Chapter 91: Minor Breakthrough

Each time Ves fabricated a mech, he imagined bringing a new life into existence. At his best, he even had the illusion that he became a god.

His Unicorn mech paled in comparison to his older designs. Made in haste, the mech only possessed the bare essentials. As a scout skirmisher, it was very light on firepower. Besides a piddling laser pistol, it mainly had to rely on a spear to threaten other mechs. Its armor was paperthin and it possessed merely adequate speed among light mechs.

Its faults were also numerous.

As a rushed product, not all of the parts aligned perfectly with each other. Though Ves managed to avoid major faults, the mech still possessed numerous inconsistencies that might prove vulnerable later on. At least all of its limbs worked as designed, more or less.

The endurance of the mech also fell short. The Unicorn could reluctantly support fifteen minutes of peak combat before it entered power saving mode. If the mech failed to recharge its energy cells, it only grew more sluggish and feeble.

All-in-all, the Unicorn was one of the worst mechs he ever designed. Yet it was also his best work to date. Ves incorporated many nuances in its design, some of which he spontaneously generated on the spot. In just two-and-a-half hours, Ves was confident that few could match his efforts.

What Ves particularly cared about was the X-Factor. In the scoring system used by the System, he only achieved a score of C- for his inspired Marc Antony design. He remembered the drive and passion he experienced when he completed his first real mech design. The feeling he had when he completed the Unicorn faintly surmounted his previous experience by a small but noticeable margin.

"It’s unlikely I pushed my score up to a B. The best I can hope for is a C or C+."

That still represented a long-awaited breakthrough. Ves harvested many clues about how to progress his implementation of the X-Factor. If he firmly grasped this step, he could surmount his current limits and be one step closer in achieving his dream of designing a completely original mech.

"Now, it’s all up to the pilot."

When Ves handed over the Unicorn, he exited the stage and entered a waiting room for designers. He quickly counted the number of people present.

"Fifteen designers. That means I’ve snatched the sixteenth ranked pilot. I’m still a bit too slow!" Ves shook his head. He missed an opportunity to snatch someone better. There was a big difference between the top 10 and the top 20. "At least my mech is decently built. It shouldn’t fall apart like the other rushed machines."

The commentators also noted his submission and pulled up the specs of his design.

"That’s interesting! Mr Larkinson’s design is the first one so far that’s holding up rather decently. Its limbs aren’t locked out and its internals are working somewhat according to their factory specs. What fearful speed!"

"What fearful precision! Larkinson managed to complete his mech successfully even when he was playing with fire. The amount of control that’s required to keep this mech together is quite fearsome!"

"I think whoever is assigned to pilot this machine will cry tears of joy. He surely lucked out by piloting something other than a walking scrapheap."

"Cadet Reddy Lovejoy here sure has a colorful history. Besides his obsessive love for pickles, he’s also a trained swordsman!"

"Oh, that’s a bummer for him. His mech is equipped with a spear!"

"Well it’s not like swords are rare. If he can scavenge a sword from another mech, he’ll be good to go!"

"Good luck out there Lovejoy!"

A few hundred meters below ground, another simulation pod turned active. The pilot inside woke up from his lethargy. The time had come for him to go into action. He patiently waited for his simulation pod to go through its checks. Once it finished testing the connection, the pilot opened his mind and let his psyche expand in the cavernous emptiness that represented his new mech’s mindspace.

As the fifteenth ranked pilot from the Abelard Academy, Cadet Lovejoy had piloted numerous training mechs. Many of them were used to being piloted by many people, so they all gave him a worn and familiar feeling.

This time was different.

He encountered something different this time during his submersion into the Unicorn. A faint radiant energy brushed his mental thoughts. Lovejoy instantly raised his vigilance. During his training, he learned to recognize the numerous anomalies pilots might encounter if the neural interface had any issues.

Fortunately, aside from that initial brush, he sensed no further strangeness. His mind successfully made a connection with the Unicorn, causing the mech to blaze to life. Its systems came online and aside from a few bumps, his mech was ready to go.

"Let’s hunt." Lovejoy smirked as he guided his mech forward. He tested each of the Unicorn’s limbs and made a few contortions. "Haha! This mech is good enough for me to display eighty percent of my strength! It was worth lowering my rank!"

Mech designers weren’t the only group of people who benefited from the Open Competition. The cadets from the Abelard Academy all sought to win a chance to demonstrate their skills and build a name for themselves. Plenty of pilots who performed magnificently in the past received life-changing offers from major powers. Lovejoy was no exception.

Still, he wasn’t the only one who intentionally depressed his ranking. Though the benefits of holding the top position was great, no one wanted to end up in a rickety bucket of a mech that collapsed at the first blow. The shrewder and more strategic pilots held back some of their strength in order to maintain a decent but not too exceptional rank.

"This time I won the grand prize. There’s nothing I can’t do with this mech!"

As Lovejoy acclimated to his mech, he engaged his sensors and searched the forest with confidence. Even if he encountered a rival mech, he bet his mech outmatched the majority submitted during this time. For some reason, he felt as if his mech echoed his confidence. The subtle loop that formed between the two caused him to feel as if he could take on the entire galaxy. He held his spear with pride.

"A coin!"

With sparkling eyes, Lovejoy enthusiastically dove forward. Just as his mech neared the coin, a ballistic shell shot him from the flank.

"Hah! As if I’d fall for an ambush! Your marks are all over the place! " Lovejoy taunted over the speakers as he used his mech’s superior agility to dance around the projectile. "Now that you’ve exposed your position, get ready to pay!"

The opposite mech turned out to be a medium cannoneer. As it was piloted by someone with a higher rank than Lovejoy, the mech did not panic or retreat.

Instead, it committed to battle and fired off a volley of shells from his ballistic cannon. Each time it fired off a heavy shell, its entire frame rattled loudly.

"With the kind of racket your armor is making, I'm surprised it's still on its feet!"

Lovejoy made a judgement call after he saw the state of his opponent. Instead of trying to rush into his opponent's face, he stopped going forward once he got close and started strafing sideways. Though the cannoneer was still able to keep up, its accuracy was horrible due to the faults integrated in its arms.

"You bastard! I know it's you, Lovejoy! Face me like a man!"

"Gladly!"

The cannoneer already missed its best shot when it failed to take out the Unicorn during its initial ambush. Its designer had panicked and rushed the mech to the battlefield under the pressure of hearing others getting a step ahead.

There was no suspense once the Unicorn got close. Lovejoy easily utilized his mech's agility to jump to the side and cut the cannoneer from the flank. Though the initial thrust dealt only glancing damage, the opening it afforded allowed the Unicorn take the initiative and relentlessly push the medium mech into a dead end.

After a final spark, the medium mech dropped onto its back.

"Too bad there's no rewards for a kill."

The objective of the match remained gathering coins. As there were too many mechs and too little coins, conflict was inevitable, though not always desirable. The more fragile mechs had to choose their battles carefully, lest they incur crippling damage that took them out of contention.

After grabbing the shiny cartoonish coin, Lovejoy quickly departed from the site. The noise might have attracted scoundrels, and he didn't want to be the mantis who stalked the cicada, only to be preyed by the oriole behind.

He quickly relaxed once he sensed no other mechs nearby. "It's still rather early. The battlefield should be sparse. It's prime time for me to hunt for coins."

Once he reached the random delivery point, he let loose the coin and allowed it to float to the skies. His systems beeped, acknowledging the completion of the delivery. He gained a score.

"This is far from enough. If I want to reach the top hundred, I have to gather at least half-a-dozen more coins."

The average cut-off varied over the years. In some past contests, the pilots frenziedly sought to destroy each other. In such fraught circumstances, a team could easily qualify by successfully delivering about four or five coins.

Normally pilots behaved tamer. They had to rationally choose their battles. Unless provoked by the possession of coins, they'd normally choose to brush aside when meeting a match. Naturally, there were always a couple of people who proactively sought to destroy the opposition in order to show off their skills and lower the average cut-off margin. As long as these battle maniacs survived long enough, they'd easily swagger past this round.

After fifteen minutes of fruitless searching, Lovejoy stumbled upon a flier racing to deliver his coin. "A chance!"

The Unicorn set aside its spear and retrieved its laser pistol. It fired a barrage of shots in the direction of the flying mech. As an elite pilot, his marksmanship was decent though he didn't specialize in ranged weapons.

With the aerial machine's speed, Lovejoy had little chance to hit the target with a couple of aimed shots. He might as well substitute accuracy for volume

as he crazily overheated his pistol. With the sheer amount of lasers beams in the sky, a couple of them succeeding in hitting the flying mech.

"Go away! This coin is mine!"

"Fat chance! Your wings are already smoking! I'm eating chicken tonight!"

The Unicorn pressed through the trees and reached the flying mech's crash site. The mech only suffered a malfunction in its power supply so it hadn't straight up turned into a pancake. Its pilot ruthlessly cut off its malfunctioning wings with a sword.

"Whoever designed this piece of dung should stay away from flight systems." The pilot muttered before turning his burning gaze at the Unicorn.

"Hand over your sword and coin, and you can keep your miserable life."

"You can pry them from my dead hands!"

Without another word, the two mechs closed the distance. Lovejoy fended off the initial thrust with decent spearwork. As a pilot who specialized in swordsmanship, he hadn't neglected his training in other weapons in case he encountered situations like this. Sadly for him, the opposite pilot was a competent swordsman himself, and despite his mech's many handicaps, he still managed to press Lovejoy back.

As the pressure increased, Lovejoy crazily split his focus. One portion analyzed his opponent's moves while the other kept an eye on the environment. He slowly guided his opponent forward.

After making a few more steps backward, the Unicorn hastily jumped aside as a volley of high-powered laser beams strafed his former position. Even as they failed to hit their primary target, they still extended forward and glanced the former flight mech.

The mech stuttered in its movements as several critical systems malfunctioned. Lovejoy took advantage of the gigantic opening and thrust his spear straight through the mech’s cockpit area. Though the mechs on the battlefield were remotely controlled, any damage to the cockpit that normally killed the pilot inside still counted as a weak point.

The flight mech lost control and fell into a heap. Lovejoy threw away his spear and quickly picked up his opponent’s sword. He turned around vigilantly, expecting another volley of lasers. When nothing happened, he carefully inched closer to the flying mech’s coin and picked it up.

"Too bad that laser gunner didn’t come forward. His mech must be a shambling wreck."

Those who piloted substandard mechs often chose to stay in the shadows. They loved to be the bystanders in a duel between two mechs. They lost their opening when one side vanquished the other in a dominant fashion.

Chapter 92: Double Trouble

After two hours of careful stalking, Lovejoy managed to deliver four golden coins. Compared to his competitors, he achieved a decent result. His luck was fairly good as he encountered two more light mechs in the process of transporting their coins. As these machines had all been prematurely rushed to the battlefield, Lovejoy easily crushed them through his superior mech’s capabilities.

However, now was the time when the match transitioned in the mid-game. Shoddy mechs stopped pouring in by now. With at least twice as much time spent on their design, the second wave of mechs all overpowered the the early birds by a significant margin.

"Too scary! It’s getting crowded here." He muttered as he vigilantly retreated from a newly spawned coin. Three mid-game mechs were duking it for

possession of the coin. A worn-out light mech like his Unicorn had no contending against even one of them. He knew his limits.

"I still don’t have enough coins."

Though he could yield in front of most dangerous encounters, he still had to fight for coins. Without at least two or three more, his chances of making it to the next round might evaporate.

He navigated through the forest carefully. By now, plenty of areas suffered from battle damage. The ground was scorched and many trees had been toppled. Broken mechs were strewn about like toys. Many of them only suffered light damage before they completely collapsed.

"Luckily my mech’s designer isn’t a total idiot. I can still hold up for a few hours."

The only issue he encountered was that his mech required frequent recharging. The few supply depots spread around the battlefield were all highly visible areas. He always had to watch his back incase he encountered an ambush.

His sensors beeped, alerting him to a nearby coin. He guided the Unicorn forward and carefully stalked past the foliage. He spotted an unclaimed coin resting against a cliff.

"Am I truly alone here?" Lovejoy wondered as he looked around suspiciously.

It seemed too good to be true. With a laser pistol in one hand and a sword in the other, his Unicorn crouched behind a dense patch of trees and waited patiently. He decreased the power to his systems in order to make his mech’s thermal signature blend in with the environment.

"Unless someone is piloting a dedicated scout, no one should detect my presence."

His caution turned out to be prophetic, since a well-built light mech approached the coin a minute or so later. The mech appeared to be a sharp-looking skirmisher. Its twin wrist cannons possessed enough firepower to melt the Unicorn in a short amount of time, though it would suffer from catastrophic overheating in return. Still, the skirmisher was not a soft cookie but a well-built machine that took at least four hours to complete.

After scanning the area, the skirmisher evidently failed to detect the Unicorn. It conveniently picked up the coin and jogged away.

"Should I or should I not?" Lovejoy considered carefully. If he jumped the skirmisher, he had a decent chance of making a crippling blow. On the other hand, a light skirmisher was one of the worst types of mechs for his Unicorn to come to blows. He decided to call off his ambush.

"What rotten luck. I found a coin only to let someone else take it away."

Lovejoy felt as if he did his mech a disservice. He should be fighting it out against his competitors in a frank and upright manner. All this sneaking around only to take a step back when he encountered a formidable opponent only rankled him further. When had he ever acted so cowardly?

His sensors picked up a commotion down a riverbank. His mech turned around swiftly and approached the noise. From the amount of noise he heard, he realized the fight turned especially intense. Only a battle over coins could lead to such a frigid battle.

"Two coins!" Lovejoy exclaimed as he approached the edge of a tangled battle between five different mechs. He guessed that two pairs of runners and pursuers had bumped into each other, with another mech joining in afterwards.

What made him hold his breath was that all of the mechs were of the medium weight class. They excelled at head-on fights but their speed was nothing

remarkable. As the mechs all had to devote their full attention to the fight, the original holders of the coins all dropped them to the side.

The cadet formed a bold plan to snatch the coins before making off. If he squeezed past the battling mechs correctly, they'd never catch his tail.

"Ten seconds. If I can avoid getting hit in that timeframe, I can get away scotch free."

He was confident he could avoid getting hit by melee weapons, but had less faith in his ability to dodge projectiles. As the mechs in the battle started to accumulate damage, Lovejoy's window of opportunity quickly closed. He had to make a choice.

"Ah, let's go!"

The Unicorn burst out from the trees and steadily approached the nearest coin. Of the five battling mechs, one of them noticed the newcomer but could not respond. As for the rest, they were too consumed in their attempts to constrain each other and only noticed the newcomer when he was within grabbing distance of a coin.

"Oh no you don't!" A pilot of a rifleman exclaimed as he shot a laser beam at the Unicorn.

The light mech managed to grab a coin but suffered a heavy hit on its waist. Its legs still worked fine, but another hit would definitely cripple its mobility. Lovejoy gritted his teeth and danced around the battling mechs in order to approach the second coin.

"Get the thief!"

"He's too fast!"

The Unicorn received another couple of hits, but they only scraped off the armor. Lovejoy picked a good moment to make his move, as all of the mechs

suffered from depleted ammunition or severe overheating. After bending down to pick up the second coin, the Unicorn raced off like a cat who caught the canary.

Even the commentators who were watching from above noticed the daring raid, though the pilots could not hear their words.

"Cadet Lovejoy is in for it now! He dared to snatch two whole coins from a crowd of serious-looking mechs. Can he get away from their clutches?"

"Ouch! One of his mech’s legs got hit! But wait a moment! The mech is still running like a horse! Incredible!"

"He got away! The medium mechs lost track of the little bugger. How tragic! They fought so long only to end up with nothing but damaged mechs. Their chances of making it through have dropped down to almost zero."

In fact, while the Unicorn appeared to be running at full capacity, the damage was a lot more serious than the observers thought. The pace the mech had set increased the burden on the damaged leg, which decreased its effective lifespan. Lovejoy had no choice but to keep running at full tilt in order to lose his pursuers.

"That should do it." Lovejoy tiredly said as he let out deep breaths. He looked down his leg and saw that the damage was fairly bad. "It won’t last very long, but I should at least last long enough to deliver my coins."

Lovejoy sacrificed a lot in order to obtain his spoils of war. He directly discarded his pistol and sword in order to lower his encumbrance.

At this stage of the battle, he could scavenge any weapon from a broken mech as long as it was simple. The more sophisticated weapons usually featured identity controls that locked them out against unauthorized users.

After scavenging a discarded knife, the Unicorn carefully trod towards the nearest delivery point. As he carried double the amount of coins as everyone else, he tried to camouflage his ill-gotten gains as best as possible. He dug some dirt and soiled the coins as best as possible before breaking up a tree trunk and stuffing the coins between a wide cut.

"It won’t fool anyone who comes close, but at least I won’t give the game away from the reflections."

Most pilots weren’t willing to fight against a mech if it carried no coins. Such a battle was pointless and did not help too much in increasing their score. However, there were plenty of exceptions.

An innocent looking rabbit mech hopped in the Unicorn’s path. Despite its fragile appearance, Lovejoy stopped as he felt a chill. The quadruped mech obviously suffered quite an ordeal. Its entire armor was worn out as it suffered from a lot of glancing blows. What Lovejoy found particularly notable was that despite its sordid look, the rabbit mech managed to avoid critical damage.

Its pilot must be a genuine powerhouse.

"Your mech stands no chance against mine. Can you please get out of my way?"

A silky smooth voice emerged from the rabbit mech. "Not until you show me what you’re carrying in your hands."

"It’s just a piece of wood I conveniently picked up. It’s a nice distraction if I throw it at obnoxious bastards like you."

"Very funny. Feel free to throw it at me then. You can practice your aim."

Lovejoy would never relinquish his hidden coins. "Go away. This is your last warning."

The rabbit mech’s pilot stayed silent, but its continued presence was a provocation in itself. He wasn’t stepping aside without a fight.

The worst thing about the situation was that Lovejoy recognized the voice. Richard Lovell was one of the Abelard Academy’s top pilots. His ranking always hovered in the top three. Such a monstrous pilot could do miracles with any mech, let alone a worn-out rabbit mech.

The face-off even attracted the attention of the crowd.

"That’s the top-ranked pilot confronting the sixteenth-ranked pilot."

"I’ve taken notice of that light mech. He’s hiding not one but two coins in that log!"

"How did Lovell sniff out those coins?"

"Who knows, but I’m sure a lot of sparks are about to fly."

"I’ve heard a bit about Lovell and Lovejoy. They both clashed a lot of times due to the similarity of their names. A lot of times, they get paired up against each other during practices."

Cadet Lovejoy indeed fought many times against Richard Lovell. He lost over ninety percent of the time. Even with a superior mech, he did not let down his guard.

The rabbit mech made the first move. It leaped forward in a powerful hop which startled the Unicorn. Lovejoy jinked his mech aside while throwing the log at the rabbit. The flimsy wood failed to scratch the rabbit, but the distraction proved enough for Lovejoy to turn around his mech and slash at the landing rabbit.

"You’re too young to catch me off-guard." The calm voice of Cadet Lovell said as the rabbit mech kicked out its leg against the grip.

After fending off the knife, the rabbit hopped close and amazingly avoided a kick as it snapped its jaws against the damaged portion of the Unicorn’s leg. The rabbit mech was too weak to snap off the entire leg, but it successfully exacerbated the wound.

"You bastard! I won’t let you take my chances away!" Lovejoy roared as he turned berserk. The damage to his mech’s leg had worsened so much that he wouldn’t last longer than an hour, less if he stressed the limb. However, he had no thoughts on preserving his leg as he crazily tried to tear apart the rabbit mech.

Even Cadet Lovell was taken aback at the sudden ferocity. He tried to pilot his rabbit out of reach as best as possible, but the mech still suffered from the limitations of its hasty introduction to the battlefield. The rabbit fended off the strikes as best as possible and even got in another hit when it fired off the laser built into its mouth.

The Unicorn took the hit head-on and only suffered damage to its torso armor. The laser ultimately lacked the power to punch through in a single hit. Lovejoy did not give the rabbit another opportunity to fire off its laser as it finally reached the rabbit.

With brutal efficiency, the Unicorn pressed down the mech’s head with one arm and slashed it with a knife with the other arm. The knife sliced off both ears along with a decent chunk of its head.

The sudden move caused the Unicorn to lose its grip. Cadet Lovell successfully moved his rabbit away and crazily hopped into the bushes.

"Yeah! Just get lost!" Lovejoy shouted even as he declined to pursue the wounded beast mech.

His expression worsened when he read the detailed damage report of the Unicorn’s tattered leg. Its core integrity was close to snapping. It could not

bear so much weight anymore. In order to maintain its shape, the Unicorn was forced to walk.

"I've got two coins. So long as I succeed in delivering them, I still stand a decent chance of reaching the top 100."

The rabbit mech had inflicted major damage to his chances of survival. In some years, six deliveries was enough to make it through. However, that was no guarantee for this year's competition. Cadet Lovejoy faced an uphill battle.

"First, I have to finish delivering these goddarn coins."

Chapter 93: Abnormal Mechs

The battlefield became crowded with mechs, both active and disabled ones. The majority of mech designers had pushed their works onto the field. Even if they were unwilling, they had to release their mechs in order to stand a chance to win some coins.

While the latest wave of mechs were built a lot more solidly, the quality of their pilots had deteriorated. This led to absurd situations like Alyssa Fill's rabbit mech demolishing a couple of mechs that had enjoyed twice or thrice as much design time.

A third of the crowd paid no attention to the other mechs as they rabidly followed Cadet Lovell's ingenious methods. His performance proved that while the quality of the mech mattered a lot, an ace pilot was able to work miracles with even the trashiest of mechs. While he hadn't managed to gather a lot of coins, his future was already bright.

Barakovski's light mech also entered the stage. As a supremely built machine, it acted like a crane among chickens the moment it descended onto the battlefield. Its pilot made great use of the tools at hand. While he generously made way for better armed mechs, it ruthlessly hunted the shabby light mechs

that managed to eke out a meager existence. The light mech easily snatched a couple of coins with this strategy.

On the other hand, heavy mechs also entered the field. Their stupendous amounts of armor and prodigious firepower deterred many mechs from engaging them. Getting dragged into a head-on fight would always be a losing proposition. These heavy mechs simply lumbered around and whenever they found an unclaimed coin, they simply picked it up and walked to the delivery point without challenge.

As for the Unicorn, Cadet Lovejoy was forced to squirrel like a rat and avoid any encounters due to his damaged state. With a leg that was almost crippled, Lovejoy had to crawl through the most desolate terrain in order to avoid the crowded spots of the battlefield.

"I’m almost there. Only a kilometer to go." He muttered as he vigilantly paid attention to his sensors as well as his intuition. "This last stretch is going to be the hardest. The delivery point is right in the middle of an open plain."

The delivery points were decided semi-randomly. The battlefield had a couple of thousand potential spots where the systems governing the match could turn it into a delivery point. All of these spots were relatively open and accessible, meaning that some devious pilots might wait in the bushes nearby.

After inching closer, Lovejoy sensed no ambush nearby, but that didn’t mean much. All of the cadets learned how to minimize their emissions by lowering their heat to a minimum in order to blend their thermal signature in the environment. Some extreme pilots liked to turn off the power reactor entirely, which meant they were completely exposed to damage if someone noticed them before they became active.

Lovejoy had to make another judgement call. He decided to rush to the delivery point without reserve.

The Unicorn burst into the open and jogged as best he could without completely allowing his leg to collapse. The stresses on the damaged leg increased, but his actions proved his worth as he managed to skim away from a small kinetic projectile.

"Haha, is that pistol shot supposed to stop me?!" Lovejoy taunted as he jerked his mech a little to the sides. "Your accuracy sucks!"

If his ambusher piloted a competent mech, he'd surely pay for his words. Yet from the scattered shots, Lovejoy already determined his ambusher's mech was nothing impressive. With grace akin to a drunken dancer, the Unicorn reached the delivery point and let go one of its coins, keeping the other stuffed in its log. The coin successfully ascended into the skies, which meant that Lovejoy gained another score.

"Haha you're too late! Keep firing if you want to, but you've already lost your chance to steal my coins!"

The ambusher stopped firing his pistol. Lovejoy guessed the enemy mech retreated even though he still failed to spot it on his sensors. He smirked at his successful gambit. The idiot thought he only had a single coin and did not know about the second one that was still sitting snugly in his log.

"Fooled you." He laughed and swaggered back into the forest.

Up at the waiting area, Ves nervously sighed in relief as his pilot successfully made it past this challenge. While he wasn't able to communicate with the sixteenth ranked pilot, he still felt a connection with the man.

Both of their futures were intertwined now. Lovejoy's success carried over to Ves, while his own accomplishments meant that Lovejoy could reach greater heights.

"Hello again Ves."

"Patricia! You’re done with your mech as well?"

"It’s just entered the battlefield." The woman replied and gestured down towards the spot where the mech descended. "I know it entered kind of late, but I’m confident my mech can catch up."

Ves stared down and gaped at the sight. His former classmate had designed and put together an arachnid heavy mech. Not only was it very heavy and thus very slow, it also carried a ton of missile launchers. He had no idea why she’d resort to such an extreme artillery loadout.

The massive spider mech armed its missiles while extending a powerful set of antennas. After turning on its powerful active scanners, it locked onto a series of mechs and fired off half of its missile tubes in one go. A biblical torrent of guided projectiles rose up in the skies before raining down onto their designated targets.

Seven nearby mechs instantly disintegrated. Two of them carried coins, which dropped upon the destruction of their carriers.

A further eleven mechs suffered substantial damage. The sudden strike instantly crushed the fighting spirits of their pilots. All they had in mind was to put as much distance from the launch site as possible. None of the mechs dared to approach the spider mech and confront it even though it was far from invincible at a closer range.

"What a strike! That’s the most deadly move I’ve seen so far in this match." The commentator praised as he put the replay of the attack on display. "Look at those mechs who survived. They completely turned into scaredy cats! One of them even threw away its precious coin!"

With its powerful sensors, the spider mech slowly crawled over to the fallen coins. Though it took some time to nab all three of them, no one ever thought to steal its bountiful prizes.

Only a single flight mech tried to inch close, only to receive a swarm of anti-air missiles to its face. The mech quickly fell from the sky like a bird who lost its feathers. All of the other pilots who lurked nearby shuddered and slinked away.

"That’s an incredibly domineering mech you’ve built."

"I know." Patricia modestly smiled, as if she was a mother watching her son performing on a stage. "I’ve spent over half a year on its design. Though it will have some trouble trying to resupply its spent magazines, as long as it still has missiles it should deter any challengers."

Many designers came prepared with a well-developed design for the free-for-all. Perhaps they spent months calculating every single detail in order to maximize its efficiency. However, many of these overprepared designers grew nervous or made mistakes once they got on stage. Many of them ultimately released a bunch of mechs that fell short of their theoretical capabilities.

Patricia evidently stuck to her design and succeeded in releasing a formidable mech. Ves admired her ability to maintain composure and deliver a consistent product.

He also had another reason to rejoice the introduction of her overbearing mech. The more opponents it killed, the more the pressure on Ves and Lovejoy eased up. With fewer mechs on the field, the easier they reached the top 100.

"Luckily your mech is on the other side of the battlefield. I’d hate to see my light mech get bombarded by your spider mech’s missiles."

Perhaps it was luck, but the Unicorn never drew attention from any of the formidable mechs currently dominating the field. Mechs like the ones designed by Barakovski and Patricia were obviously a cut above the average mid-game mechs.

Many of their designers had only lucked past the qualifiers. Now that they had to compete on their own merits, their shaky foundation proved to be their downfall. No matter how many hours they spent on their design, they could never catch up to the true talents.

That was also why when Lovejoy occasionally encountered another mech, he got away without getting crippled. Most of the badly-built mechs weren't able to hit anything with their firearms as their limbs were too uncoordinated and skewed. The abysmal hit rates of most of the mechs in play proved why quality control and certification was essential.

Still, some mechs came equipped with rapid-fire weapons. These guns might not pack much of a punch, but their sheer volume of fire meant they'd always hit something if pointed at the right direction.

The Unicorn accrued significant damage over its entire frame. Most of its armor had turned into the mech equivalent of swiss cheese by now. Its responsiveness took a disastrous dive.

The Unicorn reached the final stretch just as it was about to collapse. A small distance remained until it could deliver its final coin, upping its score to six. Whether it was enough to reach the top 100 was still in question.

He only had to go past one final obstacle. Three mechs were battling it out over a fallen flight mech carrying a coin. They must have shot it down when it flew past the area.

Unlike the previous situation, all three mechs held back their aggression. They faced off against each other in a vigilant manner, but failed to make any move. Lovejoy found the situation to be fishy.

"What are they waiting for? Are they guarding against third parties like me? Or is it just too awkward for them to start fighting when there's three of them?"

Whatever the reason, the Unicorn was at the end of its lifespan. The longer it had to wait, the more likely it would forcibly shut down. He couldn’t allow such a thing to happen.

After a moment’s consideration, he decided to ignite the conflict. He calmly raised his beaten-up laser pistol and fired a couple of ineffective shots. The focusing lens had cracked, so the beams weren’t very concentrated or straight.

The sudden attack spooked the three mechs into enacting their plans. They already stood on a hair-trigger. The stray laser beams caused them to attack each other before their brains caught up to the fact that a bystander shot at them first.

Like a mouse scurrying between a couple of angry cats, the Unicorn hobbled closer even as they became aware of its presence. The log managed to hide the fact that it hid a coin, but after a second or two the combatants recognized the old trick.

"He’s delivering a coin!"

Just as two of the mechs turned their weapons at the Unicorn, the third mech went for the fallen coin. This drew back the attention of the two who were about to attack the Unicorn, which ultimately split everyone’s focus. The serendipitous circumstance bought the Unicorn enough time to get close to the delivery point.

Just as a solid kinetic slug hit its torso, it managed to toss the coin just enough to land on the delivery point. As the mech finally deactivated due to incurring catastrophic damage to its exposed power reactor, the coin started to glow and fly in the air.

"I did it."

Chapter 94: Score

Cadet Lovejoy’s brilliant last moves were noted by few. Compared to the dazzling mechs destroying their rivals left and right, a worn-out mech like the Unicorn attracted little attention. It had quietly served its purpose for the few hours it remained in existence.

Ves almost dropped to his knees when he saw his pilot’s ploy come into fruition.

"You’re lucky that worked." Patricia noted calmly, as if the move was nothing more than child’s play. "The quality of your pilot and your mech gave the plan a very low chance to succeed. It only worked due to the enemy pilots screwing up."

He knew she had a point. While his pilot clearly knew his business, he wasn’t as exceptional as the ones from the top 10. The first-ranked Lovell still hopped around the battlefield with a half-wrecked rabbit mech, ambushing unsuspecting mechs right where it hurted. He managed to gather an incredible amount of eight coins through sheer skill.

"While I missed out on the best, I’m quite satisfied with my current pilot." Ves smiled. He already noted down the characteristics of Cadet Lovejoy and even had access to a brief profile. Next time he’d add a sword instead of a spear to his mech. "What about your own pilot? He’s ranked somewhere in the mid-300’s."

The difference between a pilot from the top 20 and the top 300 was a very large moat. A lower ranked pilot performed much worse in many different aspects. In the current round, what mattered most was judgement and battle intuition. Those who picked and choosed their battles wisely fared better than those who blindly blundered into unnecessary fights.

Surprisingly, Patricia stayed unconcerned. "Do you believe a mech’s performance is determined by the skill of the pilot?"

"Of course it is. A pilot is the brain of a mech."

"If that is what you believe, then that is how your mech is built."

The sentence was short and simple, but contained profound implications. If a designer believed the skill of a pilot mattered the most, he'd consciously or unconsciously designed a mech that allowed a skillful pilot to play it to its full strengths. While this might work great if you expected your mech to be piloted by an excellent pilot, in the hands of a more average one the mech would never perform to its full potential.

"I see what you mean. You expected your mech to be piloted by an average pilot, so you designed your mech in a way that is simpler to operate and can be mastered easily."

No wonder Patricia dared to design a heavy artillery mech for the battlefield. Any dummy pilot with a brain could operate a slow, heavy mech with simple fire-and-forget missiles. It posed no requirements to finesse and reflexes.

A pilot only required decent judgement and a familiarity with missiles in order to operate the spider mech competently. As cadets from a renowned academy, all of the pilots mastered the basics, including those who ranked in the top 300.

However, there should be a limit to how far a dummy-proof mech could go. Ves asked a pertinent question. "Will you be able to reach the finals with such a philosophy?"

"Have the masters always apprenticed a designer who reached the finals?"

"Ah, not always."

In the history of the Leemar Open Competition, the masters usually picked up a couple of disciples from the finalists. Usually did not mean always. While the masters usually liked to pick winners, they placed more importance in

compatibility. As long as a mech designer had a minimum amount of competencies, they could be picked by a master even if they did not make it through the first round.

This was also why plenty of designers valued the opportunity to make it past the qualifiers. Though extremely rare, a couple of masters had once selected apprentices from those who stalled at the start of the main event in the past. It gave everyone the tiniest bit of hope, which kept the competition vibrant.

The battlefield kept raging even after the Unicorn bowed out. After all of the excitement during the mid-game, the final hours arrived with the introduction of a couple of exceptional mechs. The majority of them were either heavy mechs or well-built medium mechs. Even Barakovski’s light mech killer and Patricia’s spider artillery mech had to make way for these alpha mechs.

The medium mech designed by Carter Gauge attracted everyone’s attention. As the top seed of the competition, he boldly spent an inordinate amount of time on his mech. It was built like a hybrid knight. Its excellent sword and shield made it a menace at close range while its accurate shoulder-mounted ballistic guns ate up anything at range.

For all the anticipation, it did not disappoint. Even with a pilot ranked in the top 500, the medium mech moved faster and hit harder than almost any other mech out there. As its pilot became more accustomed to the awe-inspiring capabilities of his mech, he practically turned into a wild beast. His mech savaged anyone in its way, and stole coins left and right.

Even the commentators got pulled into the action. "Look at that mechanical wonder! He’s at it again! This makes it the twelfth time it destroyed a mech, and it hardly received a scratch in return!"

"How tough must its armor be in order to deflect such a powerful kinetic round?"

"I don’t know, but besides artillery, there’s hardly any mech that could deter this killing machine."

Besides Gauge’s invincible medium mech, some of the other latecomers also rolled over the early birds. While some designers simply delivered disappointing mechs, others made full use of the time to submit well-armored and well-armed mechs that was worth as much as four mid-game mechs.

Most of the late-game mechs utilized advanced compressed armor that went beyond the basic procedure Ves mastered. He only mastered the shallowest layer of alloy compression. More advanced methods could work with a wider variety of alloys and provide a more effective result in much less time.

Ves also learned from the designers in the waiting room that the best armor also underwent highly classified chemical treatment. Certain chemicals added before or after the compression process interacted strangely with some of the exotic materials incorporated in the alloys. These reactions increased the effectiveness of the compression procedure, resulting in thinner, lighter but much stronger armor.

"The chemical formulas are highly prized secrets. They are one of the core possessions of a mech design company. Some even build an entire dynasty around their formulas." Patricia noted succinctly. "Entire research departments might spend decades in order to come up with a single formula. The decent ones have a market value of trillions of cols."

This was on an entirely different level. These kinds of core technologies were highly prized assets that only the most formidable organizations were able to possess.

Someone like Ves could only ever purchase a license for the outdated formulas that have long been leaked. Even then, the prices were harsh.

The first round finally finished at the end of the day. This time, the amount of destruction exceeded last year’s result. Many mechs hadn’t been able to gather a sufficient amount of coins.

The threshold for passing turned out to be around six deliveries. The only problem was that a bit more than a hundred mechs had delivered at least six coins. This meant that some might pass and some might fail.

Ves bit his lip as he anxiously waited for the score counters to tally the final results. Finally, the sorting finished.

VES LARKINSON - REDDY LOVEJOY - 89th

"Yes!" He raised his fists. He passed the first round due to having delivered the coins faster than many others who gathered the same amount. This was another minor rule that gave preferential treatment to those who risked submitting their mechs early.

He looked at the scores for the few people he knew. Surprisingly, the combination Alyssa Lynch and Richard Lovell earned an impressive rank of 32nd. Considering that Cadet Lovell piloted one of the worst mechs on the battlefield, that was an incredibly heroic feat.

As for Patricia, her domineering artillery mech blasted its way into the 70s. While her spider mech easily demolished any opposition, its traversal speed was as slow as a snail so it barely gathered seven coins.

He checked the names of anyone else he knew. He finally spotted Barakovski’s name way up at the 19th rank. She achieved a much better result than him even though she submitted her light mech a lot later. Her well-built mech hunted down many badly built mechs and ruthlessly robbed them of their coins.

As for Carter Gauge, he did not disappoint. His medium mech only came late, but its overall excellence proved even more tyrannical than Patricia’s light

mech killer. No matter the quality of its opposition, as long as it had a coin, it quickly died. With its supremely optimized sensors, it had no trouble tracking down coins. In just a couple of hours, its pilot easily gathered nineteen coins.

"This guy is in a different league than us." Ves noted as he stared at the top score. "He should be participating in events organized by first-rate superstates. Why is he slumming it with us?"

Patricia nodded in agreement. "You're right, but It's a political game. The Gauge Dynasty wants to press down the Carnegie Group's liveliness by emphasizing their deeper roots."

None of this concerned Ves, so they quickly dropped the subject.

Now that the main event had concluded, the audience started to return to their hotels. A few designers were invited up on stage to talk about their mechs in the aftershow, but Ves had no interest or expectation that he'd be invited up there.

When Ves met Dietrich back at the entrance of the arena complex, he took an irritated Lucky from his grasp. "There now, we only have two more days before we can go home."

"A lot of girls have been petting him." Dietrich explained Lucky's bad mood. "He's never gotten a proper rest. But hey, I'm not complaining. He's a great chick magnet."

Ves shook his head. His pet might look like an adorable cat, but his claws could cut right through a solid piece of armor.

"What do you think about Lovejoy? He's the sixteenth ranked pilot at the Abelard Academy. Is he better than you?"

"I'm a marksman, and he's a swordsman. We've got different specialties. His basics are very solid. I have to admit he's got a better reaction speed than me.

He’d chew me up if he gets into melee range. Still, he’s obviously too green. Any rookie pilot is no good until their lives are put on the line."

"Well hopefully that won’t matter because they’re all cadets. They haven’t graduated yet."

Dietrich shook his head and pointed at Richard Lovell’s name. "You’re wrong. There’s a couple of pilots who are different. This guy is the most obvious one. Every move he makes is focused on ending lives."

That sounded ominous. Ves had no familiarity with Alyssa Fill. She courageously designed and submitted an extremely rushed design in two hours in order to claim the best pilot available. Someone who took such a daring risk had to have some real capability. Her gamble worked, and she now had sole possession of the number one pilot, which gave her a great advantage in subsequent rounds.

Every formidable designer made it through the top 100. Those freeloaders who passed the last qualifying round while doing nothing all crashed and burned in front of an audience of trillions. Ves was relieved he made it through the first pass, but he was a little disappointed he hadn’t reached a higher score. The impressive achievements of his rivals had taught him that he was far from the best.

"I’ve got a good enough pilot, and that’s what matters. It doesn’t matter if my mech gathered six or nineteen coins. It’s enough to make it through with the best pilot possible."

He look forward what tomorrow had in store.

Chapter 95: Second Round

The next day brought the hundred surviving mech designers back to the arena complex. This time, the arena fields had been separated, which meant that the second round no longer took place on a mass battlefield.

Ves had a good talk with Dietrich last night about how he should go about designing a mech for a swordsman. Though Dietrich did not specialize in this area, many of his subordinates did and he was a wealth of practical knowledge.

"Good morning Ves." Patricia greeted him once she spotted him. "Are you ready for the second round?"

"The successive duels are always tricky. It'll be a struggle, but I'm confident I can make it."

Only a hundred of the best designers who came all the way to Leemar survived up to now. Those who made it this far were not soft persimmons. No matter who he faced, he had a tough fight on his hands. While he did not guarantee he could win every duel, he still wanted to stand out.

After opening the day with a brief performance from some musicians, the announcer explained the rules for the second round.

"In the first test, we've tested our designers on whether they could deliver a working product on time. The second round revolves around efficiency and longevity. A mech designer must deliver a product that does the job as long as possible with the least amount of cost."

The projection changed into a list of available base parts. They were the same outdated junk they've used in the previous round, but now they had a price tag on them. The number varied widely according to their quality.

"The first major challenge is to design a mech that costs no more than a thousand points in six hours. If you happened to worry about not being able to reach this height, then don't be. I can assure you that you will wish the limit is higher."

Those who reached this stage were all capable of designing a decent mech in that time. A six hour design time was rather short, but for Ves who used the QuickForge system to design a mech under three hours, it was an eternity.

"The finished mechs will then have to duel four random opponents in a standard duel environment, with a two-hour interval between each fight. The mech designer is only allowed to use the QuickForge system to make as much repairs as possible. If you can’t finish your repairs in that time, then tough luck, because many repairmen have faced the same situations during wartime."

These four consecutive duels tested a designer in multiple ways. First, they had to design a mech in a way that made it easy to repair if it incurred any damage. Second, they had to deal with a wide variety of possible damage and allocate their limited time to repairing the most essential parts.

This could get pretty brutal by the time the fourth duel was about to be held. Also, many times a mech sustained so much damage it could not fight on, which straight-up brought the mech designer and pilot out of contention.

In this case, the pilot had to make their own judgement on how to fight. Taking risks meant fights could finish quickly, but it also left them open to heavy damage that wasn’t easy to repair. They also had the option to forfeit a duel at anytime in order to avoid accumulating damage when facing a losing proposition. Yet giving up too often dragged down the ranking. Only the top 25 qualified for the third round.

When Ves approached his now-familiar QuickForge system, he went over the design templates he had in mind. The last time he designed the Unicorn, he did so with the expectation that it would be compatible to any pilot.

This time was different. He knew the pilot. He read his profile. He watched him fight. Cadet Lovejoy fancied himself as a swordsman, so Ves should design a mech that revolves primarily around the use of a single sword.

Swordsmen mechs different substantially from the standard knight type. Whereas knights benefited from a substantial amount of armor along with a trusty shield, a swordsman had less mass in order to speed up its reaction.

In a tactical sense, knights acted as door stoppers. They excelled at defensive engagements where the enemy had to go past the knight in order to complete their objectives. Swordsmen fared worse in head-on clashes, but they performed well when used as a flanker or as a follow-up.

A swordsman mech was built around its sword. Ves read up on the basics. A swordsman mech relied on a combination of mechanical power along with momentum in order to deliver fast or heavy strikes. The mech needed to be heavy enough to add a lot of mass to a committed strike, but it also had to be flexible enough to maneuver like a duelist trying to get the upper hand.

"There’s too many things to take note of when trying to design a swordsman mech." Ves concluded as he started to get a headache on how many balls he had to juggle. "I can’t design a mech as heavy as a Caesar Augustus, and neither can I make it as light as an Octagon."

He had to leave familiar territory and design a new mech from a different mold. It had to be another rushed design, though the generous margin of six hours should leave him with a decent mech this time.

First, he constructed a mental image again. With his frequent practice, he became more proficient in getting in the right mood. He hardly needed more than a minute to reach a state of sharpened mental focus.

The profile Ves received painted Lovejoy as a talkative but diligent cadet. He practiced a lot but became frustrated when his climb up the ranking stagnated. He reached a ceiling where he could not progress fast enough.

"He probably bumped against the people who benefited from genetic boosts." Ves guessed to himself. If he ended up in a situation like that, he'd tear his hair out until he became bald.

While the pilot could not improve, the mech could make all the difference. Ves thought back on the conversation he had with Patricia yesterday. Either the mech had to accommodate the pilot, or the pilot had to adjust to the mech.

"Well, I'm not designing a mass production model. I have specific information about the pilot so I don't have to dumb down my mech."

He envisioned a fairly advanced and mechanically complex mech. A whirling dancer with a sword. One that was swift and agile, but also one that benefited from strategically placed armor. Not enough to weigh it down too much, but enough to add some heft to each sword strike. The model should be nimble enough to facilitate heavy strikes where the entire weight of the mech was added to the attack.

With a solid image of the Sword Dancer, Ves went to work. He first picked out the basic components. In order to keep costs below a thousand points, he started picking the most essential parts first.

"A swordsman mech is built around its sword, so the first thing to choose is the weapon."

Ves had to admit he did not know much beyond the basics when it came to mech swords. As the default melee weapon for mechs, a mech sword was a heavy, sharp instrument of destruction. It had to be sharp enough to slice through armored portions and sturdy enough to support the weight of two mechs clashing against each other.

"It’s got to be big and heavy, but how far should I go?"

The profile did not mention Lovejoy’s preferred sword type. He could be specializing in a thin one-handed rapier or a heavy two-handed claymore. In the end, Ves made a judgement call and picked out a one-handed longsword model that cost a hundred points.

With the sword model in place, he designed the rest of the frame around the use of a one-handed sword. He spent two hundred points on a powerful pair of engines and power reactors, fifty points on high-performance energy cells, a hundred points on legs optimized for burst performance and a whopping two-hundred-and-fifty points for heavy but powerful arms.

He spent much of his remaining points on the parts he prioritized less. With two-hundred points spent on many entry-level parts like the sensors, cockpit and a backup laser pistol, he completely wiped out his savings.

As for his final hundred points, he picked out a middle-of-the-road armor system that only distinguished itself on the ease of which it could be compressed.

With all of the parts selected, Ves quickly drew up a basic design. He could afford to spend more time on its design, so he made sure to optimize his prospective mech for close-ranged high-speed engagements.

He tweaked many things such as strengthening the fingers so their grip on the sword became stronger. He reduced some of his mech’s rear torso armor in order to improve his mech’s agility. In order to keep the mech balanced, he also had to shift a few internal components so that the mech wouldn’t have a tendency to tip over.

Once he finished a detailed outline of his design, he activated the forging module of his QuickForge system. His time was a little tight due to the lengthy

procedure of compressing all of the armor plates, so he rushed through the construction again, though not as extreme.

Unlike Barakovski, he started from the inside and worked his way outward. This way, the mech’s integrity could be insured while he could cut back on the alloy compression if he ran out of time.

Fortunately, it never came to that point. He spent a solid two hours on forming the internal frame and the internal components.

The QuickForge system worked a lot better than the second-hand 3D printer and assembly system his father acquired for his workshop. The assembly system even came with automated functions that automatically layed out the cabling and other internal infrastructure in the most optimal and non-intrusive way.

"If my assembly machine was as good as this one, I’d be able to assemble two mechs a day instead of a single mech over two days."

Once he reached the process of forging the armor plating, he got to witness how the QuickForge system fabricated them in a single comprehensive procedure. It definitely impressed him when he saw how various liquified materials combined together under intense pressure and heat, all of which happened in plain view. An extremely powerful combination of electromagnetic, gravitic and some other sorcery Ves wasn’t aware of kept the process contained.

All that mattered was that he kept control over the process. Despite the dazzling technologies employed by the machine, the steps it followed differed little from the standard process.

His mech finally took shape after the plates started attaching to his frame. The metallic plates treated with the most rudimentary level of compression shone in blue. A sword that underwent a slightly different compression procedure

came at the end. Combined with the thick arms and slim legs, it gave the mech an impression that it was an icy warrior.

As Ves had timed his work meticulously, he finished a few minutes before six hours had passed.

"Time’s up designers! Lay down your work while your mech gets ready to fight. The first duel starts in a couple of minutes!"

He finished his job. Now it was up to his pilot. He hoped he could perform miracles with the Sword Dancer. After all, he formed this mech exclusively for him. He only found it unfortunate that he did not gain any new insights with regards to the ever-mystical X-Factor.

"I got a hint of a future direction with the Unicorn. Why do I feel I missed the opportunity with the Sword Dancer?"

Perhaps the extended time gave Ves too little pressure to feel impassioned. He was a little confused, to be honest. Could the X-Factor only be ignited when he was caught in an extreme mood? That made it difficult to employ it whenever he wanted to. After all, while he could hone his thoughts, he could not completely control his emotions.

"I’ll have to unfold this puzzle later. First I have to prepare for repairs."

Chapter 96: Need A Light?

Lovejoy waited in his pod. His initial high at the news of his successful advancement made way for apprehension. He knew that he’d face formidable opponents from now on. Even those ranked near the bottom of the top 100 posed a threat to him with the right mech.

"Hopefully my designer has got a brain this time and provides me with a sword."

In order to ensure fairness, the pilots did not have any contact with the outside world. Cadet Lovejoy had no impression of his mech designer, other than his

work was solid. If he could produce a mech like the Unicorn under three hours, it meant he was a viable contender.

He licked his lips. "If I manage to reach the finals and stand out, I might get an offer from the Carnegie Group’s Mech Corps."

Every cadet from the Abelard Academy dreamed of joining the Mech Corps. Those employed directly in the Group’s most prestigious branch enjoyed the most riches and authority. In return, they’d have to participate in the most pitched battles under their flag and had to live a regimented life.

"Even with the obligations, such an impressive job will set me up for life."

His pod lit up. His mech stood ready to receive his consciousness. Cadet Lovejoy opened up his mind and fell into the usual routine of letting his mind engulf his new mech.

"What the, it’s there again?!" He muttered as he felt a tingling brush past his mind. "There’s definitely something wrong with my neural interface. Why didn’t I report this anomaly to the technicians yesterday?"

He swore to himself. He was about to enter a match. This was no time to fix his technical issues.

"Urgh. Next time then."

Once the connection process finished, Lovejoy cautiously extended his senses. He found nothing out of place, so he let down his guard and beheld his new mech.

The sensations overwhelmed him for a bit. The mech moved so smooth that he was confused whether it was his own body. Though he eventually calmed down when he experienced the usual sluggishness customary to mechs, he still enjoyed this new mech.

"This machine is a lot better than the training mechs of the academy!" He exclaimed once he got used to its movements. "Too bad the designer chose to accompany my mech with a longsword."

Mech longswords were characterized by their versatility. They could be wielded with one hand or two hands and they could both slash and pierce through well-protected sections if accompanied by sufficient force.

This versatility also turned them into the jack-of-all-trades of mech swords. Lovejoy preferred wielding larger two-handed swords. His fighting style revolved around generating rotational momentum in order to unleash a flurry of devastating slashes. Such a style put great importance on the durability of the weapon.

The match started before he could consider anything else. The darkness around him disappeared, revealing a desert arena environment.

Lovejoy was ambivalent about the environment. His mech did not rely too much on heat-generating weapons so he should have an advantage. On the other hand, the lack of obstacles meant he could be shot down from a distance. It all depended on the opponent.

When Lovejoy turned on his sensors, he spotted a very powerful signal. "That’s got to be a heavy mech."

His brows furrowed at the discovery. Heavy mechs sacrificed mobility for armor and firepower. Each mech that wanted to take down a heavy boulder like that had to make a lot of sacrifices.

His Sword Dancer stepped closer. He took his time due to the limited size of the arena. The moderate pace also allowed him to adjust his footing on the sandy soil. Each environment posed different challenges to mechs, and sandy deserts played hell with footing. Fortunately, while his mech’s legs were not too big, the soles were sufficiently wide enough to avoid sinking too deep.

The heavy mech came into view. Considering its size and bulk, it did not move from its place, lest it mess up its own footing.

"Damn, it’s a heavy skirmisher. Still, this happens to be one of its worst environments."

The second round’s successive duels took place in random arena environments. This was standard in many mech duels. It just so happened that this heavy skirmisher that was built around heat-generating weapons like its wrist-mounted flamethrowers and shoulder-mounted laser cannons radiated an immense amount of heat.

In a hot environment like this simulated desert, that was a deathknell.

"Haha, this is my lucky day!" Lovejoy cheered and approached his opponent in a zigzag pattern.

The heavy skirmisher readied its flamethrowers but started with firing its laser cannons first. The high-powered, long-ranged weapons possessed decent accuracy. Their lightspeed beams could not be dodged when they fired, so Lovejoy could only dodge while relying on his intuition and the angle of their barrels.

"Goddammit, whoever designed that mech is an expert on laser weapons!"

The targeting systems of the heavy mech seemed to excel in locking onto his twirling Sword Dancer. Without a shield, Lovejoy had no choice but allow his mech to get hit a couple of times. His Sword Dancer tried to mitigate as much damage as possible by spreading out the hits. Still, he suffered a devastating strike when his mech’s left arm melted into uselessness.

"You’ll pay for that!"

With the longsword held in a single arm, he closed the distance with vengeful wrath. The mech he piloted complimented his every thoughts, allowing him to

metaphorically dance along his mech. It was a sublime experience that brought his piloting skill to a greater height. He even improved his dodging skill.

Now that he reached a close range, he started to circle around the heavy mech. His speed overcame the slow rotation of the powerful but sluggish laser cannons. The skirmisher gave up on the overheated lasers and raised its arms.

Twin gouts of chemically enhanced flames departed from the wrists. The desert turned even more stiflingly hot from the immense heat. Even Lovejoy got the illusion that he entered an oven. His mech frantically jumped back in order to avoid the initial flames.

As the burning liquids caught nothing, they fell onto the desert and kept burning. Lovejoy’s eyes sparked as he tried to circle around the fallen flames and approach the skirmisher from behind. The heavy mech was not complacent, and fired another gout of flames, only for the swordsman mech to jump back unscathed.

After repeating this pattern several times, the heavy skirmisher eventually got surrounded by its own flames. The temperature in the center of the conflagration kept rising.

"Hahaha, need a light?" Lovejoy laughed as he wondered which pilot allowed himself to get boxed in by his own flames.

The enemy pilot must have been a pampered specialist who only knew how to pilot a single mech type. Someone like Lovejoy who patiently mastered the basics of every kind of mech and weapon before settling for swords disdained those who took shortcuts. He had to work twice as hard in the academy in order to climb his way to the top of the rankings.

"I don’t know which lazy bastard you are, but you’re finished!"

The rest of the match held very little suspense. Lovejoy holstered his sword and retrieved his dinky little laser pistol. He kept a healthy distance from the flames and circled around while firing his pistol through the flames. The sheer bulk of the skirmisher made it easy to hit the mech, even if most of the shots got flaked off by its imposing armor.

Outside the arena, the commentators noted the strange circumstance of this duel.

"Look at that duel. I have not seen such a farce in three years. Those are extremely persistent flames. Normally, I'd complement the designer for formulating such a strong accelerant, but with such a clueless pilot he might as well shoot himself in the foot!"

"The pilot is Michael Forneau. He's a renowned laser marksman. Such a mech should allow him to play to his full strengths, if not for the addition of the flamethrower. Has he ever attended a single class on skirmishers? Keeping track of your flames is the first lesson pounded into your head!"

"I don't know about you, but in my opinion Cadet Forneau is unworthy of appearing on this stage. What a disgraceful performance for someone lauded to be a future expert!"

Not everyone in the audience agreed. Pilots only had a limited amount of time to get proficient with mechs. It took years to gain a basic amount of proficiency in every variety of mechs and weapons. If the time spent on broadening a pilot's range of skills was instead focused on deepening them, they could have more expert and ace pilots.

Advanced pilots like Ves' cousin Melinda were a dime in a dozen. Any decent academy churned out boatloads of advanced pilots every year. However, even a great second-rate state like the Friday Coalition could not produce a large amount of expert pilots. Demand still vastly exceeded supply.

As the commentators chattered, the constant damage wore down on the heavy skirmisher. After five straight minutes of shooting, the flames started to subside but the heavy mech was dangerously overheated. Its pilot prudently forfeited the match in order to avoid damaging his mech any further when the chance of salvaging a victory was nonexistent.

"That was easy." Cadet Lovejoy thought as his damaged mech left the arena and returned to the embrace of the mech designer. His consciousness disconnected from the machine. His next duel commenced in less than two hours so he had plenty of time to take a break.

Ves on the other hand shook his head at the silliness of his opponent. He had no complaints about getting an easy victory, though he lamented the plentiful times his baby got hit by the shoulder-mounted laser cannons. Once his mech moved close enough to see the damage in detail, he hissed.

"Even compressed armor can’t stop a high-powered laser beam."

Laser cannons possessed a destructive amount of energy. While the compressed armor did their job of preventing the damage from reaching the internals, much of the armor needed replacement. Lovejoy tried to spread out the damage over the mech’s entire frame, and while it was the right call, it also gave Ves a headache.

The difference between laser cannons and laser rifles did not merely extend to scale. Weapon designers often built laser rifles for the purpose of dealing long-term sustainable damage. Efficiency and durability mattered more than power and penetration.

Laser cannons turned those priorities around. They were built to instantly melt through thick layers of armor and deliver a devastating amount of thermal energy in an instant. Pilots on the battlefield loved using laser cannons due to their combination of high penetration and ease of resupply.

In short, the damage the laser cannons inflicted had hurt his mech a lot. The only thing Ves could do is fabricate as much replacements as possible before the next duel started.

He whizzed up a new set of compressed armor plating, focusing on the most essential parts first. Fortunately, the short duration of the duel worked in his favor. Not all of the plates needed replacements so he fabricated enough and managed to replace all of the damaged plating just before two hours had passed.

"I can’t do much about the residual heat damage that managed to get past the armor." Ves muttered regretfully. Those lasers packed a really huge punch, and even if the armor dispersed most of the heat, a small amount still wrecked havoc deeper inside his mech. "It won’t matter too much for the next duel, but if the internal damage accumulates, there’s nothing I can do."

Replacing internal components always entailed more difficulties. It took a lot more time to replace the internals due to the interconnection of the parts.

Chapter 97: Worn Down

The second duel commenced. Cadet Lovejoy became accustomed to the anomalous sensations and brushed them off as inconsequential ghosts. Instead, he focused his attention on the state of his mech.

His mouth curled out. "I like my designer more and more. My armor is back to its shiny state."

His Sword Dancer gripped its sword in anticipation of the next fight. Lovejoy hoped his opposition had more bite this time. The last duel was too disgraceful for him to feel any pride.

The darkness receded, revealing a normal suburban environment. Small houses and municipal parks dotted the arena. The obstacles were tall enough

to hinder a mech but short enough to avoid blocking their view. It was a tricky environment that favored ranged weapons.

"Over there!" He said as he zeroed in on his opposition. It turned out to be a light harasser, a mech that specialized in running rings around melee mechs like his Sword Dancer. "Damn, this one’s a challenge."

The only thing hopeful about his second duel was that the light mech sustained a lot of damage. Even after receiving some repairs, it still suffered moderate damage to its torso where an artillery shell must have exploded.

"I can use that to my advantage."

Lovejoy moved the sword back to its place and retrieved the flimsy little laser pistol again. He felt a little depressed that he couldn’t showcase his swordsmanship and instead had to rely on his pitiful backup weapon. Still, against a mech that moved faster than him, he’d be a fool to chase the enemy.

The light harasser responded first by firing its light laser rifle at him. The firing rate of the weapon was high, but the power behind each laser beam was lackluster. Even if the Sword Dancer received hits, it did not affect its integrity at all due to the strength of its compressed armor.

Ignoring the intermittent damage for now, the Sword Dancer closed the distance. While the light harasser tried to maintain the distance, the complex environment did not always make that possible.

While any mech possessed sufficient force to crash through any residential home, such an act slowed it down while also incur some minor damage. For a fragile mech that prized its mobility, that was unacceptable.

"Get back here you chicken!" Lovejoy yelled over the comm as he started firing his pistol.

While its power paled in comparison to the rifle in the harasser’s hands, the light mech’s armor could not withstand too many hits. Lovejoy carefully paced his shots in order to avoid overheating the pistol. He aimed specifically at the light mech’s damaged torso in order to exacerbate its internal damage.

Thus, the two mechs engaged in a lengthy shootout. The rate of fire slowed down for both mechs once their weapons overheated. The laser rifle held an advantage in that aspect as the larger weapon dispersed its heat much better. The Sword Dancer started to accumulate a lot more damage than its opponent.

"Man, this is why I hate light mechs." Lovejoy complained and let loose a few more curses when a lucky laser beam shot a portion of his mech’s damaged leg.

The light mech noticed that the Sword Dancer’s legs were slimmer than normal and therefore focused much of his firepower there. The devastating hit damaged some internals which abruptly reduced the speed of Lovejoy’s mech.

"C’mon! How is that discount laser rifle able to get past my armor!"

The tables turned a minute later. Though the Sword Dancer’s legs started to get chewed up, the pistol finally achieved a promising result. The latest low-powered beam that escaped the pistol managed to penetrate the scorched section of the light mech’s torso. All of the successive hits to that area paid off.

The light mech toppled over as its power reactor initiated an emergency shutdown. The enemy pilot quickly signalled his surrender before Lovejoy could unleash a few more shots.

In truth, if both mechs were in their peak condition, the Sword Dancer would have lost. The slower medium mech had no way of catching up to a light mech piloted by someone competent. While its laser rifle might be a light

variant, it still functioned as a primary weapon. The backup laser pistol wielded by the Sword Dancer could not compare.

"Truly fate smiles on me again." Lovejoy smirked as he realized this disparity. He won a match that he should have lost. "Bad luck for you. Try to keep your mech in better shape next time!"

Still, with the Sword Dancer's half-mangled leg, he risked suffering the same situation in his next duel. He hoped his designer could fix up the leg with the remaining time available. His shootout against the light mech expended a lot of time.

In fact, Ves already started to feel depressed. While lasers might not be the most optimal weapon to chew through armor, once it got past the layer of protection, they were capable of dealing immense damage.

The abrupt transfer of energy wrecked or melted a lot of vulnerable little components near the area struck by the beam. Some cables and tiny components vaporized entirely, while more distant parts only suffered from the symptoms of extreme overheating. In a practical perspective, these half-molten parts might as well not be functional anymore.

For a proper repair job, Ves needed to clean up all of the damage no matter how lightly they got off.

"I only have one-and-a-half hour left. That's not enough to repair the entire leg."

Technicians hated these kinds of repair jobs. While Ves was lucky that the internal frame didn't sustain any substantial damage, sorting out all of the tiny components and replacing them took a lot of tedium. He also had to set aside the other damage the mech sustained.

"I bet this QuickForge bucket can automate the repairs." Ves boldly guessed. The amount of automation packed in the machine could fill an entire library of

books. He refused to believe the machine had to be operated manually to this degree. "They likely turned off the easy mode so mech designers like me have to work for our results."

With no other alternative, Ves helplessly started to repair the leg. He tried to save as much time as possible by ripping out entire chunks of machinery. He cared little whether the things he removed were functional or not. As far as he was concerned, the proximity to excessive heat had compromised them all. Testing out each component's integrity took too much time.

"Now I have to fabricate and put back the replacements."

Most of the internal portions consisted of simple parts like cables, bolts and other miscellaneous things. They were simple parts that required very little thought in their production. The real challenge started when he had to put the parts back into the hollowed-out leg.

Ves had the mistaken impression that he was playing a puzzle in the highest difficulty. Sometimes he had to stuff the parts through an obstacle in order to put it in its rightful place. He prioritized speed over caution, which did not help much with the repairs as other parts sometimes got bent out of shape.

As the clock started to expire, Ves rushed his repairs and even started to slip up here and there. The damage he inadvertently caused affected the leg only marginally, but at least he was able to put replacement armor back into place.

"Alright! Let the third duels commence!"

Cadet Lovejoy had not fully recovered from his last match when he was thrown back into the Sword Dancer. The extended duel frustrated him. When his consciousness fully grasped his mech, he quickly inspected the damage.

He clicked his teeth. "The leg looks better, but not at its best. My armor coverage is still the same."

The spread-out laser shots also scorched the Sword Dancer’s other sections aside from the legs. Though they did not penetrate the compressed armor, they still weakened it substantially.

The third duel started when the frozen lake environment got revealed. The thick layers of ice ensured that most mechs could maintain their footing, but any major impacts to the surface might lead to drastic consequences. No spots of lands could be found anywhere.

The frozen environment heavily favored mechs that generated a high amount of heat. For example, lasers could fire more often and with higher power without worrying about overheating.

On the other hand, not everything worked optimally in a heavily frozen environment. Many mechs were designed to work optimally at average Terran temperature ranges. The further the environment deviated from the standard, the more some parts started to deteriorate.

"My mech should be fine." Lovejoy judged, though he admitted he was no expert. "A swordsman mech is not a mechanically complex machine. It shouldn’t have too many vulnerable stuff inside."

The Sword Dancer swiftly trudged through the howling snow. He had to find his opponent and finish him off as fast as possible in order to buy his mech designer more time. His sensors beeped a minute later as it found a heat source.

The silhouette turned out to be a medium knight. The mech looked brand new. Aside from some minor scratches on its armor, the entire mech appeared as if it had never entered a duel. That held worrying implications for Lovejoy.

"Either the pilot or the mech designer is a prodigy."

He refused to consider the case where both of them turned out to be geniuses. The only thing in his favor was that swordsman mechs usually beat

knights in a one-on-one. The knight mech spotted the Sword Dancer and readied its pristine kite shield.

"You better entertain me properly this time." Lovejoy taunted the enemy knight. "I just came off a couple of duels where my sword wasn't even needed. Hopefully you'll last long enough to satisfy my lust for battle."

While the environment could be better, Lovejoy rejoiced he could finally have an old-fashioned melee duel. He increased the speed of his mech and noted that the fixed up leg held out for now. Reassured, he heartedly threw himself into the fight by attempting an empowered horizontal slash.

The knight was no dummy and positioned its shield in place to deflect the obvious attack. However, the incredible force behind the blow hammered the knight a few steps backward. The first blow was not intended as a killing strike, but as a setup move that broke the enemy's guard.

Cadet Lovejoy's eyes gleamed as his mech danced around the shield. His Sword Dancer abruptly reserved its rotation, and its sword swung back from the other direction.

The knight sluggishly tried to regain its footing while simultaneously bringing his shield back up. Somehow, the pilot managed to skillfully do both in an instant. The slash resulted in nothing but another dent in the shield.

Despite the disappointing result, Lovejoy kept up his aggression. He slashed and stabbed while circling around the knight.

Meanwhile, the pilot of the knight maintained composure and blocked each strike without fail. Sometimes he even retaliated by stabbing with the sword in turn, which pushed the Sword Dancer back. The knight mech turned into an impregnable turtle.

After a few minutes of useless exchanges, the knight suddenly diverted from its routine. After fending off another sword strike, it slammed the tip of its kite shield onto the ice beneath their feet.

The constant maneuvers had weakened the ice layers to the point of forming cracks. The downward shield strike completely cracked open the damaged ice, causing both mechs to lose their stability.

The knight deftly escaped the unstable area due to initiating the move.

The Sword Dancer was caught off-guard, and almost responded too late. Only its excellent agility and reaction speed allowed Lovejoy to catch up and jump to a safer spot.

A hole the size of ten mechs appeared between the two mechs. Lovejoy smacked himself in the face for almost getting done in by this move. If his mech fell into the ice, he'd not only lose, he might as well totalled the entire mech. Not all mechs fared well in water unless they were specifically designed for that purpose.

Lovejoy took his opponent more seriously. Though he did not recognize his opponent, he acknowledged his skill. "This fellow is top 30 material. We're almost evenly matched."

The frozen lake environment annoyed him. He did not relish sinking down in the icy abyss. After circling around the newly formed hole, he resumed his assault against the knight, though this time he upped his guard against any further surprises.

After the next few exchanges, the enemy pilot proved its mettle. Having adjusted to Lovejoy's tempo, the knight started to handle the incoming attacks better while delivering more poisonous retaliations.

The knight suddenly sidestepped instead of blocking the the latest attack. The Sword Dancer had overextended, leaving it open to the follow-up shield bash.

The solid chunk of metal thunked against the Sword Dancer’s head. It instantly crushed half its face, most notably destroying its optics.

Just as Lovejoy frantically switched his view to the backup optics, the knight slashed its sword. As the Sword Dancer had reflexively jumped back, the sword failed to strike the torso. Instead, it managed to cut off an arm.

Lovejoy screamed in frustration. He had not expected this sitting duck of a knight to be a porcupine. At least his mech hadn’t lost its sword arm.

"I can’t keep this up. I have to change the game."

The enemy pilot’s skill restrained his sword play. It was as if he specialized in crushing the dreams of other swordsmen. After a few seconds of thought, he grinned.

"Since you like to play with ice, let me give you a nice surprise."

The Sword Dancer retreated a bit in order to open up some space. The knight stood in place, shield ready to receive the next attack. Lovejoy let out a warcry as his mech thundered forward.

Just as his mech reached the knight, Lovejoy dragged his mech to the side and made a couple of complex maneuvers. His mech half-slid over the ice while directed his sword against the ice. The sword hammered the ice several times, creating cracks near the knight.

The Sword Dancer took advantage of its superior mobility to circle around the knight while repeatedly impacting the ice underneath. While a sword was not the best tool to damage the ice, the Sword Dancer’s arms was capable of transferring a lot of force which aided the mech in its task.

After completing a couple of rotations, the ice started to deteriorate on its own. The pilot of the knight panicked and quickly stomped out of the danger zone.

"Not today!" Lovejoy yelled as his mech circled around again and confronted the knight head-on with a shoulder bash. While the impact failed to damage the enemy mech, it succeeded in interrupting its escape. The transfer of force also sped along the collapse.

A second later, the knight disappeared. It fell down into the lake and sank down in the depths.

"I hate ice." Lovejoy said as he looked on from a few steps ahead. His mech escaped the waters at the last second by bouncing back from the enemy mech’s shield. It was a close call and a risky one, but he succeeded in winning without dragging out the fight.

"Three down, one to go."

Chapter 98: Fourth Duel

Ves imagined that others had it worse. He certainly didn’t envy the designer of the knight his mech faced in the previous duel. Repairing a submerged mech took a lot of time, perhaps days to get it right.

"Well, at least my mech has more working parts than broken ones. A busted head and an amputated arm is nothing to speak of after the third duel."

The competitions in the past had shown that results diverged wildly in the second round. The consecutive duels tested the skill of both the designer and the pilot. If either of them were not up to standard, the damage accumulated pretty fast, to the point of making the mech a derelict.

Only a gifted designer like Carter Gauge or a talented pilot like Richard Lovell could turn around this convention.

The duel above the frozen lake lasted a long time. The extreme thermal conditions that simulated a frozen planet environment played havoc with the internals, especially since the armor lost its weather-sealing capabilities in the

previous duels. The rapid transition from hot to cold strained the more sensitive components.

"I don’t have time to fix up the internals. My mech is has enough redundancies so that a couple of faulty components won’t break the mech."

Ves only had a limited time to fix up the arm and head. In his view, both of them had the same priority, but he decided to start with the arm.

"Fortunately, it’s a clean cut. I don’t have to sort out the damage components."

Forging a replacement arm did not take a lot of time. As all of the internals had to be made from scratch, Ves did not have to resort to stuffing new parts in an existing space. It only took about thirty minutes to create a new arm, and an additional ten minutes to add the accompanying compressed armor.

That left him with just enough time to sort out the head. The deformed head posed some difficulties to Ves. He did not have enough time to fabricate an entirely new head. Instead, he put his jury-rigging skill to good use. He cut off the deformed section and cleaned up as much damage as he could. After fabricating a replacement sensor module, he carefully put it inside.

He flash-forged a hastily designed mask and put it over the hollow front of the head. The Sword Dancer appeared creepy now, but what mattered the most to Ves was that the sensors were operational now. The mask might not provide a lot of protection, but it was better than keeping the entire head exposed.

"It’ll do."

Time ran out before Ves could do much more. He really did not feel comfortable releasing a substandard mech from his embrace. Having gotten used to the MTA’s strict standards, it was against his conscience to deliver a piece of junk to a pilot.

When Lovejoy connected to the mech for the final time, he also felt let down by its damaged state. "The arm is alright, but the rest of the frame is still degraded."

He sighed a little as he got used to his mech’s deteriorated performance. "I know it’s been hard on you, pal, but you’ve got one fight left to go. Don’t disappoint the crowd."

Through luck and skill, he already eked out three marvellous victories. According to past trends, he should have reached the top 25 so far, but only at the bottom of the list. One loss might knock him down enough to miss to incredible opportunity to participate in the final round.

"There’s no way I’m going to miss this chance. Fame, riches and more awaits me." Lovejoy grinned as he daydreamed about all the amazing luxuries he could finally enjoy. "Hopefully my final opponent is a mech in a worse shape than mine."

The match started when the environment finished materializing. It turned out to be a hilly prairie. Vast green fields only interrupted by vision-obstructing hills encompassed Lovejoy’s view. The beauty of the environment masked a deadly undercurrent.

Such a wide open environment with rolling hills and no other obstacles provided ranged mechs with an ideal shooting environment. Lovejoy lowered his mech’s stance so that it wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb too much. As the Sword Dancer climbed its way up a nearby hill, his hastily repaired sensors pinged when it detected a very powerful heat source.

"What. The. Hell." Lovejoy uttered when he saw what made his sensors go mad. "How much energy does it take to keep that thing afloat?!"

What Cadet Lovejoy encountered was the now-infamous Pterodactyl. Outside the arena, much of the crowd’s attention got drawn to the gigantic flying mech.

This strange and extremely powerful beast mech stomped over its opponent through superior range and overwhelming armor ever since it came from the hand of one of the competition’s most popular contestant.

"Looks like Ves Larkinson’s swordman mech is matched up against Carter Gauge’s Pterodactyl."

"Better call the undertaker, because this poor little sword-wielding mech stands no chance against Gauge’s brilliant work."

"Ordinarily you’d think so, but the Pterodactyl suffered a lot of damage back in its third duel. I’m kind of hopeful for the mech called the Sword Dancer to be honest."

"Are you blind? That dinky little medium mech only has a laser pistol! How many times does he have to shoot until the Pterodactyl’s armor get scratched?"

"Anything can happen, baby. Even Gauge can’t work miracles. The Pterodactyl’s bottom armor still has holes."

Ves learned that Gauge met a strong opponent for the third duel. His mech fought hard and finally overpowered the enemy cannoneer at a substantial cost. While the flying mech’s armor could take a lot of damage, it also made it hard to replace if time was short.

Much of the armor on the Pterodactyl had not been treated with the fanciest techniques. This meant that the Sword Dancer’s backup weapon stood a tiny chance of inflicting major damage.

As a pilot thrown into an arena, Lovejoy was not aware of those facts. Regardless, he would never despair just because he encountered an overwhelming opponent. He would have long given up if he shrugged his head at every setback.

"This thing’s big and heavy, so it takes a lot of power to keep it in the air. If I can drag out the match and put my mech into power saving mode, I can drag it from the air." Lovejoy calmly analyzed once he got over his fear.

"It’s slow to fly so I can outrun its range if necessary, but I doubt this aerial mech is helpless in this regard. The designer must be someone really incredible for designing such a marvel."

The Sword Dancer retrieved its trusty laser pistol and started to fire at the flying fortress. The low-powered laser beams hit a wide area around the Pterodactyl. At this distance, many shots flew wide despite the target’s huge size and slow speed. The Sword Dancer wasn’t optimized for marksmanship and the weapon came with too many limitations.

The shots that did hit the Pterodactyl achieved nothing but alert the enemy pilot. The lumbering flight mech turned its avian head towards the Sword Dancer and fired off a massive ballistic shell from its beak.

"This isn’t fair!" Lovejoy yelped as he flung his mech over a hill.

The top of the hill exploded into chunks of soil as the shell detonated with a lot more power than usual. The Sword Dancer had to keep dancing away as a torrent of rapid laser fire erupted from the Pterodactyl’s sides.

Lovejoy frantically kept dodging amid the aerial bombardment dedicated to turning his mech into scrap. Even as he tried to keep his mech operational, he slowly realized something strange.

"This mech’s marksmanship is garbage. The mech might look shiny, but the pilot is no good."

If someone who specialized in ranged weapons was at the cockpit, his Sword Dancer might already be destroyed. Lovejoy saw an opportunity once he realized his situation.

First, he tried the safest option. He shot back at the mech with his laser pistol but only occasionally. He also deactivated most of his sensors and put his mech into a less intensive mode. The state only ensured the engines received ample amounts of power. The rest had to make do with less.

As Lovejoy put his full attention on dodging the shells and lasers, his mech only received minor damage in return. Without any distractions, he became more proficient in predicting his opponent’s aim and move just a fraction of a second before a salvo of laser beams arrived at the spot his mech previously stood.

Sometimes, skill trumped over gear. Lovejoy started to grin. While the enemy mech was a grand feat of engineering, it nevertheless did not suit the enemy pilot.

In truth, the battle damage the Pterodactyl suffered in the last duel still haunted the flying mech. Its head had also been hit, which destroyed its excellent targeting sensors. Other systems also suffered significant damage when its bottom armor got hit. Even with Gauge’s excellent skill, he only restored the Pterodactyl up to eighty percent of its best state.

About five minutes later, the Pterodactyl’s pilot caught onto Lovejoy’s strategy. The flier stopped firing most of its weapons like its finger got stuck to the trigger. The mech slowed down while unleashing its laser beams at a much more measured pace. The pilot also concentrated more on aiming properly, which gave the Sword Dancer a lot more grief.

"This is stupid! How can I get hit more often if that flight mech isn’t firing its laser beams so rapidly?"

Cadet Lovejoy knew he had to change the situation. He injected more power to the Sword Dancer’s engines. As the mech sped up, it tried to increase the range and therefore make it harder to hit.

As a flying heavy mech, the Pterodactyl nevertheless flew faster than most medium mechs. With its flight systems at full capacity, it slowly caught up to the running Sword Dancer and even managed to hit its rear armor with its low-intensity laser barrage.

"Hah, how much power are you burning? Can you keep this up forever?!" Lovejoy taunted at the flying brick that sought to overtake his mech.

There was a good reason why flying mechs never exceeded the medium weight class. The antigrav systems had to expend a lot of energy to keep all of that armor afloat. Getting it to move wasted even more precious energy. This energy consumption rapidly built up the moment the flying mech increased its velocity.

The pilot realized this fact belatedly and stopped accelerating like crazy. Instead, it used its superior lasers to bombard the Sword Dancer from a comfortable range.

"Oh well, it was worth a try." Lovejoy shrugged. While the enemy pilot was not as good as him, he was still a cadet who attended the prestigious Abelard Academy. Cheap tricks didn’t work on him. He had to figure something else than simply running away.

In the standard rulebook of mech duels, the side that played too passively lost by default. The mech that weighed the lightest was burdened with the obligation to seek the initiative. This age-old rule prevented light mechs from running away from their heavier counterparts for the duration of the entire match.

Obviously, mech pilots who favored heavy mechs lobbied hard to get this rule accepted.

"There should be an exception when it comes to flying mechs! This heavy pig with wings is just ridiculous!"

While the heavy mech was in the open, it enjoyed a commanding view of the entire battlefield. No matter where the Sword Dancer tried to hide, it could not avoid getting peppered by lasers. Whenever it tried to hide behind a low hill, the Pterodactyl destroyed it with an explosive shell. The sheer volume of fire caused the mech to get hit a couple of times. Fortunately, the shots were spread out, so no single part received critical damage.

For now at least.

Lovejoy estimated he could keep up his dodging routine for about ten minutes. After that, most of his rear armor would be melted away, leaving his mech vulnerable to a crippling shot.

The few times he shot back with his pistol, he might as well be spitting against a wall. How could he turn his awful situation around and bring down that overweight bird?

Chapter 99: Lift Up Your Sword

Ves clenched his fists as he looked downward at the stage where his Sword Dancer tried to fight against an aerial fortress. Even he was rendered helpless when facing one of Carter Gauge's impossibly advanced aerial mech.

The technology of that time shouldn't be able to support such incredible flight systems. Gauge must have spent quite a bit of time customizing the outdated wings and bring it up to the current generation.

Ordinarily, that might have led to his folly. After all, the more time he spent on the wings, the less time he could allocate on the armor and internals. Looking at the Pterodactyl's performance showed that the flying heavy mech did not lose out that much in other aspects. Its armor was especially resilient even after some hasty repairs.

Even the audience thought the match would end with no suspense and turned away to view more even matchups.

"I’m impressed Cadet Lovejoy hasn’t lost his mech yet." One of the commentators noted when he switched his view. "Out of all of the Pterodactyl’s opponents, he’s already lasted the longest."

"That’s because Lovejoy is paying more attention to dodging than thinking about hitting back. If he’s trying to outlast the Pterodactyl in terms of energy consumption, then he’s fooling himself. The heavy mech is packed with energy cells."

"The only chance he can squeeze a victory out of this narrow road is to get a lucky hit with his low-grade pistol."

With only about an estimated ten minutes left before the laser barrage cut through the medium mech’s armor, the Sword Dancer had very little else to go on. Lovejoy scowled as he pulled out every trick in his bag in order to stay ahead of the suppressive laser fire from above.

From the frequency of the lasers, he judged the heavy mech had plenty of reserves. In contrast, his Sword Dancer had been designed for short-duration high-intensity combat. Even at a lower power setting, it still drained a significant portion of energy over time.

"I have to finish this quickly." Lovejoy concluded with difficulty.

He gave up on saving power and instead routed more of it towards feeding his pistol. The weapon beeped in alarm when it exceeded its recommended safety limit. Lovejoy had to dig through the settings and override all the safeties.

The weapon’s programming estimated that the pistol had about three percent chance of blowing up with each shot. This probability increased in accordance with the amount of heat the weapon accumulated.

"I don’t care if it will blow up in a couple of minutes!" He screamed at his pistol and ruthlessly tore down the last safety holding him back from firing high-powered beams.

The pistol whined audibly as it discharged the accumulated energy in a single eye-watering blast. The beam shot straight into the sky and burned a small gap in the heavy mech’s wings.

That gap represented the first real sign of damage on the Pterodactyl. It gave Lovejoy hope, though the Pterodactyl also started to increase its speed and sway a little bit more. Both sides increased their power consumption in order to put a quick end to the match.

The broadcasters took notice of the increased intensity of their fight and put the battle on the main projection. Alongside the ongoing duel, the faces of the pilots and the mech designers were added to the sides.

"Look at the faces of Larkinson and Lovejoy! They are still clinging to the last shreds of hope. Can their Sword Dancer defeat the Pterodactyl in one of the most uneven clashes ever?"

"Our processors have analyzed the odds of Cadet Lovejoy managing to score a deadly blow. He only has a 2.3 percent chance in the best scenario!"

"It’s safe to say that Carter Gauge has racked up another victory. There’s no way the Sword Dancer’s pistol can get past that heavy mech’s armor."

Despite the long odds, everyone’s attention was glued to the tragic battle. They all hoped the underdog mech could pull off a miracle and put a dent into Carter Gauge’s invincible halo.

Those affiliated with the Carnegie Group had more reason than many to support Gauge’s opponents. Of all the talents from Leemar who faced the dreaded genius, none had high hopes of matching him equally in the field of mech design.

Where would their faces be if they let someone nurtured by a rival partner of the Coalition trample on their talents?

A lot was at stake for this fight. As the Sword Dancer had been matched up against weak opponents, it had a high probability of dropping off the top 25.

As for the Pterodactyl, it had vanquished against a couple of strong opponents so its passage into the top 25 was assured. A fourth victory in this round would cap off Gauge's invincible halo and propel his momentum into an unstoppable tide once he reached the finals.

A few minutes went by as Lovejoy kept dancing with the devil. His pistol glowed with excessive heat to the point of starting to melt its some of its softer furnishings. The Sword Dancer flirted with disaster each time it fired an overcharged laser beam at the gigantic hovering mech.

The Pterodactyl stoically endured the high-powered laser beams. The accuracy of the pistol left something to be desired and the Sword Dancer also had to keep moving which further degraded its aim. Though the heavy mech presented a large target, half of the beams went wide. Those that did hit its surface only melted a couple of widely distributed holes in its heavy armor.

The next shot achieved a different result. By sheer coincidence, the beam impacted near a previously damaged weak point at a spot covered up by flimsier replacement armor. The consecutive hit possessed enough power to melt through the damaged portion and inflict serious damage to the internals underneath.

Just as the Pterodactyl suffered a minor explosion in its underbelly, the Sword Dancer's pistol also succumbed to the abuse. The backup firearm had never been designed to tolerate this much heat, especially when firing at a constant frequency. The weapon exploded, causing heat and shrapnel to engulf the Sword Dancer's outstretched arm.

"No!" Lovejoy yelled as the surface of his mech withstood the rest of the shrapnel. He cared little for his mech’s lost arm or the scratches it received. Now that he lost his only weapon, he had no means of damaging the Pterodactyl. The game was as good as lost.

As for the heavy mech, despite the damage it suffered, the mech was built to take a beating. Heavy mechs never collapsed after suffering a single penetrating hit. Even if it lost some power, the Pterodactyl possessed enough redundancies to keep it afloat.

"What is the Pterodactyl doing? It’s stopped firing. According to our readings, its weapons should have plenty of juice left."

"It’s hovering closer to the Sword Dancer. The pilot wants to gloat over his victory!"

Some of the people in the audience started booing at the unsportsmanlike behavior. Only the most conceited individuals disrespected their opponents this way. The worst thing about the act was that the latter half of the duel had been broadcast to the entire Komodo Star Sector.

On the main projection above, both the pilot and Gauge adopted arrogant expressions. Though joined together through circumstance, they both compliment each other nicely. Gauge wanted to prove his superiority by partnering with a bottom-ranked pilot, while the pilot grew an inflated head due to the excellent mechs he received.

A shadow hung over the motionless Sword Dancer. Lovejoy already gave up on the match and sank down in his simulation pod. He paid little attention to the ongoing match.

Like a caveman staring helplessly at an aircar, the Pterodactyl emphasized its superiority by maintaining its altitude over the helpless swordsman mech. It

even dipped up and down in an exaggerated motion, which attracted further scorn from the audience.

"Finish it already you asshole!"

"You don’t have to take it Lovejoy! Just forfeit the match!"

"You’re despicable Gauge! If it’s up to me, you’d already be tumbling out of Carnegie space!"

Back in his simulation pod, the constant beeping of his mech’s proximity alarm grated Lovejoy’s ears. He stopped wallowing about his impending defeat to see why his mech hadn’t been sent to the graveyard yet.

"What the? Are you teabagging me?"

Lovejoy could accept getting beaten. He could even accept a loss against a much superior mech. After all, this competition revolved around mech designers, so the participating pilots already mentally accepted that they’d face such disparities.

What he couldn’t accept is the enemy pilot rubbing his face with a victory he didn’t deserve. The pilot of the Pterodactyl was certainly someone who certainly ranked far below him. The only reason he won in the first place was due to his massively overpowered mech.

"Even if you’ve won, that’s no reason to diss me!"

A spark of anger ignited amid his overwhelming grief. He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the sky while roaring at the Pterodactyl.

"You can trample my mech, but not my dignity!"

Caught in the fires of his rage, Cadet Lovejoy wanted to spite the Pterodactyl. He impulsively rotated the Sword Dancer and with a mighty heave he threw the sword at the behemoth in the sky.

Despite seldomly having thrown a sword before, the weapon somehow spun in the direction of the Pterodactyl without fail. The sword did not only carry the momentum of the Sword Dancer's spin. It also carried Lovejoy's defiance against his fate.

Back in the waiting room, Ves tracked the spinning sword as it flew up with undaunted purpose towards the heavy mech. He had no hopes for the desperate throw either. A sword flung from this much distance lost a lot of its power on the way up. With the kind of armor the Pterodactyl sported, it would be like a pebble thrown against a suit of armor.

Strangely enough, everyone who took note of the duel still fixed their gazes on the sword. It held a magnetic attraction to them, as if they could sympathize with Lovejoy's frustrations. They also thought it was a pity that his mech stood no chance.

Once the sword neared the Pterodactyl, the pilot instinctively tried to dodge it by moving his mech. Somehow, the mech's belated movements caused it to draw the sword to its damaged and exposed section. The pilot had forgotten all about the hole in his mech's armor and was completely clueless about his mistake.

Both Ves and Lovejoy widened their eyes. The tip of the sword scratched the edge of the molten hole before sinking deep inside the burned and melted internals. The remainder of its force allowed the blade to cut through many layers of weakened components before it finally reached a critical cable attached to the power reactor.

A massive machine like the Pterodactyl consumed a lot of energy even at rest. The interrupted cable along with the other damage the heavy mech had already suffered caused the spot to be engulfed in another localized explosion.

While ordinarily this explosion should not be any cause for concern, the safeties that were supposed to be in place had already been destroyed. The explosion caused a lot of damage to other components, which started up a cascade of errors.

The Pterodactyl suddenly lost seventy percent of its power. That was not enough to keep the mech in the air. The flight system whined as it tried to keep the mech at a constant altitude, to no avail.

The pilot woke up to the sudden crisis and frantically tried to redirect more power to the flight systems. Due to the damage his mech had already suffered, he found no alternative paths.

"What kind of piece of shit mech only has this many paths?!" He cussed, completely forgetting his earlier flaunting of his mech.

While an ordinary heavy mechs possessed a lot more redundancies, Gauge only received six hours of design time. He could not spare much energy in adding redundancies to his mech’s internals when he had to invest most of his time in improving the flight systems.

Smoke trailed the Pterodactyl as it descended to the ground in a soft landing. The wings possessed sufficient enough power to avoid a crash landing. That did not help the Pterodactyl much when the mech had been designed solely for aerial combat. It did not even possess legs, which turned it into a sitting duck on the ground.

Lovejoy’s eyes gleamed. Ignoring his mech’s amputated arm and weaponless state, he drove his mech forward and approached the Pterodactyl just as it skid along the grass. The pilot of the heavy mech noted the danger and rerouted power from the flight systems to the laser mounts. A couple of weak beams started to pepper the Sword Dancer.

"As if those weakened lasers can save you!" Lovejoy laughed as the Sword Dancer took the lasers head-on, causing it to suffer some light damage in the process. The medium mech ignored the mosquito bites and jumped on top of the grounded Pterodactyl.

The entire audience stood still. Even the commentators had no words to say.

As a mech designed to bombard the ground from above, the Pterodactyl was not meant to attack any targets that landed on its back. When the side-mounted laser turrets turned around to face the assailant, the Sword Dancer simply grabbed the barrels of the lasers and snapped them off one by one. They only managed to unleash a dozen ineffectual beams before their mounts got wrecked.

Even the majestic heavy mech’s beak-mounted cannon posed no threat to the Sword Dancer. Its range of motion only allowed the beak to swivel sideways. Just to be sure, Lovejoy stomped his mech’s foot repeatedly on the head until its neck collapsed.

The Pterodactyl lost all of its weapons. The sudden reversal caught everyone by surprise.

"Are my eyes deceiving me?" A male commentator befuddled asked. "Did Gauge’s mech got strung like a duck?"

"I don’t think anyone believed this has happened. A thrown sword changed destiny. The undefeated has tasted defeat."

"Gauge must be stewing in anger right now. Look at his awful face!"

Lovejoy cared nothing for the commentary even if he could hear it. Somehow, he snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, so he tried to cling to it as tightly as possible. He resolved not to make the same mistake as his opponent and started to dig into the Pterodactyl.

Without a weapon and only one arm intact, the Sword Dancer could not inflict much damage to the grounded mech. It had to kick aside a loosened plate and dig into the internals with brute force.

After a couple of minutes of helplessly sitting around, the pilot finally bowed down. He could not take the humiliation and exited the match by forfeiting.

Ves and Lovejoy won their fourth duel after an arduous match. Their total victories in the second round propelled them to the single digits in the top 25. Their last victory especially gave them a lot of points. It was a no-brainer for them to move on to the finals.

"Thank you Lovejoy. You really saved my skin." Ves said with a smile. He really dodged a bullet there. He could not bear to think what he'd do if he narrowly missed the top 25.

Chapter 100: Finals

The next day, before the preshow began, an executive from the Carnegie Group took to the stage. He adopted a solemn face as he addressed the crowd that just arrived.

"We have an announcement to make. Cadet Freeman who pilots the mechs on behalf of Carter Gauge has been found dead in his dorm. Our investigators have ruled the cause of his death to be self-hanging. There are no signs that others are involved."

Everyone who listened to his words was stunned. Ves more so than others due to his indirect involvement to this incident. He didn't know his name, but Freeman was the pilot of the Pterodactyl that crashed and burned at the moment of its victory. Cadet Lovejoy achieved a miracle when he triumphed over a hopeless situation.

Had Gauge quietly eliminated Freeman? Ves did not believe a cadet could commit suicide through a method as slow as hanging. These cadets should all

be strictly monitored. Security bots should also be patrolling around their dorms, ready to respond in seconds if a disturbance occurred.

Ves felt a chill when he considered that Gauge might not limit his rage to his idiotic pilot. After all, the mech that handed out his very public humiliation was designed by Ves and piloted by Lovejoy.

"We at Leemar are aware that our pilots and designers are put under an immense amount of pressure. Some believe that we should coddle them more. I disagree. Our young men might not have experienced much of what life has to offer, but they must learn to deal with adversity. Risk and reward goes hand in hand. Those who aim to win must always prepare to lose. Those who cannot endure these kinds of setbacks have no place to compete with the best."

Ves did not expect such harsh words after the death of a fellow contestant. He turned his head and noted that the graduates from Leemar showed no discontent. They fully agreed with this executive’s views. His heart chilled a little further.

"Due to the unfortunate loss of his mech pilot, Carter Gauge has lost his qualifications to continue competing. He has agreed to withdraw from the Leemar Open Competition. We express our apologies for the irregularities. The finals will proceed with twenty-four pairs of pilots and designers."

It took some time, but the crowd quickly forgot about Freeman’s apparent suicide. The festive music and impressive performances by the artists hired by Leemar did much to dispel the inauspicious cloud. Only Ves remained unmoved. He could add another name to his list of enemies.

Having successfully wiped away the stain, the event progressed to its third and final round.

"In the first round, we've tested our mech designers on their speed and timing. In the second round, we've pushed them on their endurance and their ability to set priorities. Now, in this final round, twenty-four of our best designers will now compete against each other with nothing more than pure design skill."

A projection of three QuickForge systems in a row appeared in front. A generic designer approached one of the machines and started to design a mech. Each of his actions on one machine was duplicated on the other machines. In essence, the designer was building three mechs at a time.

"With our ingenious QuickForge system, a mech designer is able to mirror their actions over as much machines as we choose. Each of our mech designers will produce three copies out of a single design, which provides their pilots enough identical mechs to reach the finals."

The projection of the QuickForge systems disappeared. A tournament bracket appeared into place. From twenty-four to twelve, from twelve to six, from six to three.

"Through a single elimination tournament, our twenty-four contestants will be whittled down to three. Their assigned pilots will be piloting a fresh identical match for every duel in order to keep things equal. Those who win their duels have more chances to display their mechs, and thus gain more opportunities to attract the attention of the masters. Naturally, the final three will also win a special prize."

In practice, the masters always apprenticed the mech designers who made it to the final three. They possessed enough skill, maturity and luck to make good seeds.

The others also stood a chance. It wasn't uncommon for a master to apprentice someone who lost the first duel due to the qualities they showed in the previous rounds.

As for the special prize, it different from year to year, but it was always a pleasant surprise. The prizes generally ranged from goodies such as production licenses, lots of cols, or even some highly prized shares for one of the Carnegie Group’s primary enterprises.

"Our contestants have ten hours to design their mechs. This is more than enough time for them to unleash their strengths. Those who have made it this far have already proven their skills among the riff raff. Now we shall see whether they have what it takes to reach the top."

Ves looked at the tournament bracket but failed to recognize his first opponent. The mech designer was a graduate from Leemar called Lachlan Kurbanov, and his paired pilot was a woman named Lisa Kwong. Due to his high ranking in the second round, his first opponent should be someone weaker on paper.

"Who am I kidding." Ves shook his head, well aware of the circumstances that allowed him to earn such a high ranking. "I only scraped by the previous round due to luck."

He did not underestimate his opponents. Lachlan and Lisa painstakingly fought their way to the final round, beating many highly skilled rivals in their way. Lachlan must be a great mech designer on the same level as Barakovski.

There were no tricks this time. Ves approached his assigned QuickForge systems and picked the middle one to work with. He looked around, only to see his view blocked by privacy screens. He could not spy on his opponents and adjust his design according to circumstance.

He shook away irrelevant thoughts and focused on the issue at hand. "Now what kind of mech shall I design?"

Should he reprise the Sword Dancer design and improve on it? The idea had merit. He already spent quite a few hours refining the design in the previous round, and though he made it in haste, the design had proven itself on the battlefield. His head already swirled with a few adjustments to address the Sword Dancer’s shortcomings.

"Still, will I be able to impress the masters if I recycle an existing design?"

The System gave him a mission. His ultimate objective was to become an apprentice to a Master Mech Designer. He had already shown off the Sword Dancer. In order to provide the masters with a better idea of his work, he should create something more unique.

"The masters don’t want to take on a lazy apprentice. I have to show some effort on my end if I wish to make myself attractive." Ves considered after a moment of thought.

A mech designer who always cut corners had limited potential compared to one that always worked hard to improve himself. Though he could not read the minds of the five masters watching from afar, he believed they wanted to pick someone with promise.

"Alright, then let’s make a new mech."

First, Ves considered the performance of the Sword Dancer in the previous round. It turned out that Cadet Lovejoy could not show off its strengths due to the nature of its opponents. The last duel against the Pterodactyl showed that Ves had to come up with a means to diminish the advantage of range.

"Should I design an aerial mech or give my mech a better ranged weapon?"

He did not specialize in flight systems. Though he knew enough to implement the standard flight systems provided by the QuickForge’s catalog, he could not make any meaningful improvements to them. Gauge’s Pterodactyl already showed how extreme a proficient designer could push a flight system.

On the other hand, adding a ranged weapon did not conform to the requirements of a swordsman mech. Some people expressed very extreme opinions about how swordsmen mechs should never carry a firearm, not even a dinky backup pistol. In addition, it wasn't like he specialized in weapons tech either.

Ves was torn between the two. He considered what his pilot preferred.

"Adding a flight system will add to the bulk of the mech, but it will also give it more options. Cadet Lovejoy only needs a tool to close the gap. The flight system is not the most important part of the mech."

He decided to add a slim flight system to a medium mech frame. It would not increase the top speed of the mech nor turn it into an aerial acrobat. It should give his mech enough tools to respond to aerial threats even without a pistol.

Now that he determined the basic features of his mech, Ves filled in the gaps by letting his imagination free reign. He sunk into his mind and sought to match a fitting purpose to his mech in order to unleash its X-Factor.

Again, while his rivals already started to work on their designs, Ves still worked on generating a mental picture. The strange disparity caught the attention of the crowd. What in the galaxy was he doing?

Ves ignored such considerations and started to think back on the Sword Dancer's final moments. Rage, humiliation and helplessness. Cadet Lovejoy lacked a means to fight back against his opponent's scorn. His mind also flickered to the final fate of the pilot who ruined Gauge's mech.

"My next mech will be an Executioner. It is not a demon or an angel. It cuts anything in its way no matter how unreachable the target. Its sword is both its tool and its badge of office. It executes only mechs, not people. Its sword shall never cut what is not meant to be cut."

With a strong intent in mind, Ves opened his eyes and engaged the QuickForge system. He opened the extensive catalog and picked a slew of parts without caring too much about the details. He let his intent and intuition decide which parts to choose.

He started with a heavy, two-handed sword ideal for chopping off heads as well as other limbs. To accommodate the sword, he selected a firmer torso, strengthened arms and somewhat solid legs to provide a powerful platform.

To power his Executioner, he picked a high-performance power reactor and a medium-intensity engine model. A more powerful engine added a little bit too much weight, so Ves skipped the most robust models.

His choices so far meant that his mech enjoyed sufficient mobility despite having heavier limbs. While it lost much of the agility that defined the Sword Dancer, it made up for it in raw power.

As for the flight system, it should first and foremost avoid hindering Lovejoy’s swordplay as best as possible. Due to his lack of proficiency in flight systems, Ves could only pick a default compact model from the catalog.

It consisted of two thick tubes with an unfolding wingspan on each. While it like a pair of deformed trees, it nonetheless provided a decent amount of thrust for the amount of space it took. The only major downside to this system was that it wasted a lot of energy.

"Since my mech isn’t using any energy weapons, I can spare the energy expenditure." Ves considered and went ahead with his choice.

After confirming his selection of components, he started putting it all together. He started with integrating the flight system to the back of the torso. Fortunately, the torso model he chose possessed a standardized attachment system that allowed for easier attachment of flight systems.

While he could complete the merging of the two components fairly quickly, Ves was not content with the basic layout. He modified the attachment point by strengthening the connection and adding a couple more redundant power lines to the flight system. He did not wish to encounter the same situation the Pterodactyl suffered when it failed to find any means to transfer power to its flight systems.

After spending two hours on integrating the flight systems properly, Ves turned to the rest. Installing the power reactor and engines provided no problems. He took a little more care with the limbs due to his mech's reliance on momentum and mechanical power to deliver damage. He specifically selected thicker limbs in order to accomodate a more powerful artificial muscle layout.

Ves spent an extravagant amount of time on making sure the internals were sound. That left him with three more hours. He painstakingly spent an entire hour on optimizing his Executioner's armor scheme. He made it more robust and added in a lot of harder edges. It made his mech look more menacing.

He filled the rest of his time with producing compressed armor. While he wished he had access to better methods and more sophisticated formulas, beggars couldn't be choosers.