

### Chapter 27: Absolute Power

In an unspoken agreement, the reinforcements that came with the Caesar Augustus busied themselves with fending off Melinda's allies.

"That's a nice mech you got there. Shame about the armor though."

"It's the Marc Antony, designed by someone I know. It's supposed to be a more affordable alternative to what you're riding."

The Caesar Augustus pilot let out a contemptuous snort. "The mere thought of cheapening any of this frame's components is abhorrent. It goes against everything this august mech stands for. You and your friend have no idea how much you sullied its grandeur."

Like an unstoppable tide, the Caesar Augustus kept closing the distance as it exchanged laser blasts. Melinda's laser cannons were running hot, but the only thing she managed to achieve was to heat up the top layers of her opponent's shield, causing only a fraction of its mass to melt. Its defensive power was a testament to National Aeromotives' heat-absorption research.

"It's useless! Face the inevitability!"

"You talk too much!" Melinda yelled as she abandoned her laser fire for a close-in approach. Like a nimble gorilla she threw her mech forward while juking as much shots as she could. The Marc Antony strained against the sudden turns even as the incoming fire heated up a lot of portions of her mech. It made the Marc Antony seem like a demon from hell, with its dark armor, glowing red spots and the ever-present water vapor leaking from the crest of its head.

"That's a funny gimmick, the Roman helmet design. But I'm afraid you're going to lose it when I HACK OFF YOUR HEAD!"

The Caesar Augustus came into melee range, but despite the pilot's words the Augustus continued to charge forward like a train. Melinda only belatedly dodged to the side, suffering a glancing blow from the Augustus' quick slash.

The two came together again and engaged in a furious exchange of blows interspersed with opportunistic laser blasts. The Augustus' shield was virtually indestructible as Melinda's dual weapons lacked sufficient weight or sharpness. The white sword struck with measured, disciplined strikes that followed a mysterious pattern. It successfully held Melinda at bay.

The pilot of the Caesar Augustus must be an elite. His formal piloting skill overwhelmed her own as he moved the Augustus fluently like it was his own body. From his sword style to his movement pattern, everything the pilot did only put Melinda in a tougher position.

"Give up. I've seen what your mech is made of. You're an inferior copy."

"Shut up." Melinda replied as sweat poured down her face. She tried her best to hang on, but the opponent kept chipping away at the HRF plating that kept her mech protected.

"I can understand why you pilot such garbage. After all, if you don't have the money, you'll never pilot a mech as magnificent as the Caesar Augustus in your lifetime."

"Not everything can be measured with money!" She hissed as she surged forward, risking a deadly stab which she parried with her borrowed sword. Her weapon cracked and broke in half, but it succeeded in taking the wind out of the strike.

Her mace already pounced from above, the heavy rounded end travelling in a straight arc towards the Augustus' head. The enemy pilot hastily raised his shield, bouncing the mace back with a heavy vibration.

"Hah, what will you do now without a sword?"

"This!" Melinda dropped the broken sword and used her wrist to fire a couple of point-blank laser blasts right in the eyes. While most of the head was able to endure the heat, the main sensors and the delicate components buried deeper in the head were not so lucky.

The enemy pilot screamed as he lost his primary vision. He performed a reflexive bash with his shield that pushed the Marc Antony back. She stepped backwards along with the push, and started to slink sideways in order to take advantage of the fact the Augustus now relied on its secondary sensors.

"You think you've blinded me? You're wrong!"

Surprisingly, the Augustus shifted adeptly in Melinda's direction. Perhaps wary of another point blank surprise, the Augustus with its melted head kept its distance while firing its wrist laser. The Marc Antony spent its energy at a fast rate trying to dodge the shots.

"I've been lenient to you so far. I didn't expect you to scorn my face. Very well, let me show you the real power of the first emperor!"

The Augustus dropped its shield, relinquishing much of its defensive advantage over the Marc Antony. Nevertheless, the Augustus moved forward with renewed grace. The enhanced speed alarmed Melinda, and it took all she had to dodge the Augustus' masterful sword stroke. The follow up strikes chipped away at the Marc Antony's exterior, shaving off several portions of its arm and torso armor.

Melinda pushed down her panic and kept composed as she danced around with her mech. As each second passed, she felt her conscious mind grow more intense. The Marc Antony's dark form echoed her every thought, allowing her to avoid the Augustus' swords repeatedly. Even in the instances where she couldn't avoid damage, she exerted her utmost to let the sword strike her mech's best armored sections.

"All you can do is run like a cockroach and jump like a monkey!" The pilot bellowed, frustrated at the continual chase. "That's all a cheap whore riding a cheap imitation like you can do. You'll never be able to match me and my mech's brilliance!"

An irrational spike of fury invaded Melinda's thoughts. All her formal Guard training warned her not to lose her composure. Having spent a lot of time mediating between hotheads piloting multi-ton war machines, she was well aware of the dangers of letting your anger get the better of your decision making.

"The Marc Antony huh? I suppose you're not familiar with Ancient Terran history. You see, way back then, Augustus defeated Marc Antony repeatedly. And now, history will repeat itself. Your cheap joke of a mech will never be as worthy as mine!"

None of her reservations remained.

Indignant at being looked down at, she willingly embraced her anger and howled. The ferocious call stuttered the young pilot's attack, causing him to present an unforgivable gap in his assault. Melinda struck out with her mace with the limits of her mech's capacity, channeling the kinetic energy of her mech's legs, its rotating torso and its entire arm in a single devastating swipe that landed accurately against the Augustus' sword grip.

The fingers crunched as the impact of an entire mech's momentum couldn't be stopped by such delicate limbs. The middle and ring fingers even separated entirely. Despite the critical damage, the Augustus was nimble enough to throw its sword to its other hand. Once the Augustus regained its weapon, the Marc Antony would suffer as it overextended itself severely in its last attack.

Melinda's eyes sharpened as she used the brief moment to do something unorthodox. She engaged the emergency release catches that kept the Marc Antony's shoulder launchers attached to its armor. Using the remnants of her mech's forward momentum, she caused her mech to bodily fling the launchers at the gobsmacked Augustus.

"No matter how much money you have, you can't spend your way to victory." Melinda grinned as she waved goodbye with her mech's free hand.

She activated the overrides that caused all the missiles to explode their payloads at once. Twin suns appeared in their midst, blasting the Marc Antony backwards. The explosion further cracked her mech's armor, but she was able to get it to stay on its feet.

As the smoke and fire cleared, the Caesar Augustus looked much sorrier than before. Its armor surprisingly only sported a few cracks and craters despite suffering two concentrated magazine detonations.

Unfortunately, even if its armor retained much of its effectiveness, the more delicate components underneath suffered worse. The amalgamated explosions radiated the combined shock waves of a full salvo of missiles. Worse, the propellants of the missiles hadn't been expended at all, so they blew up all at once as well, adding an incinerating quality to the explosions that left the bedraggled Augustus half-burning in mechanical agony.

"What, what is this.. I can't move my mech.." The distressed young man said as he kept trying to take control over his mech's twitching limbs. "The Augustus... is..."

"The Augustus is only mortal." Melinda interjected as she guided her mech's foot to crunch the other hand of her opponent's mech into scrap. The Marc Antony ominously leaned over, bringing its menacing and battle-scarred face

close to the Augustus' half-smashed and half-burned face. "You're not invincible inside that expensive toy of yours."

"At least I'm able to afford one in the real universe."

"You'll get your ass whipped just the same." Melinda noted, then bashed her mace against the Augustus' torso. The cracks expanded but the armor surprisingly held up against the blunt force trauma she frenziedly inflicted. By the time her mace broke off from the abuse, the enemy pilot's body had long since fallen apart from the excessive shock impacts.

Tossing the useless handle away, Melinda walked over and picked up the fallen mech's virtually pristine sword and shield. "Thanks for letting me borrow this, buddy."

She swept her gaze at the confused melee around her. Though her duel with the Caesar Augustus expended much out of her mech, it lasted only around two minutes. Victory and defeat hadn't been decided yet, but Melinda already pounced at the nearest enemy mech from the flanks. The opponent wasn't able to keep its attention in two directions at once, and lost its lower leg to a cruel slice of Melinda's new sword.

"This weapon's much better than I thought." She pleasingly muttered, though she missed the crunchy feel of her mace.

With Melinda's help, she freed up her preoccupied teammates, leaving them free to help out the others in turn. This caused the scales of battle to tip in their favor rapidly, leading the enemy to a solid rout as their remnants retreated up to the surface.

The Marc Antony raised its appropriated sword, causing the survivors to cheer in victory. Despite not having any advantage in the quality of her mech or her league ranking, she still managed to exude the quality of a leader. Most of the mechs who fought alongside of her were willing to follow her directions.

Please at the deference she enjoyed, Melinda lowered the sword until it pointed towards the exit. "We have a base to wreck. Let's go!"

The group of mechs squeezed out of the exit and finally reached the surface. Most of the defenders were still stuck guarding against outside attackers, but some of them had already been alerted to the intrusion.

"Show me where their control center is located!"

"Six o'clock, the dome by the tower-like structure."

"Alright boys and girls, we've got only one thing left before we can call it a day. To the control center!"

Despite the many mechs that turned around to take care of the threat that popped up in their midst, the invaders had initiative on their side and they only needed a short time to reach the control center. The hard-shelled dome protected it against all kinds of ordnance, but when Melinda crashed the lower edge of her kite shield against the surface, it cracked and started to cave in. Some of the other mechs with melee weapons joined in the fun while the rest fended off the approaching defenders.

"We can't hold out much longer!"

"Keep it up! We just need a little more time!"

The Marc Antony's last three shield attacks succeeded in prying open a hole. A light mech with a flamethrower immediately went to her side and fired off a lethally hot stream of flame that incinerated all of the control center's personnel and computers. Melinda mentally bathed in their screams, feeling gratified that they accomplished their objective.

"Uh, Melinda. You might not celebrate so soon yet. There's a problem."

She snapped out of her funk. "What's up, Janet?"

"Well, you guys managed to destroy the control center, but not before they called in the first wave of their reinforcements. You better look up in the sky."

Her sensors readjusted. She could see a small speck in the sky growing larger. It was an entry pod, allowing mechs to arrive on the surface of a planet with the speed of free fall. The pod grew larger, and larger, and larger, and larger...

"That's not a normal pod."

The pod was way too big to fit a single mech. From the size of it, Melinda estimated the pod could fit in at least eight to twelve medium mechs, which was difficult to fend off.

Only until the pod engaged its boosters to slow down its downward crash did Melinda feel that something was off. Those boosters released so much force that it rattled the entire comm center. It was as if the boosters were working their asses off arresting the fall of something much larger than a bunch of regular mechs.

An earthquake-like impact rattled everyone in the vicinity as the pod finally half-crashed in the middle of the base. The ramp of the pod lowered slowly, taking its time until it fully extended.

That was until a foot the size of a heavy mech kicked the metal ramp away. The rectangular piece of metal screeched as it bounced off the ground only to crash against the base of an antenna.

An apocalyptic mech the size of the Guard Headquarter's main building stepped out of the oversized pod. Each footstep seemed to rumble the footing of the other mechs, leading to a growing unease among the blue team. With its sturdy legs, barreled torso and a pair of weapon-encrusted arms, the metal monstrosity stretched the definition of mech.

"It's a juggernaut." Janet whispered.



In the history of mech development, there was no hard rule that set the size and weight of the mechs to a specific limit. The current modern adoption of the light, medium and heavy classification was more out of convenience than out of any calculated considerations. The doctrines that followed were what really cemented the classifications in place.

A light mech is fast and stays alive by remaining unseen or dodging enemy attacks. They usually act as scouts, saboteurs or flankers. They also make excellent flyers.

A medium mech is nimble on its feet and can withstand a limited amount of damage. They are the jack-of-all-trades in the mech world, able to fulfill any role with their unparalleled flexibility.

A heavy mech doesn't bother dodging, instead choosing to tank all the attacks coming its way. It is regarded as a tank due to the ease it is able to defend a position or break through enemy lines.

An entire industry has sprung up around these three archetypes. The system of developing and licensing interchangeable and modular components came about when different customers demanded they wanted to mount their favorite toys on their favorite mechs. Many advanced components invented these days restricted their use to a single weight class in order to maintain compatibility.

But regardless of this thriving ecosystem of mechs and mech parts, there were always some parties that wanted to take a step forwards for themselves. One such moment happened at the New Rubarth Empire's introduction of the juggernaut to the battlefield.

The juggernaut was a mech that had the ability to contend against a low-flying space ship. Its frame and its countless components weighed as much as a dozen heavy mechs, but was about a hundred to a thousand times more

expensive to build. The many technologies that kept such a gargantuan in one piece and prevented it from collapsing under its own weight were very expensive to reproduce. Such a large and heavy mech simply didn't appear to be economical.

That never stopped the New Rubarthans, though. They painstakingly invested in its development and kept the project under wraps for at least an entire mech generation. Only until they refined the design well enough to be able to operate in hostile planetary environments did they release the first juggernaut on the battlefield.

It left behind a massacre back then. The city it fought in suffered so much damage, the New Rubarthans considered the battle could have resulted in less damage if they fired off a couple of illegal tactical nukes.

Right now, the juggernauts were weapons with dubious legal status in human space. Many states hostile to the New Rubarth Empire sought to draft a treaty banning such ultralarge mechs. The devastating they could unleash rivaled weapons of mass destruction. In actuality, it would be justified if they were categorized as the newest WMD humans have invented.

All of that was of little use to Melinda now, as the juggernaut finally moved. It raised one of its arms that bristled with gun cannons and pointed in the vague direction of blue team's military base.

"Oh shit. Get out Janet!"

"I'm already on it!"

The juggernaut fired, and the entire world turned white.