

Chapter 24: Melinda

Melinda Larkinson had a busy life. As a junior member of the Bentheim Planetary Guard, she spent most of the time on patrols or back at base learning the ropes. As she was determined to reach the pinnacle of mech piloting, she continually sharpened her skills by sorting out troublemakers and sparring against her fellow guardsmen.

A great number of business flowed through Bentheim, the economic 'port' of the Bright Republic. Due to a complex system of spatial distortions, spaceships had an easier time navigating towards Bentheim. This especially facilitated ultra-long-ranged FTL or faster-than-light travel. Put simply, a ship can travel directly towards Bentheim without making any stops in between in order to reorient themselves and cycle the FTL drive.

Humanity actually stole the FTL technology they use today from a long-extermiated alien race. Through hundreds of years of study and refinement, they have already pushed their knowledge base on the tech to its limits. Nowadays, to go from one end of human space to the other only required a couple of years of non-stop travel. The existence of FTL-friendly ports formed the basis that made this swift travel possible.

Bentheim therefore formed the economic heart that kept the Bright Republic prosperous. It also invited greedy eyes, such as their ever-present rival the Vesia Kingdom. Not content with their own port system, they always hungered to invade the Bright Republic's territory and snatch the strategic planet away for themselves. Some of trouble the Bentheim Planetary Guard had to handle could be traced to the covert actions of the Vesians.

Just the last month alone Melinda had to respond to several emergencies. One case was a lone wolf who took an illicit drug and went on a rampage with his heavy mech. Another case involved a family who fell into ruin in the past

returning from the dead and taking on one of Bentheim's established family businesses. Then there were always the ever-present pirates skulking in the outskirts, ready to snap up a lightly defended transport convoy.

Though only in the service for four years, the amount of petty and not-so-petty conflicts she had to resolve numbered in the hundreds. While not a genuine substitute to the high intensity battles of a full-scale war, Melinda was able to increase her experience and sharpen her rough initially rough piloting skills.

Right now, Melinda finished her shift for the day. She deposited her mech at the hanger, waved the technicians goodbye, and left for the Guard's exclusive training center.

"Hey Melly." A fellow junior Guard pilot sidled up to Melinda. "What's up? I can see the smile in your eyes a light-year away. Got a date or something?"

Melinda huffed. "I wish Janet. Nah, I nagged my uncle for a few thousand credits and pried it out of his hands."

"Wow. And he let you do that? Must be nice to be a Larkinson." Janet held out her hand as if she was a crippled grandmother. "Spare some alms for a poor commoner?"

"Ouch!" Janet received a playful punch in return.

"Scram! I already have something in mind."

Melinda entered the training center with a curious Janet trailing after her. They skipped past the physical exercise rooms and entered the virtual simulation area.

"Oh, are you going to spar against someone again?"

"Not really." Melinda grinned. She picked a random simulator pod and hopped right inside. "I'm going to play a game."

"Iron Spirit? Haha, it's been a long time since I last logged in. I must have dropped down to the bottom of the Platinum League by now." Janet laughed with faint contempt. After all, playing a game never beat the real deal.

Shaking her head, Melinda was about to close the pod. "I'm not logging into the game just to fool around. Grab a pod and log into the game. Let's add each other to our friend lists. I'll show you what I'm about in-game."

Shrugging, Janet hopped into a pod, curious what Melinda wanted to do with a large bunch of credits. "Don't tell me she wants to buy a virtual mech? Is she crazy? If she wants to gain experience with advanced mechs, there's plenty of other programs installed in the simulators."

After the two young women logged into the game, they searched for their counterpart and added each other to their lists. Janet playfully hugged Melinda's virtual body. "I'm here now! Please tell me what you're up to now."

"We'll have to take a visit to the market for that."

They both entered the market, encountering a bustle of virtual avatars and computer-controlled personnel. Instead of approaching one of the many public access terminals to call up a shopping interface, Melinda led her colleague through the narrow streets of the simulated market city. She took a sharp turn into an alley and entered a small, rickety shop with a wooden door that almost seemed to fall apart. The interior hosted no furniture and almost appeared abandoned if not for the glowing blue ball floating in the room.

"Welcome to Chasing Clouds Mech Shop. How may I assist you, customers?" The default robotic shopkeeper asked the pair.

"Wow Mel, are you sure you want to buy something from this shifty store? I don't think the owner even bothered investing a single penny in this store."

Melinda just bumped Janet onto the head. "This store's owned by my cousin, dweeb. He's a little short on cash so he can't waste it on a frivolous expenditure like a virtual shop."

Most sales happened through the public terminals or from a mech pilot's exclusive room. The lively city and its many ancient-looking storefronts were only recent additions to the game. The BSBH Corporation wanted to increase Iron Spirit's appeal by facilitating social interactions.

"The only reason why I brought you here is so you can take a closer look at the Mech my cousin designed."

"Oh? This is the first time I heard of you having a cousin who works as a mech designer. Is it an original design?"

"How can it be an original design." Melinda shook her head as she navigated the menu provided by the shopkeeper. "It's only a variant, but it's also quite impressive."

With a final press of her finger, the dark and empty shop seemed to fade away into an endless starry sight. A mech gradually materialized in front of the two women. The Marc Antony revealed its dark and menacing visage to the two women for the first time.

"This..."

"My cousin calls it the Marc Antony. It's a cheaper variant of the Caesar Augustus. Impressive, huh?"

"Wow. And you say it's cheap? It looks just as grand as the original Caesar Augustus, just with a different flavor."

The dark armor plates, the blood-red shield with its lightning bolts and eagle wings, the various red and bronze accents, they all contributed to an image of unbridled blood lust and aggression.

"What's that cool looking thing at the top?" Janet curiously asked as she spotted the strange helmet crest and the red vapor spouting quietly from the slit at the top.

"Beats me. My cousin used the Festive Cloud Generator that's famous on his home planet to achieve this effect."

"Haha, he actually used a party trick on such a serious mech." Janet laughed, though she inwardly admitted that it added very nicely to the mech's flamboyant flair. "So what's its tier and how much for one?"

"It's a middling tier 5 mech, but it costs just 25,000 credits."

"Sounds like a good deal to me." Janet nodded. Despite not having logging in for a year, she still retained much of her knowledge of the game, including the going prices of virtual mechs. "If it's as good as the Caesar Augustus, then it's a steal."

Melinda swiped her hand, removing the illusion and returning the pair back to the shop. She went through with the purchase. "How can my cousin throw away money like that? He made a lot of changes, but the most important one is he replaced the stock armor with the 1004-HRF."

"The fucking HRF? That shitty armor the bean counters at the office loves so much? Wow, your cousin should win an award for using such a cheap material to make such a cool looking mech. No wonder it carries such a huge shield."

Once Melinda finished her purchase, the pair exited the store and they walked back to the central plaza where they could transfer to different areas.

"Give me 15 minutes so I can get the hang of my new mech. Let's head into a match after that, okay?"

"Sure, Melly. I need to go through my mech stable and make sure my mechs are still configured right. I haven't played in ages, after all. What game mode do you want to queue up for? I vote for the 2v2 Arena."

Melinda shook her head. "I won't be able to play the Marc Antony to its fullest potential in an arena match. Let's queue up for the Wartorn Instances."

"Damn, sister, so you wanna jump straight into it. I'll go prepare a long-ranged support mech for you then, because you'll need the cover."

As Janet left to sort out her neglected game account, Melinda entered her mech stable and walked to the stall where her new purchase awaited her entry. The dark mech emanated an invisible aura even as it silently stood inert.

"It feels as if I'm being sucked into hell." Melinda shivered a little, unnerved that a mech that hadn't even started up give out so much intensity even if she couldn't describe what she felt. "It's as if this mech is not a machine but a god."

Even as she closed the distance, the unease increased. She activated a lift to bring her up the cockpit that opened up from the chest. Like entering the belly of a beast, she slipped inside and strapped herself on the chair.

"It's just a mech and not a monster, so why am I being so melodramatic?"

She calmed herself down and booted up the mech. It came to life with a flicker, causing its golden eyes to shine like twin suns as various systems engaged their checks. After all the systems reported no errors, Melinda finally gained full control over the mech. It blew away the constant unease Melinda felt before. It was as if it was all an illusion.

"Okay now, I only have a few minutes to get used to its quirks."

Melinda dove into controlling her mech with gusto. After using the neural interface to connect with her mech, she felt as if she had become a giant filled with strength. The neural interface worked great, with no lingering issues unlike with older, second-hand interfaces.

The Marc Antony's shield overburdened her shield arm, throwing her mech out of balance. She carefully trod then jogged then sprinted with her mech, getting familiar with the angled posture required to move with her tower shield held in front. She then repeated the same motions only without the shield, just to see how much her speed had been affected.

The fifteen minutes came and went in a flash. Janet opened up a private conversation with Melinda. "Come on Melly, show me what you can do with that beast."

"Alright. I'm kind of curious as well if my cousin's work can stand up to a real fight."

The both of them paired up and entered matchmaking for one of Iron Spirit's larger game mode, the Wartorn Instances. It simulated real battlefield circumstances, as most mech battles between the smaller human states employed at least a few dozen mechs. Wartorn Instances usually played out as a team deathmatch mode with an impressive amount of players on each team, ranging from the standard 50v50 to a gigantic 1000v1000 during special events.

Since Melinda wanted to drop into combat immediately, she selected the fastest 50v50 mode. Only a couple of minutes were required for Iron Spirit to match them up with 98 other Platinum League players around the galaxy.

Iron Spirit customarily limited the matchmaking for Bronze League to a single planet or star system. Only until a player reached Silver, they'd be able to play

with mech pilots from many light-years away, though in the lower leagues most of their teammates and opponents came from the same star sector.

Naturally, as career pilots, Melinda and Janet easily achieved their Platinum ranks, and had the qualifications to play in a league filled with veterans, e-sports athletes and geniuses.

As the large map started to load, the fifty players of team blue, evidenced by the blue glow encompassing the name tags above their mech's heads, came together in a large holding area.

One impressive looking flying mech had a small crown hovering over his name tag. He was the highest ranked player in their team, and enjoyed commanding privileges as a result.

"The name's Jaxon645, as you can read. I'm too lazy to form a plan, so you can do whatever you want to do. It's not as if you're kids."

Janet and Melinda both shook their heads. Just because most of the players in the Platinum League were professional pilots in the real universe, didn't mean that leadership was unnecessary to win in the game. But it was usually difficult for fifty complete strangers to agree to a single person's ideas, so nobody really bothered to take over the vacuum in leadership.

So with an awkward silence, the fifty pilots waited silently in their mechs until the holding area opened up a ramp. It turned out they waited in a massive transport ship.

The lightest mechs already sprinted out the exit as soon as possible, leaving the slower medium mechs up next. Melinda in her Marc Antony and Janet piloting some kind of medium cannon-wielding mech both exited in the next batch, stepping foot into a muddy, cratered battlefield.

"Looks like it's Mud Planet. Hooray." Janet cheered without a hint of celebration. "It's going to be tough to hold a firm footing with all the wet soil. At least the bomb craters are able to provide some form of cover."

As if aware that running from one side of the battlefield to the other side posed many risks, their team stayed in place and started to entrench their positions. The enemy team must be doing the same as well. Only their light mechs have gone ahead, their nimble legs and adept piloting avoiding much of the hazards the muddy terrain posed.

A scout on their team reported back in the team-wide voice channel. "Enemy position spotted. They are backed against a small mountain. Impassable by medium mechs and heavier. My judgment is that they're in it for the long haul."

A series of groans escaped from many of the other pilots. While they had been dumped into a muddy flat ground that offered no geographic advantages, the enemy team lucked out and got deposited right next to a defensive position.

"We can't out-turtle them, so let's not bother." Jaxon645 said unwillingly. "I'm going to fly around and see how tall this mountain is. I might be able to snipe them from the top."

Thus, the nominal leader of the team left their starting position with a small crowd of other flying mechs following behind.

Melinda furrowed her brow. By taking away all their fliers, the ground mechs became vulnerable to aerial harassment. "Spread out or advance together?"

"The terrain's not bad enough to force us to spread out." A heavy mech pilot said, worried about getting ambushed from the flanks. "Let's not thin ourselves out too much and let the enemy pick some easy bargains."

"I agree. We've got a large number of heavies, so let's escort them to the front line."

Halfway to the frontline, the plodding mechs encountered an ambush. A deluge of long-ranged missiles rained down from the sky with the wrath of a god.

"Incoming! Dive for cover!"

"Goddammit, are our scouts sleeping?!"

The missiles accurately focused on two of their heavy mechs, bombarding them with so many explosions that only a couple of burning parts were left.

"There's another salvo!"

"We can't do shit here! Let's run back!"

"You retard, they're just going to keep shredding us with missiles if we turn back! There's no cover between here and our starting point. The only way we can survive is if we advance."

As another heavy mech got torn apart while another dodged in the nick of time, the team's channel devolved into chaos. Indignant at the inaction, Melinda felt her temper rise. She piloted her mech forward and banged her tower shield against the hull of a skittery heavy spider mech.

The noise deafened the arguments. "Look boys, our flyers are gone and our light mechs are asleep. We'll never get rid of the target locks on our mechs, so what's the point of running? I plan to charge at the enemy. Who is with me?"

Silence prevailed in the interlude between missile launches. The Marc Antony banged its mace against the side of its heavy shield, letting the clanging shake their minds awake.

"I asked, WHO IS WITH ME?!"

Now that everyone on the team turned to Melinda, they began to notice the mech's unusual appearance. It had an aggressive build, carrying a stylized tower shield and a bulky mace. The red vapor helmet crest lent the mech an ancient, authoritative air, as if they were facing a martial general instead of just another mech.

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Janet stepped forward with her mech. "I am!"

Taking the opportunity to push the rest of her team into something other than sitting ducks, Melinda turned around and led Janet forward. "Follow me if you want to win!"

As if pulled by inertia, most of the medium mechs followed the strange black-and-red mech. The heavies struggled to follow in their footsteps. Soon enough, their entire team approached the enemy team's position like a wave crashing against a cliff. Lacking any fear, Melinda kept her bulky shield in front and focused her eyes for other ambushes. Her blood pumped faster as she relished the upcoming clash.