

Once everything was in order, Ves briefly accompanied his children to a larger VIP booth that he had reserved for his entire clan.

Numerous clansmen had already arrived beforehand and stood up from their comfortable seats.

"Sir!"

"We're all rooting for you and Juliet!"

Ves smiled. Of all of the Larkinsons that wanted to see him in action, the mech designers of the Design Department expressed the greatest enthusiasm!

He didn't fully understand their compulsion. Ves designed his mechs plenty of times in their presence.

While Shannon Maris performed her nanny duties and settled the children in their seats, Ves approached his colleagues and subordinates and chatted with them for a while.

Miles Tovar, Merrill O'Brian and Cormaunt Hempkamp were Journeymen, just like Ves. The biggest difference was that they were much further behind, so much so that there was little point for them to sign up for the tournaments. They would just humiliate themselves while allowing their confidence to get crushed.

"Don't pay too much attention to the specifics in an attempt to copy the best practices of other mech designers." Ves advised them. "Try and look for sources of inspiration. If there is anything going on that catches your interest, try to analyze and deconstruct the source of your distraction. Then try to figure out whether you can develop an application based on what you have learned."

The three Journeymen all nodded seriously no matter whether they already learned this lesson.

Ves then turned towards the younger generation of Larkinson mech designers.

"Hey, kiddos." He grinned as he stretched out his hand to pat Maikel and Zanthar's heads. "I'm glad to see you here as well. What I said earlier applies even more to the two of you. As Apprentices, you need to work towards developing your own ideas. This is the only way you can formulate a legitimate design philosophy that you can carry to the end. I am still waiting for you to become Journeymen and lighten our workload."

"Will you design a luminar crystal rifleman mech for this tournament?" Zanthar eagerly asked.

"Hmmm... maybe. I hope so, but you never know. These tournaments impose a lot of restrictions on what we can stuff in our mech design to minimize the usefulness of existing mech designs. I am sure the tournament organizers will throw in a few more curveballs in order to keep people like me on our toes."

The Davute University of Technology was the premier mech designer school of the new colonial state. It expected the best of its students and Ves did not believe its attitude would be any different towards the people who applied to compete in its tournament.

Chapter 4844 Expectations

Spencer Hall was an ultramodern venue that possessed a technological aesthetic. The architect did not hide the huge amount of technology and metal that went into its construction. All of these advanced components were necessary to make the place adaptable and accommodating for any type of event a university might hold.

Tens of thousands of spectators had already arrived in advance. Large groups of adolescents congregated together. A notable proportion of them wore the jade green hoodies and shirts that proudly showed off a stylized gray wheat ear, the emblem of the Davute University of Technology.

Ves had no idea why a tech-oriented educational institution would choose to represent itself with an agricultural symbol of all choices, but none of it was his business.

As more and more people entered the venue, Ves could see that the engineering and mech design students made up an unusually high proportion of the group.

"They have all come to learn from you." Zanthar Larkinson stepped up to his side. "I can't blame them, honestly. I have learned from you first-hand. The stuff you teach can't be found in any of the textbooks or classes that they have access to. I think they might already be satisfied if they learn a scrap of your repertoire."

Ves chuckled. "I am afraid these earnest students won't be able to get what they want. If my design philosophy was so easy to learn from, the mechers wouldn't have labeled it as Class IX. I hope they can gain more general inspiration from their work. I don't want them to inherit my design principles. I want them to form their own original ones. If I can do it, so can they. These young men and women are all enrolled in the best mech design university of Davute. They should have done more than rote learning."

He knew that the colonial state had invested a disproportionate amount of funding to accelerate the growth of the DUT. It needed to become a top school of the entire Krakatoa Middle Zone in order to build up its prestige and attract more talented students and professors.

After Ves finished his examination of the student body, he shifted his gaze towards all of the other spectators down below.

Different from the party goers who attended the typical mech combat tournaments, the ones that decided to show up today all wore neat and refined clothing. Business suits and clean dresses were common as the professionals all tried to present themselves at their best.

It was as if they were attending a church session instead of a mech design tournament.

There were multiple reasons why these people wanted to look clean and professional. This event was less of a party and more of a work conference of sorts. They were surrounded by their peers in the mech industry and were expected to talk shop with each other as the competition dragged on for many hours.

The mech technicians, engineers, sales associates, marketing managers and etcetera also wanted to make sure they did not leave an awful impression to their future employers, peers or superiors.

Even the mech designers put an effort into presenting their most refined sides as it was not a secret that scores of Senior Mech Designers and maybe Master Mech Designers would be observing or presiding over the tournament!

Maikel all thought it was because of the star of the show. "You're a big deal, sir. The Twin Weapons Tournament isn't the biggest mech design tournament of the founding festival. A lot of Masters would rather be elsewhere at this time. It is only because the most famous mech designer among the younger generations has decided to take part that they have chosen to come."

Well that certainly did not help soothe his nerves.

Though Ves was too experienced and confident in his abilities to suffer from performance anxiety, he was keenly aware that he needed to make an excellent impression in front of the Masters of Davute in order to earn 9 impressive fleet carriers for his clan!

Those brilliant and accomplished mech designers may very well have come to scope out his design abilities in advance in order to judge whether it was worthwhile to collaborate with him on Davute's key mech design projects.

Ves was determined not to disappoint their expectations.

In fact, he wanted to do better. He wanted to exceed their estimates of his design capabilities!

By the time he was finished, those Masters would beg to collaborate with him on their most ambitious mech design projects!

Ves received a silent alert that informed him that he needed to go down and prepare for the start of the Twin Weapons Tournament.

He patted Maikel and Zanthar on the shoulders. The two had grown a lot since they first came under his tutelage. Both of them had grown into bright and motivated Apprentice Mech Designers who were well on their way to flesh out their nascent design philosophies.

What Ves appreciated the most about the two of them was their work ethic and their decisiveness.

Ves had faithfully passed on one of the most important lessons he learned during his formative years.

Professor Velten, late of the Flagrant Vandals Mech Regiment, once used her own life trajectory as an example of how much mech designers could squander their time on politics, socializing and other activities that did not benefit their progression in the slightest.

She eventually exhausted her potential as a Senior Mech Designer and waved away what little chance she had of advancing to a Master.

Her lack of progress and contributions to the mech community also left her with little choice on prolonging her life. She could only exchange a discounted version of a serum with her meager means and ultimately completed a botched treatment process that left her with no more avenues to live past two centuries.

Though many years had passed since Ves the young Apprentice received Professor Velten's teachings, he still held an immense gratitude towards her for enabling him to rise so quickly.

This was why he frequently imparted the same advice to his students.

Acquiring the right attitude was paramount and more important than every other lesson he taught to them. He did not really care whether they learned how to design living mechs or inherited his passion for luminar crystal technology. He just wanted his students to make the most out of the limited amount of time they could spend on their life's work.

Though Ves did not have the confidence that Maikel and Zanthar would follow in his or Ketis' footsteps and become a Journeyman before their thirties, there was no need for haste.

They would reach their initial goals sooner or later as long as they continued to enrich their knowledge, built up their own theoretical frameworks and worked on more design projects.

Naturally, his students also needed to develop spiritual potential, which they thankfully did. Ves had no proof of this, but he had a hunch that his teachings along with their frequent exposure to spiritual phenomena had spurred on the emergency of this crucial quality.

He would have to test this hypothesis when he taught other students in the future.

Ves left the VIP booth after kissing each of his children on their heads one last time before he went down and entered a preparation area.

Many fellow Journeyman Mech Designers had already gathered. They showed clear reaction to his arrival but otherwise kept to themselves.

Good. Ves did not want his competition to be cowed by his reputation.

"Ves." Juliet Stameross walked up while wearing a business suit that carried the markings of the Penitent Sisters and the Larkinson Clan. "About the mech design proposals..."

He raised his palm. "Let's talk about that after we have received the restrictions and requirements of this tournament. I have my ideas, including one that I think is especially promising for the unique format of this contest, but I need to be sure it is applicable for this instance. I can promise you that we should definitely be able to impress the audience if we can implement my best idea."

He looked forward to implementing his latest product of his imagination. It attracted him a lot ever since he first came up with it. The brilliance and value proposition of this innovative idea impressed him so much that he even thought it had potential to become the basis of one of the major mech commissions that he agreed to fulfill!

As such, his participation in the Twin Weapons Tournament served a greater purpose than validating his progress and impressing his fellow mech designers.

He wanted to showcase a new method of employing mechs that had the potential to become a strong boon to the forces of Davute!

It might even match the impact that the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie Redeemer had on the Hex Army!

As Ves chatted with Juliet about irrelevant matters, he struggled to contain his grin. He wanted to amaze both his fellow competitors and his entire audience with his original new idea, but it was not yet time for him to steal the show.

A university attendant soon entered the preparation area. "Everyone! May I have your attention, please? The tournament shall commence soon. Please follow our instructions and stand on the places that we have marked for you. There is no need to do anything else before the design phase starts. We have no intention of occupying your time and the time of our valued guests. We only ask you to follow our rules and present us with the best possible mechs that you can develop within the deadline."

It took a bit of time before the recorders came to live. The Twin Weapons Tournament had finally begun!

Ves tuned out the introductory speech and all of the other useless talk. He was grateful that the Davute University of Technology assigned more professional announcers who didn't come from the entertainment industry.

The only time where he paid attention to the people speaking to the crowd was the distinguished-looking gray-haired man who commanded everyone's attention.

The reason why everyone fell silent was not just because he was a professor employed by the DUT.

He was also a Master Mech Designer who had been in the industry for almost two centuries!

Ves did not know much about Master Hergard Elroy, but he recalled the older man's record.

Master Elroy dedicated his life to advancing his Class IV design philosophy. The MTA officially referred to his specialty as 'Alternative Propulsion Drive Systems', which was a fancy way of describing weird and radically different means of making mechs move from point A to point B.

Juliet could probably describe his work a lot more than Ves on account of their similar research and design interests.

What actually mattered was that Master Elroy spent many decades of his career on studying and deciphering many different alien drive technologies.

He did so long before the Red Ocean ever became accessible. His rich experience in researching and reverse engineering all of the weird alien tech originating from the old galaxy put him at a clear advantage in doing the same for all of the phasewater tech originating from the new frontier!

"Master Elroy likely possesses the deepest attainments in phasewater theory and warp drive technology among the academicians in Davute." Juliet quietly communicated to Ves. "He also has many ties to Morton Tech and the other top development companies of the colonial state. He is an extremely popular collaboration partner."

Ves looked more impressed. "I see. Thanks for the clarification."

It did not sound likely that Ves would collaborate with Master Hergard Elroy on any future projects. The man was probably working to develop better iterations of minidrives. These extremely expensive transphasic mech systems were only destined to be equipped by high-ranking mechs. They were too uneconomical to be employed by standard mechs.

That did not stop him from respecting the Master. The older man was already over two centuries old but still retained his hunger to explore more unknown alien technology.

Chapter 4845 Additional Requirements

As soon as Master Hergard Elroy stepped onto the main podium of Spencer Hall, everyone stopped their discussions and paid attention to the man. His accomplishments and his importance to Davute earned him a lot of respect.

Ves was no exception. He might not be too familiar with the Master Mech Designer and his research, but anyone who managed to realize a design philosophy and become a powerful transcendent represented the best of the human race.

He and every other participant stood behind the Master in the background as the latter addressed every listener.

"Welcome, everyone." The gray-haired man spoke in a dignified but lecturing tone. "Today, the Davute University of Technology is pleased to host an event that brings some of the best Journeyman Mech Designers of our colonial state together in friendly competition. Both young and old mech designers are eligible to demonstrate their work and put them to the test in real physical combat."

A lot of people perked up when they heard that. Scoring the competition mechs by throwing them into fights was much more interesting than relying on abstract numerical scores or subjecting them to a high number of simulated AI-driven matches.

"Each of you must be curious why our school has decided to organize a tournament themed around designing pairs of mechs." Master Elroy smiled. "Here in the DUT, we prepare our mech design students to become a part of a rich and vibrant mech community. No mech designer works in isolation. The mechs they design by themselves are rarely employed by themselves. Instead, they are often fielded in multiple numbers and alongside mechs based on other models as well. The true strength of mechs does not lie in their superior mechanical forms or the properties they rely upon to amplify the capabilities of their pilots, but the synergies they can attain when fighting alongside complementary machines."

Ves and many other mech designers nodded in agreement. This was a truth that every mech designer learned. Whether they comprehended this concept during their studies or became enlightened to it after they started their careers, it was undeniable that mechs worked best when they varied their configurations and relied on teamwork and cooperation to produce astounding results!

Master Elroy continued his speech.

"The Twin Weapons Tournament is by no means an attempt to fully reproduce the intricate connections that enable weaker mech forces to defeat stronger opponents. It is nonetheless set up in a manner that encourages the participating mech designers to spend more effort on co-dependence rather than individual strength. If our contestants do not take my words by heart and choose to design two separate and individual mechs, then they will miss the point of this tournament."

Ves and Juliet both understood the underlying message. It might not be possible for every pair of mech designers to collaborate with each other on a closer level, but they at least needed to coordinate their work in order to stand any chance of making it through the later rounds!

Once Master Elroy completed his opening statement, he started to address the more practical topics.

"Let me proceed with explaining the rules of this tournament. The event lasts three days in total. Our teams of mech designers have two days to design their competition mechs. We will subsequently assign mech pilots from a pool of roughly equal mech pilots lent to us by the Federal Military of Davute. I will not divulge any further on the mech pilots, but rest assured that their skills are almost uniform and that they do not possess any overly specialized abilities or piloting styles. Every pair of competition mechs will be put in a single-elimination bracket where only the undefeated shall win the entire tournament. Every mech shall be repaired after every match, so their battle damage will not make an impact in any subsequent matches."

The rules concerning the mech pilots did not surprise anyone as the descriptions published beforehand already mentioned that this would happen.

Ves found it to be a fairer if less certain process than being assigned mech pilots in advance.

A single-elimination bracket was an unforgiving method of filtering the better mechs from the worser ones. A single mistake or counter had the potential to doom a promising team of mech designers!

Though Ves did not exactly feel comfortable with this, he knew that his work could not afford to falter even once if he wanted to fulfill his goals.

"As the combat phase will only commence two days later, I shall explain the most relevant rules of the design phase. Once the pairs of mech designers have taken their places, they are granted 48 hours to work in full view of our remote and in-person audience. Our contestants are not only expected to design both a melee mech and a ranged mech at once, but to fabricate them in rapid speed with the help of our advanced Superfabs."

That did not sound much different from the previous tournaments that Ves participated in. The only deviation was the fact that Ves and every other Journeyman had to work in pairs.

Master Elroy began to smile a bit more as he came up to the most interesting part of his announcement.

"Now, I shall begin to state the design parameters that every team must abide by in order to submit a valid pair of competition entries. We will transfer a detailed technical document that fully lists out the restrictions and requirements that we have set, but I shall explain the most important ones. We have selected a narrow selection of materials that our teams can use to design and fabricate their mechs, a number of which has rarely been employed in mechs before."

"None of the materials are strong or particularly valuable, but each of them are native to the Red Ocean. The Journeymen are expected to familiarize themselves with the resources at their disposal and draw out their greatest strengths. As the materials are not difficult to work with, the advanced superfabs that the teams can use to fabricate their competition entries can complete their tasks in a handful of hours."

This was also good news to Ves. He did not want to allocate an entire day on fabricating the mech parts and assembling them into place. The more time that he and Juliet could devote to their design work, the better!

"No phasewater will be made available. It is impossible to incorporate any transphasic components in the competition mechs."

No one looked surprised when they heard this rule. Phasewater technology was still relatively new to humanity. The key ingredient was too expensive to squander in a mech design tournament, and any powerful transphasic weapons employed by the competition mechs might possibly be able to produce accidents as their attacks punched through the arena's protective measures and hit the crowd!

"The competition mechs are only confined to landbound mechs." The mobility-oriented Master explained. "It is permissible to equip them with boosters. They are not allowed to be equipped with

serious flight systems. The arenas do not offer sufficient space for high-mobility maneuvers. It is also more compelling to test the cooperation between mechs that need to move more deliberately."

Juliet immediately frowned. This was a substantial handicap to her work! Flight systems played a huge role in her design philosophy and work approach, so being prohibited from using them in any of her competition mechs seriously limited her options!

Ves reassuringly patted her back. "It will be okay. Boosters can also be powerful in the right situations."

Master Elroy began to look amused as he announced the next set of rules.

"That is not all, ladies and gentlemen. In order to further throw off our mech designers and prevent them from falling into existing routines, we have added a number of other restrictions. The first one is that at least one out of the two competition mechs designed by our teams must be a light mech. To be more precise, their total mass must remain below the threshold of a second-class light mech as defined by the Mech Trade Association. It is up to the teams to decide whether they wish to turn their melee entry or ranged entry into a light mech."

Ves almost jerked his body. This was a massive limitation!

He looked around and saw that more than a few mech designers looked upset or dismayed. They did not have much experience with light mechs, or simply did not possess a design philosophy that plays well with these fast but fragile machines.

At least the participating Journeymen could decide which one they could design as a light mech.

Ves and Juliet exchange glances again.

The latter clearly looked more relieved. As a mobility specialist, Juliet possessed much greater depth and experience in designing light mechs. Her design philosophy should truly be able to play a useful role during the design phase!

"The second abnormal rule is that both of the competition mechs designed by the teams must include an artificial weak point on the frontal surface of their frames."

"What?!?"

Projections of example mechs featuring this deliberate weak point emerged into view, allowing everyone to clearly understand what the Master Mech Designer meant with those words.

"As you can see, these generic humanoid and beast mechs incorporate panels that appear to be made out of fragile glass. These panels are placed on their upper chests and must possess either a circular, oval or square shape. Their total area must be 2 square meters or more, though we do not recommend making it larger than necessary. Internal components must be easily accessible to any opponent that easily manages to breach this fragile material."

Ves frowned. This was a tricky rule! He had never heard of any mech design tournament that toyed with the participants by imposing such an arbitrary and atypical rule.

No mech designer would ever introduce such a heavy and deliberate weak point on their serious mech designs!

Though Ves was thrown off-balance by this weird requirement, he eventually managed to calm down and figure out whether this demand affected his existing ideas.

He could already tell that beast mechs possessed an inherent advantage in this tournament because their weak points wouldn't be readily accessible as long as they walked on all fours.

Then again, humanoid mechs weren't helpless either. Their ability to hold external equipment with their articulating hands easily allowed them to hold thick and sturdy physical shields that could manually close the weak points on their chests.

All in all, the additional requirements generally made mechs more fragile and vulnerable against damage. This should shorten the matches that would take place during the combat phase.

Ves had already looked around and counted the number of teams that he would be competing against.

A total of 71 teams ultimately took part in the Twin Weapons Tournament, which meant that numerous rounds of matches must be held in order to go through the single-elimination bracket format.

All in all, Ves felt a bit annoyed more than anything else. The competition mechs that he would have to design with Juliet would end up coming to life as partially crippled and deformed living mechs.

Ves did not want to design overly flawed mechs, even if they only served a limited purpose, but the tournament organizers left him with little choice.

He sighed.

"It will be hellishly difficult for us to design a pair of mechs that won't instantly crumble because their frontal weak points are so easy to target. Maybe I will need to design a variation of the Battle Skirt System in order to add additional protection."

Master Elroy smirked as he mentioned another restriction.

"Oh, I should also state that while energy shield generators are permitted to be used, their potency and energy consumption will undergo heavy alterations. They will not perform as strong as normal, and they will rapidly deplete what little energy reserves the competition mechs are allowed to have when they begin their matches."

"..."

Chapter 4846 Looking For Combinations

"Begin!"

Ves and all of the other participants of the Twin Weapons Tournament had a serious design challenge on their hands!

He could swear that Master Elroy and his fellow colleagues were laughing behind everyone's backs for coming up with these inane set of rules.

The biggest limitations were the rule that forced the teams to design at least one light mech and the rule that compelled all of the mechs to incorporate an obvious weak point.

The implications of these two rules were massive and forced every participating mech designer to discuss their plans with their partners.

Once all of the 71 teams took their places in the main area of Spencer Hall, a large number of energy screens came to life, isolating them in their own little cells.

The floor shifted to reveal numerous terminals, work tables, break rooms and most importantly the advanced superfab.

Ves studied the model for a moment. It was considerably better than ordinary second-class superfabs but fell short of the AP-VEX Superfab that he obtained for 60 million MTA merits.

Many mech designers immediately approached the superfab in order to explore its interface and study its technical specs. They needed to know what it was capable of in order to ensure their upcoming design work could be realized in the short time they had available.

"Hm, this is a surprisingly user-friendly superfab model." Ves remarked as he compared its technical specs to that of the superfabs he worked with. "The DUT is a learning institution, so it makes sense for it to procure a large batch of superfabs that are designed with wider tolerances and lower precision in mind. The degree of automation and preassembly functions are also particularly high. It is easier to fabricate working parts with this machine, but it is nearly impossible to stretch it beyond its narrow limits and produce truly excellent parts."

That was a disappointment to Ves. He was accustomed to working with more advanced hardware that were primarily designed to be utilized by Senior Mech Designers and Master Mech Designers.

However, there was no time for him to waste on maximizing the quality of his products. He needed to prioritize speed instead, and working with a more dummy-proof superfab was clearly the better choice.

As the two Journeymen from the Larkinson Clan thoroughly explored the superfab's capabilities, they had already begun to discuss the ramifications of the rules and restrictions.

"Those enforced weak points are going to be a huge pain." Ves complained. "Almost every mech designed for combat and even non-combat purposes always carry thicker armor at the front. There are good reasons for this as they are most likely to get damaged by frontal threats. Leaving the rear less armored is not that reassuring, but there are ways to prevent enemies from targeting your rear while in active combat. You can't do that when targeting enemy mechs. You have to face them with your front."

"We can design mechs that can circumvent this rule. For example, you can arm it with weapons that can fire backwards." Juliet proposed.

"Nope. Won't work. I've already skimmed through the full document that explains the rules. There are provisions that specifically guard against that loophole and many others besides. We can design a knight mech with a thick fat shield if we want, but it can't be permanently affixed above the weak point like a pseudo-armor plate. Those Masters who drafted these rules have accounted for every possibility. We should just follow the rules and not try anything funny."

"I see." The Penitent Sister mech designer frowned. She was just as unaccustomed to this situation as Ves. "If we truly must incorporate these dreadful weak points into our mech designs, then we

need to think about defense first. The other mech designers are likely doing the same. Our mechs cannot win any matches if their weak points are exploited first. Our design approach must proceed on the premise of defending the weak points of our own machines while at the same time setting them up to target the weak points of the opposing mechs."

Ves slowly nodded in agreement. "Your logic is sound. I agree with you. The Twin Weapons Tournament centers almost entirely around how the competition mechs are able to handle these vulnerabilities. Well, there is also the rule that forces every team to design at least one light mech in their lineup. If we can design a striker mech, it should be able to counter that light mech really hard, weak point or not. Don't you agree, Juliet?"

His partner for this competition frowned.

"I am afraid it is not as simple as you think. Striker mechs... are indeed effective against light mechs, but only at close range. They will struggle to take out ranged light mechs. Striker mechs are also generally heavier and slower in order to accommodate more armor and firepower. Their defenses are generally stronger to compensate for their lack of evasion ability, but in this case it is not a good choice because their weak points are clearly exposed."

"We can equip the striker mech with a shield. They're commonly known as riot mechs." Ves proposed. "It is a common combination to pair a mech with a ranged weapon and a shield in numerous regions of human space."

"Hm, that might work, but there are reasons why mobile rifleman mechs are more popular, Ves. Striker mechs are already slow enough. Striker mechs equipped with shields are even slower and less agile. They have clear advantages in ranged combat, but they cannot effectively defend themselves in melee combat. Light mechs can ironically counter them as long as they are attacked from their rear. The mechs you have described cannot turn around quickly enough to defend against attacks launched from other directions. You will effectively be trading a frontal vulnerability point to a rear weak vulnerability if you opt for a riot mech."

Ves frowned and rubbed his hairless chin. "You sound like you don't want to weigh down any of our mechs with physical shields."

"I think that relying on armor is a trap." Juliet theorized. "When Master Elroy explained the rules to us, you can hear his disdain towards mechs that are equipped with physical or energy defenses. Don't forget about his specialization. He has a deep appreciation and bias towards mobile mechs. I would not be surprised if he was the main individual responsible for drafting the rules in the first place. I think that he is subtly encouraging us all to design highly mobile mechs."

"That... is an interesting theory, Juliet. I did not think about this situation from this angle. I am not certain that your interpretation is as strong as you suggest, though. The rules may be set in a way that encourages the use of highly mobile mechs, but I wouldn't rule out the alternatives either. One of the most straightforward pairings that we can design is a rifleman mech and a knight mech. The former shoots down the enemy mechs while the latter defends from most of the incoming attacks. It is a classic combination even if the added restrictions force the teams to make compromises or adaptations such as equipping the ranged mechs with a shotgun or a flamethrower."

Ves believed that most teams would opt for this classic combo. It was probably fairly weak against certain combinations of light mechs, but fairly strong against anything else.

The two mech designers from the Larkinson Clan continued to argue against each other about what sort of mech types they should focus upon.

Ves already had his mind set on a particular combination. "We need to design at least one light mech. If this is the case, then I would prefer it to be a light skirmisher."

"What is your reasoning?"

"Because out of all of the possible light mechs we can design, the light skirmisher possesses the highest lethality under ideal circumstances. We could design a light ranged mech, but its firepower will be so low that it cannot threaten any opponent unless it is able to strike the weak points. It is better to stick to a classic light skirmisher that can either storm an enemy's front and attack the weak point with great speed, or have it circle around and attack a slower but more defensive mech from the rear where it cannot adequately fend off attackers."

"I am not opposed to designing a light skirmisher." Juliet said. "I have sufficient experience with designing one. I also think it is a good and flexible choice. The more important decision is the ranged mech that we pair with a light melee mech. It cannot be slow and rely too much on armor to defend itself because it will only be outflanked in a serious match."

A light skirmisher was a purely offensive mech. It was exceedingly bad at defending other friendly mechs, so it was a bad choice to pair it with a less mobile ranged mech.

Ves kept thinking. "A mobile rifleman mech might do, but I do not feel it is the right choice. It will perform decently against most opponents, but it is easily countered by an opposing light skirmisher. I would rather go for a striker mech because it can at least defend effectively against these pesky flies. Besides, Spencer Hall isn't all that large. The range will remain fairly short so striker mechs should have a greater advantage in this specific tournament."

Juliet shook her head in disagreement. "If we go for this choice, we will suffer from the problem that we have described before. It is too easy to counter a striker mech with a mobile rifleman mech that is careful about maintaining its distance."

Neither mech designers liked this dilemma. A rifleman mech and a striker mech both possessed clear strengths and weaknesses. Choosing one would force the two mech designers to commit to a strategy that might not work out that well against all opponents.

"If we have to stick to a light skirmisher as our melee mech, then we will always have a problem with the survivability of the ranged mech." Ves sighed. "The single-elimination bracket makes this an unwise decision. Our mechs cannot suffer a single defeat. If they do, then we are out of the tournament. I don't know about you, but I am determined to take first place. We need to think outside the box and come up with a more adaptable and resilient combination that can fight against a variety of opponents with at least decent effectiveness."

Juliet gazed at him. "You sound as if you have already come up with a possible solution. What do you propose?"

"What if instead of settling for either a rifleman mech or a striker mech, we combine both of their strengths in a single frame? What if we opt for designing a hybrid mech that can carry both a long-ranged weapon but also has in-built flamethrowers or vice versa?"

"...I do not think that is a wise idea, Ves. We only have two days to complete our work. Hybrid mechs are some of the most complicated and time-consuming mechs that you can design. It will take too much time for us to design a hybrid mech that incorporates multiple integrated weapons without introducing more weak points. The ideal of trying to combine multiple ranged mech types into a single mech frame sounds promising in theory, but it is anything but practical."

"I disagree."

"Are you sure about that, sir?"

Ves smirked. "Have you forgotten about my recent improvements? I've become a lot more capable recently. I can tell you that I can do three times as much design work as before. Do you understand the implications of this? I can essentially cram 6 days worth of design work during the design phase! Perhaps hybrid mechs are not viable choices for other mech designers, but I am different. If you believe in my ability, then let us proceed with this combination. As long as the hybrid mech is light enough, it can accompany our light skirmisher and assault the enemy mechs at close range!"

Chapter 4847 Hybrid Challenges

"A hybrid mech?"

Juliet Stameross wasn't stupid. She was a Journeyman just like Ves and deeply understood the technical challenges involved with designing a hybrid mech.

These were mechs that did not easily fit into a single category. They deviated from other humanoid mechs in that they could not replicate the human experience.

Conventional humanoid mechs such as swordsman mechs and rifleman mechs fought in a manner that closely mirrored how normal infantry soldiers fought.

Ves had recently taken part in such a battle himself, so he fully understood how much more difficult it was to design a hybrid mech that performed fluidly enough in less than two days.

"We will be making this a lot more difficult for ourselves if we design a hybrid mech for this competition." Juliet said with a frown. "Hybrid mechs are offensive mechs that normally do not stand out in terms of mobility. They are faster than knight mechs but slower than rifleman mechs. We can make them faster by lowering their armor content, but it will be difficult to make them any faster without compromising their integrated weapon loadouts."

Hybrid mechs were offensive mechs by nature. Taking away their weapons invalidated his selection for this mech type. This was not a price that Ves wanted to pay in order to squeeze out a marginal amount of speed from this mech.

Ves and Juliet rapidly sketched out a couple of crude draft designs. They performed a few hasty calculations in order to get a rough estimate of the technical parameters of their competition mechs.

This ate away 20 minutes of their precious time, but they had no other choice. They needed to verify that their plan was viable before they invested the rest of their allotted time on realizing their desired mechs.

"The light skirmisher should easily be doable." Juliet confidently said. "It is partially based on the Ferocious Piranha as there is not much of a reason to deviate from a winning formula that we are already familiar with. The only major deviations are the lack of a flight system and other changes to account for landbound operations. The light mech will not have the greatest top speed, but should have excellent evasion characteristics, especially in conjunction with its powerful but short-lasting boosters. It is only armed with twin knives and a backup pistol but that should be more than sufficient for its needs."

Ves studied the proposed light mech. He felt that its armor might be a little too inadequate than he was comfortable with, but it was not as if thicker armor would make that much of a difference.

There was a part of Ves that did not entirely feel good about this proposal. It took a moment for him to realize the reason why he felt restless.

Juliet did not add anything exciting to the technical design and configuration of the light skirmisher. She did not go out of her way to add an experimental feature or stray too far out of her comfort zone. She approached the tournament with the mindset of sticking to what she was good at and trying to make it as solid as possible in the little time they had to complete their work.

She did not do anything wrong per se, but she did not adopt a champion's mindset to this challenge.

He inwardly shook his head. Juliet had not progressed as far as Ves and did not have any notably brilliant innovations to her name. There was no reason to fault her for trying to design a competition mech that was within her means and no further.

In fact, it was not necessarily a bad idea for their team to make sure that at least one of their mechs turned into a known quantity. Its relatively conventional configuration could balance out the extreme design choices that Ves had made for the hybrid mech.

Juliet closely studied the draft design that Ves had sketched.

"It is as I thought. You went for a slimmed-down medium hybrid mech that is weighed down with numerous offensive armaments. While I admit that it should likely be fast enough to rely on evasion to avoid a great deal of damage, it is ultimately not a light mech."

"I am aware of that." He responded. "The reason why I slimmed down the armor to this extent is to add a bastardized version of the Battle Skirt System that we created for the Maiden of Adversity design. I think it achieves the best of both worlds. The modular and adjustable armor plating will not offer as much protection as a solid physical shield, but it can be adapted to better guard against different kinds of opposition. What is even more important is that it can gradually shed its broken plates and reduce the total mass of the hybrid mech on a gradual basis. The final advantage is that it can offer physical protection without occupying any of the limbs."

Juliet looked troubled again. "That sounds good in theory, but it is difficult to realize it with the limited tech and materials that we have to work with. The amount of effort you need to design a version of the Battle Skirt System that is specifically adapted to your hybrid mech can take several hours. What if you fixate too much on this optional feature and neglect the fundamentals of what should already be a complicated hybrid mech?"

He sighed. "Just trust me, okay? I can do it. I know I can. I have the skills and the cognitive abilities to design this hybrid mech within the allotted time. I wouldn't propose a mech design like this if I thought I would be short of time."

They discussed the issue a bit more but Ves remained adamant that he could make it work despite Juliet's legitimate doubts.

"This is a challenge that is beyond the level of a Journeyman Mech Designer." Juliet pointed out. "You will need to push yourself beyond your limits in order to complete your extensive wish list."

"Then you should be glad that I am not a normal Journeyman. I can really do this, Juliet. I can always pull back the scope of my design if it turns out that it is too ambitious for its own good."

The hybrid mech that Ves proposed included a number of weapon systems that each took a certain amount of time to integrate into the mech design. He could always leave them out and fill the empty spaces with extra armor or other components if necessary.

Once the pair of mech designers agreed with the combination that they had chosen for their competition entries, they moved on to specifying the more esoteric features of the two mechs.

Ves had left this matter for last because it would be the gimmick that he wanted to rely upon to propel him to first place in this tournament!

His colleague knew that he had left this for last for a reason. The idea he had in mind was great but might not work with all possible combinations of mech types.

"Alright. I don't think I need to explain to you that pairing a light skirmisher with a mobile hybrid mech can either turn into an amazing combination or become a recipe for disaster. It depends a lot on how the two mech pilots are able to make use of their mechs and how well they can coordinate with each other. The tournament rules doesn't say whether the mech pilots drawn from the Federal Military are squad members who have developed any existing synergies, but it is safe to assume that this is not the case."

Juliet nodded in understanding. "That can be a serious handicap for us. Light mechs have little margins of error to begin with. Knight mechs and other sturdy machines can afford to make mistakes, but we have given that up by committing to a speed route. We should look for methods to increase the degree of coordination for our mechs while preventing our enemies from doing the same. We can easily accomplish the latter by applying the same glow of the Ferocious Piranha to our light skirmisher. We only need one mech to fulfill this purpose. We can devote the other to a supportive glow."

"No." Ves shook his head. "I already thought about that, but I do not think it will work out the way we hoped. Everyone is aware of my existing work. The Ferocious Piranha is one of my most famous works and I bet that our competitors will definitely find a way to account for this factor. Besides, the mech pilots of the Federal Military are well-trained and highly disciplined as a rule. They should have already received specialized training to resist such effects given how much copies of the Ferocious Piranha the LMC has sold in the last few years."

He did not want to be predictable. He hated the idea of sticking to what worked in the past, because that was a good way to get countered by people who had done their homework on him and his work.

"Suppressive glows are one of the strongest advantages of your work, Ves. What alternative do you have in mind that can help our competition mechs defeat their opposition?"

"Do you recall Master Huron's works?" Ves began to smirk at his colleague.

"I do. You based several of your own applications on his neural network technology. Where are you going with this, Ves?"

"Don't worry. I am not going to mess around with neural interfaces. I don't have the necessary knowledge or permits to do so. My idea is that I will use my own design philosophy and specialty to design these two mechs as twins, for lack of a better word. My vision is to design these two living mechs concurrently and make them close from the beginning. Not only will they be attuned to each other as if they were born on each other's hips, I want to make it so that their mech pilots will be able to form a similar connection to each other."

"That... sounds as if you are trying to replicate the deep and extensive coordination of the bonded couples of the Gemini Family."

"The Geminis may be incestuous weirdos, but you cannot deny that what they have created is utterly brilliant. I don't dare to claim that my mech designs can recreate the full effects of their so-called destiny teams, but if I employ Titania as the design spirits of the two competition mechs, I am confident I can rig a special connection between the two living mechs that can facilitate a small-scale network that is strong enough to make a difference during the combat phase! I call it the Twin Souls System!"

The Twin Souls System!

It was the latest creative idea that Ves came up with! In his opinion, excellent teamwork was a fantastic force multiplier. If he could drastically increase the familiarity and coordination between two mech pilots who did not know each other too well, he could ensure that his competition mechs would be able to produce synergy that was far in excess to that of other mech pilot duos!

Juliet finally looked impressed at this time! The idea sounded simple, but it was too difficult for most people to realize.

For example, Master Huron had to dedicate his entire career to mastering neural interfaces and developing dangerous and finicky neural networks in order to produce comparable results.

The Gemini Family had to become complete pariahs and cross a lot of ethical lines in order to allow their bonded couples to understand each other over many years of their lives.

If Ves could reproduce just a fraction of their most desired effects by tweaking the spiritual designs of his competition mechs in specific ways, then he predicted that it would make a huge difference in the arena!

This was a design application that had a lot of promise as far as Ves was concerned.

For now, he only limited it to fostering teamwork between a single pair of mech pilots.

If he fleshed out this design application in the future, he might be able to increase its scope to allow for much better communication and coordination between many more mech pilots at the same time!

Chapter 4848 Twin Souls

There was no better venue for Ves to experiment on his promising new design application than the Twin Weapons Tournament.

Even though Ves had only come up with it recently, he possessed a lot of confidence in his ability to develop a working application of the so-called Twin Souls System in a short amount of time!

The mechanics of it weren't all that complicated. Ves could copy and paste many of his existing design solutions that he had previously employed in spiritual networks and battle networks.

In his opinion, the new Twin Souls System was a specialized spiritual application that sat between a spiritual network and a battle network.

A normal spiritual network was quite loose and relaxed, but it lacked the intimacy and strength to add much value in combat. They were much more useful in non-combat situations as they were meant to subtly increase the kinship between large groups of people.

A battle network could produce extremely powerful effects, but its requirements were way too high. Specific groups of people such as the Penitent Sisters and the Swordmaidens were extremely homogeneous and already forged a close camaraderie for many years.

While there was a chance that the mech pilots assigned to Ves and Juliet's team already trained and fought alongside each other for several years, there was no point in forming a battle network between just two individuals.

What Ves sought to create was a middle option that was strong enough to forge a closer understanding between the two mech pilots without going overboard. If he made his Twin Souls System any stronger, then the requirements to effectively make use of it would become too excessive.

The entire point of introducing the Twin Souls System was to create a more accessible and less troublesome method of enhancing the teamwork and coordination of small groups of mech pilots.

It was fine if the level of teamwork produced by mechs loaded with the Twin Souls System never came close to the efforts of Master Huron or the Gemini Family.

There was no way that Ves could catch up to over a century of advanced research and lots of trial and error with a single invention.

Juliet fell into thought yet again as she tried to imagine how their competition mechs would fare with these changes.

"I know you well enough that I shouldn't doubt your promises." She said. "If you believe you can do it, then I am inclined to assume you can do so. My concern is that the mech pilots may not be able to adjust to your work as well as you think. We know nothing about the mech pilots or how the Federal Military selects and trains its mech pilots for that matter. They can be best friends or they can be pilots who are assigned to separate units. It greatly helps if they are part of the same mech regiment, but if that is not the case, they will have to start cooperating without an existing basis."

Ves confidently smirked. "That is fine. In fact, I would say that is great. If our pair of mech pilots are unfamiliar with each other, then the other pairs of mech pilots assigned to other teams will be no different. The tournament is supposed to be as fair as possible when it comes to the allocation of mech pilots, so there shouldn't be any major differences in this regard. Do you know what this means? It means that it takes much less time and effort to progress the teamwork of our assigned mech pilots! The first match will be the roughest as the dummies from the Federal Military have to get used to all of the new stuff. So long as they get over this hurdle, they should quickly be able to master the new possibilities introduced by my Twin Souls System."

It was a major gamble, but also a calculated one. Ves might not like Davute, but he had to admit that the Clive Consortium and all of the other big players truly put a lot of work and effort into building up the fundamentals of their state.

The core military organization of the Colonial Federation of Davute consisted of consummate professionals who were already reserved in a similar capacity back in the old galaxy. Davute had already indoctrinated them to see each other as close comrades and fellow servants of the state.

In fact, perhaps Ves could make use of this patriotism and tie it into his competition mechs.

The two Larkinson mech designers continued to discuss and argue about their plans. There were plenty of areas that sounded dubious, but they didn't have the time to discuss every single matter of concern.

"Stop." Ves raised his palm. "We have already spent way too long arguing about this and that. Normally, we have lots of time to conduct research and perform calculations in order to figure out whether our plans are viable or not, but this is a tournament. We don't have the time to be so thorough. Let us start with our design work and go from there. We can still use the following hours to think about our plans and make adjustments on the go if we think it is necessary. Is that okay?"

The female mech designer reluctantly nodded. "Very well. How do you want us to design these two mech designs? It is clear that I am the most suited to design the light mech while you are much more capable of designing the hybrid mech. However, we cannot work on them separately if we want them to carry both of our strengths. Should we employ a design network?"

Ves needed to stop and think about that. A design network would help a lot with making sure that the two mech designs remained in harmony with each other. It cut down on the friction and enabled the two mech designers to easily become aware of each other's intentions towards their ongoing work.

This sounded perfect for a mech design tournament that was centered on cooperating duos!

His only objection was an ethical one. Would employing a design network constitute an unfair advantage that would taint his results in this competition?

After all, none of the other teams could employ anything remotely as effective as the design network!

Ves thought about how the other teams of mech designers might fare.

He recalled that Sara Voiken and Dulo Voiken had also signed up for this tournament. Ves could vaguely sense through the Larkinson Network that they were working diligently on their mech designs a fair distance behind his position.

The two siblings possessed a much closer relationship with each other than the relationship that Ves had with Juliet.

The two grew up together and studied the same subjects. They learned from the same mentors and teachers in the Voiken Family and worked under the same circumstances.

They may not have gone as far as the Geminis and outright married each other, but their deep familiarity with each other should not be underestimated!

Then there was the Power Pair. Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone might not have been together as long as the Voiken siblings, but they apprenticed themselves to the same Master Mech Designer and even developed highly similar design philosophies. That enabled them to work concurrently on the same pair of mech designs with exceptionally low friction!

All of this prior history constituted distinct advantages that Ves and Juliet simply could not match.

Ves had also taken a good look at his other competitors. Since the Twin Weapons Tournament did not set an age limit, there were numerous pairs of older Journeymen in the running who had collaborated together for over half a century!

With that sort of teamwork in the mix, the advantages bestowed by a design network did not seem that impressive anymore.

"We will employ the design network, but not now." He told her. "Blinky has grown stronger as of late, but he cannot maintain the design network on a continuous basis like Alexandria. We need to spare this option for the times where we can make the most use out of it, which should be in a few hours. For now, we don't need to collaborate so closely with each other when we are selecting our parts and designing the basic frames of our designs."

"Very well."

The two began to work on their assigned mechs while occasionally paying attention to what their partners were doing.

This was harder than it sounded as they needed to be able to complete their work in a much shorter timeframe than before.

Juliet clearly struggled to complete her tasks despite the fact that she was mainly responsible for designing a smaller and much less complex mech.

On the other hand, Ves comfortably split his focus and ran multiple parallel thoughts that each worked on different aspects of his hybrid mech design.

The collection of tech, parts and materials made available by the tournament organizers were fairly restrictive and specific. There were large gaps in what the database had available. The mech designers were further restricted from what they could design due to applying an extensive set of restrictions.

For example, Ves discovered to his dismay that he was not allowed to equip his mechs with any explosive weaponry. Grenades and explosive missiles were not an option.

This forced Ves to alter the configuration of his hybrid mech. He originally intended to equip it with detachable shoulder-mounted missile launchers.

The idea behind it was to let the hybrid mech fire a single volley of missiles at the enemy at the start of the match. Once the payload went away, the mech would purge the missile launchers and carry on without as much weight on its shoulders as before.

"Will you remove the missile launchers entirely, Ves?"

"No. I still think it can be of use. I will just load them with utility missiles instead. We can still equip the hybrid mech with EMP missiles or smoke missiles that can help our machines intercept the opposing mechs without receiving as many attacks."

Perhaps it was better this way.

Ves continued to select the mech parts he needed to form the basic building blocks of his competition mechs.

Just as he expected, the quality and overall performance characteristics were not that impressive. They were so disappointing that they could only maintain parity with mechs designed roughly 200 years ago. He understood that this was necessary in order to ensure the teams of mech designers could fabricate the mechs in a short timeframe.

While most of the technical standards were thankfully not as archaic, Ves still had to make a lot of regressive adaptations in order to account for the reduced performance of many parts.

This was another hidden challenge that tested the adaptability of every mech designer.

Fortunately, Ves started off as a third-class mech designer, so he possessed much more experience than anyone else in designing relatively low-performing mechs. He easily addressed these technical issues as they came up with hardly any slowdown.

His productivity along with his deftness started to attract even more attention than before.

Ves could feel all of the eyeballs directed to his body. He was more than sensitive enough to detect when people were paying close attention to him and noticed all of the staring from the start.

This was despite the fact that the energy screens had completely isolated him and Juliet in their own little space!

Some of those pairs of eyeballs belonged to powerful mech designers. This did not cause him to grow nervous or self-conscious as he was too confident to let his nerves interfere with his work.

So what if all of those Masters dissected his design choices? Let them watch! Ves was not afraid of showing off his design process, or else he wouldn't have agreed to take part in this tournament in the first place!

He smirked. He could tell from numerous signs that a lot of people were becoming increasingly more impressed with his performance.

"This is just the beginning."

Chapter 4849 Initial Reactions

Many different people paid close attention to the work of the famous patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

It was not an exaggeration to say that a significant proportion of the audience solely decided to observe the Twin Weapons Tournament in order to see Ves in action.

Whether they could gain anything useful out of their observations was another matter. Laymen couldn't understand anything while Master Mech Designers derived a frightening amount of information from their limited observations.

No matter how well they understood mechs, nobody had a clear idea of what Ves and Juliet had in mind!

Within the floating VIP booth where a bunch of Larkinsons were observing their patriarch with rapt attention, a lot of discussion had broken out as soon as they figured out the mech types that Ves and Juliet had selected for their competition entries.

Miles Tovar frowned. "I thought that Ves would base his mechs on his old classics."

"How so, Miles?" Cormaunt Hempkamp asked his fellow colleague.

"My best bet was that he would go for a rifleman mech armed with a luminar crystal rifle along with an offensive knight mech that messes with the minds of the opposing mech pilots. This combination is dangerous from a distance and difficult to overcome at close range. It is simple to design and makes for a solid combination."

"That is not our teacher's style." Maikel Larkinson shook his head. "Ves likes to solve his problems from a more creative and unconventional angle. He only makes the most obvious and logical choice if he can't come up with anything crazier that promises to deliver better results."

"...That sounds like him, alright. It appears that your understanding of our patriarch is correct. I do not think that many mech designers in his position would dare to work on a hybrid mech. In fact, I've scanned the other teams and there is only a single other pair of Journeymen that is starting to work on a hybrid mech."

The two teams had made a daring choice. Whether it worked out for them or not was not certain, but none of the mech designers involved were simple people!

While the Larkinsons possessed a lot of faith in their patriarch, they could not help but be concerned whether all of the added time spent on designing a hybrid mech was worth the loss in refinement.

"Ves is better than everyone else." Miles claimed. "I don't know how good he is exactly, but he improved a lot since a few months ago. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought he advanced to Senior already."

Zanthar perked up. "Is there a transition period between Journeyman and Senior?"

Several mech designers shrugged.

Cormaunt Hempkamp chuckled. "You are either a Senior or you are not. All ranks are discreet. It is impossible to get stuck halfway. No one truly knows where the patriarch stands. I do not believe that even he truly knows whether he is ready to take the next step."

"His upcoming mech designs are really interesting."

"Don't talk about that here. Don't forget that we are not in our own turf."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

The Larkinsons spoke a bit more about what the Larkinson mech designers were doing. They not only discussed the team of Ves and Juliet, but also the other two teams that took part in the contest.

Miles Tovar knew that he was not that impressive of a Journeyman among his colleagues in the Larkinson Clan. He lacked the spark of brilliance that caused certain people to stand out and progress a lot faster.

Though he was working hard to expand his knowledge base and figure out ways he could apply his niche in a more useful capacity, for now he believed he could enhance his position by utilizing his social skills.

"Ves originally recruited Sara, Dulo, Janassa and Tifi during another tournament a few years ago." Miles said. "He fought and defeated them during the combat phase. I wonder whether he'll do the same again. The best way to scope out another mech designer is to test your skills against the other."

This caused the Larkinsons to direct their attention to numerous other pairs. They did not really know any of these strangers so it was unclear whether they could pose a decent challenge to the competing Larkinson mech designers.

Still, a few of the other mech designers had achieved remarkable results in past contests. There were more than a dozen different teams that had individuals who managed to score in the top 10 in mech design tournaments such as the Strange Lands Tournament.

"Papa is the strongest!" Marvaine childishly exclaimed as he drank his fruit juice from a straw. "His mechs are so awesome that they will beat everything without any of them falling down."

Andraste on the other hand looked glum as she hugged an injured Lucky against her chest. "There's no swordsman mech. The only melee mech is a light skirmisher, but its knives are so short that they are not as fun as wielding swords. If Ketis was here, she would definitely be able to design a swordsman mech by herself. She doesn't need anyone's help."

"Nuh-uh. Papa can make everything better."

"No way! Papa is great at designing everything else, but Ketis is way better at designing swordsman mechs. She told me that herself!"

"She's lying!"

"She's telling the truth!"

"I don't believe you, sister!"

As Andraste and Marvaine kept arguing about this issue, Aurelia grew annoyed and patted Clixie on her side.

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat dutifully jumped from the oldest sister's lap and began to intersperse herself between the two squabbling kids.

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

"Okay, okay! I'll drop it, alright?"

"I'm sorry, Clixie..."

"Miaow..."

As the hours went by, it steadily became clear what the other teams of mech designers intended to design.

Since it took a lot of time for obvious progress to be made, numerous mech designers made a game out of guessing the configurations and the design characteristics of the works in progress.

"Oh, I think I understand what the Voikens intend to design." Merrill O'Brian spoke now. "Sara Voiken excels in designing defensive mechs. Dulo Voiken specializes in designing spearman mechs. They do not have many choices if they both want to make good use out of both of their skill sets. I already expected them to design a medium spearman mech as that is what Dulo is best at designing. I did not expect that their team would also design a light harasser mech equipped with special javelins."

That caused a lot of Larkinsons in the VIP booth to pay more attention to the Voiken designs.

Both Sara and Dulo exhibited excellent teamwork. They mainly worked on their assigned mech designs, but did not hesitate to add to the progress of the other mech whenever they came up with a good solution.

For example, Sara worked on the armor systems of both mechs while Dulo worked on the long weapons equipped by the two machines.

The spearman mech did not look that special, but there were plenty of mech designers that understood that they should never underestimate Dulo's spearman mechs. He was bound to add a few surprises to the design in order to give it an edge against the competition.

Perhaps Dulo might reveal the key elements of his spearman mech design at a later time when the design became increasingly more complete and detailed.

For now, the most interesting mech design was the light mech that Sara mostly worked upon.

Though it did not have as much armor as the other mechs, Sara Voiken was still able to apply her extensive expertise to optimize the light harasser mech's armor system so that it made the most out of what little protection it possessed.

It was the occasional times when Dulo Voiken worked on the light harasser mech that intrigued a lot of people who knew him and his work. It seemed odd and unusual to equip a light mech with a bunch of javelins.

"All of these parts will weigh down the light mech." Miles Tovar analyzed. "They won't be able to deal much damage if they are flung to the enemy by hand. They're more useful if the light mech employs them as short spears. It should at least be able to leverage its momentum to empower its spear thrusts."

Merrill pointed out another aspect about this mech design. "Those javelins are not made out of solid metal. Their tips... will probably consist of plasma!"

The working principles of these energy javelins were the same as plasma cutters, but upsized to the point where it became useful in mech combat.

Proper plasma weapons were usually only employed by first-class mechs, but that did not mean that plasma weapon technology was inherently high-end.

It was still possible to use relatively cheap components and materials to develop effective plasma weapons as long as they came with a lot of compromises.

Numerous mech designers became increasingly more impressed with what Dulo attempted to create.

"The design of these plasma javelins is ingenious." Miles Tovar noted with. "Dulo is attempting to maximize their heat and power at the cost of longevity. Its heat buildup will be horrendous, but it doesn't matter as these javelins only need to be able to form a plasma tip for a couple of seconds at most. The Voikens can even take advantage of the expendability of these projectile weapons by overloading its systems and hopefully cause them explode while they remain stuck to their targets."

That might be a great way to disable a lot of competing mechs!

"A light mech cannot carry too many javelins. It will run out after three or four throws."

"The javelins are not that thick and heavy. I can understand why Dulo doesn't want to make them too large, but the light harasser mech does not have the mechanical power to throw out these spears with great force behind them. If the thrower is unlucky enough, those plasma javelins will slide right off the armor of the enemy mech."

The spectators clearly did not seem impressed by the works of this team. Even the expert commentators that was made up of a panel of Senior Mech Designers employed by the Davute University of Technology did not put much faith into this implementation.

[I am disappointed by the descendants of Master Barnard Solas Voiken. It is clear that they are being hampered by the demand to include at least one light mech in their designs, but their response to this is to design a light ranged mech that relies on throwing disposable energy spears to deal damage. The only saving grace of this mech is that it is also equipped with a submachine gun.]

[Now now, I would not dismiss these energy javelins out of hand. Miss Sara Voiken and Mr. Dulo Voiken are both employed by the Larkinson Clan. It is possible that they have learned powerful alien technologies that may be applicable to the energy javelins. We will have to see when Dulo Voiken has completed their designs.]

[You are being optimistic about the young man. He is forcing himself to add spear-like weapons to a mech that has no business with them. It is a waste of time for him to work on these energy javelins. He can achieve much better results if he equips the light harasser mech with a more powerful rifle. It should be able to offer decent covering fire for the spearman mech.]

[I would rather spend more time on studying the hybrid mech that the employer of the two Voiken siblings is working on. Look at how much progress the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan is making. Its frame already looks more complete than the aforementioned light harasser mech, and that is despite all of the work that he must put into integrating so many weapon systems. If Ves Larkinson does not slow down in the following hours, he should be able to complete his ambitious hybrid mech design well before the deadline!]

Chapter 4850 Mech Designers And Egos

As the 71 pairs of mech designers exerted their utmost to design the mechs that would allow them to rank high in the tournament, many important figures closely tracked their performance.

A small but distinguished group of mech designers and other dignitaries had gathered in an invisible VIP booth.

Different from the other floating observation rooms, this one happened to be equipped with an advanced stealth system.

This enabled the VIP booth to descend and provide its occupants with a more detailed view of the mech designers working down below.

In the past few hours since the Twin Weapons Tournament had begun, the VIP booth had been dipping close above the heads of numerous mech designers without alerting them in the slightest.

Perhaps the more sensitive or more augmented Journeymen may have felt an odd presence approaching, but the pressure riding on them meant that they were too distracted by their design work to notice anything unusual.

Among the Davutans that occupied the invisible VIP booth, two of them took up a central position in the seats.

Master Hergard Elroy looked amused as he studied the progress made by the different tournament participants. The odd rules introduced by him and his fellow teachers at the Davute University of Technology were already serving their purpose. The special demands threw so many mech designers out of their comfort zones that they all needed to exercise their imagination and design skills in a different manner than before.

None of the Journeymen were content with the demand that they needed to add an obvious weak point on the front of their mechs. They did everything possible to prevent enemy mechs from being able to exploit these vulnerabilities.

A higher-than-average proportion of designs centered around beast mechs. There were clear advantages to employing them as quadruped machines such as tiger mechs usually pointed their chests downwards.

While there were still ways for enemy machines to strike at these weak points, it almost certainly took more effort than usual to destroy beast mechs in this fashion.

Humanoid mechs on the other hand received other forms of protection to make it harder to target their weak points. Physical shields and barriers became the most obvious ones. Master Elroy had to add many different rules and sub-rules in order to prevent these cheeky Journeyman Mech Designers from going too far and defeating the original intention of this rule.

The weak points had to remain sufficiently accessible to enemies. Master Elroy and his colleagues did not care whether this rule inconvenienced many mech designers. They still had a number of options to mitigate this vulnerability. It was up to the mech designers themselves to develop more creative solutions that could successfully help their mechs survive in the arena.

"Well, Master? What is your judgment on the work of Patriarch Ves Larkinson?" A female voice impatiently asked.

"Patience, Madame Kernsk. I am well aware of your need to supply information to President Clive, but the tournament has only started fairly recently. The hybrid mech that your subject of interest is working on has yet to reveal his full plan. I cannot read minds and my understanding of the patriarch's field of expertise is still shallow."

The chief of staff of the highest political leader of Davute did not look amused. She did not want to spend three entire days on keeping an eye on a single individual.

She recognized the necessity of her task. No single individual within the borders of Davute had affected the state quite as drastically as the infamous leader of the Larkinson Clan!

If the information provided by Major Durant and the other individuals trapped in the pocket space was accurate, then this crafty mech designer was the chief individual responsible for launching a successful breakout attempt!

It was not an exaggeration to claim that Ves had played an important role in handing over a pocket space to the colonial federation.

Without his involvement, it became a lot more questionable whether the pocket space would remain whole and usable!

This made Reina Kernsk more ambivalent towards the Larkinson Patriarch. The man's influence in Davute had become too strong.

If he ever spoke a bad word about Davute, millions of people could easily lose faith in the state as well!

This made it even more important for Davute to manage its relationship with Ves Larkinson.

"We need as much information about him as you can provide to us. Nine capital ships are at stake."

Master Elroy did not expect to hear this news. "That is an excessively magnanimous prize for his services. There are larger groups than the Larkinson Clan that are not able to order as many fleet carriers at once. How many mech design commissions does he need to fulfill to win these new capital ships?"

"Every completed mech design corresponds to three fleet carriers. That is the agreement that we have forged with Patriarch Larkinson. We have received much criticism at court and in our network as a result, but we can handle the pressure. President Clive and I still possess a great amount of faith in Patriarch Larkinson's ability to adapt and overcome. That does not mean we operate on blind faith. It is better to obtain second opinions and third opinions on his capabilities so that we can properly plan and anticipate for the future."

Master Hergard Elroy understood the government's perspective. He had lived for over two centuries and worked with plenty of government institutions. He learned how to work with many different government entities and institutions in order to gain access to the exotic alien technology that he excelled at reverse engineering.

He chose to become a leading researcher at the Davute University of Technology after conducting thorough research on the people he intended to work with. He found it quite reassuring that

President Yenames Clive and his administration were more than happy to entrust capable mech designers and scientists with vital projects.

It was highly unusual for the government to pay so much and make so many concessions for a mere Journeyman Mech Designer.

There were many of them in Davute. Their skills and accomplishments varied considerably, but their design philosophies and design applications were too immature to make a difference in the fortunes of states.

Ves Larkinson was a clear exception to this rule. Mech designers such as Master Elroy generally judged the competence of mech designers by how much their products impacted the lives of people living in human society.

Rank technically didn't matter. A Master Mech Designer may be able to design beautiful and exquisite mechs, but if they only ended up in the hands of ultra-rich first-class elites, then the professional in question had done almost nothing to make human civilization stronger and better.

On the other hand, an ingenious Apprentice Mech Designer may be able to design a unique mech that not only happened to solve a problem that no one else managed to address, but also sell its copies for millions, thereby changing the future of entire states!

There was no doubt that Ves had already reached this level back when he was just an Apprentice in the Komodo Star Sector.

Whether it was his commercial works or his commissioned works for the Hex Army, Davute correctly recognized that the value of this young and flamboyant mech designer exceeded that of almost every Senior in the Krakatoa Middle Zone!

Therefore, Master Elroy was neither surprised by how much Davute was willing to pay for the Larkinson Patriarch's services nor thought that the boy was being overpaid.

"He is good for his age. I will give you that, Madame Kernsk." He spoke up after a time. His eyes continued to study Ves and his incomplete hybrid mech design. "I can see that he has a strong ego and passion for his work. That explains why he has been able to develop an entirely new field in mech design by himself, but it also makes him harder to work with. He will only work at his best if he respects the mech designer he is collaborating with or if he is able to take the lead in a mech design project. A young mech designer who is accustomed to being in charge and has achieved great success at doing so will not agree to be reduced to a subservient position."

Reina Kernsk frowned. The detailed study and analysis on Ves already described as much, but the colonial government still hoped that he would be more... accommodating in this regard.

"What does that mean in concrete terms?" She asked. "Our strategic advisors have formed a list of Masters that we believe may assist Patriarch Larkinson in fulfilling his mech design commissions. His previous works for another state is lacking in this assistance, and that has resulted in slightly subpar mechs in terms of raw performance. Our state wishes to avoid this and ensure that any of the mechs that the patriarch has designed for our state meets the highest standards. We cannot do that without involving Masters such as yourself."

"I understand." Master Elroy nodded. "Generally speaking, I do not object to assisting a young and promising Journeyman Mech Designer, but I am afraid that I am the exception rather than the rule. I

have withdrawn myself from competition so that I can dedicate more of my time on academic research and advancing the technologies that are helpful to other mech designers. I am both a teacher and a facilitator and have long developed a more generous mindset towards the younger generation. It is regrettable that my competences are not that relevant to his commissions."

"Perhaps you can involve yourself in order to act as a bridge or a mediator between Patriarch Larkinson and our older and more distinguished mech designers."

"That can work, but... it is too much of a waste, Madame Kernsk. My other colleagues will not accept my involvement if I have little to contribute to the design. It will only insult and irritate all of the mech designers if I needlessly insert myself in their projects. You will need to convince them to let a Journeyman dictate their work, which should not be easy. However... the status problem may not be as great as I fear..."

The female chief of staff turned to the Master. "Can you clarify that, Elroy?"

The older gentleman shook his head. "It is irrelevant for the time being. Let me give you my perspective. Too many of my colleagues will either outright refuse or only collaborate begrudgingly with a younger mech designer who is only valued because he has invented a few useful tricks. That is not to say they deny the worth of Patriarch Larkinson's innovations, but they cannot accept the fact that your government values his contributions over theirs. It is not in your best interest to alienate them against your state."

Reina Kernsk looked annoyed. Cooperating with Ves Larkinson was clearly the most logical choice, but the egos of the Masters that Davute had painstakingly attracted to its side made this far more difficult than it should.

"Our advisors are eager to encourage Master Manuel Terrence to collaborate with Patriarch Ves Larkinson on a line of energy shield-based mechs. In fact, we would welcome it if Renewal Tech & Design can form a joint venture with the Living Mech Corporation to publish a comprehensive line of strong energy shield mechs that also possesses the characteristics of living mechs."

Master Elroy laughed. "Hahaha! Good luck trying to convince Master Terrence to serve as the junior designer to a mech designer as young as Patriarch Larkinson. The good Master is not the best at cooperating with other mech designers. He has a strong passion for his work, and his dogged persistence in designing mechs that primarily base their defenses around energy shields has long caused him to become more withdrawn, shall we say. Terrence will most certainly try to usurp Patriarch Ves' leadership and impose his own vision on the mech design commission."

The woman frowned. "That is not what we wish to see. We explicitly commissioned the work of Patriarch Larkinson. We already signed separate contracts with Master Manuel Terrence."

"Then my suggestion is to leave him aside. Do not start with him because it will not end well."