

## Chapter 81: Culling

After Professor Marshall finished her introduction, the entire crowd separated into groups of hundreds. Each of them were guided towards different locations, where every mech designer had to stand at a predesignated spot. Even the fliers had to stay put above the heads of the walkers.

Professor Marshall patiently waited until the student guides made sure their groups were in the right places. "Now, let us begin with the qualifiers. Three days from now, the best of you will showcase your skills to our most distinguished guests. Only a hundred of you will receive this opportunity, which means we have a big task ahead of ourselves in order to cull 99.8 percent of all contestants"

Everyone shuddered a bit. Too many mech designers had flocked to the competition. Even with the age limit of thirty years, the Komodo Star Sector was simply too big.

Everytime the LIT held its open competition, they liked to mix up their tests. Though the organizers often reused most of them, the selection of tests still gave the contestants some anxiety. After all, no one claimed they excelled in everything.

"For the qualifiers, we will hold two rounds today and one more longer trial tomorrow. In our first round, you will be tested on your fundamentals. Without a well-rounded foundation, you have no right to be considered by our masters. In our experience, many of you fail to make the cut, so only one out of five will qualify for the next round."

A projection lit up in front of everyone's faces. To the surprise of Ves and everyone else, it consisted of a series of exams.

"What the hell? Are we back in school?"

"Damnit! I already forgot half of what I learned!"

"Hah! No exam will stop me! I'm the learning expert!"

Some mech designers moaned as if beset with tragedy, while others arrogantly claimed they could ace any exams in a breeze. As for Ves, he maintained his confidence. He might not have been the best book learner, but all of the knowledge he gained from the System had been comprehensively stuffed in his mind. There was no way he'd forgotten any details.

"In the real universe, when you are hired to do your job, you are expected to perform competently. Any of you who have slacked off in any fundamental subject will never have what it takes to grow in the industry. Every Senior, Master and Star Designer has reached their heights by relying on a combination of hard work and talents. Mere connections and wealth can give you a head start, but no designer has ever achieved enduring success by staying lazy."

The din quieted as some of the designers understood the professor's viewpoint. Most of the participants came from far away in order to impress the masters. These eminent figures could not be swayed by regular means such as the size of your wallets.

"Designers, please prepare to fill in the tests. Each of you have received five different exams at a level just beyond what we expect our last-year students to master. You may choose three of the subjects to fill in and submit. Take note that we will only give you five hours of time, more than enough to complete the exams if you are proficient in your chosen fields. Your scores will be counted together and only the top 10.000 will pass."

That meant that forty thousand mech designers were forced to bow out in the very first round. The Leemar Institute of Technology did not hold back in their attempts to diminish the giant crowd of designers. Most of these mech

designers were about to have their hopes crushed without even getting a chance to show off their skills in front of a crowd.

"Start!"

The projections unlocked, allowing each designer to interact with the digital exam files. Ves spread them all out to see which topics Leemar picked out for him especially.

COMPUTER SCIENCE

MATHEMATICS

MECHANICS

METALLURGY

PHYSICS

Ves swore to himself. He forgot that he declined to round out his foundational skills when he last received a windfall of DP. While he considered his Mechanics and Metallurgy skills to be his best, he neglected to improve his Computer Science, Mathematics and Physics.

"Well, out of the three latter skills, I suck the least at physics."

In order to boost his confidence, he chose to start with his best subject, Mechanics. He flipped the page of the mechanics exam book and started to tackle the problems within.

"This.. this is easy!"

While the old Ves might have crashed onto a cliff, the current him hardly stumbled at the sight of these questions. He leisurely used the correct approach to answer the questions. Some of the problems even concerned how to accomplish greater speeds, which fell right into his alley with his highly developed Speed Tuning sub-skill.

Only at the end did Ves encounter some snags. He vaguely suspected that Master Olson had personally formulated these problems, because they fell into her specialties. He did not specialize in designing energy-efficient mechs, let alone engines. Only his solid foundation in Mechanics allowed him to provide basic answers to the toughest questions.

"I guess anyone who followed courses under Master Olson should breeze through these tests. Anyone else can just blame their poor luck."

When Ves put aside mechanics and opened his metallurgy exam, he raced through the first questions with record speed. While his foundation in Metallurgy was a little shallower, he still had a massive head start compared to the vast majority of his rivals.

Thankfully, most of the difficult questions at the end had to do with alloy compression. Only the elites who studied at the best second-rate institutions were exposed to this exclusive subject. An anomaly like Ves who had every possible subject in his reach simply cheated his way into mastering the basics of alloy compression. In the end, he was quite confident that he aced this exam.

"Now, onto physics. Hopefully my previous scores can compensate for my abysmal performance here."

Pure physics formed the basis of many other related subjects. Ves gritted his teeth and struggled through the problems like a soldier crawling through a trench. He used his much more solid foundation in other skills to figure out the crux of the problems posed in this exam, with mixed success. He only got off lightly when he encountered problems that had to do with his Armor Optimization sub-skills.

After five hours of tortuous number-crunching, the buzzer sounded and the projections winked out. "Time is up! That is enough, ladies and gentlemen.

Take a moment to rest while our processors and assistants will score your work."

Almost every walker collapsed. While the fliers endured very little stress due to the comfort provided by their expensive antigrav clothes, the walkers had to fill in three entire exams while standing up. Ves supposed the organizers wanted to subtly test everyone's endurance, for he had witnessed a few contestants collapsing after an hour or two of standing straight.

"Heh, those guys who can't even stand for a couple of hours are pathetic."

"This test isn't fair! Why do they test us on math when processors take care of everything nowadays!"

"I have no idea why I'm being tested on assembly. It's not like I intend to pursue a career as a fabricator."

Evidently, a lot of people fared worse than Ves. He did not sympathize with them. If you wanted to compete at this level, then you'd better be as good as the students who graduated here. If Ves was still stuck as an average novice mech designer, he'd never have the guts to show up. All of his fellow contestants who overestimated themselves were about to receive a harsh dose of reality.

While everyone took a half hour break, Ves visited one of the bathroom stalls before grabbing a free lunch. Many designers huddled together and squirmed as they awaited their scores.

"Alright! Time's up! We've graded your exam papers and most of you have done a passable job. Yet we do not have any use for average results. Our masters only seek the best, and I am sorry to say that most of you will find your journey ends here."

Professor Marshall then pressed a button that caused a lot of people to light up. "Anyone who is lit up by a red light, please vacate the area!"

An uproar ensued as many overconfident designers protested their heartless elimination. While most of the walkers simply shook their heads and stepped away with glum faces, the fliers kept yelling that the evaluation was flawed and mistaken.

"SILENCE!" The dean yelled, and a large group of guards showed up with their stun rifles charged and ready to fire. "We are not your babysitters. Anyone who wishes to view their scores and protest the way we've graded them, you can go backstage. Do not hinder these proceedings."

Under the threat of getting stunned, even the most obstinate designers lowered their heads. Ves found it sad that most of the walkers had left the stage. They were simply unable to keep up with the advanced curriculum of a more developed state. He figured that most of the poor bums that are left must have some strengths to rely on to make it past this strict test.

To everyone's amusement, not everyone got the picture.

"THIS ISN'T FAIR! I'M THE SON OF-"

The poor fellow got shot by a stun projectile, shutting him up pretty quickly. A handful of his type joined him in his unconscious bliss. Fortunately for all of them, their antigrav clothes kept them aloft. Through some override, the clothes automatically floated them off the fields.

"Now, that we have that out of the way, we will proceed to your next challenge. Your task is to see whether you have what it takes to defeat your opponent in a mech design duel. Like all conventional duels, you are given a period of time, in this case eight hours, to design a mech out of a fairly limited selection of parts, though you can design your own if you wish."

Ves already participated in this kind of struggle during the qualifiers where his mech ran a gauntlet. This time, his mech faced another one in a duel, which meant he'd have to pay attention to other aspects.

"This time we've added a twist. You see, while you are allowed to design your mech in peace, you will do so in full view of your upcoming opponent, who will likewise be able to spy on your every move. Every aspect of your design is exposed to your enemy, from its loadout to its shape and even programming."

That was new! Ves had never fought a mech duel like that even in practice. This turned out to be a lot trickier than he thought. "If I'm designing a flight mech, my enemy can just designing a heavy artillery mech in response. I can counter that by designing a knight, but my opponent can counter that by designing a flying marksman."

A headache already started to build within his mind. How could he design a mech in peace when he and his opponent kept spying on each other and change their designs to incorporate counters?

### **Chapter 82: Transparent Duel**

Now that the previous round eliminated most designers, everyone gained sufficient space to work. The regulating system automatically paired mech designers against each other, forcing everyone to shuffle around. Ves walked to the left side of the field and met his opponent.

"Hi. I'm Ves Larkinson." He greeted politely. He looked at the man's floating nameplate. "So you are Floyd Lee?"

"Tch. This will be easy." The Leemar graduate contemptuously said. Unlike the other students who wore purple, he wore an exclusive blue uniform decorated with many more symbols. He also wore a silver sash, which carried a special meaning that Ves couldn't figure out, though only a few graduates shared the same colors.

Ves frowned a bit at his opponent's lack of response. He wanted to spark up a conversation to learn more about his opponent, but his contempt revealed no further openings. He only figured out that this handsome floating man was an

elite, and from his accent he likely originated from a core planet of the Carnegie Group.

"Give up, loser. I have no idea how you got through the first round, but I can assure you your progress ends here. Save me the trouble and make way for a future master."

"No thanks. I'd rather stay." Ves said in a clipped tone. He encountered plenty of entitled bastards in the past when he studied at Rittersberg, and he learned that the best way to cope with them was to keep your responses minimal.

Floyd intended to press the conversation. "Don't think that the rules will stop a man of my caliber. I have ways of cleaning you up if I find you displeasing."

"Are you sure it's a good idea to say that in the open with all kinds of monitoring systems active?"

"This little school doesn't care."

Evidently, Ves placed too much faith on the Leemar Institute of Technology's impartiality. Past competitions sometimes ended strangely when contestants of lesser means dropped out or spontaneously fell sick. Eventually it grew so bad that the LIT had to make a statement and put a stop to these unsavory actions.

His mood sank when Ves figured out that mere words could not elicit protective measures. He considered Floyd closer. Though he looked imposing, Ves did not find him to be particularly notable. He didn't recognize his face or his name, so he shouldn't be too famous.

As someone who recently stared death in the face, Ves was not easily cowed. Not anymore. Though he still acted discreet, he recently realized there were times when he had to forge ahead even if he ran into obstacles.



"You refer to yourself as a master, but all I hear is bluster. Come back before me with an official master seal from the MTA and then we'll talk. Until then, prepare to go back to your villa, because I'm going to eliminate you in a couple of hours."

"You..!"

In effect, Ves burned his bridges with his opponent. Without any means of reconciliation, Ves backed himself into a corner. If he succeeded in attracting the attention of a master, then clueless blowhards like Floyd were inconsequential. If he failed, then not only did he fail the System's mission, he'd also have to watch his back on the return trip.

The duel started soon enough. The noise disappeared when a new projection surrounded everyone. Everyone recognized the familiar interface of a virtual mech workshop. The only addition was that everyone could view their opponent's workshop and even access their files on the terminal.

Professor Marshall explained how their designs were tested at the end of the design period. "As with all standard duels, your designs will be piloted by our proprietary AIs in a hundred different simulations. Whoever designed the mech that wins the most will qualify for the next round. There's only one little change."

Everyone waited in anticipation.

"The piloting AI will remember the previous matches and can improve from its previous experiences."

This was a bombshell. Even after several hundred years of development, piloting AIs could never really match up against real pilots. The normal simulations only used the most basic, foolproof AIs for testing. Generally, only high-grade AIs were able to adapt intelligently to prior experience, and required a lot of processing power to do so.

The conventional strategy in designing a mech for a duel was to make it as simple as possible. The simpler the mech, the flatter the learning curve. This allowed the piloting AIs to grasp the mech as fast as possible and effectively use its strengths.

In a situation where the mech had time to learn from its mistakes and improve its performance over time, the story was different. Higher performing mechs were usually more complex, featuring a much steeper learning curve. The advantage of more complex mechs were that they usually performed much better in certain situations. If the AI was able to grasp the right technique for the right situation, it could leverage a complex mech's strength to incredible heights.

"You have eight hours to complete your design. Now start!"

Everyone approached their terminals and opened the interface. At their current level, the LIT did not expect everyone to design a functional mech from scratch, so everyone had a choice of standard components. Ves took a look at what kind of parts he had to work with, and estimated that they matched up to 3-star mechs in Iron Spirit.

"That's a little beyond what I'm used to, but with my recent improvements I should be able to handle them. First, I have to determine the shape and weight classes."

He took a look at Floyd, who confidently picked a frame without even bothering to wait for Ves. His empty workshop shimmered and the giant shape of a panther-shaped mech came into view.

The floating designer laughed down at Ves. "Hahaha, I gave you a chance to retreat, but now it's too late! I'm at the top of my class when it comes to felinid mechs! Let the Beastmaster show you how it's done!"

To his regret, Ves was not very familiar with beast mechs. Even if Ves could see everything Floyd was doing, without understanding most of it, he might as well be blind.

If Floyd chose to work on a humanoid mech, Ves could easily dissect his every move. Now, he could only guess at his design choices. From what he recalled, beast mechs usually flexibility for superior mobility. With four limbs, these wolf or tiger-like mechs possessed unequalled speed and agility, sometimes surpassing humanoid mechs of the same weight class.

In exchange, these quadruped mechs had less choices to work with. Wolf-shaped mechs usually relied on their highly sophisticated jaws, while tiger-shaped mechs also used their claws. There were more differences, but these were the main points. From What Ves could gather, Floyd's tiger mech was on the lower end of the medium weight class.

"Such a mech relies on speed and momentum to pounce on their opponents. In an open terrain, a light mech built for endurance can maintain their distance and chip away at the slower tiger mech."

Ves doubted that this was the correct solution. Who knew if Floyd followed some classes under Master Olson and could temporarily boost his mech's speed. He was unwilling to gamble on this front.

"I have more leeway if I make a more durable mech. It's best if I design a heavy mech, but I don't have any practical experience in designing them. I can only resort to hefty medium mechs."

Though he didn't know if the X-Factor worked on AI pilots, he still took a few minutes to sharpen his intent. His improved concentration made it easier to fall into the right mood. Even as Floyd occasionally tried to interrupt his thoughts, Ves easily swept aside the words.

"If Floyd fancies himself a beastmaster, then my mech will become the ultimate hunter."

In the end, Ves deferred to his past experience in working with the Caesar Augustus model. He scrolled through the parts section and picked out any legs, arms and torso that conformed to the Caesar Augustus.

All the basic parts of his medium mech eventually appeared in his virtual workshop. With a sturdy torso and legs, the mech he envisioned should be able to withstand a charge if it held a shield.

Against beast mechs, the best way to fight them was to shoot them down before they came into melee range. If Ves knew what kind of terrain the duels took place, he could comfortably make his choices. Yet Professor Marshall hadn't said a thing, which meant that the duels took place in randomized environments. He could not ensure his mech could face the beast mech in open terrain.

"The main armament will be a sword and shield. No, perhaps a spear is better, with a knife as a backup option. The best way to deter a charge is to point something long and sharp at them."

Then what if Floyd implemented ranged weapons on his mech. Ves studied his opponent's early progress and noted that the mouth and flanks possessed the right infrastructure to mount a couple of rifles. He wanted to keep Ves guessing.

If Floyd intended to be meticulous, then he'd definitely incorporate at least one ranged weapon. That meant that Ves had to respond in kind. He studied his chosen parts and noted that the arms only allowed for shoulder mounts. He could forget about wrist-mounted weaponry.

"Shoulder mounts are too fragile, but I don't have any choice. If I resort to a rifle then my mech will take too long to switch weapons."

Everything had their tradeoffs. A mech with shoulder mounts could never match up against a dedicated rifleman in a shootout. Ves persisted with his choice because he doubted Floyd relied entirely on lasers or cannons for his beast mech.

As time passed, Floyd laughed when he saw what Ves decided. "Hahaha! Can't make up your mind? You're not going anywhere if you split your focus."

Ves ignored everything but his own work. Unless Floyd ditched his beast mech and turned to an entirely different frame, Ves gained nothing if he kept staring at his opponent's design. He trusted in his design and its ability to hunt tigers.

He chose to design his medium mech based on armor, agility and close-ranged prowess. Fending off a beast mech required a certain level of fluidity. If he made his mech too sluggish, it could not keep up with a flanking beast mech.

The parts he chose already possessed pretty good armor. He only replaced the base plating with a lighter but more durable variant by using the alloy compression machine. Those who were not familiar with alloy compression could only scratch their heads, but someone like Ves who mastered the basics, he could still produce the plates when fed with standard materials.

Fabricating all of the replacement armor by hand took three hours, and that was with the virtual workshop giving him a speed boost. The process was much slower in reality. As mech duels were only supposed to be finished within a day, these virtual workshops customarily offered these kinds of conveniences so the audience wouldn't get bored.

He spent another two hours slapping together the rest. As Ves chose to go with a simple loadout, he did not have to extensively rearrange the internals. This saved him quite a bit of time. Together with his high Mechanics skill, he

easily pieced together the different parts into a harmonious whole. He only made minor modifications to strengthen his mech's spear handling.

A hunter slowly took shape.

With a couple hours left to go, Ves raised his head to see how Floyd progressed. His jaw dropped when he looked at his opponent's design.

Somehow, he converted a medium ambush-type tiger mech into a heavy artillery-type centaur mech. The mech somehow gained massive amounts of armor without conflicting its movement, while its head had been replaced by a narrow torso that held an ominous laser rifle. Floyd even gave up on the claws and crudely replaced them with heavy hooves. Its main weapon however was the prodigious amount of missile launchers mounted on its back.

While the centaur mech possessed no close-ranged capabilities, its numerous missiles and its high-class laser rifle meant that it could chew up anything that came within sight. The sudden changes also introduced numerous flaws. The engine power could not keep up and its laser rifle used up too much energy for the power reactor to catch up.

That still left Ves at a fundamental disadvantage. His humanoid medium mech could never compete at a distance and was too slow to close the distance in time.

"I screwed up." Ves admitted to himself. He put his complete focus into maintaining his concentration, which made him forget that he could take a peek at his opponent's work. Now he paid for it by allowing Floyd to make a u-turn without alerting him. Turned out that focusing too much on the X-Factor was not always a good thing.

### Chapter 83: Unconventional

His brain started churning hotter than ever before. The feeling of crisis hounding after his back was distinctly unpleasant. He had to figure a way to climb out of his own hole.

"There's only two hours left. Before I do anything else, first I should see if Floyd is able to pull another fast one."

As Ves studied Floyd's jury-rigged centaur mech, he found many minor errors. Instead of starting anew with a basic heavy frame, his opponent chose to forcefully increase his beast mech's weight class by slapping a lot of parts together.

He understood why Floyd went in this direction. If he replaced the frame, he'd have to throw away at least a couple of hours of work. Evidently, he couldn't bear to start over.

"Is he crazy?" Ves asked when he realized what Floyd did. In his perspective, it was better to use a frame built to withstand the stresses of a heavy mech than to forcefully reinforce a lighter frame. This ungodly centaur mech certainly had its faults. Compared to a purpose-built centaur mech, his chimera's speed, power and integrity was awful.

Floyd wasn't stupid. His mech might not be capable of chasing an opponent, but it possessed enough firepower to devastate anyone at range.

The missile launchers was also a source of anxiety. Floyd had left them empty. He'd probably chose the missile type at the very last second. With the variety of missiles available, Ves had no way of modifying his mech to withstand a specific missile type.

"Odds are, he's going to resort to one of the three major types: high explosive, thermal, or kinetic. I doubt he'd pick something indirect like EMP or smoke particles."

If Ves could pin down the mix of damage types and optimal ranges of the launchers, he could work some additional armor.

"Hmm, I don't think he'll replace those missile launchers with other weapon types. His mech can't withstand the weight or energy consumption of anything bigger."

This gave him an idea. He looked at his mech's shoulder lasers and made some optimizations. He enhanced their accuracy and fire rate at the cost of impact. He even went to the trouble of incorporating an enhanced targeting system into the head, allowing it to track fast-moving projectiles. In the end, he turned them into decent anti-missile systems.

Ves spied on his opponent again and confirmed he didn't change anything again. Floyd still tried to paper over the worst cracks of his hasty modifications. Besides the missile loadout, everything was set in stone.

"His design still stands a better chance than mine." He concluded after a minute of consideration, though with a narrow margin.

They chose to pursue different extremes. Ves designed a structurally sound mech with the time allotted to him. Floyd embraced the weird duel format and changed his design midway in order to counter his opponent's efforts. While both had their strong points, Floyd took the lead by making his switch at an opportune moment. Ves had no time to change his fundamental design.

"I've got about an hour left. There should be something I can do."

He looked left and right but unfortunately he couldn't steal anyone else's ideas. The projection systems only made the workshops viewable to their owners and their opponents. Only the audience and the organizers were able to see everything, but they had no way of communicating their observations to participants.



"I need to think outside the box. I can't just submit this design without taking advantage of the competition format."

He thought about his opponent's mech. Its main damage dealer was its missiles. The laser rifle also posed a threat, but not too much due to the centaur mech's insufficient energy and heat absorption capacities. As the mech gained a pair of humanoid arms, Ves also couldn't rule out that Floyd added a melee weapon such as a spear at the last moment.

He considered his options again in light of this information. While a spear might make the centaur possess some bite at close range, it wasn't enough to fend off a purpose-built melee mech. If his hunter successfully closed the distance, he'd bet his medium mech could beat the centaur mech eighty percent of the time.

"That centaur is slow as hell, and will probably fall apart if it tries to run. Does my mech even need a lot of speed?"

His mech already weighed a lot for a medium mech, so he gave up any strategies involving a dash. Instead, he considered the opposite. If he beefed up his mech's armor and shields, then it stood a better chance of fending off the missile barrage.

"I don't have a lot of leeway in adding more protection. Although..."

If Ves submitted his design in a blind duel, he'd never overburden his mech. Now that he saw what his opponent was working on, he could avoid the pitfall of choosing an overly specific loadout only to risk stumbling on a direct counter.

"I don't need to stick to conventional limits. The best way to endure a missile bombardment is to put as much layers in between the missiles and the mech."

His memories provided him with some inspiration. He especially revisited the concept of modular armor. Naturally, he had no time to replace his mech's

armor with a modular system, nor did he wish to do so in the first place. Instead, he referred to the system's premise.

"The goal of a modular armor system is to treat armor as a disposable product. When necessary, it's better to discard a spent piece of armor in exchange for a reduction in weight."

He could apply this concept to a shield. He wanted to design an incredibly thick shield, one so heavy that it had to be supported by wheels or tracks if possible. Who cared if his mech slowed to a crawl. He'd bet it was still a bit faster than that rickety centaur mech on even terrain.

After regaining his spirit, Ves implemented his crazy idea in the hour that remained. Even if Floyd stopped his tinkering and puzzled out his intentions, there was nothing much his opponent could do to respond.

Ves obfuscated his work by designing only a small portion of his shield. Like a pre-assembled block, if he duplicated its shape, he could easily stack them together, though without alloy compression. Before he did so, his opponent laughed at its small and weak-looking shape.

"Hahaha! That little shield isn't big enough for what I have in store for you! Even if you used alloy compression, it still won't stop my firepower!"

Again, Ves questioned Floyd's sanity. If he stopped laughing so much, he might notice the camouflaged attachment points at the shield's extremities. Despite his bewilderment, he kept pretending to work on something else.

The last minute initiated some frantic changes. Both Ves and Floyd sped up and added a lot of new parts. Ves kept one eye on Floyd's actions while he implemented his own plan.

As predicted, Floyd added a melee weapon to his mech. Instead of a spear, he chose to add a halberd instead. As for the missile loadout, he went for an even mix of high explosive and kinetic payloads. The kinetic missiles excelled

at damaging shields and slow-moving mechs, while the explosive ones fared better in damaging lighter and more exposed components.

Just as Floyd finished his additions, he took a taunting look at his opponent's workshop. His grin vanished. "Impossible! That's impossible!"

Ves removed the useless fittings meant to cover up the attachment points on his shield. He scanned the design and duplicated its very basic shape with the most basic materials. The virtual workshop allowed him to duplicate any material as long as it wasn't too complex. The shield barely qualified, but Ves successfully duplicated a handful of identical plates with simpler materials.

With the quickest speed, he clicked them all together, forming an oversized rectangular barrier. The main point of the shield was its layered composition. If the front layer became too tattered, the mech could easily detach it by prying off a few locks. With up to four different layers, the wide and tall shield provided enough bulk to withstand the centaur mech's entire missile complement.

Naturally, his mech could not even lift a big and heavy shield without cracking its arms. To support the shield's alignment, he hastily added a couple of unpowered wheels to the bottom. They served no function other than to bear the shield's weight and make it easier to push forward on flat terrain. If the mech came across more complex terrain, its pilot could choose to discard some layers in order to carry it like a conventional shield.

"This is cheating! Anyone! My opponent is cheating!"

Sadly, Floyd received no response. The virtual workshop scanned both designs and approved them without comment. Ves ignored his blubbing and sat down on the field. He worked for eight straight hours. He deserved a rest.

"Ladies and gentlemen, now that you have submitted your designs, we will see whether they can vanquish the opposition. In the interest of finishing this

round in a prompt fashion, we will speed up the simulations so that we can receive the results before the hour is over. Let the duels commence!"

The virtual workshop environments vanished into thin air. Instead, a new set of projections appeared. A projection of the automated duels appeared in front of every pairing. As expected, each duel was held in a completely random environment. Some fought in a city, while others fought in a forest. A couple of duels even took place on a low-gravity moon, which threw both AIs off-whack.

Ves and Floyd's first duel took place in a fairly average desert environment. The hot environment favored the medium mech, as it mainly relied on its melee weapons to deal damage. The centaur mech had to watch its heat buildup, and it showed as its AI chose to slow down its rate of fire when it spotted its humanoid opponent.

"Fucking idiot! Shoot faster! Empty those launchers!"

The fast-forwarding made it difficult to judge what was going on, but Ves saw that his mech held an overwhelming advantage. The relatively flat terrain facilitated the jury-rigged wheels. His unnamed mech sluggishly advanced, making sure to hide as much of its profile behind the giant shield.

"What kind of shit-for-brains did the LIT put in my mech! It's not even moving a lot!"

Even the centaur's piloting AI thought it was a bad idea to test his mech's speed limits. Floyd underestimated the importance of his mech's integrity. With all the crude additions, it was a wonder his mech didn't fall apart.

The medium mech started to speed up. It stoically endured the missile bombardments and discarded the damaged layers when they were spent. When the shield lost half of its mass, the mech was able to speed up and cut short the centaur's lethargic bombardment.

The halberd proved to be a little troublesome, but the centaur AI lacked familiarity with the weapon. In the end, the medium mech discarded the shield and flanked the centaur from behind. The centaur could not keep up with the change in direction and got its rear area wrecked.

Ves won the first match. "Only ninety-nine to go."

The second match took place in one of the worst environments for his design. The hilly forest terrain impeded the mech's oversized shield. After a few minutes of fruitless fumbling, it finally learned to detach most of its layers and regain its mobility. After a few minutes of patient hunting, the centaur finally revealed itself as it fired a sudden missile salvo from a hill.

The centaur easily prevailed. It leveraged its height advantage as much as possible while the medium mech suffered from discarding most of its shielding.

The duels sped up after the first couple of matches. Ves already determined the overall trend. As long as his mech was able to maintain its shield, it won as it easily blocked every missile in its way. The centaur grew smarter by seeking the most complex environments to make its stand.

Thus, the first couple of victories favored Ves, but after the twentieth duel he lost his lead. The AI pilots both adjusted their tactics while responding better to their opponent's actions.

The medium mech learned to angle its shields and spread out the impacts.

The centaur mech aimed its laser rifle at the wheels attached to the shield.

On and on the duels progressed, until finally the last one finished.

"Yes!" Ves yelled and raised his fist. He prevailed over Floyd by a comfortable ratio of 58 wins to 42 losses. He qualified for the next round while Floyd was sent packing. While the Leemar graduate possessed some solid skills, he lost

his cool and tried to one-up his adversary by turning midway. If not for his questionable decisions, he might have reached further.

After his excitement cooled, Ves faced his opponent and held out his hand. "It was a good duel."

Floyd spat downwards and turned his back on Ves without a word.

#### **Chapter 84: Gene Boosts**

While it felt good giving Floyd a mental smack, Ves knew he provoked an angry bear. If the stakes weren't so high, he'd rather take a step back. Now, his pressure increased. He was not content to take second place this time. He had to dazzle the audience and mesmerize at least one of the masters present.

"The road ahead has just begun. If I take Floyd as a standard, then I will only encounter tougher opponents."

Plenty of contestants wanted to dispute the results. Most of them mainly blamed the AI pilots for failing to unearth their mech's potential. Most of the complaints came from the fliers.

"You cheated! There's no way a nobody like you can beat my awesome mech!"

Sadly for Floyd, no one cared about his accusations. While a student supervisor arrived to address his results, he had no leeway in giving the alumni from Leemar a helping hand.

"According to the logs, both mechs are designed within acceptable boundaries. Mechanically, there's nothing fishy there, even if both of you made some unconventional choices."

"What about my crappy AI pilot? I obviously got a retard for a pilot!"

The supervisor shook his head. "Every mech in every simulation started with the same AI pilot. They all have the same capacity for learning and adaptation. According to the logs, the AI pilot for your centaur mech peaked midway. It couldn't figure out new strategies. As for your opponent's medium mech, its AI pilot constantly unearthed new things to try."

In other words, one mech provided slightly more options than the other mech. There was a limit how diverse a pilot could utilize the tools at hand. The main factor that limited the centaur was its crippling slow speed. The lack of speed narrowed its options to purely offensive and defensive stances.

As for the design submitted by Ves, the AI pilot was able to take the initiative in most battles due to its freedom of movement. It could charge straight ahead or it could take it slow by flanking its opponent. This was actually the main reason why heavy mechs never achieved dominance. Without sufficient mobility, a mech was nothing different than a sitting duck.

After verifying the validity of the results, the supervisor took the devastated Floyd away. Sadly, some of the losers kept making a fuss, though they were easily taken care off with a few stun bolts. Ves couldn't believe how many designers broke down and acted like babies.

"I always thought it took discipline and constant study to become a mech designer. I have no idea how these rich kids managed to graduate with a degree in mech design."

"Pff. It's genetics man." A fellow walker supplied. "Everyone knows their parents constantly injected their kids with genetic boosts. They take 1 hour to learn a theory that regular people like us take a day to understand. There's different injections available that can strengthen your muscles, make you smarter or even remove the need for sleep."

That was fairly new to Ves. "I thought those kinds of things are illegal or don't even exist."

"To commoners, they might as well be fairy tales. It's a conspiracy the upper echelon is happy to keep under wraps. They even banded together in order to suppress any credible mention about these boosts. If you don't believe me, then try and uploading a post. I can guarantee you'll be arrested quicker than you can take a leak."

Ves almost didn't believe it if not for one thing. Had he already taken some 'injections' himself? When he recalled the few times he ingested the System's attribute candies, he measurably grew stronger in a couple of areas. Was the System messing with his genes each time he ate a candy?

The news shook his view of how the galaxy worked. He always treated those rumors about genetic tampering as air, but perhaps he underestimated the progress humanity made over the years in terms of human genetics.

"Do you have any proof?"

"Pff! Of course not! I'd be dead if I had anything. I've only been able to learn a bit because I have a moneybags for a friend."

As today's program came to an end, everyone slowly left the parade ground. As Ves tried to keep an eye out on Dietrich and his cat, he reconsidered the matter of upgrading his attributes. Now that he developed some decent skills, perhaps it was time to upgrade his intelligence.

"If I had another windfall of DP, I can afford to splurge on a couple of intelligence candies."

The price of a candy corresponded with the height of his current attributes.



Any attribute between 1.0 and 2.0 could be upgraded by buying a candy worth 1,000 times the desired height. For example, with his current intelligence of 1.2, if he wanted to raise it to 1.3, he'd have to spend 1,200 DP.

If he wanted to raise his intelligence to 2.0, he'd have to spend a cumulative amount of 13200 DP in total.

After reaching the threshold of 2.0, the price of the attribute candies multiplied by 10,000, meaning that he'd have to spend 21,000 DP to upgrade his intelligence to 2.1.

The price of upgrading an attribute grew to stupendous heights the more it grew. At his current level, Ves had no way of earning enough DP to upgrade his intelligence to a meaningful level where it could make a difference.

That was why up to now, he always emphasized the acquisition of skills. They provided concrete benefits at reasonable costs. Ves always planned to upgrade his intelligence and perhaps some other attributes in the long term. Despite his envy, he maintained his current stance. At most, he'd upgrade his intelligence by a couple of points so that he wouldn't come across as stupid when faced with a master.

Ves sighed when he thought about his empty DP reserve. All of his plans meant nothing if he didn't gain another source of DP. With both his virtual and real universe sales stalling, he had no way of buying anything anything from the System to help him out in the competition. He had to rely on himself to reach the top.

He only became a little disappointed when the Mech Designer System became less unique. The rich and powerful had their own ways of getting ahead even without a supposed reality-altering software program.

Ves finally found Dietrich near the exit. The pilot yawned as he greeted his friend.

"Man, this is the most boring competition I've ever watched. There's nothing exciting about watching thousands of nerds geeking out over a couple of stupid exams. The only part that interested me was the duels, but it finished way too quickly for me to enjoy."

"Haha, it might not be very exciting for you, but for mech designers like me, it's been a thrill."

"Are you sure you mech designers are still human? I'm not surprised if you've all been replaced by aliens."

Without a technical background, pilots like Dietrich could never appreciate these kinds of events. Ves enjoyed the opportunity to cash against his peers. Watching his skills grow better from a boring Status was much less tangible than winning an actual match against a living person. It made all of his improvements look real.

Different from before, the LIT erected temporary housing for the remaining visitors. Each modular apartment came with all of the basic necessities, and were fairly secure as well. The temporary housing area became more crowded with the heavy security presence. In order to prevent improper actions such as bribery or sabotage, the entire place turned stiflingly safe.

Dietrich whistled in appreciation when he saw how many mechs patrolled the perimeter. "Leemar sure takes a lot of effort to secure a simple housing area."

"I'm glad they take our security seriously. I've already offended one bastard from the Coalition. There's no telling what he'll do behind my back."

As Dietrich lacked any understanding of mech design, he wasn't really able to follow the mech duel in the second round. When Ves explained how he triumphed over his opponent, he snorted.

"Bah, what a git. This guy refuses to admit his loss because he's not as good as you. That should be the end of the matter."

Ves truly hoped he had no more encounters with Floyd, but he vaguely suspected he might not be so forgiving.

After an uneventful night, the contestants returned to the fields. Out of the fifty thousand participants, only five thousand remained. The final round of the qualifiers aimed to cut down their numbers to a measly five hundred. The attrition was horrible but necessary in order to make the main event presentable.

Just like last time, Professor Marshall addressed the crowd. "Today is the day where we will decide the final 500. Who among you will be lucky enough to perform in front of a crowd of the most eminent figures in the mech industry? Who among you will be projected in the homes of every household in the Komodo Star Sector? The chance to gain fame and make your name known to trillions of people is in your grasp. Are you not excited?"

Every mech designer cheered. They all fought hard to make themselves more prominent. Even if they failed to catch the interest of a master, the trip was still worth it if they became a household name. Fame was a precious resource that accelerated any mech designer's career.

"Now, let me begin with the third round. This time, the format revolves around teamwork. As you all know, mech designers often work together with other designers when involved in a major project. The best and most widely used designs are always a collection of each designer's best results. No mech designer in existence claims to be the best at everything, though the Polymath comes awfully close."

Everyone laughed a little. Clair Gramza was an absolute genius with a terrifying level of intelligence. The amount of fields she specialized in could fill

a whole data chip. Ves secretly wondered if the Star Designer bathed in intelligence gene boosts since birth.

"This time, we wish to see some cooperation among you. Everyone will be grouped into teams of ten. Your task is to collectively design a single mech, which will be matched against every mech your rival groups have come up with once. This time the AI pilots will not remember their previous results, so all the matches are absolutely consistent. The top fifty groups with the most wins will collectively qualify for the main competition tomorrow!"

Everyone gaped at the competition format. Working together wasn't unheard of. Usually, small groups of mech designers often came together to produce designs intended for mass production.

The problem was that when the number of people surpassed five, these groups often became unwieldy. There were too many cooks in the kitchen. Everyone had their own ideas. If some people shared the same specialties, they could easily clash. It was a nightmare trying to corral everybody even if their thoughts aligned.

"Now you may be wondering how you can control so many designers in a single group. Well, that's for you to solve. You can have one designer do the work while the other nine do nothing. You can have each designer spend one hour with the design interface before letting another take over when their time is up. You can partner with someone strong and beat up those you disagree with. As long as no one requires medical attention, we will not intervene."

"That's barbaric!"

"Hah! I'm the captain of the boxing club! If you don't want a bruise, you better acknowledge who's boss!"

Ves had never heard of such an absurd ruleset for a group contest. Even physical intimidation wasn't ruled out.

"Remember! The only design our simulations will accept is the one submitted by the group's designated terminal. We won't care if others block you from accessing the terminal, or if your entire group has argued so much that your design is incomplete. What's on the terminal will be the only thing that's approved. Now, find your group mates and make some new friends!"

A complex series of projections guided everyone together in groups of ten. Ves quickly met an eclectic group of designers. Seven of them were fliers, indicating their deep backgrounds. Four of them even wore the LIT's alumni uniform. Ves was only one of three who came from a less affluent background. He quickly stared at the young man and woman who remained on the ground.

"Hi. I'm Ves Larkinson, from the Bright Republic."

The woman glowered at him. "Missy Phillips. Vesia Kingdom."

His smile dropped a little when he heard that. Of all the possible teammates, the organizers grouped him with a girl from an enemy state.

Sensing the tension between the two, the remaining guy tried to break the tension. "Hello everyone. The name's Clark McCullum, and I'm born and raised in the Coalition."

Both of them shook their hands with Clark. Neither Ves nor Missy wanted to mess up their chances by having a fruitless argument over their national pride.

"If you plebs could kindly shut up, us real designers are about to work." A bossy woman called from above.

Neither of the three walkers appreciated her tone, though they dared not raise their voices. The woman was one of the graduates from Leemar. She also sported the most symbols on her uniform, which meant she earned plenty of achievements during her time as a student.

Still, Ves did not want to be crowded out by the elites. He summed up his courage and asked, "Who are you?"

"You have the pleasure of addressing Cynthia Barakovski. Perhaps you have heard of B&F Integrated?"

B&F Integrated was one of the Coalition's heavy industry manufacturers. They also dipped their toes into mech production. The sales from their mech division easily surpassed a trillion cols.

After a few seconds, Missy's eyes widened. She recognized her name. "You're that Cynthia Barakovski who reached the top hundred in the last iteration of the Junior Rimward Games!"

While Ves still didn't recognize her name, the mere mention of the Junior Rimward Games was sufficient to overawe everyone present. The Junior Rimward Games was the most prestigious sports competition in the galaxy for everyone under twenty-five. They expanded into non-physical sports such as mech design a long time ago.

Cynthia soaked up the attention with a smile. "You can rest that we will easily qualify with my presence. As long as you don't disturb me, I can easily design a killer mech."

Both Clark and Missy practically had stars in their eyes. Ves bewilderingly stared at their worshipping gazes. He never really paid much attention to the massive Rimward Games, let alone the smaller Junior edition. He could only stand in place and witness Cynthia bewitching everyone into giving her space to design their group's mech.

While Ves did not doubt Cynthia's accomplishments, it did not change that they were supposed to work as a group. Those that survived so far all had their strengths. As someone aiming to reach the finals, Ves believed even his

own input should be valuable. He was not content to risk his chances by leaving it up to a stranger.

### Chapter 85: Teamwork

Their group was already off to a quick start. Cynthia Barakovski rolled over most of her fellow designers with her immense accomplishments. Even Ves became almost convinced. If not for his stellar confidence in himself, he might have let the elite Leemar graduate have her way.

The workshop's terminal rested on the ground, forcing her to descend. Just as she approached the console, Ves stepped forward and held a hand.

"Please wait a moment, Miss Barakovski."

Her eyes pierced his own with a disgruntled intensity. "You are in my way."

Okay, this conversation already went downhill. Ves quickly adjusted his suggestion. "If I may add, I'm sure that with your accomplishments, you are more than qualified to take the position of lead designer. However, I'm pretty sure everyone else can contribute their own insights to our design. Are you willing to let us provide you with some suggestions?"

Sadly, Barakovski treated his suggestions like air. She contemptuously flipped her hair and turned around.

One of the fliers sank down in order to block Ves from pursuing her. "Our princess doesn't have time to entertain third-rate peasants like you. Now run along and play in the dirt. Your participation is unnecessary."

The other fliers closed ranks and made their stances clear. Ves almost couldn't believe how fast they threw away their pride as designers. He turned around to ask for help from his fellow walkers, only to see Missy and Clark turning their heads as if they were blind and deaf.

"Ves, let's not rock the boat. We only have twelve hours to design a mech. A future star like Barakovski can easily come up with a complete design."

"Yes, if we distract her too much, we'll only be ruining our group. To be honest, I'm barely scraping by. I'm not good enough to compete at this level anymore. Why not sit back and let her carry us past the qualifiers? Do you know how much of an honor it is to be part of the five hundred who will show up on stage tomorrow?"

Both of them came up with reasonable excuses. Even some of the fliers agreed with them. After being ganged up by practically his entire group, Ves had no choice but to back down.

"Alright, we'll see, but if she makes a mistake, I won't hesitate to call it out."

Naturally, everyone ignored those words. How could a nobody like Ves even compare against a prominent designer like Miss Barakovski? She represented the entire Friday Coalition in an immense competition that spanned a quarter of the galaxy. Even if she barely reached the top 100, the level of competition in these events was staggering.

Nevertheless, Ves thought it was not wise to put all of their eggs in a single basket. Even the disciples of a master never claimed to be proficient in every field. However, he had no means of forcing the issue. He reluctantly stood back and allowed Miss Barakovski to do her wish without further objections.

The young lady started her design process by picking the basic frame. She confidently skipped the medium mechs and went straight for a light mech. Such a choice took a lot of daring due to the lack of options. Barakovski's other choices made it clear that she wanted to design a skirmisher.

If Ves was in charge, he'd pick a safe and boring medium mech. Sadly, he could only watch as Barakovski went all-in on her build. She intended to design a mech reminiscent of his very old Nomad.

Certain types of skirmishers excelled in different situations. Barakovski's skirmisher was obviously built for endurance. Fuel cells took most of the



limited available capacity. To complement her choice, she chose to utilize a low-intensity fuel-injected power reactor to provide her mech with a steady amount energy. Most of this energy would be spent on powering up the mech's only weapons, a pair of lightweight wrist-mounted laser cannons.

Ves frowned at her decisions. He had a decent amount of experience in working with these kinds of systems. The wrist-mounted laser cannons was especially tricky. A light mech's arms were not supposed to incorporate such an intensive weapon system. One stray shot could disable the entire mechanism.

To her credit, Barakovski knew what she was doing. She revealed her proficiency in metallurgy and physics when she stripped the light mech's armor and painstakingly designed an entirely new compressed armor scheme that even Ves wanted to praise. She personally fabricated all of the compressed armor plating with practiced skill.

"She's a true prodigy designer." Missy uttered next to him. She practically gazed at the elite Leemar graduate like she was a goddess. "That armor is truly divine. I could never in a million years fabricate such pieces without slipping up."

Barakovski evidently mastered assembly as well. The way she smoothly interacted with the terminal and the virtual workshop's tools gave Ves the impression that she spent many hours in an actual mech workshop. Even though he was not a slouch, his System-enhanced skills lacked the genuine fluency of actual experience.

As the alloy compression took a very long time, Ves started to take a look around. Curiously, his vision of the projections of the other groups was blocked. He had no way of determining their designs. Yet he could still watch and hear what they were doing, as if the organizers wanted to let others see how their rivals tackled the issue of teamwork.

"Well, this is a fine mess." A burly designer commented as he spat out some blood. His clothes were disarrayed. Six other designers were sprawled on the ground, each of them nursing a lot of bruises.

"You did good." A handsome prince-like figure said as he clapped his lackey's back. "Now that we've gotten rid of the riffraff, we can get rid of this trash design and start over with something competent."

At another side, a group that happened to consist of seven walkers bravely tried to fend off the three fliers who disagreed with their actions. Their antigrav clothes gave them an advantage in the air, but their numbers were too feeble to reverse the situation. Their constant harassment slowed down the design process and caused them to spend most of their time staring at each other.

On the flipside, at least half of the other groups got along cordially, if not entirely harmoniously. The best groups often counted an abundance of Leemar graduates on their midst. Their solidarity and familiarity with each other gave them a united front against their scattered groupmates. The weight of their school also counted for a lot.

He spotted no genuine cooperation between all ten members of a group. Even if some of them held a similar opinion to Ves, others dragged them down. His own situation was hardly unique. Practically every group had at least one elite designer that wanted to take charge. The meek and the hanger-ons pressured the others in order to ensure they could get their free rides.

While Ves did not claim to be the most observant participant in the competition, he still smelled a conspiracy of sorts. From the size of the groups, to the placement of the terminals, everything had been set in place to encourage conflict instead of cooperation. He wouldn't be surprised if the group composition had been fudged as well.

"Really, when every group is led by an elite, this round will simply devolve into a series of solo duels."

This meant that every group was back to square one. Of the five-hundred lead designers, only fifty of them would survive. Even if someone like Barakovski was a cut above the rest, he did not wish to gamble on a ten percent odds.

Having concluded that this was actually a subtle trap, Ves still had to come up with a solution. He turned back to Missy and Clark. They sat on the ground as if they were a pair of bored little children. He quietly approached them and caught their attention.

"Only seven hours to go before we get our free pass. What's up?"

Ves drew closer and explained his analysis. He expected the two to get their heads back in the game.

Instead, they looked at him as if he was a troll. "Really now. That's kind of clever. But what difference does it makes if every group is similar? It's not like we can contribute to the design."

"Do you really believe that? Where is your pride as a designer?"

The two had no fight in their eyes. Ves really thought the speech by the old guy at the start had been wasted on these freeloaders. How could they expect to get ahead in the mech industry if they didn't fight for their jobs?

"Okay, you two can stay and sit on your asses for all I care. I'll figure out a solution on my own."

Perhaps if Ves kept at it, he might have persuaded the pair to back him up. However, when he looked at their soulless gazes, he gave up. These two lazy bastards deserved to rot for the rest of their lives.

He didn't know what he wanted to do, but he stood to the side for now. Ves had no reason to interfere as long as Barakovski worked flawlessly.

Different from Ves, Barakovski started from the outside and slowly worked inwards. Besides selecting all of the basic components such as the engines and power reactor, she spent most of her time trying to harmonize the armor system and wrist lasers. For a light mech, these two components were of prime importance that had the most direct influence to the mech's performance.

Frontloading these components meant that Barakovski wanted to budget out her time. For example, if she was forced to spend too much time on the armor system, she could choose to spend a little less time on the internals.

And indeed, Barakovski spent a lot of hours just to optimize the wrist lasers. If Ves wanted to do a proper job, he'd need to spend at least two days to get it working right. The woman acted too much like a perfectionist and kept fiddling with the most minute components.

Ves sneaked a little closer and coughed a little. "We only have five or so hours left. In the interest of completing the design, I suggest you start working on the internals."

"What do you know?!" One of her self-promoted guards spoke as he floated downwards. "Those laser cannons are our only weapons. If our lady's time is cut short, who knows if they'll malfunction?"

"Yeah, and who cares about optimizing the internals anyway? It's just a bunch of cables and muscles. There's hardly any complexity involved in uncrossing a couple of wires."

The comment from the second goon made it clear to Ves that he had no idea what he was talking about. Having worked with the awful mess that was the Caesar Augustus, he knew more than anyone else in the group the fragility of a crowded and unoptimized internal structure.

With everyone set against him, Ves had no way of remedying the situation. Barakovski ignored his advice and kept tinkering with the wrist lasers. An entire hour went by until she finally put down her work.

"I'm finally done with these laser cannons. The hard part is over." Barakovski sighed as she paused in her work. One of her group mates brought her some refreshments, which she enjoyed with relish. "Alright, there's only four hours left to go. The rest is easy."

This time, Ves watched as Barakovski started with the internals. Unlike her earlier performance, Ves cringed when she made a number of shortcuts and other questionable decisions. It became clear to him that her mechanics had not reached the journeyman level.

When Ves suggested she was making a mistake, the entire group looked at him with contempt.

"Really now. Where did you study? Rittersberg? What no name planet is that?"

"The Bright Republic is the backwoods of our Komodo Star Sector. I don't believe a barren place like that knows more about mechanics than Leemar."

No one acknowledged his expertise in this area. He stood at a crossroads. If he did nothing, then he might miss one of the greatest chances of his life. There was too much at stake.

"Maybe I'm thinking too much." Ves whispered to himself.

He waited until the group let down their guard. Once everyone turned back to the terminal, Ves sprinted forwards and brushed aside the bodies in his way.

"Hey!"

"What the?!"

"STOP!"

Once Ves came close, he tackled Barakovski to the ground. Both of them dove through the projection and landed harshly on the ground. He moved around her body and held her neck in a chokehold-like position. Sadly, he hadn't figured out what to do after that. He had never attended any close-quarters combat classes.

After several seconds went by, it became clear that none of the other designers had any clue either. They all look paralyzed as Ves seemed to transform into a crazy beast ready to devour an innocent maiden.

"Unhand me scoundrel!" Barakovski hissed as she moaned in pain. The tackle came unexpected and her landing was hard. Her soft, boneless body wiggled against Ves in a weak, helpless fashion. Whatever gene boosts she received had not been spent on improving her physique.

Both sides were stuck at an impasse. Ves originally wanted to knock Barakovski unconscious, but he was afraid of dealing more damage than necessary. He already offended her enough.

"Look, can we talk about this?"

### **Chapter 86: Carrying**

#### **Carrying**

No one made any rash moves. Ves held Barakovski tight against his body. He hadn't embraced a lot of girls in his life, so the feeling of having a pretty girl in your arms distracted him. The other males in the group appeared outraged while the girls looked scandalized.

"You bastard mongrel! That's the class princess you've injured!"

"Your dead now! B&F Integrated isn't a company you can offend!"

The commotion even attracted the attention of their neighbors. Most of the conflicts happened at the start of the design period. Ves surprised everyone

by making his coup with only a few hours remaining until they had to submit their design.

"Don't push me!" Ves growled angrily while he tightened the hold on Miss Barakovsi's slender neck. He attempted to channel a bit of his state of mind when he fought back against the pirates on the Saint Hearst. The designers drew back in fear as if scalded by hot water. They were as green as the flowers in a garden.

"You guys are trying my patience. Can you stop ignoring me all the time and listen to my suggestions?"

The eight other designers stood helplessly as they remained undecided. Ves was glad to see that none of the people here had a clue on how to liberate Barakovski. It seemed like every mech designer received only perfunctory self defense training during school.

As the mech designers argued about, the hostage had enough. "Quiet! We are not a brood of headless chickens. We are mech designers. Let us talk it over rationally."

"There's no value in negotiating with that brute!"

No one treated her latest words seriously. They all thought she just wanted to free herself from her captor's clutches. While the mech designers kept bleating and insulting Ves, he lowered his mouth to her ear.

"Look, I'm sure you're a great mech designer, but it's clear you haven't specialized in mechanics. I've got a much deeper foundation in this field."

"Huh, is that so?" Barakovski huffed as she tried to untangle herself from his grasp. Her movements only rubbed her slim body harder against Ves. "While I might not have received any tutoring from a Master, I can assure you that I've achieved some very good grades in my mechanics classes."

Ves shook his head. "This is the big leagues. We're not in class anymore. Have you attempted to develop your mechanics since your graduation?"

"Hmph! It's only a few months. Are you any better?"

"As a matter of fact, I've devoured three journeyman textbooks on my way to the Leemar System." Ves smirked. "And I haven't skimmed over them either. I understand the essence of all of them pretty well. If you'd just let me access the terminal, I can show you how much better our mech can perform."

Barakovski paused a little at that. Her expression still radiated skepticism.

"You really claim to master not one, but three entire journeyman-level books?"

"Yup, and they're all credible books from credible authors. Does Takanata, Ulmer, Smith, James, Coventry and Lin ring a bell to you?"

While some of those surnames were common, every mech designer should be able to link them to the most renowned academics in mech design.

"I see." She said flatly as she reconsidered her stance. "Even I can't claim to master three journeyman books this fast. You're either boasting shamelessly or you may be an undiscovered genius."

"I prefer to think myself as the latter."

Barakovski giggled a little, surprising Ves. Even in such a tense situation, she displayed no fear. He even suspected that her anger had already subsided. She sighed a little and leaned back against his skinny chest.

"I don't know which one describes you best, but I suppose an apology is expected. I'm sorry for disregarding your perspective. If you really do claim to be a genius in mechanics, then there's little harm in letting you work on my design. I'm tired anyway. I'm not at my best anymore."

Truly, Ves enjoyed talking with intelligent people. Barakovski was the only person in their group who actually behaved as if they graduated from college



instead of from a pigsty. He had more than enough of the overweening pride of these entitled Coalition citizens.

Deciding to trust her words, Ves let her go. Both of them quickly rose up from the ground and dusted off some of the dirt and grass that clung on their clothes. The other designers stopped arguing when they saw that Ves and Barakovski acted cordially.

"Did you give up, loser?"

"Be silent!" Barakovski barked and crossed her arms over her chest. "Look, we don't have the time to squabble like children. While my friend here was a little extreme, we've talked over our issues and I've decided to give him a chance."

"What?!"

"He'll ruin our design!"

She clapped her hands, causing them to quickly shut up. "Do I have to repeat what I said? Just shut up if you have nothing useful to say. I'm just as skeptical as you are, but this matter directly concerns our chances of passing this round. If Ves here is truly better than me in mechanics, then he deserves a chance to contribute. That goes for all of you as well. I've been negligent in considering your skills. If you've been holding out on us, now is the time to step forward and make suggestions."

Sadly, the entire crowd disappointed her by remaining silent. No one had the guts to claim they knew better than Barakovski. Besides Ves, it really appeared that none of their group specialized in mechanics. It truly was a bitter state of affairs when almost everyone in the group wanted to sit back and sleep their way through the qualifiers.

With her tentative blessing, Ves approached the terminal slowly. If anyone wanted to jump on him, he'd be ready. Fortunately, no one had the spine to contest their intentions, so Ves reached the controls without hindrance.

"There are a number of things that can be improved that I can point out immediately." Ves began to explain in the hope of getting everyone's acceptance. "First, the engines. While Barakovski chose to go with a conventional high-efficiency engine model, our mech's loadout is a bit light due to the inclusion of compressed armor. This gives us a bit more leeway with regards to capacity, which in my opinion is best spent on a more powerful engine model."

"That will make our design less efficient. A powerful engine burns more fuel." Barakovski pointed out.

"That's true, but remember what kind of battles our mech will face. We're sending our design off to a series of one-on-one duels. Do we really need to stuff so much endurance in our design when it's only expected to last one single encounter?"

"Our mech is built to outlast any opponent. There's no such thing as too much endurance."

"That's true, but I also think that there's a point where sacrificing power in favor of endurance isn't worth it anymore. Our light mech's top speed is below average for an endurance-focused design."

When Barakovski stopped arguing, Ves took that as permission to replace the engines. He chose to install a slightly more powerful engine model from the list of available components. Naturally, the new engines also added more weight, but the additional power was worth it as its top speed gained a substantial boost.

"What else do you want to change?"

Ves started reversing some of her decisions and worked methodically on areas that haven't been touched. Though Barakovski never admitted defeat, she tacitly allowed Ves to implement his own decisions. With his intervention, the integrity of their design gained a massive increase. The mech's performance slowly stabilized. The chance of suffering critical damage decreased due to his skillful work.

In the end, Ves monopolized the remaining hours of the clock. Even when Barakovski showed some discontent at some of his decisions, she kept letting him run amuck. He appreciated her inaction. Somehow, he even suspected she only maintained a negative attitude in order to placate the other group members. The others still did not trust Ves even if he implemented better solutions than anything they could come up with themselves.

"Five minutes remaining! Please finalize your designs!"

Ves already finished his design. After checking over the entire mech once again, he stepped back and gestured at Barakovski. "I'm done now. You can check over our entire design if you want."

She shook her head. "I've followed your every move. Nothing you've done is egregious enough for me to intervene. Besides, even if I want to change something, there's hardly any time left on the clock."

Indeed, as the counter ticked down, many groups had laid down their work. Not all of them were as relaxed. Some groups that suffered from extensive infighting kept fiddling with the terminal.

Even now Ves could see that a handful of groups hadn't even completed their designs. They were the abject failures in this round. He admired the LIT for coming up with such a deep and challenging test.

While working together as ten to come up with a single design sounded simple, the reality proved much different. The audience had a field day when

arguments and fistfights broke out. All of the mech pilots and bodyguards sitting on the stands painfully looked away when these nerdy engineer types showed off their pathetic skills.

Only a few designers had a passable proficiency in self-defense and martial arts. Those who paid attention to their physical training dominated their groups, though whether their design skills was just as good as their fighting prowess was another matter.

If any groups understood the essence of this round and genuinely worked together as ten, Ves had no clue. At least he hadn't seen any enlightened teamwork among the groups surrounding his own.

His heart pumped faster as the duels commenced. Just like the last round, the projections sped up the simulations in order to save time. As Ves had worked intensively for a couple of hours straight, he had no energy left to concentrate on the action. The duels fast-forwarded so quickly that Ves hardly registered each win and loss.

"Impressive work." Barakovski praised as she sat down next to him. "It looks like we're winning most of our matches."

"Is that so?" His anticipation grew as he tried to register their mech's performance. It did manage to dance around almost all of the opponents it encountered. It only ran into a wall when it faced a flying opponent. "That's great! We're winning!"

In actual fact, their mech performed so well that it constantly climbed higher in the giant ranking projection. Half of the designers were too scared to watch the duels. Instead, they kept their eyes peeled on the ranking list. Every time some groups changed positions, the designers groaned or cheered.

The third round finally ended in a crushing victory for Ves and Barakovski's mech. While their light mech might be lacking in firepower and armor, its

prodigious mobility and impressive endurance allowed it to keep teasing around any opponents it encountered. It only lost when matched against its hard counters, such as sprinters, fliers and marksmen. Any other mechs proved too sluggish to match the nimble mech.

"Yes! We've ranked 16 out of 500! We've qualified!" Ves cheered as he saw the final results. Their group only had to reach the top 50 to pass. Reaching the sixteenth rank meant they possessed ample strength to compete in the main event that started in the following day.

Barakovski suddenly glomped him in order to give him a quick hug. "Thank you! Without your help, our mech couldn't have lasted this long."

"No problem. I'm glad you gave me a chance."

Both of them quickly separated. Ves coughed a little. He hardly ever got close to a woman. Her closeness made him a bit uncomfortable.

"I guess we might encounter each other again in the days ahead."

Her smile disappeared. "You're right. I won't show any mercy if I end up on the opposite side."

"The same goes for me. Best of luck then."

They shook hands before parting the group. Now that the qualifiers came to a close, the designers had no reason to stick together with those they despised. Of their entire group, only Clark had the decency to thank him for pulling their group ahead. Missy simply huffed before running off and the other designers flocked to Barakovski, completely ignoring Ves.

"All in a day's work." He sighed and left the fields in order to meet up with Dietrich and Lucky.

## Chapter 87: Banquet

Now that many mech designers and their followers left the premises, the temporary living area received a much-welcomed renovation. The cheap and convenient apartments made way for compact villas that contained room for up to twenty residents. The LIT also stocked the villas with all kinds of amenities, from the rarest teas to the most sophisticated entertainment centers.

Ves only met up with Dietrich briefly before a student guide approached him from above.

"Mister Larkinson?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Good. Our institution invites you to attend a banquet together with your fellow designers."

That sounded interesting. Ves accepted the invitation and followed the guide towards a palatial hall floating in the distance. A floating conveyor brought up guests like Ves who lacked antigrav clothing to the entrance. As he looked around, he noted that a lot more walkers had made it through the qualifiers, though he reasoned that most of them got carried by their groups.

Still, even if they got knocked out tomorrow, they still benefited from the honor of presenting themselves to trillions of people. With their status as a past contestant who made it through the qualifiers, they could leverage that prestige into wealth and status. No one despise the Leemar Institute of Technology, especially its famous annual competition.

The dining hall was resplendently large. Calm and relaxing music extended from the instruments of a handful of musicians. The main tables offered ample space for all the guests. A larger and more extravagant set of tables sat at the front, reserved only for the masters and the most eminent visitors.

Though the hall appeared simple, Ves recognized the precious materials built into the furniture. Even a cannon shell couldn't blast them apart. The subtle extravagance impressed all of the designers who came from humble backgrounds.

A small projection lit up in front of him and guided him to his seat. As a noname designer from a remote third-rate state, his seat was near the end. He looked around and spotted Barakovski near the front.

If their seat positions were ranked, she easily entered the top 20. As for Ves, he was clumped together with the walkers and freeloaders. He sat onto his seat without fuss and waited for the rest to gather around.

"Mr. Larkinson?" A woman called from behind.

He turned around to see a familiar face. "Patricia Schneider?"

He had not expected to meet an acquaintance from the Bright Republic. Patricia had always been an enigmatic figure back when he studied at Rittersberg. She was a genius who excelled in every field. Every classmate sighed that it was a pity that she hadn't gone to study at Leemar or some other famous second-rate institution.

To see her here was a remarkable turnaround. Ves looked around and did not spot any other former participants of the Bright Republic's Fusion Cup.

"Don't bother looking around. We are the only ones from the Republic who qualified." She said and took the seat next to him. "I do have to say that I thought you had potential, you're still a few years too early to compete in Leemar. It's quite a pleasant surprise to see you grow so much."

Unlike any other designer in the room, Ves sensed Patricia had nothing but goodwill to him. He appreciated her willingness to approach him. He missed the casual candor he was used to in the Republic.

"I've grown a lot since the last time we met each other. I always thought my last victory was more due to luck and circumstance. Now that I've caught up in my studies, I'm confident I can beat you in a straight fight."

"Is that so?" Patricia smiled mysteriously at him. "Maybe we can find that out tomorrow. You never know. I still have to pay you back for knocking me out before I reached the finals."

"Haha, I had no choice really. My career was at stake."

Somehow, Ves acted a lot more confident around Patricia. Before, he always saw her as an inviolable goddess, whose talent in mech design outmatched anyone else at the Rittersberg University of Technology. With the help of the System, Ves improved so much that his confidence gained a massive boost. He no longer regarded himself on a lower level to the former class princess.

Patricia raised her eyebrow. "I've heard you've started up a new mech workshop on a rural planet. That takes remarkable courage. Without a large investment, it's very difficult to start an independent business."

"Thankfully the MTA provides independents like me some space to do business. Without the licenses, I have to do everything from scratch."

Licensing became a popular way to earn income from technology in the mech industry upon the establishment of the MTA. The behemoth organization practically coerced every tech company into releasing their non-cutting edge developments to the market. Also, industrial espionage was widespread at that time, so the inventors decided to legalize and monetize the acquisition of their technology.

The distribution of technology eventually benefitted the entire industry. Everyone had access to a uniform minimum standards. No one was forced to reinvent the wheel anymore. It also lowered the barrier of entry to startups like Ves' workshop and restrained larger companies from dominating the industry.



After a few minutes of chitchat, they quieted down when the masters entered the hall. Everyone stared with hopeful eyes at these eminent masters. Of the five masters who expressed interest in taking a new apprentice, only four were present. Master Null had declined to attend, probably in order to avoid letting spies record his gestures. Even the most hidden fugitives can be identified if they showed up in public too many times.

Professor Edith Marshall sat stood up from her seat and addressed the crowd. "Congratulations for making it through the qualifiers. In the last two days, the masters and I have witnessed some remarkable performances. You may be thinking that the qualifying rounds appear too arbitrary and whimsical."

A few designers groaned when they remembered the hellish ordeal of the past two days. The transparent duel and the group duel rounds were especially infuriating for some.

"The truth is, a real designer has to cope with many different circumstances. The strongest mech designer isn't necessarily the one who can output the best designs. As far as we at Leemar are concerned, the ideal mech designer is one who is adaptable. Only by thriving under the most difficult circumstances can you survive the coming storm."

Those ominous words sparked a murmur of concern among the crowd.

"Maybe some of you are already aware of the unrest that is growing in our star sector. We are not alone. The unrest has spread in our neighboring star sectors, and will soon engulf all of human occupied space. Armies will be mobilized and entire mech corps will be thrown into battle. The blood that is about to be spilled will dye many planets red."

A handsome designer sitting near the front of the table stood up, courageously interrupting the dean. "There's a famous saying among designers. The time of war is the time of our lives!"

A lot of people smiled at that, though Ves and Patricia kept a stern face.

"Well said! We develop instruments of war, and only during wartime will we see the most demand for our services. A design is not a static, timeless product. Many times, we receive requests to modify designs in order to cope with a specific planetary environment or to counter a popular model utilized by the enemy. The simulation mech duels you've experienced so far is but a simplification of the great game that is played among the greatest designers."

A few of the masters nodded, giving weight to Professor Marshall's words. With a sophisticated industrial base, any state gained the capability mass-produce or mass-modify a substantial amount of mechs.

If an enemy happened to favor lasers, you could respond by designing a mech that was resilient to directed energy. Such a change could be done in days if the scale was small. At a larger scale, even a massive entity like the Friday Coalition was able to replace and refurbish its entire mech complement in a couple of months.

The capabilities of an industry supported by the full might of an entire state was terrifying. Even the Bright Republic had built up a formidable reserve in order to cope with the coming aggression by the Vesia Kingdom. If war eventually broke out, Ves expected to be drafted in order to put his capabilities to use in supervising such superfactories.

"Before we begin to serve the masterpieces prepared by our cooks, I have one more thing to say. When I look at all of you, I am astounded by the variety of your origins. Some of you have proudly graduated from this school. Others have studied elsewhere in the coalition, while a smaller portion of you have even climbed your way up from more humbler origins."

As one of the few designers from a third-rate state, Ves and Patricia certainly knew the others outnumbered them. The resources and knowledge the

designers from a second-rate state enjoyed massively overshadowed the best efforts of a third-rate institution. The two could not even come close.

Ves only gained the qualifications to attend the banquet due to his cheat of a System. He wondered how someone who attended the same university as him managed to keep up with him. Patricia surely had her own secrets in her pocket. That was one of the reasons why Ves tried to strike a friendship with her. As equals of the same strength, they might cooperate some day.

Professor Marshall pressed a button on her comm, causing a projection to light up above the tables. It projected the name of a famous society, underneath of which spelled out numerous benefits.

"The Clifford Society is the Carnegie Group's most exclusive club for mech designers. Our rules allow any designer who passed the qualifiers to join our most esteemed ranks."

Many of those present already knew about the Clifford Society. Anyone present here could apply, though practically only those who were not attached to any major influences actually joined. The real elites already signed exclusive contracts with their backing.

"No matter your origins, affiliations or home state, we are a neutral group that serves the Coalition on behalf of the Carnegie Group. Certainly the other partners of the Coalition have their societies, but we have the most welcoming attitude. As we have attracted numerous influential designers over the years, our reach extends to the entire Komodo Star Sector. No matter where you reside, our Society is able to provide support at any time."

The professor enumerated the many advantages a member enjoyed. They provided an open platform could discuss freely with other members. They offered a small sample of exclusive learning material, some of which could not be found on the galactic net no matter how many cols you were willing to

spend. The Society even held many gatherings where different designers met frequently with new faces.

"Are you going to join?" Patricia whispered quietly at his side.

"Yes. This is one of the reasons why I spent all the trouble of travelling to the Coalition. The Clifford Society has an illustrious name in the sector. I don't have a lot of sources I can rely on to advance my design skills. The Society is a viable alternative to the MTA in terms of their library alone."

She shook her head at his words. "Joining the society isn't free. Officially, you'll be prohibited from helping any influence that is hostile to the Friday Coalition. Unofficially, you'll become a man of the Carnegie Group. The other partners of the Coalition will close their doors to you, not to mention you'll be stared at by the Hexadric Hegemony."

"As someone who has tried to go it alone, I quickly learned how vulnerable I am. Any casual conglomerate can wipe me out if they think I'm an irritant. The only way I can get some job security is to attach myself to a greater influence."

Once Professor Marshall finished her speech, everyone's comm units beeped. They all received an extensive package that contained a brochure and a contract for the Clifford Society. They could sign the contract at any time, though they only had a month before it expired.

Some of the people present signed the contract immediately. Others like Ves planned to go over the contract in detail later. Right now he reserved his energy for the competition that started tomorrow.

"Enough talking. Let's dig in!"

### **Chapter 88: Spectacle**

The day of the main event arrived. As a prestigious event witnessed by everyone in the star sector, the LIT did not hold the competition on a plain

grassy field. Instead, every participant was brought to a huge and extensive arena complex.

Ves, Dietrich and Lucky looked out from the window of the shuttle. After passing through innumerable islands, they finally came into view of the LIT's sector-famous arena complex. It encompassed as much space as a major city from the Bright Republic. The complex already prepared five hundred stages. The most formidable fabrication and projection technology the Carnegie Group had developed underpinned the systems of this immense competition stage.

Much like the Republic's Young Tiger Exhibition, the competition in Leemar disdained the use of simulations. They only resorted to using simulations during the qualifiers for expedience. Now that they were about to broadcast the design contest to the public, they had to showcase their power. Everytime the LIT held its open competition, the people from the Coalition and many smaller states got to enjoy thrilling fights between real mechs piloted by real mech pilots.

"It's too bad they don't let outsiders like me pilot on your behalf." Dietrich sighed. He truly wanted to share the stage with Ves and make a name for himself in the duelling stages. "It sure sucks to be a pilot."

"Haha. You mech pilots have your own competitions." Ves responded lightly.

Humanity currently loved all things mechs. Though mech designers received their fair share of admiration, the highly technical environment made it hard for laymen to get excited.

In contrast, mech pilots overshadowed shuttle racers in daring and excitement. Even a small place like the Bright Republic held a hundred of different competitions each year. The Young Tigers Exhibition might be a prestigious event, but the ones where veteran pilots showed off their skills

attracted ten times more fans. The celebrity culture around piloting massively overshadowed the attention placed on mech designers.

When they came close, Ves witnessed thousands of shuttles descending from orbit. As a major event, the competition attracted millions of spectators. Most of them merely came because they lived nearby. Most likely, only ten percent truly understood what was going on. The rest just came to see the thrilling mech duels.

Leemar only paid attention to the guests of influence. Many industry insiders attended from afar. Ves even guessed that representatives from some of the major corporations in the Republic would be present today. The competition not only gave the foreign talents a chance to shine, it also brought a lot of powerful men and women together from across the sector. Many deals and trades were made under the table during each event.

"Alright, please disembark follow me. It's very crowded today so watch your step!" A guide called out once their shuttle landed.

A massive amount of people converged to the arenas. Dietrich and Lucky had to separate from Ves again. They followed the majority of the crowd to the spectator entrance. As for Ves, he boarded a smaller shuttle that brought him and his fellow designers to a resting area backstage.

Up on the main stages, a grand spectacle unfolded. The show preceding the competition featured music and dances from the most popular entertainers in the employ of the Carnegie Group. In between, different executives entered the stage to introduce various high tech innovations such as a new engine model or a renewal of a popular consumer electronics device.

"The Group never fails to milk the publicity dry." A designer sitting next to him remarked. "Each year they go through the same process."

Ves nodded in agreement. "It's a good way to distract the audience when we're still in the design phase. A pure mech design competition is pretty boring to the average viewer."

Watching someone design a mech in real time was like watching a sculptor chisel a statue. While the end product might look impressive, no one wanted to go through all the boring parts for hours on end.

"The other partners of the Coalition have their own pageants. This is nothing unusual. Now that we're facing tumultuous times, every power is going all-out in attracting talents. Even the notoriously close-minded Konsu Clan have opened their doors."

"You'd have to be insane to hire yourself to the Konsu Clan. There's hardly any room for promotion for outsiders."

"That's true, but the Konsu Clan is honest about it. You'll only have to sign a twelve year contract. After that, you're free to go."

That sounded like a pretty good deal. If Ves failed to qualify for today's event, he'd probably be forced to crawl in front of their doors and beg them to take him in. Thankfully he fought well enough to avoid such a miserable fate.

After half an hour of advertisement, the mech designers finally entered the stage. They bowed before the millions of people present and the trillions more who watched from their homes. The entire star sector took notice. An executive from the Carnegie Group introduced the rules for the first round.

"Today is the day where we will hold our famous free-for-all! Five hundred mech designers are given access to our proprietary QuickForge instant fabrication systems. These designers can choose to rush out their design or take it slow in order to perfect their work. However, the speed in which they finish their design decides the ranking of their allocated pilot. The faster they finish a design, the better their pilot!"

Leemar's renowned free-for-all format had a lot of strategy behind its simple rules. The round lasted for twelve hours. A mech designer was free to submit his design at any point, but if he took too long, then he will only receive a mediocre pilot. The fastest submission always received the best pilot from a batch of five hundred cadet pilots from an affiliated mech pilot academy.

The QuickForge fabricator was able to produce or modify many simple mech components, giving the illusion that it worked just as fast as a virtual workshop. Naturally, this only applied to obsolete technology. This was the reason why Leemar used the equivalent of 3-star mech components in the qualifiers. The time and cost to fabricate more advanced components grew massively at that point.

These renowned cadet pilots fought on behalf of their mech's designers in an enormous space consisting of many temporarily fused arenas. In this random forest environment, giant coins occasionally spawned at random locations. Mech pilots had to search for these coins and bring them to a random location, though they had to look out for ambushes. Regardless who possessed the coins, the pilot who delivered the coin successfully gained a score.

To keep it all fair, the five hundred pilots were completely isolated. They piloted the mechs remotely through advanced transmission technology. In a real war, there were millions of ways for an enemy to interfere with these signals. In a venue completely controlled by the Carnegie Group, the risk was deemed acceptable. The Group did not want to risk the lives of their future pilot officers, after all.

The key issue of this round was that a mech only had one life. Once it received fatal damage, the mech did not have any opportunity to collect more coins. The designers who submitted their designs early had more time to collect coins. Those who came later might overshadow the rush jobs, but with



lower ranking pilots and less time to collect coins, they had an uphill battle to fight.

Another key issue was that the allocated pilot remained attached to the designer if they successfully survived this round. Only the top hundred teams who submitted the most coins qualified for the second round. The pilot rank was thus of prime importance to your chances of reaching the finals.

"Now, every year, we receive the same complaints. It's not fair. It's too arbitrary. Everyone should receive the same quality of pilots."

The executive turned around and stared at the designers on stage. All of them felt the intensity of a man who climbed his way up the ranks of the renowned Carnegie Group.

"I am a businessman. You work for us. As a responsible businessman, I expect my subordinates to work promptly and deliver their products on time. Those who can never meet their deadlines will never cut it in the mech industry. The best mech designers are always those who are a step ahead of the competition. It is up to you to decide how much time you wish to spend on your designs."

Everyone felt the weight of his words. While some of the designers had little clue what he was talking about, Ves knew better as he already had some experience running his own business.

The free-for-all in fact could be considered a race. Those who worked faster gained a lot more advantages, though sometimes the slowpokes turned the tables by submitting an almost invincible design.

In essence, Ves had three overall choices to make before he even started. He could rush out a sloppy design and gain an elite pilot who could search for coins before the majority of the competition entered the simulated battlefield.

This was the highest risk a designer could make and had enormous influence to their future course. If Ves succeeded in his gambit and climbed his way up the top hundred, then he paved the way for a clear road to the finals. With a high-ranking pilot by his side, he had the qualifications to fight for the number one position.

If Ves was not that confident in a quick design, he could take it slower and submit his design somewhere around the average. With enough time, he could design a substantially better mech who could go toe-to-toe with almost any opponent except for the slowpokes.

Finally, he could take his time and design a truly perfect mech. With sufficient time, he could build up a mech that enjoyed a full coverage of compressed armor. With such a marvellous protective layer, his mech would be virtually invincible.

"Still, the pilot I'll get won't cut it. There's a huge difference between a top pilot and an average pilot." Ves considered carefully. He wanted to reach the absolute top. Those who took their time were mostly content with reaching the top hundred or top fifty. Only the designers who submitted their designs fast enough had the right to struggle for the limited amount of available apprenticeships.

Throughout the competition, Ves already acted boldly. He already staked his entire future to a single throw of the dice. He had to keep walking his chosen path to the end.

"Three hours. I should be able to finish a functional design in three hours." Ves whispered to himself. The average submission time in past competitions usually hovered around five to six hours. Cutting that in half meant his mech inevitably retained some serious flaws. The key was to minimize or mitigate these flaws.

## Chapter 89: Steed

After explaining the rules, the executive retreated and allowed others to direct the first round. A guide brought every designer to their allocated QuickForge system.

A marvel of engineering, every QuickForge cost as much as a hundred mech workshops. Its impressive capabilities allowed for almost instant fabrication of any device as long as its complexity did not exceed a certain standard.

Though insufficient to mass-produce any currentgen mechs, it had no trouble in pumping out two-hundred year old designs.

"These are the toys that the students of Leemar can polish their design skills." Ves guessed. The Carnegie Group didn't design these QuickForge units for a simple competition. "How I envy those who gained the chance to study here."

Designers who spent a lot of time with these miraculous systems could gain a lot of proficiency in working with real mechs. Though the assembly process was massively simplified and sped up, it still provided much more hands-on experience than working with simulations and projections.

Once everyone reached their assigned stations, they waited for the signal to start.

"Three, two, one, go!"

Everyone rapidly engaged the QuickForge system. The students from Leemar had a distinct advantage. They used their familiarity with its systems to immediately start fabricating a frame. Sophisticated assembly arms flash-produced the alloys in midair, kept aloft by the most precise antigrav emitters.

Impressed by the speed of which these systems produced a frame, Ves hurriedly tried to catch up.

"Right. If I want to finish a frame at the fastest speed possible, I'll have to go for a light mech."

Though he preferred to design a versatile medium mech, its larger mass and size meant it took more work to get it running. A light mech not only had a reduced material requirement, its limited loadout meant it only needed a couple of small components to make it fully functional.

As Ves wanted to make his mech count in the first half of the round, he focused on improving his mech's peak capabilities. It needed all the performance it could get in order to remain competitive with the mechs submitted a few hours later. The battlefield fortunately featured small resupply depots where mechs could supplement their ammunition and energy, so mechs with shorter running times still had a chance.

After a brief consideration, he therefore picked a sprinter mech. He rapidly scanned the list of pre-made components and picked out a laundry list of limbs and internal parts. He particularly paid attention to the legs. Drawing from his experience with the Octagon series, he focused on prioritizing agility instead of top speed, though not to such an extreme extent this time.

"In the early stages of the free-for-all, it's more important for a mech to be able to avoid damage. The less damage it incurs, the longer it will last."

Some mech designers chose to go for the opposite strategy. They built a crude heavy mech brimming with armaments. Such a heavy brick relied on its immense armor and firepower to deter others from taking it on even as it sluggishly transported a coin. The tiny light mechs like what Ves had in mind gained no advantage in taking on such monsters.

Though fairly safe, their limited speed and mobility meant that these lumbering oafs had a lot of difficulties finding coins. They could only cover a limited area. Even if they spotted a coin, any rival mech could easily snatch it before the heavy mech reached the spawning point.

"Heavy mechs are just a dead-end in this mode." Ves concluded. Only heavy mech specialists had a way to make it viable. Anyone else only risked their downfall if they played with something they didn't fully master.

Now that he developed a concept, he had to attach the proper image to his design. In a contest like this where his entire future was at stake, he had to pull out all the stops. Even as his slower rivals all began to fabricate their parts, Ves still remained unmoved. He closed his eyes and sharpened his intent.

"My mech will be a steed fit for the most talented pilot. A proud machine, it cherishes its freedom to move. Any location is within reach. None may blaspheme its integrity. Violators will be speared by its horn if they are weak. Those who are stronger can never touch its surface, for my mech is fleet of foot and can depart whenever it wishes."

Ves envisioned a unicorn in the form of a humanoid light mech. Proud, inviolable and fleet of foot. The new design he had in mind combined all three aspects into a coherent whole. He felt empowered by his vision.

"Let's go."

He started to design and fabricate his mech. Though the interface of the QuickForge system was complex, it basically functioned as a monstrous amalgamation of a design terminal, a 3d printer and an assembly system. As Ves was quite familiar with each system, he had little trouble adjusting to the combined controls.

He put his full attention into getting his light mech assembled properly. Though the QuickForge system accelerated the fabrication and assembly process to a ludicrous speed, it also risked the amplification of any unaddressed faults. A tiny misalignment between components could snowball

into a massive cascade of structural instability. Ves had to keep his eyes peeled and work with utmost precision in order to maintain control.

The only snag he faced was that he had to tune out the commentators.

"...Look at the beauty Cris Adrian has in mind!" A male announcer pointed out. "From how many components he has in mind, he's definitely going to make his splash in the mid-game!"

At least the mech designers had some measure of privacy this time. Opaque screens blocked their view of their rivals. In addition, each designer had access to a function where they could obscure all of their actions to the entire audience. This allowed designers to hide their proprietary techniques, though they were only allotted an hour of privacy in total.

A female announcer complemented her colleague. "Cris Adrian is one of Leemar's top graduates of this year. He has graduated cum laude in mech design, so his foundation is top notch! He recently accepted an invitation to work for the Carnegie Group directly, so he's certainly the man of the hour at this moment!"

"While Cris is a talented lad, look at his self-declared eternal rival! Mortimer Presutti is on fire! Having climbed from a life from the slums in a dusty planet at the edge of the Carnegie Group's sphere of influence, he quickly gained appreciation from everyone due to his remarkable intelligence. Now that he's reached this stage, I'm certain this one-in-a-century talent will dazzle us all with his nimble design!"

That caused Ves to stutter a bit, which almost screwed up his work on fusing a leg to a torso. If not for his quick reaction, he might have wasted a lot of time.

"This Mortimer sounds like trouble. If he's going for a light mech, then he'll be releasing his mech in the same time frame as mine. I can't let him get the better pilot."

With this new information in mind, Ves began to work more recklessly. Though he started to slip up now and then, most of the errors were too inconsequential to bother addressing. He pushed his assembly skills to the limit by speeding up as fast as possible while maintaining control. He felt as if he was balancing on a knife edge. Instead of slowing down to catch his balance, he instead moved faster, causing him to wobble harder.

"We've tallied all five hundred in-progress designs and put our brightest minds to work. The preliminary results are in! About 93 are light mechs, 320 are medium mechs, and the remaining 87 are heavy mechs."

"That sounds about right. There's always an even proportion of light and heavy mechs every year."

"How many of them are aerial mechs?"

"A staggering 78 designs show openings for flight systems. It seems like a significant amount of them are built to hunt for coins."

"The cowards! Don't these designers have any confidence in their work! I want to see some action!"

Ves slowed down when he reached the arms and legs. In order to preserve his design's offensive power, he had to pay particular attention to the musculature in the limbs. The default scheme of the limbs were sorely outdated. With the advantage of two hundred years of progress, he radically tore out the old layout and began to swiftly implement a crude but modern musculature. Though not as good as a proper scheme, his improvised work still raised the specs of all four limbs by a significant amount.

He optimized his mech for wielding spears, though he also added in a laser pistol to deter any fliers. While the pistol did not amount to much of a threat, it was sufficient in holding off opportunists who wanted to pick off an easy target.

Though the rules did not reward a kill, one of the viable strategies in this mode was to eliminate as much competition as possible before they accumulated a lot of coins. The best targets were those who were in the middle of transporting their own coins.

"Enough about the boys. Let's check out how the girls are doing! Just look at Cynthia Barakovski's fearsome light mech. It's only partially but it already looks like a maneater. It certainly possesses the most bite out of all the light mechs."

"Oh I don't dispute that, but she could certainly speed up a little. By the time she finishes this monster, the battle will already progress to the middle stages."

Ves idly noted Barakovski's mention. Despite her average skill in mechanics, her mech should still be a formidable machine in terms of armor and weapons. If she intended to take her time, then she was certainly designing a light mech killer. That was bad news for him.

"Looks like our mechs might clash." He muttered. If he allocated more time on his mech, he could close the gap, but that meant he'd miss out on the best pilots in the pool. In order to reach the finals, he had to give up a lot of toys and settle for something fast and cheap.

### **Chapter 90: Talents**

Ves toed a dangerous line. He worked faster than ever before using a machine he never touched. If he tripped up even once, he'd fall down the precipice. He made risky maneuvers left and right, all in the name of maximizing performance in the least amount of time.



"I can feel my skills are integrating. There's no better way for me to master my new gains than to push them to the limit."

Despite being one step away from ruination, Ves felt truly alive at that moment. He was made for this. His performance went past a hundred percent as he reached a peculiar state of zen. Only his massively empowered concentration allowed him to enter this special state. Under this remarkable influence, he worked as furiously as a ritually empowered demon, which even managed to attract the attention of the commentators.

"Who is that foreigner? He's working remarkably fast! While he's a little sloppier than the talents from Leemar, he's crushing them in terms of decisiveness!"

Some of the audience even started to divert their attention to Ves. While he had no impressive background or reputation to speak of in the Coalition, his frantic pace still marked him out as an unusual contender.

"According to my files, this dark horse here is Ves Larkinson, a native from the Bright Republic. He doesn't have any achievements to speak of. He graduated from a third-rate university from a third-rate state with average grades. The only two things to note is that he founded an independent mech workshop without outside investment and that a mysterious charity from the New Rubarth Empire has gifted him a couple of lastgen production licenses."

Everything the spectators heard so far failed to impress them at all. Only the involvement of the New Rubarth Empire took them aback. Even if only a tiny and obscure influence from the massive first-rate superstate took interest in Ves, the news was still sufficient to shock the crowd.

Under the rule of the ruthless Emperor, those who lived and thrived under his rule had to possess a certain amount of strength. If not, their wealth and possessions would have been snatched a long time ago. It had to be said that

even the most banal powers from the New Rubarth Empire possessed enough might to crush the Komodo Star Sector a dozen times over.

Elsewhere on the stage, Barakovski's smile turned intrigued. "Interesting. Seems like my meeting with him was fortuitous. I always knew there was something fishy about him. The Bright Republic can't possibly nurture a mech designer like him. If there's the shadow of New Rubarth behind him, it all makes sense."

Meanwhile, Patricia's eyes remained tranquil as she steadily built up her design. She took no special note of her former classmate from the Republic. The only thing she had in mind was her design. Her subdued way of working drew no eyes from the audience even if her fingers operated the QuickForge system in a masterful way.

There were also some on the stage who treated the news contemptuously. One graduate from Leemar snorted offhandedly when he heard the commentary. "Truly worthy of the Rubarthans to invest in a random ant from the most backward place in the star sector. Hah, if that influence is truly legitimate, then we'd all heard about it by now."

Though Ves attracted a brief spike of attention, the short-lived excitement died down quickly. In the eyes of the insiders, he was merely a talent who got a lucky break. Whether he could transform the gifts he received into his own strength was another matter. Many dazzling talents who graduated from the LIT and the other elite schools of the Coalition possessed much more substantial track records. Their many accomplishments awed the people present.

The heritage of the various partners in the Friday Coalition could not be belittled. Despite their intense rivalry, they unceasingly produced successful talents year after year. Only a comprehensive education system could pump

out an unceasing amount of talents. The Coalition also nurtured them properly by putting them under the wings of more experienced designers.

"Speaking of remarkable designers, who do you favor?"

"Is that even a valid question? There's only one person on stage who deserves to be called an emperor of their generation. If you lived under a rock for the past couple of years, then lo and behold the radiance of Carter Gauge."

No one disputed the commentator's assertion. Even the illustrious household names such as Mortimer Presutti and Cynthia Barakovski had to bend the knee in front of a genuine powerhouse like Carter Gauge.

"As a descendant of the ruling Gauge Dynasty, there is no question Carter will inherit the role of chief mech designer from his father."

The Gauge Dynasty was the strongest partner of the Friday Coalition. They were the first to arrive at the desolate Komodo Star Sector. With their innumerable assets and power, they blazed a trail and colonized the juiciest star systems. If not for the entries of rival powers like the precursors of the Konsu Clan and Hexadric Hegemony, the Gauge Dynasty might have firmly grasped the entire star sector.

Nowadays, their immense strength and unruly behavior often invited universal condemnation. Though the Dynasty could overpower any other partner, even they had to halt if the rest of the Coalition combined together in opposition.

Militarily, the Gauge Dynasty unquestionably occupied the throne. The Konsu Clan was only a distance second. The almost evenly-matched Vermeer Group hounding at their heels, not content with their third-place position.

In comparison, the Carnegie Group's core strength did not even come close. The Group pursued an economic and diplomatic path to dominance. Their industrial power matched the Gauge Dynasty while their connections spread

beyond the star sector. No one belittled the Carnegie Group even if their strength was fairly weak on paper.

"That is interesting! Carter Gauge is disregarding the usual strategies and is calmly designing a medium mech for the late-game! If anyone else is doing the same, I'd call them a loser. If it's Carter, then he surely has a sinister plan in mind."

"His mech will surely be a peerless killing machine, though I wonder how he will gather enough coins. Even if the spawn rate increases bit-by-bit, it still doesn't give him a lot of opportunities to catch up. His mech will also be outplayed by the higher ranking pilots."

There was a remarkable disparity between the top ranking pilots and the ones who ranked beyond the hundreds. Those who dwelled in the bottom ranks still possessed a certain amount of strength, or else they wouldn't be present. Still, they've all exhausted their potential, so it was incredibly difficult for them to grow stronger.

Carter's arrogance gave him so much confidence that he was willing to kneecap himself with a trash pilot. It was as if he taunted every other powerhouse on stage that he could beat them even with his hands tied behind his back.

Despite everyone's praise, the powerhouses among the designers were not convinced of his strength. Even Ves who occasionally heard about Carter's accomplishments did not shrink back. Even if he admitted that Carter likely possessed a deeper foundation, he still wished to clash head-on against the Coalition's best.

As two hours went by, his mech slowly came into fruition. Ves spontaneously adjusted his design when he learned new tricks. Though he still pursued

speed, he also wanted to bestow his mech with a minimum amount of self-protection.

"We have our first submission! Who is it?!"

"It's a mech designed by Alyssa Fill, a guest from the Myari Seven Stars! That's not even a proper third-rate state! It's only a fourth-rate minor power!"

"Now that is certainly exciting! Can this quick little rabbit snatch enough coins before the wolves are released on the battlefield?"

Alyssa literally designed a small and nimble rabbit mech. Among the standard beast types, the rabbit shape offered an unsurpassed combination of speed and leaping power, though its agility wasn't anything to slouch at. However, she rushed through the design and fabrication of her mech with excessive haste. Whether the mech could match even fifty percent of its specs if it had enough time for development was still in question.

The bottom floor of the combined arena space came to life. The lights revealed a temperate arboreal forest interspersed with plains and hills. All of the terrain consisted of real dirt and real trees. Leemar spared no effort in making the competition as realistic as possible.

Once Alyssa's rabbit mech entered the battlefield, a large and powerful signal engulfed the modified cockpit. The remote controls of the mech engaged. Hidden several hundred meters below ground, five hundred simulation pods rested silently as the pilots inside waited to be called up. One of the pods lit up, signifying a successful connection.

"He's in! Richard Lovell is in! The top cadet of the Abelard Academy has taken control of the rabbit mech! Look at the movements of the mech. He's testing out the integrity of his new acquisition carefully."

"Only rarely do we see a mech enter the battlefield at the second hour. It should be cruel and unusual punishment to subject a top cadet pilot to such

an awfully rushed mech. Just look at its left forepaw. It's practically falling apart already!"

The entire crowd derived a cruel sense of satisfaction every time a talented mech pilot got paired with an absolutely awful trash mech. This was one of the competition format's greatest attractions.

Genius pilots got paired with trash mechs while trash pilots got paired with elite mechs. The struggles between the two wildly different pairings always resulted in impressive fireworks.

"The rabbit mech is hopping away now! Lovell is sniffing after coins! A pity that for a beast type that excels at sensors, Alyssa only installed the most rudimentary sensor system in the rabbit's head. Those large floppy ears are completely wasted as antennas. The star cadet is forced to scramble blindly for coins in this dense and tricky forest!"

Everyone laughed at the spectacle. Rabbit mechs functioned as the scouts in any organized group of mechs. They outperformed humanoid light mechs in that regard alone, though they paid for it by faring worse in a head-on battle.

Still, Alyssa spent all of her time on making her mech functional. She only spent a couple of minutes installing the simplest sensor system, which happened to malfunction right now. Lovell was forced to rely on his visual sensors which massively cut back on his detection range.

Perhaps pressured by Alyssa's daring speed, a couple of designers pulled the trigger a short time later. Six shoddily produced mechs joined Alyssa's rabbit in the battlefield. Just as the elite pilots engaged the controls, three of the mechs instantly malfunctioned.

"Amazing! Three of them suffered catastrophic failure! One locked both legs, another can only actuate about ten percent of its motive power while only while the last one blew up directly!"

"The other three mechs are not faring any better. While they can still move around, their integrity is even worse than Alyssa's rabbit mech. They'll simply collapse at the first blow!"

"The early bird gets the worm. Who cares if they can stand up in a fight? They all entered the battlefield before the first fighting mechs arrive. As long as they gather a couple of coins, they've accomplished their mission."

With a significant chunk of the top pilots taken away, Ves rushed to complete his mech. He cut back on a couple of luxuries such as a sophisticated sensor system and an improved energy transmission system. Only the essentials mattered.

During this sensitive period, only a few more mech designers dared to submit their rushed designs. Most encountered setbacks immediately upon entry in the battlefield. They submitted their mechs way too early, and suffered widespread scorn from the entire star sector.

A mech designer that failed to judge his own work correctly had no place in the upper echelons. They were never going to live down this moment for the rest of their careers. The audience instead lamented the wasted opportunities for the elite cadets to showcase their skills.

In the meantime, Ves finalized his design. He took an incredible two-and-a-half hours to complete a somewhat functioning light mech. It was one of his first works to date where he fully utilized his newly gained Journeyman skills. Gradually, a light shone in his eyes.