

The Mech 5541

Chapter 5541 Uneven Challenge

Tension started to spread across the press hall. Everyone else fell completely silent as they observed the invisible confrontation between Professor Ves Larkinson and Master Aulaus Kreshnick.

This was not an ordinary challenge.

The journalists invited to this Q&A session may look as if they had become completely frozen, but they were frantically writing or dictating words through their cranial implants.

Each of them smelled drama from this exchange!

Hundreds of journalists began to conduct a lot of research. They dug every piece of information that looked relevant to them and began to weave the details into narrative that may or may not make sense.

It didn't matter so long as it was exciting enough!

Other individuals who intended to issue their own challenges became thoughtful as they observed the man who was lucky enough to issue his own one first.

Master Aulaus Kreshnik should not belong here. He was a dignified and powerful first-class mech designer who had realized his design philosophy a long time ago. He had lived through 5 times as many years as his target, and accrued a lot more knowledge and experience during his long career!

To be appointed as the leading mech designer at the Red Ocean branch of Pritchard & Terse was a testament to his ability and competence in the notoriously competitive Rubarthan mech market!

Why would such an esteemed mech designer travel to a middle zone and issue a challenger against a much younger professional who was not only just a Senior, but not even first-rater?!

This was an incredibly unfair matchup according to the standards of the mech industry!

It was almost as outrageous as Ves issuing a challenge to a lowly Novice Mech Designer!

Ves had every right to refuse such a ridiculous challenge. Let alone a Master Mech Designer, even a Senior Mech Designer of the same age as Aulaus Kreshnik would incur a lot of notoriety for the act of 'bullying' a member of the younger generation!

Yet strangely enough, none of the people in the crowd appeared to acknowledge the inherent unfairness of this possible matchup.

It was not because Master Kreshnik was a bad mech designer that diminished his work or anything.

It was because Ves was too strong of a Senior Mech Designer!

In fact, given all of the feats that made him so famous and notorious in and outside of the mech industry, an increasing number of people questioned whether the phrase 'mech designer' still held the same meaning when applied to Ves.

He was practically an alien freak compared to every other Senior Mech Designer!

The greatest reason why most people did not think that Master Kreshnik was bullying Ves was because of the disparity between their galactic citizenships!

The Red Association designated Ves as a tier 3 galactic citizen and did not receive any pushback for it. Many important power blocs such as the Red Fleet, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact did not object to this highly unusual promotion, which effectively meant they approved of this measure.

All of this effectively meant that Ves possessed capabilities that exceeded the vast majority of high-ranking mech designers in the new frontier!

Master Aulaus Kreshnik also happened to be on this list!

Even though he was a 200-year old Master Mech Designer who designed first-class multipurpose mechs all of the time, none of his designs or research results actually contributed all that much to human society.

Whether he refused to share his best results to humanity at large, or simply wasn't competent enough to produce major breakthroughs and advancements in his respective fields, Master Kreshnik simply wasn't valuable enough as a mech designer and a human being.

The best way to understand the differences in status was to imagine how human society would change if any of these people suddenly disappeared one day.

If Ves ever got lost, the damage to red humanity was incalculable! Much of his work was either incomplete or had yet to reach their full potential. The disappearance of his design philosophy may or may not compromise his living mechs, but the loss of his inheritance was a tragedy!

His absence would also stall all of his ongoing developments and research projects. Red humanity would lose the inventor and the most useful guide to many different E-technology applications.

Much of the reasons why the mechers promoted him from a tier 6 galactic citizen to a tier 3 galactic citizen all at once was because he was responsible for amazing innovations such as the companion spirits, design spirits, the transcendence glow, kinship networks and battle networks!

Ves had managed to develop all of these radical advancements before he reached his fortieth birthday!

His future potential was even more monstrous. If people had any idea what sort of crazy ideas he was cooking up in his mind and how likely he was able to realize them in the future, then their evaluation of him might increase even further!

Unfortunately, galactic citizenship was mostly based on current value rather than nebulous contributions in the distant future.

Even so, Ves truly possessed the strength and capital to defend his elevation to a tier 3 galactic citizen. The presentation where Ves introduced the Fey Fianna reinforced this idea ever further.

Compared to a renowned prodigy who had received the personal recognition of numerous Star Designers as well as god pilots, Master Aulaus Kreshnik was practically a nobody.

He was a tier 7 galactic citizen according to his record.

That might sound fairly impressive as it was not easy for many people to become a galactic citizen, let alone rise above tier 9, but this was considered a mediocre result!

Pretty much every Master Mech Designer was able to become a tier 8 galactic citizen. Master Carmin Olson had become one as well, and so did Master Benedict Cortez.

The act of realizing their design philosophies and the inherent capabilities of Master Mech Designers in general already merited this status.

Master Kreshnik was not all that special among other first-class Master Mech Designers, so his galactic citizenship only rose by a single tier as he continued to design a lot of mechs and developed his specialization further.

If the Rubarthan Master ever went missing, then the negative impact of his loss was... negligible.

Sure, Pritchard & Terse might enter into a crisis that might cause the company to collapse, but there were so many other mech companies in the Rubarthan Pact that such an incident could never affect the state of the mech industry.

Not even a crisis as enormous as the Great Severing had caused the business community of the Red Ocean to collapse!

The most serious loss that red humanity would suffer was that the mech industry lost an authoritative expert on energy shield technology.

Perhaps energy shields might not improve as fast as before, but who could tell the difference?

All of these thought exercises clearly highlighted the enormous disparity between the two mech designers.

In fact, people might even be able to argue that it was unfair for Ves to confront Master Kreshnik.

How could a tier 3 galactic citizen possibly condescend to bullying a mere tier 7 galactic citizen?

Of course, the actual reality wasn't as straightforward.

The two did not compete against each other in terms of overall contributions, but their ability to design good mechs.

Ves was unable to translate many of his contributions into the narrow field of mech design.

Master Kreshnik's extensive years of experience and knowledge accumulation became a lot more relevant in this situation!

In the end, no one was able to come up with a definitive answer of who possessed the advantage in this matchup.

The only way to know for sure was to allow the challenge to play out! The process and the outcome would definitely show how far Ves had come in terms of mech design.

This was why everyone was still in favor of the challenge even if Ves was at a severe disadvantage.

In any case, they all maintained their silence as Ves did not show any intention of avoiding this challenge.

He calmly discussed terms with Master Kreshnik.

At this time, the much older mech designer did not accept the proposal to let the Red Association preside over the challenge match.

"It is not my intention to question the impartiality of the mighty Red Association, but as a high-ranking honorary member of this great organization, there is an inherent conflict of interest."

"The Red Association would never tarnish its reputation in professional matters." Ves retorted.

"It is not my intention to question that. I believe in their impartiality as well, but it is best to address this matter to prevent any future unpleasanties."

The two sides eventually agreed to allow the challenge to be supervised by the Red Association as well as the more local equivalent set up by the Rubarthans.

The first-rate colonial superstates did not like the Red Two.

If possible, the Terrans and the Rubarthans did everything possible to avoid interacting with the mechers and the fleeters, so they built up their own infrastructure that could partially fulfill the roles of the current hegemon of human civilization.

The two argued on a bunch of other terms.

Neither side was allowed to make use of mech models other than the Standard Fey Fianna and the Nelerat Mark I.

Ves was not allowed to equip his drone mechs with custom fey that were not on the official product catalog of the LMC.

Neither side was allowed to apply any upgrades or modifications to their machines.

The two spent 10 whole minutes on restricting the range of mech pilots that would pilot their machines in the challenge match.

The mech pilots should not be older than 40 years old.

The genetic aptitude of the mech pilots should be no higher than B-.

The mechs should only be piloted by genuine second-class mech pilots who never benefited from first-class education and augmentations.

Neither mech designers were allowed to interfere directly in the challenge match through the use of E energy manipulation or other forms of space wizardry.

The stakes were high. Both sides stood to lose a lot of reputation and market share if they lost. This was why Ves and Master Kreshnik did not dare to be sloppy!

"When?" Ves succinctly asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Acceptable. Anything else?"

Master Kreshnik loosened his posture and smiled. "No further. We have covered all of my points of concern. I find the terms to be acceptable."

"I have no objections either. Good luck, then. May the best mechs win."

That was it. The challenge had been made and accepted.

Tomorrow afternoon, the newly announced Fey Fianna would enter into a challenge match against the Nelerat Mark I, an unannounced second-class defensive rifleman mech that was sure to contain a lot of surprises!

Though Ves did not have a good understanding of Master Kreshnik's specialization, the image of the Nelerat Mark I contained a lot of useful clues.

If Ves did his homework on the Rubarthan Master Mech Designer, he would surely be able to decipher this interesting ranged mech design.

"Before I move on to answering other questions, let us get these challenges out of the way." He announced as he addressed the crowd again. "Anyone who intends to issue your challenge to me, raise your hand. I am willing to accept a handful more in order to prove that my work is robust enough to handle a diverse range of threats. Please do not issue any challenges if all you have is a ranged mech model."

After a brief delay, around 50 arms rose in the air. That offered Ves plenty of challenges to prove from, though he was sure that not all of them were serious.

It would not surprise him if a mech designer simply wanted to take advantage of all of the publicity to spread his name, not caring that he would turn himself into a laughing stock for presenting a weak mech!

"Hm, let's see who can give me a worthwhile challenge..."

Chapter 5542 Interesting Challenges

After Ves courageously asked for other challengers to come forth, around 50 or so mech designers or representatives eagerly wanted to enjoy their moment of fame as well.

Yet not every mech design was suitable to challenge the recently unveiled Fey Fianna.

"I challenge your Fey Fianna with my Honest Arx! Do you dare to put your drone mechs up against my axeman mechs? If you are confident in the defenses of your mechs, then my Honest Arx will be happy to put them to the test! Let's turn this into a tovsio group match. Combat mechs like ours are not meant for dueling. Only a big battle can their teamwork shine!"

Everyone including Ves could see that the Fey Fianna was at a disadvantage against an axeman mech like the Honest Arx.

The offensive melee mech possessed a good balance between physical power, defense and mobility. It was only armed with a large axe and a backup pistol, but it did not require any more complicated weapon systems in order to function as an excellent breakthrough machine.

Such a mech was sturdy enough to resist a lot of attacks on approach. Once their enemies were within reach, the power of their continuous axe blows could disable nearly any form of defense, including energy shields!

Although the hyper energy shield field Fey was able to leverage a large amount of water-attributed E energy to amplify its defenses, there was a limit to this process.

Ves performed a lot of quick mental calculations in his mind. He carefully estimated the specifications of the Honest Arx based on his observations and felt that its offensive power was not weak.

The only part about this mech that was weak was its mobility, but he was pretty sure that his challenger took this into account. The Honest Arx should have a means to close the gap.

Another unfavorable point was the group match. If Ves had a choice, he would rather opt for a one-on-one duel than a more chaotic group match.

Melee mechs working as a team could easily box in their opponents from multiple sides, thereby negating any advantage in mobility to an extent.

It was not possible for a ranged mech to kite numerous melee mechs, especially in a fairly restricted environment such as a mech arena.

In short, the Fey Fianna had to give up so many advantages that the only way for it to win was to overpower the Honest Arx on a qualitative basis!

Yet this was exactly the trap that his latest challenger had set. If Ves refused this challenge, he implicitly conveyed the suggestion that his Fey Fianna were not that special.

This would neutralize a part of the momentum that Ves had managed to build up during his previous presentation.

So what?

The Fey Fianna possessed clear strengths and weaknesses. Though its ability to cope with different situations was greater than usual if it was able to pick and choose the right combination of fey, that still did not take away its vulnerability at close range.

Though Ves had designed the Fey Fianna in a way that it was able to put up a 'decent' fight when armed with a melee weapon, a dedicated offensive melee mech was so much better at the former would only be able to buy a dozen seconds more time before it inevitably got crushed!

Though Ves could think of a few ways for 10 Fey Fiannas to perform a miracle and somehow defeat 10 axeman mechs after paying a grievous price, it was not worth it to take on this punishing challenge.

He plainly shook his head. "If you wish to put your Honest Arx to the test, then I suggest you approach a mech designer who has recently designed a comparable melee mech. I am not afraid to admit that my Fey Fianna will not fare well in this matchup, but only for the time being. If you are willing to wait for a year for the first batches of Fey Fiannas to grow and for our mech pilots to become much more proficient in piloting them, then I am more than willing to accept this challenge. Even if my drone mechs are still disadvantaged on paper, I am more than willing to bet that the precipitation of time has benefited my Fey Fiannas a lot more than your own products!"

Ves smirked as the opposing Master Mech Designer looked upset.

It took a bit of quick thinking, but Ves had successfully mitigated the damage of refusing the challenge. He not only emphasized that this was a lopsided matchup to begin with, but that his Fey Fianna could still defeat a bunch of threatening axeman mechs so long as they had developed their individual powers long enough!

This was a capability that virtually no other standard mech model possessed. Ves essentially communicated to everyone who was watching this Q&A session that as long as the Fey Fianna grew old enough, it could transcend any weakness that restrained it in the past!

The Ouroboros was the most impressive example of this, but it was a pity that Ves was not able to explain that it was 'his' work.

He hadn't even been born when the Ouroboros initially came to life!

"Next." Ves said as he let the randomizer pick another challenger.

A small light soon shone on a woman who sat near the back of the hall.

"Thank you for unlocking my voice. I am Master Ginevra Hubert-Colmain from the Greenwich Middle Zone." A woman introduced herself while she projected her newest work. "My mech company has recently designed the Montebera GHCMQ-3. It is a second-class hyper lancer mech that excels at charging but can purge its armor and competently fight hand-to-hand with short spears. I would like to compare its performance against your Standard Fey Fianna. Their mech archetypes may be completely different, but we can learn the most about our works when they are put into atypical combat scenarios."

Few if any people imagined a matchup between a drone mech and a lancer mech. The two were so far apart that it seemed that they belonged in different galaxies.

Their roles were very different on a fundamental level.

Drone mechs were generally versatile, but lacking in strong specialties and hard power.

Lancer mechs were highly specialized and only excelled in a very specific role.

Of course, the Fey Fianna and Master Hubert Colmain's Montebera were hardly typical to their mech types.

This made this potential matchup a lot more interesting.

Would the Fey Fianna have the hard power to defeat these formidable-looking melee mechs?

Would the Montebera have the flexibility to overcome all of the difficulties imposed by the fey and defeat the drone mechs themselves?

No one was able to come up with any definitive answers to these questions!

That was a strong indication that this challenge was meaningful. Neither side was at an overwhelming disadvantage, and the variables were tricky enough that neither side could complain about the unfairness of this matchup.

That was good enough for Ves.

"Terms."

"Fight in space if preferable. The Montebr needs enough free space to build up its momentum and perform a proper charge."

"Not necessary." Ves rejected. "The Fey Fianna is not a heavy knight mech. Your Montebr doesn't have to build up so much momentum to breach the defenses of my machine. It is best to limit these challenge matches to Phoca Arena. It is large enough that your lancer mechs should still have enough room to perform adequate charge attacks. Do not forget that the limited range in the arena grants my Fey Fianna less time to shoot at your Montebr."

Master Hubert-Colmain conceded this argument. "Very well. Then let us turn it into a match that involves the least amount of mechs as possible. A single duel is most preferable. The mass of our mechs may be far apart, but their prices are in the same range."

That was an interesting choice. Her request essentially signaled that she had greater confidence in her Montebras if they did not have to fight against many ranged mechs at the same time.

Ves had a guess why this may be the case. From what he could surmise from the appearance of the Monebra, the lancer mech was fairly heavily armored in its base configuration.

Once it purged its armor, its physical defenses plunged while its mobility skyrocketed.

Though it would be far too exaggerated if its speed and maneuverability matched the standards of a light mech, the liberated machine should still be fast enough to quickly catch up to the Fey Fiannas.

However, his latest works were not slow. It would still take a bit of time for the Montebras to catch up to the kiting Fey Fiannas.

This gave his drone mechs enough time to pelt the Montebras with a continuous stream of attacks of multiple ranged weapon fey!

Master Hubert-Colmain had clearly witnessed the offensive prowess of the Fey Fianna during the previous demonstrations. If dozens of fey focused their fire on the relatively fast but fragile Montebras that had purged their armor, then the latter would quickly be defeated in detail!

"How about a small team?" Ves suggested. "A one-on-one duel is too simple. I think a two-on-two match is more interesting for everyone. If one mech makes a mistake, there is still an opportunity for the other one to redeem itself in the unfolding battle."

"That is acceptable."

They continued to discuss the terms of this challenge. They were nothing special and contained all kinds of common sense rules that were meant to prevent cheating and gaming the system.

"See you tomorrow afternoon." Ves eventually concluded his talk with the Master from the Greenwich Middle Zone. "It is nice to compete against an actual second-class mech designer. I am curious to see how my Fey Fianna will fare against a pair of lancer mechs."

"Do you have enough Fey Fiannas and mech pilots to fight multiple challenges on the same day?"

"We do." Ves smiled back. "We do not have many Standard Fey Fiannas left that are paired with mech pilots who have been able to train with them for longer than a week. By the way, we still have three Elite Fey Fiannas in stock that are also open to challenges. If anyone else has a collection of transphasic hyper mechs, feel free to issue your challenge."

The randomizer picked a bunch of people who issued unacceptable challenges. Ves did not think too much about these developments and simply refused any obvious unfair matchups.

Soon enough, a man who almost looked as young as Ves stood up when he was lucky to be selected.

"Everyone has learned that you are a prodigy and a genius. You have feats on your name that no other mech designer of our generation has come close to accomplishing by themselves. You are a hero of our times."

Though Ves felt flattered by the praise, he knew that this was useless talk.

"The Q&A session does not last all-night. Please be succinct so that we can spare as much time as possible."

"I have also earned the reputation as a genius!" The young mech designer quickly said. "I might not be able to match you in the quantity of my inventions, but I am utterly convinced that their quality exceeds the quality of your own works! Please accept my challenge and agree to put your Fey Fianna in a duel against my latest hybrid mech!"

When the boastful mech designer finally projected an image of his proud work, all of the other mech designers exhibited a unified reaction.

They grew disappointed.

Ves did not bother to hide his contempt. "Is that it? Let me guess. You are still a Journeyman Mech Designer, right?"

"So only you are allowed to accept leapfrog challenges? Do not underestimate me, professor. I am a genius! I have won design duels against Senior Mech Designers in the past! My latest hybrid mech is more than able to push your Fey Fianna to its limits."

Ves' response to this extraordinary claim was to transmit a command that opened a hole beneath the Journeyman's seat.

"Bye bye."

Chapter 5543 The Human Interest

Nobody who had the guts to issue a challenge to Ves was stupid.

Except for that Journeyman Mech Designer who either tried to become famous overnight or thought that his disgrace of a mech design actually stood a chance against the Fey Fianna, the other challengers all exerted a lot of pressure.

This was because their qualifications were all good. Their mechs were all well-designed and possessed numerous different advantages that gave them an edge over the competition.

Ves did not dare to underestimate them. Just the fact that they were designed by Master Mech Designers who realized their design philosophies a long time ago and made further advancements in the years ahead meant that their specializations were bound to make a massive impact in battle.

That did not mean that Ves was afraid of them. Ever since he developed the ambition to turn the Fey Fianna into the market leader for second-class drone mechs, he needed to show that it had the strength to resolve numerous challenges.

The Storm Sparrow line had earned its dominance for many generations due to its strength as well as its ability to cope with a diverse set of enemies!

The demonstration match that took place before already showcased the superior performance of the Fey Fianna, but despite the lopsided numbers, not everyone was willing to take this outcome seriously.

The opposing rifleman mechs simply hadn't been good enough.

The challenges issued by other mech designers were different because the quality and strength of their works definitely ranked a lot closer to the top of the mech market!

All of this presented a lot of interesting questions for Ves. He knew that so long as the Fey Fianna either won or produced a good showing during tomorrow's matches, its ascension to a market leader would turn into a guaranteed outcome!

However, if the challenger mechs all outshone the Fey Fianna, then that would cause many people to doubt whether the hype was real.

Ves did not dare to accept too many challenges for that reason. Numerous victories in succession might cause the Fey Fianna to build up a little more momentum, but the initial public reaction was already high enough.

In contrast, just a single ugly defeat where the Fey Fianna got utterly crushed by a challenger mech would have significant negative repercussions!

It was a lot easier to remember such a glaring defeat. Even if the Fey Fianna went on to win the remaining challenges, the stain could not be removed so easily.

In the end, Ves rejected a lot of challenges because they contained traps or because they stacked the deck a little too much in the favor of the other party.

No challenger wanted to lose, so they tried to get away with as many favorable terms as they could.

This turned into a game of sorts. The challengers engineered their proposals that granted them serious advantages without making it obvious on the surface.

Ves managed to catch most of these pitfalls anyway.

This was because every mech designer had to present the mech models meant to challenge the Fey Fianna. There was no way that Ves would accept any challenges when he did not even know what to expect!

In any case, when Ves did not hesitate to reject over a dozen different challenges, he made it clear that he did not care about his current image.

He also conveyed the clear ability to discern the strong points of different mech designs upon sight and figure out how the rules benefited them in an unreasonable manner.

This was a subtle way of proving his competence as a mech designer. At the very least, it was impossible for other mech designers to take advantage of his ignorance in their shared profession.

In the end, Ves chose to accept two more challenges.

One of them would put his Fey Fianna in a match against a striker mech.

Under normal circumstances, a striker mech was one of the natural counters against a drone mech.

The flamethrowers or other area denial weapons of a striker mech was one of the most suitable ways to wipe out a lot of spurs at once!

The Sparrows of the Sparrow Storm were especially vulnerable to this as they were both thin and numerous.

The Fey Fianna deviated so much from this pattern that it had become a different mech type entirely!

The question now was how well the Fey Fianna could cope against a 'former' counter like a striker mech.

The results had significant implications to Ves and his latest commercial work.

If the fey proved to be strong and resilient enough to cope with area attacks such as those launched by flamethrowers and explosive missiles, then that would undoubtedly make the Fey Fianna much safer to pilot!

After all, the real enemies of red humanity were the native alien races of the Red Ocean. Numerous races invested heavily in arming their warships with all kinds of missiles and more exotic forms of weapons that could easily wipe out a lot of spurs at once.

The fourth and last challenge that Ves accepted surprisingly involved the Elite Edition of the Fey Fianna.

The challenger was willing to put forth a top-notch quasi-first-class transphasic hyper hero mech!

Just like the Elite Fey Fianna, the hero mechs were designed for an elite mech unit and not really meant for widespread adoption. They looked like they could be fairly threatening at range, but become even more dangerous up close.

It was almost certain that these hero mechs would choose to close in, as they were at a clear disadvantage at range.

Accepting this challenge was essentially putting the Elite Fey Fianna up against melee mechs, which was anything but ideal.

The biggest mitigating factor was that hero mechs were not completely optimized for melee combat.

Having designed numerous hero mechs in the past, Ves possessed a particular love and understanding for this interesting mech type.

Though the opposing hero mech model clearly looked like it possessed a couple of nasty surprises, that was to be expected for a mech of this caliber.

Quasi-first-class mechs straddled the line between second-class mechs and first-class mechs.

They already possessed a part of the characteristics of first-class multipurpose mechs, which meant that their ability to cope with different situations was much better.

It was pretty clear that the Elite Fey Fianna would be facing an uphill battle when fighting against a hero mech that boasted even better versatility in combat, but Ves could not resist this interesting scenario.

Ves needed to know.

He needed to know whether his Fey Fianna could defeat his favorite mech type.

Even if his Elite Fey Fianna ended up losing this high-level matchup, Ves did not think he would have any regrets!

Once he dealt with all of the challenges, Ves resumed the Q&A session, though not everyone was able to maintain their interest by this time.

Instead of sitting around and asking stupid questions, a number of people would rather wait for tomorrow and view the confrontations between the Fey Fianna and the challenger mechs!

Of course, this only applied to the minority of the crowd. Most were serious journalists who were earnest about doing their jobs.

"Eric McMaster of the Human Interest." A bookish-looking first-rater introduced himself as he spoke in one of the most sophisticated accents that Ves had ever heard. "I would dearly like to invite you to an interview where we can explore your thoughts on subjects such as the role of the Red Association in the current age or the future of red humanity in the context of widespread availability of E energy radiation. Alas, since you have set a clear rule that every question must be relevant to your latest product reveal, we will have to postpone this interview."

"Do you have a question, Mr. McMaster?"

"You have revealed powerful technologies with the release of the Fey Fianna. According to expert analysis, the principal reason it is able to punch above its weight is because you have especially developed new E-technologies for your work. Given the abstruse, confusing and thought-provoking nature of E energy and the technologies derived from this phenomenon, is there any justification to the argument that we are working with a force of magic as opposed to a force of science?"

What a deep and difficult question.

Though Ves was not familiar with the publication that Eric McMaster worked for, Alexa already sent a quick summary to his cranial implant.

The Human Interest was apparently a monthly publication that primarily published philosophical and political articles.

It had a reputation for being erudite, and many of its writers were known to be idealistic.

In other words, they were dreamers.

Yet it was because of this exact characteristic that the Human Interest had become a widely read publication among the upper echelon of human civilization!

No matter whether they were leaders, statesmen or politicians among the mechers, fleeters, Terrans or Rubarthans, they all shared a common interest in this elitist publication!

The Human Interest occasionally invited guests to write opinion articles on a relevant subject matter. The writers had the option to publish the articles with their names or remain anonymous to shield themselves against any possible backlash.

Ves actually grew intrigued about this publication. The Human Interest must be able to influence a lot of human policy makers, which meant that its influence was great!

How come he never heard of it before? This was one of the many secrets that separated the upper echelon from the masses.

"I think it is wrong to turn this into a false dichotomy." Ves answered. "Science and 'magic', however you choose to define it, are both artificial constructs. We construct certain models and theories of how stuff works, but that does not mean we make the rules of how our reality operates. That would make us gods. That said, I prefer to retain the conventions of science in my work. The word 'magic' has negative connotations and can produce many misunderstandings. It also imposes

expectations that we can magically wave our problems away as long as we manipulate E energy well enough. I do not want my mechs associated with such an impression. My mechs are powered by E-technology, not magic. It would be a mistake to think otherwise."

To be honest, Ves was not as confident in this answer as he sounded, but he kept his doubts hidden.

"Thank you for your insightful answer. Allow me to ask a different question. Your Fey Fiannas appear to be able to affect human society to a greater degree than many other mechs for sale. How do you think that your Fey Fianna can strengthen our society if it continues to sell? Will these changes be for good or for ill?"

It could be argued that those were two questions, but oh well.

"My main ambition has always been to persuade the mech community to treat their mechs as if they are living beings who are eager to partner with mech pilots. The popularity and the prospected sales of the Fey Fianna gives me hope that I can introduce more people to the wonders and benefits of living mechs. More specifically, the Fey Fianna is also a new and more advanced form of living mech. I want to make it clear that I am the foremost authority in this specific field. Everyone else who has dabbled in living mechs cannot possibly design a mech like the Fey Fianna. They simply do not know the right methods or design philosophy to replicate all of the work that I have put into mech models such as the Fey Fianna."

The journalist looked mildly impressed. "You sound confident on this matter. It is clear that you care greatly for your living mechs. Your previous works have already shown a measure of autonomy and conscious thinking in past instances. However, the fey that accompany your Fey Fianna seem so intelligent and responsive that it is difficult to believe that it is controlled by a single mech pilot. How much do the pilots control their own fey, and how much are the spurs governed by their own living mechs? Thirty years from now, it is conceivable that you will develop this specific application further. Is there any place for a human mech pilot in the cockpit of a mech in this potential future?"

Chapter 5544 Concerning Trend

The Human Interest possessed an outsized influence in human society.

That was the case in both the old galaxy and the new frontier!

Though the Great Severing had separated its Red Ocean branch from the Milky Way, the Human Interest in the new frontier simply carried on with only minor adaptations to its policies and approach.

One of the main goals of the Human Interest was to serve as the conscience and the guiding voice of red humanity.

It was one of the publications that most encouraged the people of the new frontier to cling to their original humanity and avoid getting lost in all of the radical changes that took place in the new frontier.

Whether it was the heavy pressure exerted by the Red War or the seemingly magical gifts brought by exotic radiation, there were many ways for people to stray from their original selves.

This was anathema to a publication like the Human Interest.

This was why Ves felt as if he was in the crosshairs of this newspaper at the moment. Many of the changes brought by his inventions steered their users in a direction that turned humans increasingly further away from how they used to think and behave back in the Milky Way.

It was difficult and dangerous to attack Ves directly, especially since his work had received widespread support from so many different parts of human society.

The best way to attack him was to question the safety of his works.

Ves leaned forward and stared a little closer at Eric McMaster. This was a first-class journalist who worked for one of the most influential publications of human civilization. It would be a mistake to underestimate this sharp and observant fellow!

"It is difficult to describe and define living mechs in the terms and meanings that people use today." He replied to the journalist's latest question. "Their properties and their implications may not be agreeable to everyone. I am aware that humanity is averse to the idea of surrendering too much control to artificial intelligences and autonomous systems. However, my living mechs are different from those cold and unfeeling machines."

"Is that truly the case, Professor Larkinson?" McMaster immediately interjected. "By your frequent admissions, living mechs are not only intelligent to the extent of developing actual sapience, but they are also able to take partial or complete control over their own 'bodies'. That is a concerning development. How far do you intend to slide down the slippery slope? The more we depend on your living mechs, the less our mech pilots are able to fight by themselves when your inventions fail for whatever reason."

The journalist's words evoked deep-rooted fears of losing control over the technologies that humans depended upon to live and prosper.

There were many cases in human history where automated societies either glitched out or crashed completely. The people who lived under those circumstances certainly did not enjoy the experience!

Ves found that he could not provide an answer without making at least one concession. This was not a pleasant development, but he saw no other way of worming out of this confrontation.

Avoiding it would do no good. Fundamental problems like these would show up sooner or later. It was best to get it out of the way while he was still surrounded by a halo.

"Living mechs may not be for everyone." He admitted. "It takes a certain level of trust and willingness to pilot mechs that are alive and can grow more powerful over time. I cannot guarantee that living mechs can be twisted into monsters or enemies of red humanity, but I have done my best to minimize these undesirable outcomes. I have little control over what happens once my living mechs fall into the hands of my customers. It is up to them to treat my products correctly and 'raise' them into the strongest and most dependable allies of red humanity."

"You speak as if your living mechs are a separate race, one that is able to learn from the human race long enough to betray it one day."

Ves grew increasingly more frustrated at the attempts to twist his living mechs in the worst possible light.

"As I have said before, living mechs develop according to how they are being used and treated." He firmly responded. "Unlike ordinary mechs that steadily depreciate in value the older they become,

my products are the opposite. They can become stronger, smarter and more unique over time. These are all powerful advantages that can lead to much better results in battle. However, these tradeoffs do not come without a price. The people who intend to make use of them must treat their machine partners in a responsible manner. I see them as the modern equivalent of pets. They can be our most valuable companions, but only if we treat them with love and respect."

Eric McMaster adopted a deeply skeptical look. "Are you suggesting that red humanity cannot overcome our enemies and secure our survival unless we turn to living mechs? Is the power that we can obtain from them worth the risk of raising an even more threatening enemy in the future? How can we stop ourselves from raising and educating a superior synthetic race that may eventually decide that there is no purpose to serving their creators anymore? No living beings wish to become slaves to others if they can help it. The greater their power, the greater the risk of rebellion. Do you agree, or do you deny that your living mechs can turn against humanity one day?"

This was growing increasingly trickier for Ves. Gavin and numerous other advisers quickly transmitted a few diplomatic ways for him to deflect all of these concerns, but he did not pay attention to any of the well-meaning advice.

The questions posed by the journalist were all valid and deserved proper answers in return. The topics were also deeply related to his design philosophy. Ves could not avoid these issues if he wanted to develop his specialization further.

"Living mechs are products that are uniquely suited to the Age of Dawn." He responded first. "The introduction of E energy radiation has given us access to a new source of energy, but because it is so powerful and so accessible, there is a much greater chance that malcontents will abuse its power and inflict harm on others. Does that mean that we should abandon hyper technology and E-technology? That is absurd! The native aliens of the Red Ocean do not care about our morality or our doubts. They will wipe us out so long as we keep holding ourselves back all of the time."

"That does not mean that we should abolish all of the rules and the taboos that have kept our society safe and prosperous in the previous age, professor."

"I agree." Ves smiled. "I doubt that many people will be able to control themselves once they have managed to get their hands on a powerful warship. That said, the power of living mechs cannot be obtained in an instant. It takes years and constant use to fuel their evolution. Their growth efficiency is too low if they are left by themselves. Only through constant human contact will they be able to tap into their potential, and that is intentional. They are never designed to operate independently. They need us, just as we need them. It is only when we work together that we can both achieve greatness."

Just as McMaster wanted to ask another question, Ves quickly muted the insistent journalist's voice.

"That is enough. There are many others who are waiting to ask their questions. It is not polite to deprive them of their opportunities. Next!"

The rest of the Q&A session proceeded fairly smoothly as no one wanted to make life difficult for Ves.

The only issue was that the contentious exchange had Ves' good mood. He no longer felt as satisfied as he knew that trouble was likely brewing in the future.

If an influential publication such as the Human Interest started to regard living mechs as a potential threat, then a movement may arise in the future where his products might be actively rejected by entire groups of people!

Though Ves did not think this would happen as his works were simply too useful, it wouldn't be the first time that humanity deliberately turned its back on powerful technology because of paranoia.

Ves needed to reset his mood and restore his mindset, or else he would never be able to handle tomorrow's challenges with grace.

This was why he decided to check up on the people who had fallen in love with his Fey Fianna.

"This mech is a blast! It's so much easier to pilot than the Sparrow Storm that it isn't even a competition!" A ticket holder enthusiastically exclaimed after he reluctantly exited the cockpit of a demonstration mech. "Five minutes is not enough! I haven't come close to exploring what I can do with all of those fantastic fey. Controlling them is a breeze. Them being alive isn't as scary as it sounds because they are so trusting and obedient. They remind me of my kids. You only have to raise them right."

After the evening rolled on, much of Phoca Arena had become a lot emptier. The product reveal had come to an end and many people had their fill of the excitement of today.

Not everyone chose to leave, though. A large number of mech pilots and other interested parties continued to linger long after the main presentation had come to an end.

Each of them became so fascinated by the Fey Fianna that they either wanted to test pilot the new mechs or study them at closer distances.

The fact that tens of thousands of mech pilots, mech designers, mech commanders and even mech design students chose to stay in the evening was a testament to the attraction of the LMC's latest product line!

"When you came up with the Fey Fianna, could you have imagined that you would have made such a splash in the mech community by releasing your new drone mech?" Gavin asked as he stood next to his superior.

Ves shook his head. "I never thought about putting it up for sale. The Fey Fianna... is not a traditional drone mech. I thought that if I managed to succeed in designing a multi-spirit living mech, I would keep it as an exclusive mech for our clan. A machine with all of these capabilities sounds as if it is too good to be used by other people. I also believed that only the Larkinsons can make full use of the living and growth aspect of my new mech."

Alexa Streon found that to be a perplexing idea as she held Lucky in her arms. The cute archemetal cat purred as she petted and scratched his head and back in just the right ways.

"Meow-"

"You cling too much to the habit of reserving your best works to our clan." She told Ves. "I have not lived through the turbulent early history of the Larkinson Clan, but it has clearly stabilized ever since you chose to settle down in Davute. The Design Department has designed and updated many Larkinson-exclusive mechs that were quite good on release. They may not have been able to produce an impact as large as the Fey Fianna, but they would have expanded the LMC's product

catalog and sped up the growth and expansion of our clan. Why did you decide to confine well-received mech models such as the Stingripper, the Nullifier and the Redlance to our clan?"

"There were good reasons at the time." Ves defended himself. "We were fighting a lot more actively against the Fridaymen and other human opponents back then. Each of them are capable of spending a lot of time and effort on dissecting and figuring out all of the weak points of our mechs. Our clan has relied a lot on unexpected trump cards to turn a battle around. We still need to rely on them to prevent the native aliens from figuring us out. While I am willing to think about putting up a handful of Larkinson-exclusive mech models for sale, our Larkinson Army must still retain its own unique strengths in order to remain competitive."

He did not intend to change his mind too much.

Chapter 5545 Priority Hires

Miss Alexa Streon came from a Terran ancient clan. She was familiar with the benefits and the rationale of building up a mech roster of exclusive models.

However, the Larkinson Clan was different from the Streon Ancient Clan.

The latter was a behemoth and had so many mech designers at its disposal that it was not short on exclusive and commercial works.

The Larkinson Clan was much smaller and needed to earn a lot more money in order to deepen its foundation.

The Larkinsons had a lot of ambitions, but not enough funding, resources, access and relationships to strengthen and deepen their roots in human society.

The successful expeditions occasionally produced massive windfalls, but these were incidental and unreliable earnings that had nothing to do with normal economic activity.

Due to the expeditionary fleet's penchant for challenging ever more powerful adversaries, the Larkinson Clan was forced to invest much of the money and resources obtained from plunder into strengthening its own forces!

In short, the Larkinson Clan's military arm had grown disproportionately large compared to its civilian arm!

That was not a healthy development at all. If the former ever suffered a catastrophe, the flawed foundation of the clan would immediately teeter on the precipice of collapse.

This was because it was impossible for the underdeveloped industries of the Larkinson Clan to maintain the current level of expenditures and other needs of the vastly oversized Larkinson Army and the Larkinson Navy!

What was worse was that the Larkinson Clan had recently founded a lot of side branches on different planets.

Each of them enabled the LMC and other daughter companies to enter into a lot of new markets, but it took a lot of time and money to pay back the initial investments.

In short, the Larkinson Clan was still stuck at the stage where it needed to put a lot of effort into building up enough profit-generating activities to sustain its high consumption.

It made a lot more sense for the Larkinsons to focus a lot more on building up its core businesses, of which the Living Mech Corporation was by far the most important.

Yet instead of devoting more time and energy on expanding its product catalog, Ves directed an unreasonable amount of time and effort into designing and updating all kinds of Larkinson-exclusive mechs!

Though Ves understood Alexa's underlying perspective, he did not entirely agree with her perspective.

He shook his head even as he stared at all of the trial mechs being put to use. "We are all products of our environments. During my career, I have found that depending on others is dangerous without enough force on hand. The cost of betraying us was not high enough because we weren't strong enough to retaliate. That has started to change as our clan built up its mech legions and started to win impressive victories with the help of our exclusive mechs as well as our expert mechs. We pursued growth through the fastest means possible, and that strategy has paid off. We would have never been able to earn so much glory, fear and respect in such a short span of time. Have you forgotten the lessons that I have taught during my Frontier Wisdom course?"

"I did not forget, but... you have neglected your mech company for too long, sir. You are lucky that you have designed a remarkably powerful mech that can captivate the market this time. If you failed to design a mech that is close to the level of the Fey Fianna, you would have been unable to stand out from the competition. It would have been much harder for you to reverse the decline of the LMC at the start of the new mech generation."

Ves nodded. She had a good point. It was not healthy to rely on flukes and other rare blowout successes to correct for his mistakes.

He continued to watch the trial mechs being piloted by both experienced drone mech pilots as well as complete newcomers to this mech type.

It was interesting to see that both groups responded well to the Fey Fianna. Hardly any of them exhibited any frustration or lack of trust towards the living mechs.

"I intend to invest a lot more into expanding and updating the product catalog of the LMC in the next two or three years." Ves decided. "You are correct that our clan's economic foundation is not good enough. We grew so quickly that our uneven development has caused many parts of our clan to fall behind. I will focus on designing a lot more commercial mechs in the second-class market. The Design Department will also undergo a large expansion to scale up our design activities. I hope that our clan will be in a much more solid position by the time we begin to participate in the deep strike operations. By then, my focus will largely be centered around strengthening our clan's core combat capabilities."

"In other words, you wish to go back to old habits."

"So long as our product catalog is large enough, our clan should be in a much more stable position." Ves responded. "Aside from that, we have a much larger number of mech designers at our disposal. We can design a lot of mechs even when I am busy with other affairs."

"The quality of our designs and the popularity of our products are highly dependent on your work, professor. The lack of Master Mech Designers in our Design Department is a major limitation."

"I know, but that just means that we should put a little more effort into raising other competent mech designers. What people actually want are living mechs that introduce a lot of new stuff that they have never seen from any other machines. They do not necessarily have to be designed by Masters or an outlier like myself in order to become popular. Just look at Ketis. Her unusual circumstances have led her to find her own path to success. Her swordsman mechs are so useful that they will always have a place in the market."

"Ketis alone is not enough to take over the burden of supporting our clan."

"Then we just need to obtain more mech designers who can design living mechs by themselves." Ves shrugged. "You are on your way to becoming one. There's also a kid in our Design Department that has been puzzling over living mechs for a while. Then there are my students who are on track to graduate from the Eden Institute in the coming years. Each of them can expand our design capacity in the best way possible. Wouldn't it be great if you are in charge of your own design projects?"

The former Terran scion did not think she was ready to bear this heavy burden.

"It is too premature to conclude that I can take over your role and design new living mechs that can achieve the same level of sales as your past successes. I am not entirely suited to working on second-class mechs either. I am much more at home with first-class multipurpose mechs, and the same applies to the graduates of the Eden Institute."

"Don't worry. I promise you that our Design Department will go through a major expansion in the near future." Ves said with a reassuring expression. "One of the reasons why I agreed to take a trip to Bortele is because I intend to hire a lot of second-class mech designers to fill up the void left behind by the lead designers who chose to undergo EdNet training. The success of our latest product reveal will definitely make it easy to hire a lot of competent Journeymen."

Ves did not intend to return to New Constantinople VIII without a handful of mech designers who were just as good as his other lead designers.

Though Ves had his mind set on becoming a first-class mech designer, the product reveal today had renewed his appreciation for second-class mechs. They were still an important pillar of the Larkinson Clan, and it would be short-sighted to waste all of this accumulation because he wanted to play with shinier toys.

Even a first-class mech designer such as Alexa Streon believed that the Larkinson Clan should strengthen its commitment to second-class mechs.

Gavin helpfully tried to assist in this matter.

"We have received a lot of offers and applications this afternoon. We are already used to them, but the amount of people who are interested in working with us has skyrocketed. I can tell you that there are dozens of Journeyman Mech Designers among them who are currently in Bortele. You won't find many places where you can find a larger reserve of mech designers for hire. If you want, you can inspect their records and invite them to an interview. This will allow you to return to Diandi Base with half-a-dozen of Journeymen that can alleviate our lack of manpower."

That was a good suggestion. Ves originally planned to travel to a different destination to hire a batch of Journeymen, but he might as well start in Bortele since it hosted an even larger mech scene.

"I will be busy inspecting and tuning the Fey Fiannas for tomorrow's challenges for the remainder of the night." He said before turning to his latest student. "Alexa, you have learned enough about our clan to understand our needs. Can I leave this responsibility to you? By the time we depart from Bortele, you should ideally bring along 6 Journeyman Mech Designers that can enrich our Design Department."

The woman did not expect to be handed so much responsibility. "I should be able to handle it. What are your requirements?"

"You should already have an idea of what I generally want. Limit your hiring to Journeyman Mech Designers. We can hire large amounts of Apprentices everywhere, so don't worry about them. Don't look at Seniors or Masters. It will be difficult for them to accept that they have to answer to me. What I need are talents that are willing to commit to the Larkinson Clan and answer to me. If that is not possible, then you can just leave them out of consideration."

"Understood, sir. Your demands will disqualify many promising Journeymen, but I understand your concerns."

"That reminds me that we need to work on filling up the gaps in specializations. For a long time, our Design Department has been subject to shortcomings and limitations arising from a lack of relevant specialists. Try and put extra effort into hiring Journeymen who are specialized in ranged kinetic weapons, ranged energy weapons, energy shield generators, light mechs, heavy mechs, ECM systems, auxiliary mechs, field repair systems and smart metal systems."

Both Gavin and Alexa became overwhelmed by Ves' wish list.

"Your demands are not small." The woman responded after a few seconds. "Unless you are willing to lower your requirements, I do not think it will be possible for us to hire enough Journeymen that can cover all of your demands."

"It's okay, Alexa. Just do the best you can. I have listed my demands in order of priority. I am already happy so long as we can add a few ranged weapons specialists to our Design Department, but it is always if we can cover all of the other fields that I have mentioned. If we want to increase our sales even further, we will have to design more mechs and make use of more advanced tech and more original design solutions. It will be difficult for our mech company to break into the much more competitive markets for rifleman mechs and so on if we don't even have a proper ranged weapon specialist on hand."

Previously, the products of the LMC had no hope of becoming a market leader, so it didn't really matter if they possessed obvious technical shortcomings.

That was becoming increasingly less tenable now that he wanted to enter the big leagues. As Ves continued to move up in the mech industry, he learned that mech design was increasingly becoming more of a team effort.

It was not enough to rely on his own efforts to design good mechs. He needed to have an excellent team around him to support his ambitions!

Chapter 5546 Wait and See

Ves felt it was premature to shove so many responsibilities to a new Larkinson mech designer who had only joined up relatively recently. Nevertheless, Alexa had proven that she was competent and trustworthy to take care of important matters.

She was particularly good at administration and working with high technologies. This meant that she was one of the most ideal assistants he could ask for, especially now that the Design Department had become a lot emptier than before.

Ves felt almost guilty for thinking about ways to keep her by his side. Alexa would never reach her full potential if she continued to act as his gopher. She needed to design mechs on her own once she broke through to the rank of Journeyman.

Now that he had clarified his plans for the immediate future, he observed the trial mechs and people's reactions to them for a while before he decided to retreat.

The challenge matches scheduled for the next day loomed over his shoulders. Ves was certain that none of them would be easy to win. The prospect of losing was a very realistic prospect.

This was why Ves was more than willing to pull another all-nighter. There were always ways for a clever enough mech designer to squeeze more performance out of a mech design.

Unfortunately, many of his options were limited. The challenges centered around proving the combat effectiveness of standard mech models.

The rules set by Ves and his challengers explicitly prohibited any modifications and upgrades that deviated from the base models.

The most Ves could do was to conduct repairs and tune the components within a narrow range that was permissible.

Many standard mechs required extensive changes to their settings. A number of their parts also had to be manually tuned in order to accommodate their individual piloting and fighting styles.

It was generally sufficient to rely on mech technicians or maybe low-ranking mech designers to perform these basic tweaks.

Ves doing all of this work in person was overkill, but he didn't care. He understood his mech designs the best. He was one of the only people who could tune and optimize them to the next level.

Nothing exciting happened as an entire night had passed in Bortele III. Ves did not go out or take any unnecessary risks. He did not even bother to leave Phoca Arena as its mech workshops already satisfied his needs.

Once the local star rose above the horizon of the capital city again, Ves finally took a break and freshened himself up to face the new day.

Once he started to enjoy breakfast, he checked the news and paid attention to the initial reactions to his Fey Fianna.

Many people still retained a high opinion of the Fey Fianna, but that did not mean that they were completely confident in this radical new drone mech line.

The most important criteria was whether it would be able to hold its own in the battles of the Red War.

Battles between different mech forces had subsided by a lot now that red humanity faced an existential threat.

All of the bouts between the Fey Fianna and other mech models mainly demonstrated their combat prowess when fighting against other 'small craft'.

What truly lingered on people's minds was whether the decoys and the other functions of the Fey Fianna would hold up when they fought against actual alien warships.

"Our initial orders are already high, so much so that they can keep our mech factories busy for months." Gavin explained as he entered the VIP dining room that Ves had claimed for himself.

"This is only the tip of the iceberg, though. Many potential customers are not in a hurry. The Fey Fianna imposes a lot of demands on their owners. Mech forces will have to plan around the use of drone mechs, and they will also have to start with stocking up on a lot of spare fey. Their leaders are questioning whether it is worth it to change the way they fight just to accommodate the Fey Fianna."

Ves briefly paused.

The only noises in the room were produced by Lucky, who was crunching on his own bowl of high-grade exotics. Rare and difficult to obtain materials worth thousands of MTA credits steadily disappeared into his gullet.

"Meow-"

"I don't expect our Fey Fianna to become a must-have for second-raters, but it sounds like people still need a lot more convincing."

"That is right, boss. The challenge matches scheduled in the afternoon will help with this, but the true test will take place on the battlefield."

"It will take months before the Fey Fianna will deliver a steady stream of positive battle results if that is the case." Ves furrowed his brows. "Will we be able to maintain the momentum of our new product line in the absence of immediate proof?"

"Every brand-new mech model suffers from the same problem." Gavin nonchalantly replied as if it was not a big deal. "If we want to speed this process up, you can instruct the expeditionary fleet to prioritize their deployment in the field. The Spirit of Bentheim can produce them quickly enough, and it will only take a month or two for our mech pilots to become proficient enough to use them in actual battle."

"That won't be necessary. General Verle and the legion commanders can make their own decisions on this matter. I do not believe that they are blind to the many advantages of the Fey Fianna."

They just had to be patient.

Gavin shook his head. "It doesn't matter if our mechs has yet to reach its peak. Our production capacity has already reached its limit, and it is not easy to find third-party manufacturers that can expand our production. Greater demand will just make the waiting list longer."

"You've mentioned that multiple times. Has it become difficult for us to increase the mass production of our mechs?"

"We were hopeful about the market appeal of the Fey Fianna, but we were not truly ready for a response as big as this, boss. You should already know that production is mainly limited by two factors. First, many third-party manufacturers are already locked into existing contracts with fixed business partners. Sales of mechs are booming because we are in the early stages of a galaxy-wide upgrade spree. Many forces are swapping their lastgen mechs for brand-new hyper mechs, and that means that many mech production lines are working around the clock."

"So that is why it is so difficult for us to find new third-party manufacturers to take care of production, particularly in more distant middle zones."

"Raw materials are also in short supply. The prices for everything has increased even further because demand has increased. Many colonists chose to relocate from the front to the rear of human-occupied space. It takes a large amount of construction materials to build all of their new apartments, houses and workplaces. Then there is the increased attrition from all of the battles and skirmishes of the Red War. Both mechs and warships are getting destroyed at an increasing rate. These losses can be made up as long as our side is able to salvage the battlefield, but the aliens sent to attack our border systems are just as greedy for them, especially if there is a large amount of advanced tech or transphasic parts flying around."

"I see."

As red humanity increased its exploitation of the star systems within its territory, more and more raw materials became available.

Yet the demand for materials rose even faster!

It had only been a decade or so since the Red Ocean became open to widespread human colonization. Many settlements and colonies were still stuck in a relatively rudimentary stage of planetary development.

In addition, the New Elites Program encouraged many parties to expand their armed forces. More mechs and starships were being built than ever in the Red Ocean, yet the increased supply was only a drop in a bucket compared to the huge demand!

"This is a situation where centuries-old megacorporations have an inherent advantage over smaller upstarts such as us." Gavin explained to Ves. "Many large mining companies and material wholesalers always supply their goods to their biggest and most reliable clients first. Smaller players such as us are next in line. Whatever is left gets sold on the open market, but that has become increasingly more scarce."

Ves scratched his head. "Hearing this makes me think that our clan should branch out into the mining sector. Why should we continue to rely on these material suppliers who are constantly playing favorites with their old buddies?"

"It is not that bad. Our clan is already starting to break into the old boys network. You are a tier 3 galactic citizen, after all. Many companies are willing to do you a favor and give you special treatment just to stay on your good side."

Ves was vaguely aware of that. "It is not enough, or else you wouldn't have mentioned this issue."

"You know how it goes. It takes a lot of time for large companies to pivot and change."

They soon returned to talking about more relevant topics such as the sales projections of the Fey Fianna.

The numbers were optimistic, but it was difficult to know how much the Fey Fianna's rise would lead to the downfall of other competing drone mech models.

"We cannot estimate how much market share the Fey Fianna can gain due to the fact that it is attracting a lot of mech buyers who are unfamiliar with drone mechs. Our loosest estimate is that we should comfortably be able to capture 10 percent of the drone mech market if we account for the expansion."

"That sounds like a minimum safe number."

Gavin did not even deny this. "Personally, I think the Fey Fianna can easily occupy 15 or maybe even 20 percent of the market for drone mechs, but we need to keep track of so many interrelated variables that it is impossible for us to know for sure."

A market share of just 15 percent in a specific product category was already enough to turn the LMC into an established player in the mech market!

This much market share meant that the mech company was able to design such good mechs and sell enough of them to repeat these successes in the future.

It was not enough for Ves, though.

He wanted the Fey Fianna to overtake the Sparrow Storm Mark XII and capture at least 30 percent of the market, if not more.

"It will be much more difficult to jump from 20 percent to 30 percent." Gavin warned his boss.

"Part of the reason why the Sparrow Storm is so widely used among drone mech users is because there is a rich and vibrant community of third-party mech designers and development companies that have designed many different varieties of Sparrows. They can easily license one of many official Sparrow designs and modify them to perform better under different circumstances. They can also obtain a more general license and design their own custom Sparrows from scratch that can complete missions that cannot be done by official Sparrows."

Third-party spurs were not always the most reliable, but they had many other advantages. They could be cheaper, more versatile, obtain new functions or make use of brand-new tech that had yet to be integrated in any official models.

"Are there many people and companies who have decided to license our standalone fey?"

"There are, but not too much. It is too early to tell whether we will be able to create a large and vibrant community of third-party fey developers. Just like many customers, they are still waiting to see whether the Fey Fianna has the qualities it needs to become a market leader or close to it. Developers do not want to risk the chance of investing so much time and money into developing a new fey model, only to find out that the Fey Fianna has collapsed in popularity."

In other words, this took time as well.

"We'll just have to wait. Perhaps we should reward the early movers and incentivize more companies to invest in our fey systems."

"The LMC is already working on that. For example, they have recently begun to organize a contest."

"A contest?"

Chapter 5547 Organizing a Contest

A contest.

That sounded interesting.

Ves had a decent amount of experience with contests and competitions. He competed in them on occasion whenever it suited him. He derived a certain sense of enjoyment from showing off his design skills in public. He also found it fun to whip up a mech design in a matter of days if not hours.

Contests and competitions were generally reserved for journeymen and lower.

Once mech designers advanced to the rank of Senior, they usually lost their hot-blooded demeanor.

Having reached the upper ranks of the mech designer hierarchy, Seniors usually worked on more important affairs that could have significant consequences for a major mech company or an entire state.

How could such an esteemed figure possibly waste his time on a childish tournament?

After all, mech design tournaments mainly served to simulate the real competitive design process!

From a certain perspective, Ves had chosen to participate in the hardest 'mech design tournament' of all, which was participating in the galactic mech market of the Red Ocean!

The Fey Fianna was his competition mech entry. He relied upon it to defeat the other 'competition mechs' in the form of the top models on the market such as the Sparrow Storm Mark XII.

The winner of this 'tournament' would be the one to become the market leader!

Of course, a real-life mech design tournament was not rigid. SKL Mech Industries and other mech companies all had the power to contest the outcome and present their own works in the future that could threaten the Fey Fianna's dominance!

This was the charm of competing in the market. Nothing was static and the winners could be overtaken at any time. The conditions weren't fair either as other contestants could be older, cooperate together or take advantage of superior access to tech, resources and useful connections.

The pressure Ves had to endure in order to compete in the greatest contest imaginable was far greater than what he experienced during his tournament participations!

After all, the stakes were far higher this time!

This was why Ves completely felt that it was pointless for him to sign up for any mech design tournaments these days.

It was literally child's play to a mech designer of his caliber.

That did not mean that he thought that mech design contests had become redundant to others.

He still saw how it could stimulate and reward more junior mech designers.

Ves just felt a bit unaccustomed to the fact that he turned from a participant into an organizer!

"Tell me more, Alexa."

The former Terran mech designer did so. "The contest we intend to launch will not take the form of a tournament where mech designers must design their fey on the spot. Our goal is to kick-start the formation of a vibrant and active community of third-party fey designers. This is why we are simply asking for anyone who possesses the necessary skills to sign up on the LMC's galactic net portal and design their own fey based on the licenses that can be obtained at a discount. They can design their own fey and submit them to us within the next six months. After that, we will evaluate the entries and award the top to with prizes up to 10,000 MTA credits."

"The top prize is only 10,000 MTA credits?"

"That is correct. We believe it to be an appropriate sum for winning first place. Second place and third place will earn 5000 MTA credits and 1000 MTA credits respectfully."

That used to be a massive sum for the Larkinson Clan just several years ago. Nowadays, Ves just considered it to be pocket money.

"We can do more with this, Alexa. We have just received a huge infusion of cash from granting so many licenses to mech companies and mech designers. Why don't we jack up the top prize to 100,000 MTA credits or even a million MTA credits? That will definitely encourage the formation of a lot of third-party fey models!"

Strangely enough, both Gavin and Alexa shook their heads.

"A higher prize pool will distort the competition." The personal assistant explained. "Many Seniors and maybe even Masters will get tempted by the opportunity to win a large amount of money by doing relatively little work. While it is true that they can design better fey than Apprentices and Journeymen, the issue is that they are too good to rely on designing fey. These esteemed mech designers are already highly successful and often run their own businesses already. Instead of wasting their time on designing fey for another competitor, their time is much better spent on designing a new mech platform that is also open to third-party contributions."

That... made a lot of sense. Seniors and Masters valued their reputation too much to design variants of products that belonged to other unrelated mech designers.

A large pot of gold might tempt a few of them into participating in this contest, but once it was over, they would go straight back to working on their own original mech designs!

If the goal was to foster a sustainable market for third-party fey, then what the LMC truly needed to do was to attract the Apprentices and possibly Journeymen who were much more likely to keep updating their fey designs in order to maintain their income!

"I understand." Ves said. "You should disallow the participation of mech designers who rank higher than Journeyman if that is the case."

Alexa nodded. "We have already added that to the rules, but it is still a good idea to keep the costs at a proportionate level. The higher the cash prizes, the greater the chance that Journeymen will enlist the aid of large development companies that can mobilize thousands if not tens of thousands of R&D personnel. The competition will devolve into a contest of who has the greatest backing."

"I see. I guess you have already considered all of these scenarios. I guess it is not necessary for me to intervene, then." Ves rubbed his hairless chin. "Do I need to announce this contest later today?"

"It would help if you can direct attention to it. You do not need to go all out, or else it will attract the wrong sort of participants. Just a small mention is enough to arouse the interests of low-ranking mech designers who are struggling to break out of their mediocrity."

Every tournament and contest had a goal. This one was meant to build up a modest community of third-party fey designers.

As long as this initiative yielded the desired result, Ves and the Design Department no longer had to worry about designing lots of fey models for the purpose of expanding the versatility and use cases of the Fey Fianna line.

Due to the characteristics of a drone mech, the Fey Fianna vaguely worked in a similar manner to a modular mech platform.

Just like how the Bright Warrior could completely swap out its internal and external loadouts to function like a space knight or a rifleman mech, the Fey Fianna could take on completely different roles depending on the choice of fey!

In fact, the right kinds of drone mechs were much more suitable to the approach to modularity. Their spurs were entirely external and could easily be swapped out by different fey models.

Bright Warriors on the other hand had to return to their mothership and spend at least a few hours in the mech workshop to painstakingly replace the modular components attached to their mech frames. This was a cumbersome process that could not be completed during a short but intensive battle.

In any case, the Fey Fianna had a much better chance of overtaking the Sparrow Storm Mark XII if the market gained access to a large variety of useful fey!

"Oh, by the way, has there been any response from SKL?" Ves asked.

Gavin shook his head. "SKL has not released any statements, whether through official or unofficial channels. It is not in the nature of a large megacorporation to respond quickly to any external developments. The executives that run these companies prefer to remain silent and allow their subordinates to conduct thorough investigations. Once they have read the detailed reports, they will make decisions based on the will of their shareholders and their ongoing business strategies."

"That sounds like it will take a while."

"Don't be surprised if SKL will take multiple months to finally do something about a new upstart that is threatening to dethrone one of their cash cows. Even now, SKL still has far greater concerns on its mind."

"That is good." Ves smiled in relief.

He was afraid that SKL might feel unusually threatened, or that one of its mech designers felt the need to take this matter more seriously due to the involvement of a tier 3 galactic citizen.

The longer the SKL remained distracted and complacent, the better. The Fey Fianna needed precious time to dig into the market and win the hearts of a large number of customers.

If SKL suddenly released the Sparrow Storm Mark XIII that integrated hyper technology a lot better than its previous iteration, then the Fey Fianna's momentum would definitely slow down a lot!

Inertia and sunk costs were powerful forces. A lot of existing customers still had Sparrow Storm in their hands. If the cost of upgrading them to the XIII was way lower to replacing them all with Fey Fiannas, then many of them would probably stick to their familiar machines even if the works of Ves were objectively superior.

That reminded Ves of the challenge matches scheduled in the afternoon. His Fey Fiannas needed to deliver dominant performances in order to reinforce the image of superiority in everyone's minds!

"Alright, I am done with breakfast." Ves said as he rose from his seat. "Let's get ready for the big occasion."

The product reveal had become a multi-day spectacle. Many people who attended yesterday's presentation came again in order to try out the Fey Fianna.

Feedback from the people who took the Fey Fianna for a spin was overwhelmingly positive. A lot of mech pilots found it regrettable that they had to leave the cockpit far too soon.

As the hours passed by, Ves fulfilled several duties, from listening to user feedback in person to taking part in several interview sessions.

Of course, the clan had carefully selected the interviewers to ensure that none of the questioning touched on any difficult or controversial topics.

All of the marketing helped to raise the profile of the Fey Fianna and persuade more people to take an interest in the drone mech model.

It was a pity that one of the more traditional methods of evaluating a new mech model did not work anymore in the current day and age.

"Many mech commanders base their purchasing decisions on their experiences with piloting the virtual version of a mech model." Gavin explained to Ves. "The old simulation programs were never completely adequate, but they were realistic enough that most people can account for the minor differences. That has become completely different nowadays. Hyper technology and E-technology can't be broken down into a set of clear rules and formulas that can form the basis of a new physics model that can accurately simulate their performance."

Ves understood this problem quite well. "I bet that all of the companies involved in this business are having a hard time."

"This shortcoming has sparked a growing crisis in the use and popularity of simulation programs. None of the companies who develop them have yet to make any significant improvements that have closed the gap between simulation and reality. There is only one exception, but it is one that has yet to become widely available..."

"You're talking about our Mental Simulation Training System."

Gavin smiled and nodded. "Exactly. This special simulation program of yours has unexpectedly turned into an unexpected success. This is not the time to talk about competing in the market for mech simulation programs, but I think we can not only compete in this business, but potentially establish a monopoly over this entire sector! As long as your tier 3 galactic citizenship allows you to get away with it, I think it is worth it for you to make this attempt!"

What a bold idea!

Chapter 5548 Monopolistic Temptations

For a moment, Ves felt awfully tempted.

Every entrepreneur dreamt of securing a monopoly on the market.

Becoming the sole provider of a good or service meant that Ves did not have to bow down to anyone!

He could dictate the price levels to earn the maximum possible revenue. There were no pesky competitors who threatened to undercut his prices.

Ves also did not have to invest as much time and effort into increasing the competitiveness and value proposition of his good or service. He could choose to spend his time on much more important pursuits while continuing to rake in a lot of money.

More importantly than that, becoming the sole provider of an essential product granted him a lot of power.

His identity became a lot more important as people would not dare to affront the sole owner and developer of the most realistic simulation program that currently existed.

Losing access to the MSTS when there were no viable alternatives in place meant that thousands, millions or even billions of mech pilots would lose access to an essential training tool!

If this denial of access lasted long enough, then the overall skills and proficiencies of those deprived mech pilots would definitely fall behind compared to rivals who still retained access to the MSTS!

As such, whatever decisions that Ves made in relation to the MSTS could change the fate of entire states and large organizations!

Wielding so much direct power was both tempting and scary.

Ves was not sure whether it was a good idea for him to obtain so much strategic power over human society!

"Have none of the simulation program developers managed to create an improved physics model after all of this time?" He questioned.

His personal assistant shook his head. "If there is, then everyone is doing a good job at keeping their mouths shut. I think it is safe to assume that no one has cracked the code. In fact, if you are willing to believe in the rumors on the galactic net, then none of the companies have made much progress beyond the basics. The properties of E-technology are too deep, complex and more importantly mutable. How can you simulate a new energy type that can actually undergo perplexing changes based on what people think at the moment?"

Ves shrugged his shoulders. "I am sure that a lot of clever people are working on the problem at the moment. I think it will get solved in 4 or 5 years. It can even be solved sooner if a Star Designer takes action."

A prolific inventor like the Polymath would definitely be able to come up with her own new simulation program after spending a bit of effort!

She was much more suited to this sort of work as her domain was practically tailor-made for this purpose!

Figuring out new phenomena and deriving universal rules from them was a clear expression of discovering the truth of how reality worked.

The only reason why the Polymath had yet to turn her formidable intellect to this issue was because she needed to direct all of her effort into reverse engineering and converting the greater beyonder gate.

If no other Star Designer was willing to address this increasingly more pressing issue, then adopting the MSTS in the immediate future sounded like an increasingly more attractive prospect!

However... was the MSTS able to keep up with the massive expansion of usage?

Currently, Vulcan essentially acted the server of the MSTS. He was able to maintain the current level of use without much issue, but if he had to simulate a thousand times more training scenarios at a time, then even he would explode from overworking!

Ves would have to develop a more sophisticated solution in order to scale up the MSTS to a level where mech pilots across human-occupied space could make use of it, possibly with moderate restrictions in order to reduce the total load.

He may even have to create a new design spirit that was designed to act as a server from the very beginning!

Even though Vulcan was doing a decent job so far, his lack of specialization in this area resulted in a lot of inefficiencies.

"I will talk to Jovy Armalon about this next time we meet." Ves eventually decided. "If I decide to make the MSTS available to the wider public, I will likely have to do so through the channels of the Red Association."

This was not unusual. There were many different people and companies who wanted to sell their goods and services to a wider audience but lacked the scale or infrastructure to reach every market.

Many of the items listed on the Association's Merit Exchange consisted of highly prized specialty products that were difficult to obtain through other channels.

In any case, Ves did not have to worry too much about distribution, dirty tricks, unfair treatment and so on if he relied on the Red Association to manage the MSTS.

The downside was that he would have to give up a lot of control over it. Ves might not have much choice in the matter if other simulation program developers failed to make enough progress.

"The urgency shouldn't be too much for the time being." Ves surmised. "Many mechs only apply hyper technology to a shallow degree. It is easy enough to manually simulate the phenomena they can produce. Mech pilots can still gain a lot from training with regular virtual mechs."

This was not ideal, though. A solution had to be found to prevent mech pilots from backsliding in the new age.

Ves temporarily set this matter aside and focused on preparing for the next big event.

He went through another wardrobe change. He did not wear the same exaggerated getup as yesterday.

Instead, he wore a more martial ensemble that resembled a military uniform. This granted him a more combative vibe that fit the occasion a lot better.

Lucky dispensed with a cape as it wasn't necessary for the archemetal cat to dress up this time.

"Meow meow!" The cat perched on Ves' shoulder again.

Ves reached up with his arm and petted his cat.

"How are you feeling so far? Have you detected anything suspicious?"

"Meow."

"That is reassuring. The mechers are doing a good job at maintaining security."

His last talk with Jovy constantly lingered in the back of his mind. Ves had not forgotten about the fact that the Red Cabal had issued a huge bounty on his head.

The rewards sounded so tempting that Ves almost couldn't believe that no one had made any attempt on his life so far. No major irregularities had occurred. The mechers responsible for maintaining security had not increased their alert level either.

If anyone wanted to make an attempt, then they had to act today at the latest.

Ves did not intend to stick around in the Bortele System any longer than that. He would remain out of the public eye for the remainder of his stay before teleporting directly inside the hull of the Tarrasque.

Though Ves felt a little concerned at how his would-be assassins intended to bypass all of the heavy security, there was no use for him to worry so much about this issue.

He could only shove this issue to the back of his mind and focus on the stuff that he was able to affect through his own actions.

"Let's head out. Make sure to keep an eye on my back, Lucky."

"Meow."

As the time had come for Ves to make his reappearance, the mech arena had already become just as full as yesterday!

Though a portion of yesterday's ticket holders declined to enter Phoca Arena again, it was easy enough to sell their seats to other people who were interested in witnessing the show with their own eyes.

The hype surrounding the recently announced Fey Fianna was still strong enough to draw in a lot of people in the Bortele System who missed out on purchasing a ticket the first time!

As the spotlight shone on Ves once again, he briefly took in the excitement and anticipation in the air.

A lot of people expected the Fey Fianna to vanquish its challengers. Whether that would actually happen remained to be seen, but Ves had enough confidence in the combat capabilities of his latest commercial mechs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another day where you can get to know our new Fey Fianna line better. As you are all aware of, we are about to host four action-packed challenge matches for

today. We have cleared the entire arena grounds in preparation for the matches between the Fey Fianna and a variety of new or yet-to-be-released mechs designed by others. Let me briefly explain the rules and format of these challenge matches."

Ves spent the next five minutes explaining the rules that he agreed upon with his challengers.

Every challenge consisted of only a single match that would determine the success and failure of this venture.

The MTA along with possibly other institutions would referee the matches in order to maintain fairness.

The mechs used in the competition were all standard copies with no custom changes and additions that exceeded a low threshold.

The mech pilots working for the challengers were all carefully selected to match the strength of the Larkinson mech pilots.

The number of mechs assigned to each side had to be adjusted for the cost, counter factor and other variables in order to make the matches as fair as possible.

All of these rules imposed additional burdens and restrictions onto the participants, but they were very much necessary in order to ensure the challenge matches correctly showcased the strengths and weaknesses of every mech model.

"By the way, before we proceed with introducing my first challenger, let me briefly mention a contest that our company has decided to hold."

Ves proceeded to draw attention to the new Fey design contest that had just launched this morning.

"The Fey Shaper Contest is open to all Journeyman Mech Designers and lower. With a generous prize pool, anyone who is willing to design a compelling new variant of one of our Fey can win up to 10,000 MTA credits!"

Although 10,000 MTA credits could be used to buy a single luxury handbag, it still represented a fortune to many impoverished mech designers!

MTA credits was a standardized currency that was based on the spending levels of the mechs.

This was why a sum of 10,000 MTA credits was bound to make a lot of second-raters crazy!

Many second-class Apprentices and Journeymen could launch an entire medium-sized mech company with this much money at their disposal!

Whether they would actually be able to make their company profitable over the long run was another matter.

In any case, Ves could clearly sense a spike in excitement as many younger mech designers felt they had a chance of entering the top 10 or even the top 3!

"Before I let you go on and plan your designs, let me warn you that my Fey all have the capacity to be alive or host a life." Ves carefully said. "You need to design them with a respectful mindset towards life. If you solely participate in this contest without caring for your work, then do not be surprised that your entry will earn a low score even if it contains superior tech and design implementations."

That sounded rather confusing to many people, so Ves shared a helpful tip.

"If you want to be sure that your new fey design is well-received, then I suggest you fabricate a few copies and assign them with different Fey Fiannas to see how well they cooperate with each other. If the living mech likes your new fey, then you have done a good job. If that is not the case, then you will have to go back to the drawing board. This contest can only be won by the designer who possesses the strongest heart towards their fey."

Chapter 5549 The Master Gambler

Once Ves announced everything that he wanted to convey to the public, he finally made way for his first challenger.

There were no official rules for challenge matches as they were informal by nature.

However, they happened often enough during the Age of Mechs for mech designers to formulate a set of customs.

In any public challenge matches, the mech designer that issued the challenge deserved to enjoy his own moment in the spotlight.

Lights began to shine onto four distinct second-class mechs that had just entered the expansive arena grounds!

The Nelerat Mark I proudly flew forward. Each of them primarily functioned as rifleman mechs, but their arsenal and their notable defenses made them look as solid as heavy artillery mechs!

Their most distinctive feature was their excess armor. Unlike other rifleman mechs that generally eschewed armor in favor of mobility, the Nelerat Mark I had taken the opposite approach.

Not only was its frame thicker and more heavily armored than usual, but it also carried additional modular armor that made it look as if the mechs had turned into industrial mechs all of a sudden.

"Deployable armor." Ves accurately identified.

The rifleman mechs weren't supposed to haul all of this heavy and bulky armor all of the time.

If they ever deployed with all of this additional cargo, they were meant to find a favorable firing location and deploy their excess armor into a small defensive cover that could resist quite a number of attacks.

Even though the Nelerat Mark I carried a lot of excess armor plating, none of them looked particularly expensive. They were all made of fairly cheaper materials that could easily be bought in bulk.

Ves bet that Master Kreshnik resorted to hyper technology to amplify the defensive strength of the deploying armor. That was the only way for this arrangement to make sense.

Another aspect of the Nelerat Mark I that attracted his gaze was the weapons loadout of this rifleman mech.

Instead of arming it with a large cannon, Master Kreshnik instead chose to equip his defensive rifleman mech with two identical gauss rifles.

Ves had to scratch his head at this design choice. It was not a decision that he would have picked as it was quite difficult for mech pilots to handle two external rifles at the same time.

There had to be a clever rationale behind this deliberate design choice, but Ves was unable to figure it out at the moment. He would have to wait until the match commenced before the truth would become clear.

The Nelerat Mark I possessed many other nuances that spoke of thoughtful and deliberate design. Ves gained a much better sense of Master Aulaus Kreshnik as a mech designer.

Much like other first-class mech designers, Master Kreshnik preferred to calculate as many possible solutions as possible.

The Nelerat Mark I looked as if Master Kreshnik had utilized his cranial implant and all of the processors he could muster from the Red Ocean branch of Pritchard & Terse to calculate and optimize as many aspects of this mech as possible!

That explained why Master Kreshnik was so confident in his work.

Large megacorporations such as SKL Mech Industries most certainly had more design teams and processing power at their disposal, but it was impossible for them to allocate all of those resources on a single mech design project at a time!

Just like Ves and the Design Department, many mech companies tended to work on multiple mech design projects at the same time.

Pritchard & Terse evidently chose a different direction. Ves increasingly developed the suspicion that the company under the leadership of its new acting leader had completely put everything else aside and invested all of its resources into a single mech design project!

This enabled Master Kreshnik to concentrate on designing a single mech during the first year of the Age of Dawn.

With no other distractions and obligations in the way, Master Kreshnik could work day after day to turn the Nelerat Mark I into a true hyper mech that had the potential to win awards!

"What an interesting business strategy."

This was an extreme decision. If the Nelerat Mark I failed to catch on for whatever reason, then P&T and its new leader had essentially wasted a crucial year while their competitors released a bunch of profitable mech models during the same time period.

There was no way that Master Kreshnik could take over the mech company if that happened!

"This guy is a gambler."

A highly calculative gambler, but a gambler nonetheless.

Ves could tell, because he was a similar sort of mech designer!

Sometimes, he did not even bother to do his math before he made his bets!

As Ves tried to imagine the approach towards designing the Nelerath Mark I, he guessed that Master Kreshnik had tried to spice up his work by making a number of risky gambles.

From the deployable armor to the double gauss rifles, Master Kreshnik boldly gambled on the chance that his creative design choices would pay off in reality!

"Maybe he'll be proven right."

The most remarkable aspect about this new mech was not the aforementioned design choices.

What truly caused Ves to take the Nelerat Mark I more seriously was how many hyper materials had been stuffed into its frame!

Many mech models released in the past half year only reluctantly incorporated hypers into their construction. This was because their previous iterations were designed during the Hyper Generation where all available capacity had been used up by functional parts.

Converting these lastgen mechs into currentgen mechs in a hurry could only be done by removing a few of these functional components and putting hyper materials in their place.

This was a painful sacrifice and one that mech designers hated to make. This was why models such as the Sparrow Storm Mark XII only barely met the definition of a hyper mech.

"The Nelerat Mark I is different from all of that junk." Ves immediately concluded.

The four rifleman mechs conveyed the impression that they were four compact mountains that just happened to move.

Even though they were clearly made out of metal, Ves had the weird impulse to treat them as mountains made out of the solid form of rock!

No other hyper mech had managed to produce such a strong reaction from Ves. The Nelerat Mark I had clearly been designed to function as a hyper mech from the onset, and not an average one either.

It was easy enough to design a fairly strong hyper mech by adding a larger than usual quantity of hyper materials into its frame.

The hard part was to unify all of that hyper materials into a more cohesive package that could materially affect the performance of the hyper mech in a highly focused manner!

Even though the Nelerat Mark I was clearly not alive, the mech nonetheless relied on a more sophisticated implementation of hyper technology to produce a phenomenon that was similar to an artistic conception!

"It's akin to an extremely well-designed and well-made low-level artifact."

Just because mechs weren't alive did not mean they were weak. The mech industry had advanced the state of mechs for over four highly productive centuries.

A hundred Star Designers emerged during this time who all made significant contributions to the development of mechs, all while treating their works as lifeless objects.

Master Aulaus Kreshnik made an appearance as well. He moved closer to the central position occupied by Ves.

The man looked proud, and had every right to feel this way. Ves and many other mech designers could already tell that the Nelerat Mark I was bound to perform better than other ranged mechs of its kind that was currently released on the market!

This was the power of an accomplished Rubarthan Master Mech Designer.

Although there were many second-raters in the audience who felt upset that an elitist first-rater chose to go down and compete against their own homegrown mech designers, the Red Association did not prohibit this kind of behavior.

If second-raters were upset about outside intrusions, then they just needed to work harder and design better second-class mechs to fend off the competition!

The mechers only cared about advancing the state of mechs as fast as possible.

First-class mech designers always exerted a high degree of competitive pressure onto the lower markets as they were always willing to earn easy money if the native mech designers were not up to par.

In the current situation, the first challenge match could be interpreted as a duel between a 'real' second-class mech designer like Ves and a powerful first-class mech designer who did not belong in the middle zone like Master Kreshnik!

Of course, this competition took on another dimension when Ves thought about the subtle ties to the Rubarthan Pact's internal political struggles.

Ves had no interest wading into the mud fight between the Smokestack Prince and the Inferno Spear Prince, but it looked as if he did not have a choice in the matter.

"Professor Larkinson." The 200-year old Rubarthan Master Mech Designer kindly greeted Ves upon approach. "Thank you for accepting my challenge. You are just as courageous as your reputation suggests. Few Seniors dare to accept a challenge from a Master, though it could be argued that you are different from the rest of your group. I hope that you will not take my challenge as a personal insult or a condemnation of your skills."

What a diplomatic opening.

Ves smiled back as he shook the Rubarthan's relatively firm hand. "As a mech designer, I enjoy this competition in its purest form. Our feelings and our opinions are irrelevant. Our main purpose is to serve mech pilots, and we do so by designing the strongest and most suitable mechs for their needs. Let our works be judged by those standards, and nothing else. I do not reject your challenge because my Fey Fianna must prove it has the ability to cope with a variety of powerful threats. It sure looks like your Nelerat Mark I's fall into this category. Would you like to introduce your work to the public? Why have you chosen to design a defensive rifleman mech?"

The Master Mech Designer was not afraid of revealing a bit of information about his unreleased work.

"The Nelerat Mark I is the culmination of Pritchard & Terse's effort to design cost-effective counters against small craft and other threats on the same scale. While there has been a concerted effort in the mech industry to increase the firepower of ranged mechs to make them more effective against warships, P&T believes that the native aliens will make much more extensive use of starfighters and more notably phasefighters in the near future. Our enemies are learning from us. They may not be able to imitate our mechs, but what they can do is to increase their production of phasefighters and develop more effective tactics to prevent our mechs from coming close and using their space suppressors to destabilize their transphasic energy shields!"

What a far-sighted perspective on the Red War!

This was reflective of yet another calculated gamble. Whereas most of his rivals had indeed tried to design mechs that performed better against warships, Master Kreshnik consciously went against this current and chose to design a mech that specialized in shooting down alien small craft!

Master Kreshnik must have set this goal before the start of the Hyper Generation. That meant that he did not know at the time that the Red Association would unveil space suppression technology that made melee mechs a lot more threatening to alien warships.

In response to the much greater threat posed by all of these melee mechs, the aliens would most certainly respond by producing a lot of starfighters that were especially designed to counter all of these melee mechs.

Yet before these starfighters could do their jobs, the Nelerat Mark I would be ready to swoop onto the battlefield and shred these alien craft apart with their twin gauss rifles!

Chapter 5550 The Challenges of the First-Class Mech Market

Master Aulaus Kreshnik made a lot of odd and risky choices when he took over Pritchard & Terse.

Though the company built up a modest presence in the Rubarthan mech market over the years, The Great Severing affected P&T much more than other companies!

Due to the company's relatively light footprint in the Red Ocean, the branch headquarters found itself unable to bear the burden of updating its entire first-class mech catalog.

The competitive pressure was too high. Whereas other mech companies transferred plenty of Master Mech Designers and a lot of other supporting infrastructure to the new frontier, P&T only had Master Kreshnik, a bunch of contributing mech designers and a lot of low-ranking mech designers not worth mentioning!

This put P&T far behind its other competitors in the Rubarthan Pact!

Since the start of the Hyper Generation, every existing client and customer clamored for hyper mechs.

The performance boost was too great. If mech designers and mech companies did not update their existing mech lines soon, then they would inevitably get dumped by the vast majority of their customer base!

This put Master Kreshnik in an awful position. As the most capable mech designer left in P&T's branch headquarters, he was unable to update all of the existing product lines by himself.

Every competitive first-class multipurpose mech design represented the culmination of the collaborative efforts by 5 Master Mech Designers over months if not years of dedicated work.

The difficulty became compounded by the fact that Master Kreshnik did not lead any of the design projects that resulted in the creation of the old mainstays of P&T!

Most of them had been birthed from the visions of the founders and lead designers of Pritchard & Terse that comfortably remained in their old haunts in the Milky Way!

There was no way that Master Kreshnik could inherit these old mech designs and do them justice. He also did not have the prestige and connections to convince other Master Mech Designers to replace the design philosophies that allowed P&T's products to carve out their own niches in the Rubarthan Mech Market.

P&T was not the only company that suffered from this problem. Many other mech companies found themselves incapable of supporting the bestsellers and mainstays that used to channel steady profits into their coffers in a bygone age.

Most of these companies that had fallen into trouble chose to give up. They put up their brands, their fixed assets, their personnel, their intellectual property, their existing business contracts and sometimes even their high-level design talent up for auction!

A large round of consolidation ensued during the first year of the Age of Dawn as large megacorporations eagerly snapped up a bunch of smaller competitors. This enabled the big players to quickly fill up their own gaps, putting them in a much better position to update their own outdated mech lines!

It would have been completely normal for P&T to give up and allow itself to be absorbed by a larger company.

Master Kreshnik was different, though. He went against the grain and argued hard that the company still had a future as an independent company in the Age of Dawn.

"I spent weeks arguing with the remaining upper management of P&T." Master Kreshnik spoke to Ves as both of them waited for their respective mechs to complete their final inspections. "In my 200 years of life, I have worked for one organization after another. P&T is but the latest employer that has accepted my services. I am tired of letting others dictate my work. Now that I have a chance to take over our former branch headquarters, I needed to take the plunge."

"Bold choice." Ves responded. "Being in charge is always better in my book. I would have thought that Masters such as yourselves are more than capable of starting off on your own. Why did you not go independent sooner?"

"It is not as easy as you may think, professor. The first-class mech market is much more brutal than the other markets. No single Master can expect to do business by designing and publishing first-class multipurpose mech designs by themselves. Every customer expects to obtain the best of what their budget can afford them, so it is essential for a team of five Masters as well as an entire support network of high-tech development companies to unite all of their efforts to produce a single mech design that can possibly outperform the prevailing competition and sell enough units to recoup the massive expenditures."

Ves pressed his lips when he heard that. Master Kreshnik did not mince any words when he described the extreme difficulty of developing a profitable first-class mech.

While it was true that first-raters had so much money at their disposal, they were much more knowledgeable and discerning as well.

Many first-class organizations were already capable of raising their own in-house design teams.

Mech companies that catered to the open market had to exceed the standards of all of those in-house mech designers in order to sell their products, and that was not an easy task!

"So you decided that P&T should give up on the first-class mech market?"

"It was not an easy decision to make." Master Kreshnik spoke with narrowed eyes. "Many executives in my company have become attached to the status and prestige of working with an established brand in Rubarthan society. It is considered to be a great shame and a mark of failure for a first-class mech company to retreat from its native market and go 'down' into the second-class mech market."

"Yet you managed to ram this decision through anyway."

"The data supported my arguments. Our chances of developing even a single profitable first-class hyper mech model were virtually zero. Since no one else has been able to offer any alternatives that could give us a viable pathway to remain in the first-class mech market, we had to choose between two different options. We could either sell our company to a larger conglomerate, or we could temporarily retreat to the second-class mech market while steadily rebuilding our capital to return to our original market in the future."

"If I was in the shoes of those executives, I think that transferring to a bigger, more prestigious and more secure mech company sounds like a good deal."

"That is true, but much of the value of a mech company is concentrated in its high-level design talent. If I choose to depart from P&T, the company becomes an abandoned shell that is burdened down by outdated mech designs and other marginal assets. I have every justification to leave on the spot considering that a force majeure has occurred that unreasonably damaged my own interests."

"So you used the threat of your departure to browbeat the remaining executives into keeping P&T independent."

"Correct. Once I found out that they are primarily driven by profit and status, it is not difficult to formulate strategies that target their proclivities and vulnerabilities. I presented a workable business plan that calls for building up a foundation in the second-class mech market first. Once we have stabilized our new positions, we can gather the necessary capital and design talent to make a fresh start in the first-class mech market. It does not matter if we abandon our old mech lines, as none of them are designed with hyper mechs in mind. Their individual brands also aren't valuable enough to keep them alive. It is better if I design my own hyper mechs based on my own vision from the beginning."

"You will be giving up the first mover advantage if you start out later."

"That is a necessary sacrifice. If you want to survive in this business, then you need to possess an objective understanding of your own situation. I have made the decision that it is better to retreat and wait until our collective understanding of hyper technology has advanced much further before I design serious first-class multipurpose mechs once again. There is so much we have to learn before we can properly utilize the properties of hyper materials."

"I agree. It is not a bad idea to be a little more patient and try to find ways to differentiate yourself from the competition."

The two continued to chat as if they were friends and colleagues rather than bitter rivals.

As much as Master Kreshnik issued a challenge to Ves, the two did not have a strong basis for conflict.

The Fey Fianna and the Nelerat Mark I did not compete directly against each other. They occupied their own corners of the second-class mech market and addressed different needs.

Ves and Master Kreshnik were also completely different from each other. They did not compete for the same opportunities, so why should they hold any personal animosity for each other?

The only complication was that Ves suspected that the Smokestack Prince had induced Master Kreshnik to issue this challenge.

No matter what, losing the challenge match definitely damaged Ves' interests. This made it a lot more difficult for Ves to befriend the Rubarthan Master.

That did not stop him from pumping Master Kreshnik of every scrap of information related to the current situation of the first-class mech market.

Originally, Ves intended to put his products up for sale in this market as well.

Yet the more he learned, the less he was willing to go through with this plan.

Considering how even a 200-year old Master Mech Designer lacked the confidence to compete at this level, it appeared that it was way too premature for him to think about designing commercially viable first-class mechs at this stage!

"Compared to the Terran mech market, the Rubarthan mech market is not as difficult to enter as an independent." Master Kreshnik freely shared. "The former is largely captured by old and established brands. Terran customers are much more accustomed to work with a selection of trusted mech companies over the long term. There are Rubarthan customers that adopt the same approach, but since our mech market is more dynamic, there is much more acceptance to purchasing standalone mechs to adapt to changing circumstances or address an immediate shortcoming. However, the level of competition in the market is so high that you need to be the best in your field to sell more than a handful of copies."

If that was the case, then Ves could forget about selling any of his mechs onto the Rubarthan mech market in the next decade or two. He did not think he could meet all of the harsh requirements that would allow his first-class mechs to reach the necessary level of performance, especially when he had to implement all kinds of powerful and extremely advanced high technologies.

"What would you advise if I want to enter the Rubarthan mech market?" Ves asked. "I am studying hard to become a first-class mech designer. What do you suggest I do once I have learned the necessary tech?"

Master Kreshnik gave the younger man a pointed glance. "I suggest that you take a step back and collaborate with more established Rubarthan mech designers. You already have a history of collaborating with numerous other mech designers and mech companies. You can use this existing model and apply it in other cases. It isn't necessary for you to retain any ownership of the mech designs that you have contributed to. The lessons you learn and the experience you gain when working as a contractor are the greatest rewards that you can earn. When it comes to designing first-class mechs, it is vital for you to build up a network of high-level talent that you can rely upon for collaborations and technical support."

Ves nodded in understanding. He was incredibly deficient in this area. It couldn't be helped since he was an outsider to the first-class mech industry.

"I guess this is why most second-class mech designers hardly ever succeed in entering the first-class mech market. It isn't enough to possess the requisite knowledge and skills. You also need to find a lot of willing partners to support your goals."