

### Chapter 26: Objective

Now that Melinda got out of the high of super-realistic combat, she remembered why she stepped into the simulator in the first place.

"This mech... the specs aren't bad. It's a pity about the armor. It doesn't hold up in a large melee. The shield's also far too heavy for the scant amount of protection its offering."

Still, when she saw how few gold she had to spent to repair her mech and replace her shield, she smiled. The total amount she lost paled in comparison to the amount of gold she earned from performing well in that last match. She even received the coveted MVP award. The game really went all-out in retaining its older customer base with these tricks.

Janet whistled her appreciation as she read the score list. "Damn Melly, you went to town on them. You've personally disabled four mechs."

"Yeah and pretty much wrecked my entire mech in the process. At least I won't cry about the repair bill."

"You wanna go for another match?"

"Yeah. I need to get familiar with this mech. My little cousin did a good job with this machine."

"That's for sure. If your new mech is fully equipped with the HRF, then he has my respect. Half the red team fired potshots at you and you still made it through the end. I didn't know you were so gutsy for leading the charge."

"I got caught up in the moment, I guess."

She didn't know what made her enjoy piloting the Marc Antony so much. For a 5-star mech, its specs were mediocre and it clearly tried to do too many things at once. Yet when she hopped into its cockpit, she felt as if she embodied a

war god ready to wipe out heretics. Its dark paint scheme and blazing red shield brought out the urge to go on the offensive.

"Janet, do you think the game's become more realistic? I hardly noticed I was playing in a simulator."

"Duh, that's because you're playing with the Planetary Guard's best simulator pods. They simulate movement and impacts with ship-grade artificial gravity."

"Hmm, maybe that was it. The simulator pods from the game center don't go that far in providing the most realistic experience."

The simulation pods of the Guard might not be the best in the galaxy, but they still provided excellent training opportunities.

The two queued together in another Wartorn Instance. This one was the map of the day, a 200v200 featuring a massive battleground with multiple objectives to capture or destroy. Matches could last up to two hours if both sides were evenly matched.

The matchmaking took a few minutes to gather enough players. Once it finished matching players, their team entered another lobby. This time Melinda ignored the posturing and smack talk between her more dominant team members. Trying to assert leadership of a group of 50 pilots was barely doable, but it almost couldn't be done with 200 unless you were famous.

"Let's stay on the defensive this time. I want this mech to last a little longer this time."

"How about the forward depot? We can refill our ammo and energy cells there if we need any, which you sorely do if I recall your mech's energy expenditure."

As the match started, the mass of mechs left the giant hangar and entered an urban combat environment. Modeled after an old Terran historically preserved

city, most of the structures were only a couple of stories high. Enough to cover mechs at ground level, but not enough to provide significant protection if enemies shot at them from the air.

All 200 mechs in their team split up as they attended to their chosen objectives. Some players intended to assault a remote location, while others planned to defend a spot to the last mech. Melinda and Janet were joined by a gaggle of random mechs as they reached a small forward depot that represented one of the secondary objectives in the game.

"Our main win condition is to conquer the city hall, while the enemy team has to take over our military HQ."

The asymmetric conditions forced the two teams to adopt different strategies. The military HQ offered better repair and resupply, while the city hall possessed better active defenses. It encouraged the blue team to attack and the red team to defend. However, if the red team just kept turtling behind their walls, they'd run out of ammunition, energy cells and other resources. So the fight for the secondary objectives prevailed at the start of the match.

When they reached the bunker-like depot, the group of mechs spread out to form an effective defense in each direction. They needed no discussion to decide where they'd be best employed. Janet brought her cannon mech to a reinforced firing position just within the bunker. She had a great forward view while being completely protected from aerial attacks.

The first sounds of combat already rang out further in the distance. Scouts from both teams encountered each other, leading to limited skirmishes. A distressed light mech with a missing head suddenly barged the bunker's perimeter. Only its IFF or identification system prevented it from being blasted to pieces.

"They're coming! Eight mechs! Mediums and lights!"

The light mech disappeared before providing greater detail. Seeing that no heavy mech had joined their defense, likely due to the depot being situated too far forward, Melinda readied her shield and held her other arm ready to fire laser blasts.

The missiles came first. An arcing volley of missiles flew from a couple of blocks away and splashed against the surface of the depot, damaging its reinforced exterior. The second volley that came after got shot down by their team's anti-air. Subsequent missiles kept getting intercepted.

While half of their team preoccupied themselves in shooting down the missiles, a couple of townhouses split into pieces as a group of five melee mechs burst through. Their guns blazed as they focused their firepower on a rifleman. The structure it hid behind got smashed to pieces, allowing the enemy mechs a clear line of fire to heavily damage the rifleman.

Melinda kept her Marc Antony in the open, trying to offer an alternative target to the attackers. Unfortunately, they played it smart, keeping their attention focused on the more vulnerable ranged mechs.

"Hey! Over here buddy!" She indignantly called, and charged towards their position while firing half her missile complement. The projectiles successfully diverted the attention of one of the medium strikers, who activated its head-mounted rapid-fire machine guns to shoot down the missiles one by one. Nevertheless, Melinda made it through halfway by that time and her wrist laser kept pelting the striker, dealing moderate but sporadic damage due to the spread of her shots.

The striker retaliated with a barrage of shotgun fire, the pellets stripping the front layers of her shield. Nevertheless her shield held up against the attacks which could easily shred a light mech to pieces.

Melinda stopped firing her lasers. Instead, she raised the mace in her mech's grip and prepared to smash it down against the opposing mech's face. The striker responded by activating a wicked looking bayonet on his shotgun. As her mace came down, the striker dodged the telegraphed attack and thrust with its bayonet.

Grinning, Melinda rotated the torso of her mech, causing her unbalanced mech to haul its shield in an angle that neatly deflected the bayonet attack in time. She then leaned her mech's entire weight against the shield, pushing the striker off-balance with its weapon extended. A kick caused the shotgun to fly away, while the mace came around to smack viciously against the striker's face, crushing half its head. A few further whacks on the disoriented mech caused its cockpit to cave in, squishing the pilot into meat paste.

Her other teammates had the attackers well in hand by now. Melinda and another fellow striker kept the four remaining mechs to stall, leaving them vulnerable to medium and long-ranged fire from Janet and her fellow mechs. The opponents left another fallen mech behind before fleeing back to their lines.

The reprieve bought some time for them to get a grip on how their team fared in other locations.

"Forward depot is secure. Fended off a small raid."

"The fucking communications center is heavily entrenched. We ain't gonna capture a thing with a squad of heavies ready to rain missiles and cannon shells down on us."

"We were beaten back at the evacuation shelter. They took complete control of the civilians there. They're loading hostages. I can't make out which kind."

"The red team is up to something. If they're defending the satellites while hauling hostages, then they must be calling in reinforcements."

"Shit! We gotta stop them before they call in something nasty!"

"Yeah go ahead. Unless we divert at least 50 mechs to the comm center, we're not going to dislodge them from their cozy position."

"Well they're going to win if we're sitting around!"

"Relax. They've diverted so many mechs that the power plant is less secure. Once we take it over, we can pull the plug and say goodbye to all of their fixed defenses."

Melinda nodded as she understood why there hadn't been a second wave of attackers. She felt agitated at the lack of heads to bash in. Her mech wasn't made to sit around idly. "Janet, let's resupply and go."

Most of the mechs present at the forward depot used its ample supplies to refill their energy cells and ammunition. If an enemy came to attack, they'd be highly vulnerable. Luckily, no one came, and Melinda managed to refill her missile launchers and a couple of spent energy cells.

They decided to approach the communications satellites, which was currently under sporadic assault by their fellow team members. Missiles and other ordnance shot at the massive structures. However, most of the physical projectiles got shot down, while the lasers only caused surface burns against the surprisingly resilient antennas.

"It's useless trying to melt those antennas. They're built to last against a siege." One experienced pilot spoke over the comm. "If we want to deny them the comms, we've got to destroy the control centers or backup power generators."

"We need to get close somehow. It's too risky to go in by air or at ground level. Is there an underground access point on this map?"

"There are, but our enemies have mechs holed up behind a lot of barricades. It's going to be hell pushing through any of the tunnels."

"We've got no choice." Melinda said, already having a bad feeling about this situation. "Unless you want to keep dicking around trying to melt all the antennas with your lasers, we've got to do something to disrupt whatever they're up to. Let's meet up to the north access point."

Melinda left Janet behind. Her cannons wouldn't be useful in the tight confines of the underground. While Janet and her cannonneer stayed behind in order to provide supporting fire, Melinda gathered a ragtag bunch of mechs with the same thing in mind and entered the tunnel to the north of the comm center.

The dark environment only lit up with red emergency lights, too dim to provide effective lighting. Melinda and the dozen other mechs switched their sensor mode from optical to whatever night or dark vision they possessed.

Their scout went ahead at a faster but less noisy stride, disappearing for several minutes before sending back his observations. "Six light and medium mechs spotted at the juncture ahead. It's a warning post. They're going to make a run for it as soon as we appear."

"We're not built for stealth." A rifleman noted. "Let's focus on storming half of them while letting the rest go. It's gonna suck if they get off a warning, but I don't think we have any better solutions."

"Sounds alright to me."

"Ok."

"Let me go in front." Melinda insisted despite the presence of several light mechs in their midst. "I might not be as fast, but I'm the only one with a big-ass shield."

"Fine by us." One of the light mech pilots spoke. "You might stand a decent chance surviving their booby traps if they set up any."

With a short deployment plan set up, they barged through the tunnels and into a small open storage area. A few empty containers stood in the way between them and the startled enemy mechs. Some had evidently been playing cards or something, as they responded to the intrusion half a second slower than normal.

Keeping her shield in front, Melinda used her other arm to blast a few lasers at a missile-carrying mech. She managed to score a couple of hits at the same place, melting one of its launchers. Sporadic fire from her teammates caused the launcher module to take further damage, until a small shell caused the entire thing to detonate all of its missiles. The massive chain of explosions wrecked the missileer and disrupted the enemy's formation.

A few of the nimbler mechs dodged the incoming fire and successfully slipped away. However, the same couldn't be said for the medium mechs. Slower and easier to hit, Melinda's allies shot at their legs to disrupt their posture and prevent them from gaining speed. They eventually reached the outnumbered enemies.

Though everyone used their night vision, the eerie red glow of the Marc Antony's eyes gave the dark mech a grim facade. The vapor crest at the top of its head caused the medium mech in front of her to quail. Nevertheless, the pilot was a Platinum Leaguer, and he wasn't resigned to death. The enemy mech fired off an entire salvo of short-ranged missiles that blew back the Marc Antony, yet still the shield held though with half of its layers gone.

"You're going to pay for that!" She yelled and dove back in to bash the mech into a battered pile of components.

The other mechs finished off the remaining enemies. "Let's move on."



As they reached the end of the tunnel, they met with a stream of cannon fire. One of Melinda's teammates got hit in the leg, severely damaging his mech's mobility. "Shit! My left leg's a goner!"

"Make way!" Melinda yelled and surged at the front to hold her shield over the fallen mech. "Someone drag his ass behind cover."

"What do we do now? We haven't got enough firepower to contend against their cannons."

"Did you forget our objective? Push through no matter the cost!"

Without waiting for a reply, Melinda stepped forward and bravely took the lead. The other mechs hesitated before deciding that they didn't have another opportunity. They followed with gusto. Those with ranged weapons fired while on the run, causing very little damage to the cannonneers down the tunnel but it did force them to keep their heads behind cover.

As Melinda kept up her run, her mech continued to get hammered by shock waves as its shield received constant cannon impacts. It was tough for her to bull through the sheer amount of kinetic energy thrown in her way, but the adverse circumstances only made her heart pump faster.

"That's it. Keep firing on me. My mech can take the punishment."

The shield started to lose its square shape as the ends got shot off. Some of the shells even exploded against her armor, causing several cracks. Still, she successfully closed the distance before the cannons could do worse. With her halved shield, she bashed one enemy mech aside while her mace pounded against the cannon of another enemy, disabling the weapon.

Her opponent retaliated by throwing the useless weapon towards her, causing her to falter in her follow-up. The mech used the gap unsheathe the sword behind its back. By the time the sword slashed down at her, Melinda managed

to regain enough balance to block the strike with her shield, causing it to split apart.

Angry at the loss of her shield, she fired a couple of quick laser blasts before pouncing aggressively with her mace. The lasers distracted the mech long enough for her mace to disable the enemy mech's sword arm. Her subsequent strikes successfully wrecked its four limbs.

The narrow confines and the barricades made it difficult for both sides to see how the battle progressed. Nevertheless, Melinda felt confident her team had the upper hand. She conveniently scavenged her fallen opponent's sword before hunting her next victim.

That was until a salvo of long-ranged missiles streaked from the dark. Melinda hastily jumped back and picked the recently disabled mech. Its IFF systems was still operating, so most of the missiles turned at the last second to acquire other targets or explode against the walls of the tunnel. She dropped the half-dead mech once the missiles had been spent.

"That was a neat trick." A surprisingly young voice echoed from the tunnel. "But I'm afraid that's where your luck will end."

The darkness made way for a brightly colored mech. Its white exterior showed no marks, and even its shield looked pristine. The tall and majestic-looking mech had held back so far, keeping it and a small squad holed up at the exit to the surface.

"Well shit." Melinda said, noting how her shield was gone and her armor looked cracked and scorched. "You're running the stock model?"

"Indeed I am." The pilot replied conceitedly. "I have no tricks. I find the original to be a pleasure to pilot, even in reality. You could say that I'm a fan. Just so you know, there's one thing I hate."

"And that is?" Melinda idly asked as she grimly readied herself for perhaps the toughest fight with her new mech.

"I hate impostors."

The sparkling white Caesar Augustus thundered forward with its kite shield in front and its other arm blasting an even more powerful salvo of lasers.

Melinda growled as she side-stepped the assault and retaliated with firing the cannons on both her wrists. She used her superior mobility and all the piloting skill she possessed to keep the damage to a minimum.

"I'm not afraid of you. Bring it on!"