

### Chapter 25: Wartorn Instance

The noise of battle echoed all around her as missiles kept raining down in salvos. Only now the blue team started to employ countermeasures. The medium mechs kept zigzagging while the heavies used their prodigious firepower to strike the missiles down.

Melinda and Janet skillfully navigated forward. They dipped in the many craters to spoil line of sight and hide behind cover in case snipers aimed at them. Though not high-powered weapons aimed at them, they received sporadic rifle fire from their entrenched opponents. Melinda resolutely shielded Janet from incoming fire with her shield.

"Their team's light mechs must be engaging the enemy scouts by now." Melinda noted as the missile fire stopped landing with unerring accuracy. Spoiled by their ECMs, the deadly payloads sprayed down in a wider spread, damaging many mechs but not to the point of wrecking them completely.

"What are Jaxon and his flyers up to?" Janet whined as she felt useless trudging behind Melinda's shield. Her cannon mech had no chance of firing back against an enemy hiding behind makeshift trenches.

"We're dueling their fliers. Don't bother us." The highest ranked player in their team spoke before shutting off his comms.

"Janet, you're too vulnerable if you go any further. Stay here and provide support, okay?"

As a trained pilot, she recognized her circumstances, so she nodded without a word.

Melinda already scanned the sight in front of her. "Open terrain. Trenches. A lot of ordnance thrown in our way. I don't think they want us close."

"No shit Melly. The only thing I can do is huddle behind a crater hoping they don't send arcing missiles at me. I really picked the wrong mech for this battle."

A heavy knight bumped next to Melinda, his shield outweighing even her own. "Hey, what's the plan?"

"We charge forward. Once we get in their midst, we can turn this situation around. At the very least we won't be in a one-sided slugfest."

"You heard her lads, follow us!" The knight-type mech yelled as he raised his hammer in the sky and lumbered forward.

Melinda overtook the heavy mech and kept her shield squarely in front. She checked her sensors to see if their team came with them, and when she saw they only kept plodding behind craters, she grew agitated. They were close enough for their rifles to deal a lot of damage. She clanged her mace against her shield so hard it almost dented the edge of the giant slab.

"Step on it! Keep running and don't stop until you get in their faces!"

Though she was just one mech of many on the field, somehow her eye-catching form seemed to attract more gazes than normal. Her red crest that made her appear as a valiant warrior inspired others to follow along. Most of them were veterans or expert players after all, so they knew how bad they had fallen into the enemy's kill zone. They put down their apprehensions and followed after the shield bearers at the front.

Perhaps recognizing that Melinda's mech led them forward, the enemy fire started to slant towards her position. She utilized her mobility as best she could, trying to weave to the sides in order to throw off their aim.

Nevertheless, she wasn't as nimble as a light mech, so quite a few cannon shells and laser beams impacted her gigantic shield. One large-caliber

cannon round even blasted the right corner of her shield into pieces, almost throwing her off-balance.

"Get on your feet!" The heavy knight player yelled as he interposed in front of her, taking the brunt of the volleys while she regained her balance.

"My shield can still take much more." She pushed past his trudging form and sprinted faster. "We're halfway. Just a bit more and we can pound their faces."

Melinda felt an overwhelming desire to crash in their faces. She forgot she was playing a game, she forgot that her real life wasn't at stake, she even forgot to take note of the Marc Antony in order to write a report. No, the only thing in her mind was to bull through their firepower.

Her HRF-plated shield started to crack from all the ballistic impacts she received. The laser beams exacerbated the damage by melting the cracks wider. The shield was thick but eventually the fact that it was made out of inferior metals and received a deluge of firepower couldn't prevent the bottom half from cracking away.

"Fuck!"

The loss of that section threw her off balance, and some sharp-eyed shooters immediately lowered their aim, hitting her legs. She could manage the laser fire, but the heavier cannon shells further threw her off-balance. Only through skillful piloting did she manage to stumble past the initial seconds. After she regained her balance, she charged forward and closed in on the enemy trenches. She raised her other arm and held up her mace.

"Bash their heads!"

Ragged warcries escaped the throats of the other players in their team as they finally closed the distance. They lost 9 mechs throughout the run, but they finally made it to the trenches where the enemy's ranged superiority ceased to offer a decisive advantage. The enemy team possessed a clear

lack of close-ranged fighters. However, a heavy striker appeared before Melinda and fired his over-sized shotgun at her approaching form.

"I can still take it!" Melinda said with gritted conviction as she felt her tattered shield fall into pieces. She flung the remainder at the shotgun mech, causing it to flinch for a split second. Her mech's raised arm began to fall, allowing the mace to travel in a dangerous downward arc towards the enemy's head.

The heavy striker's shotgun crunched as Melinda feinted her attack, successfully deceiving her opponent as she slipped her mace further downwards and cracked his main weapon. However, the lunging strike left her open to a counter attack, an opportunity the heavy striker took as it raised both its arms. The glowing hot holes on top of the wrists spewed a gout of flame as searing as a spaceship's engine exhaust.

"Ahh!"

Melinda awkwardly rolled away, throwing mud and burning liquids in every direction. Just as the striker adjusted its aim, a barrage of cannon shells impacted its torso, pushing it back and spoiling its attempts to take its opponent out.

"Thanks Janet!"

"You're welcome!"

Before the other mechs in the trench ganged up on her, Melinda was determined to finish off the striker. She got into its face and smashed the mace against its left wrist, disabling the flamethrower. Still moving forward, she used her free hand to grab the mech's other arm, keeping it from turning the remaining flamethrower in her direction.

She then bashed her mace against the enemy mech's face to disrupt its main sensors before bashing lower in order to disorient the pilot sitting in the cockpit. The heavy striker's armor largely held against her mace, but the

amount of force she was putting in strained the pilot to the point of almost passing out. The shock waves passing through the armor could be deadly in itself once it gained a certain level of strength.

Sure that she knocked out the pilot, Melinda dropped the unresponsive heavy and turned to face a pair of medium laser riflemen. They had qualms about firing at her when she stuck close to their ally, but its defeat left them with a clear line of fire. As she stormed over, Melinda raised her own fists and charged up the power of her laser cannons.

The three exchanged laser volleys. Both sides tuned up their weapons so the damage they all took caused a couple of systems to malfunction.

Nevertheless, Melinda remained steadfast, closing the range until she got into melee range. The two riflemen discarded their rifles and unsheathed their combat knives, but before they could do anything, Melinda shoulder bashed one mech while pounding her mace against the other mech's grip, redirecting its path.

The mech that received the bash rolled onto its back, its knife only leaving a deep groove off the Marc Antony's thick front torso. It tried to retrieve a pistol to fire at her, but before it could do so her heavy knight teammate finally reached the trench with an awe inspiring jump that landed onto the fallen mech's leg, the many tons of weight crushing them into broken parts. The enemy mech was finished.

Melinda already turned her attention to the other rifleman, who tried to scamper away to higher ground. Melinda didn't let off her prey, pouncing forward in order to beat the fleeing mech with her now-battered and misshapen mace.

"Die!" She screamed as she crunched the mech's back plates into deformity. She took advantage of the gaps she created by firing the lasers with her other wrist, burning or melting tons of critical components.

Her team was about to overrun the enemy team, but a barrage of shells and lasers rained down from above. The unexpected attacks threw team blue for a loop, taking the wind out of their frenzied assault. Team red used the opportunity to retreat.

"So much for the top ranked player in our team."

"Fucking lone wolf! Go back to arena if you wanna play hero."

With no fliers left on the blue team, their opponents enjoyed complete air superiority. The red team's fliers flew so nimbly that it would take a lot of trouble shooting them down.

It was better to chase the ground pounders and finish them off first.

"Don't let the runners off!" Melinda yelled as she charged forward even as her mech received a couple of dents from the aerial assault. With a frustrated growl, she primed her shoulder launchers. With the amount of firepower the fliers were throwing in their way, she had little trouble establishing target locks. She instantly dumped her entire payload into the air. Not even looking at whether they reached their targets, Melinda detached the launchers from her shoulders, freeing up more weight.

"Suppressing their air power." Janet spoke over the channel as their team's anti-air started to support the team from the rear. Tracer fire from rapid-fire cannons streaked through the air while volleys of missiles tracked the elusive figures trying to cause havoc.

Unfortunately for them, the enemy successfully regrouped to a second line, where a reserve of fresh mechs took over from their battered teammates. The fresh round of volleys suppressed the blue team's advance.

"What are you guys standing for? Get going!" Melinda yelled as she spurred her own mech forward. She raised her half-wrecked mace with one arm while blasting the enemy positions with laser fire with her other arm. When the laser

cannons overheated from the rapid firing, she threw her mace to her other hand and fired with the other wrist cannon.

The Marc Antony always carried heavier armor than usual among mediumweights, but the mech's armor started to show some cracks. Her left eye blew apart while her reactor's power generation reduced by a third. Nevertheless, she still managed to haul her mech to the second line with both wrist cannons blazing with excessive heat.

The enemy was ready for her. A sword wielder closed in while firing a ballistic pistol. The heavy bullets impacted her mech's damaged chest, exacerbating the damage and causing her to stagger a little. By the time the sword wielder closed in, his weapon already aimed at the gaps in the armor.

Melinda threw her damaged mace at the approaching enemy. The weapon bounced off the mech, startling it and slowing down its charge. Melinda took advantage of the pause to bounce backwards while firing her already stressed laser cannons. The lasers melted the sword wielder's frame here and there, achieving little effect due to the poor accuracy of the shots on the move.

"There!" She yelled in triumph as she picked up a sword from a fallen mech. With a weapon in hand, she met the enemy mech's second charge. With some ingenious manouvring, she deftly avoided the charge while parrying the opponent's blade. At the same time, she extended a leg to trip the mech and succeeded. The mech sprawled in the muddy soil as gravity and momentum did their work.

"Who else!?" She yelled in the public channel as exulting in her triumph. "Is this the red team's best?!"

"Your opponent is me!" A grizzled voice called out as a sword down struck from the air.

A damaged medium flier slammed down with its entire weight supporting the sword. Having received the alert from her damaged but functional sensors, Melinda barely managed to dodge to the side, unfortunately leaving her mech's left arm and a part of the shoulder behind. Despite the catastrophic damage, the Marc Antony still maintained integrity, not having suffered too much loss in performance except for the missing limb.

"So you must be the one who tore our fliers apart." Melinda noted as she scrambled to perform whatever damage control she could from her sparking cockpit.

"I did my job." The flier replied as he detached the damaged wings from his mech's back. "Too bad my teammates on the ground are worthless. I'll just have to sweep you all myself, starting with you and your morale-raising antics."

"You must think highly of me if you think I'm able to keep this bunch in shape."

"It also helps that you're damaged. I'm here to finish you off."

Without any other exchange of words, the two clashed against each other, sword to sword. The flier possessed most of the advantages. His mech was nimbler and still possessed both arms. The pilot also revealed polished sword skills that could only have achieved this state through constant battles.

The ex-flier aggressively sought to tear the Marc Antony into pieces. It took all Melinda had focusing on defense and firing the occasional wrist laser to hold back the onslaught. The smart play here was to wait until Janet or some other mechs came by to lend a hand.

"I can't hold on." Melinda gritted her teeth as she admitted it. She threw away all her reservations and threw her mech forward.

The ace pilot reacted far too quickly, as if already expecting such an action. Melinda almost couldn't reach her opponent, so she exerted the utmost of her



piloting skill and jumped her hefty mech forwards. The impulsive action caused her to impale her mech onto the enemy's sword. Nevertheless, she managed to redirect the sword strike into stabbing the less important components such as the energy cells. This left Melinda's remaining arm free to chop straight down.

The first chop split the flier's head in half. The second slash cut through the enemy's thinner armor and slashed the engines into a mess, immobilizing the mech. The third stab ran straight through the torso and out the back. Red blood faintly coated the sword as she had deliberately aimed at the enemy's cockpit.

With a tired sigh she surveyed the battle. With most of the enemy fliers suppressed, the battle between the ground mechs determined victory and defeat. Team red obtained a decisive advantage at the start by disabling many mechs at long range. Team blue evidently had the advantage in close-quarters combat, and dished out plenty of payback.

"Did we win?"

Not a lot of mechs remained. Shortly after, only one remaining mech from team red still stood on its feet. Melinda kept back as support, only firing her over stressed wrist cannon whenever an opening presented. A high-powered cannon shell ripped apart a damaged foot, causing the enemy mech to tumble for a bit. The mechs fending it off now pounced at it like it was a bowl of caviar. The last of the red team didn't make it through the dismemberment.

[Team Blue has won the match.]

Melinda rubbed her eyes as she came down from the high. "Is the game always this intense? I enjoyed this match way more than I thought."

Despite its ragged state, the Marc Antony performed well for a discounted 5-star mech. Even in its damaged state and missing an arm, the mech still

exuded dominance, especially now that it left the battlefield. It was as if feeding the machine with the flesh and blood of its enemies allowed such a machine to grow.

"That's just nonsense." Melinda shook her head. "I don't know how Ves did it, but I actually want to hop back in and queue for another match."

Janet's voice popped up from their private channel. "You. Were. AWESOME!"

As Janet babbled in the many ways Melinda pounded her opponents into pieces, the girl in question still digested the previous battle. "I don't know why but the game has grown more realistic. I've been affected by the realism of this game."