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Judah's giant chainsword began spinning up, the whining keen adding to the flood of noise coming from the turbines. Jered felt the armor's weight shift, leaning in for a final assault. Reflex made him manipulate the dead controls, but it was to no avail. The massive combat robot's feet threw sparks as it slid across the floor. Its feet caught momentary purchase, and the killing machine rolled into a headlong controlled tumble. With a fearful blur of movement, its giant sword was now arcing overhead, as if to cleave the opposing mech-gladiator's armor in two.

But the jets cut out short.

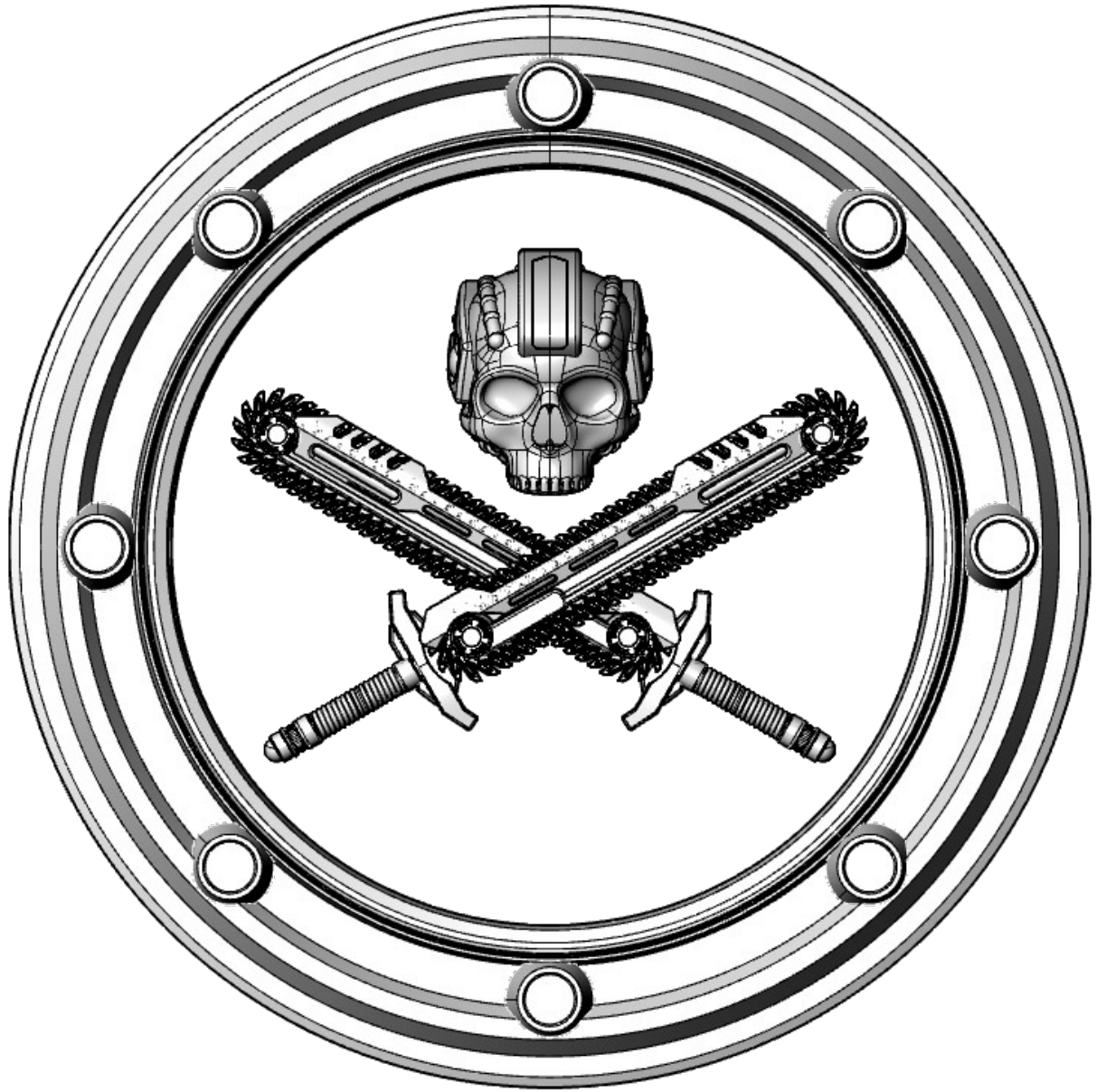
To Beautiful Rachel, who keeps me sane.
I know it's not easy.

Code Of Armor: Vengeance, Part One

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CODE OF ARMOR: VENGEANCE

By

John Bear Ross

CHAPTER 1

“You have one purpose here, human. Fight. Fight, and die, and we shall sell the composite sensory feeds to millions of worlds in our trade networks.

So, enough of this 'contracts' and 'rights' pablum. Do what we brought you here to do. Fight.”

-Unknown Gatekeeper

“All systems online, Jered. I am ready to defend this house.”

“Good, Judah, I am too. Last diagnostic checklist reads green across the board. Let's go get some,” Jered said.

“Agreed. Let's 'get some,' as you say. Your father likes that phrase, too,” the smooth robotic voice said.

Jered squinted as the artificial red sunlight poured through his mech's tinted canopy as he and his armor stepped through the grand archway. The sides of the towering grand entrance were carved with elaborate flourishes of stone alien vines surrounding battle scenes of raised reliefs, like giant coins. Some depicted death, others victory, others the portraits of the arena's greatest fighters. He hoped to add his name and visage to the laser-carved portal someday, even if the place was just a bottom-tier dump and slaughterhouse. Today's victory would mean that they were half-way to freedom.

“Yeah, that's probably where I got it from, Judah. The old man. I wish he was here to see me, now,” Jered said.

“Your father does not approve of this establishment, Jered. He and Mikralos have never seen eye to eye,” Judah said.

“Yeah, that's one way to put it. Dad's probably hated by most of the Gatekeepers in Junctionworld, but he and Mikralos seem to have some bitter feud going on.”

“Agreed, pilot,” the computer said.

Pock marks from projectile weaponry were scattered along the arch, obliterating some of the scenes and profiles. They were never repaired. The Gatekeeper who ruled over Berva Proxima Arena, Mikralos, thought it gave the place character and an edge of danger. Jered thought it made the place look shabby and run down. Mikralos was reckless, but he and

Judah's contract of indenture-hood was linked to the floating techno-blob and the small, armored fiefdom he presided over.

It was the same type of giant portal through which his family's armored gladiator team strode for years, even if it wasn't the usual prestigious coliseums in which they were accustomed to fighting. Despite his recent streak of bad luck at the gambling tables, Jered was a Kramer. He was a killer clad in steel and hydraulics, piloting the helm of his inherited death machine.

Jered's victories over seventeen pilots here at Berva Proxima, seven of them to the death, were all in the pursuit of paying off his steep debts. He ran his fingers over Judah's control yokes, flipping off his weapon safeties as he moved the giant armored monstrosity into a slow, thundering jog.

His display panel remained red and black. The safeties weren't disengaging.

He hit them again, trying to bring his weapons online. Judah's control displays blacked out, and "ERROR Control Computer Compromised ERROR" began flashing over and over in his heads-up display.

Jered thumped the side of his cockpit's electrical control panel. "Gate damn it, not now, Judah!" he said.

Static and electronic noise poured out of Judah's control audio feedback. Jered unbuckled his harness and began to pull circuit chips out of the control panel, trying to hard-boot the tangled myriad of alien circuits. If he lobotomized the armor, hopefully Mikralos or the staff would notice something was wrong. Hopefully, he could stop the match. The crowd roared as Judah stormed through the arch. The shielding they were behind blocked noise and shrapnel, but speakers all along the ring of force field arrays and transparent armor boomed the cheers of a thousand different species.

Judah continued its plodding gait to the engagement point, about half-way to the center of the floor. The red lights in the arena's ceiling turned bright white for maximum broadcast illumination. Small camera drones flew in strangled orbits around Jered and his armor, and the main spotlight in the armored camera turret flooded over him from above.

The ring announcer's voice boomed an introduction in a number of languages and data streams, but Jered continued to work at Judah's controls to no avail. When the sentient control computer failed to respond, even to him stomping on the large red emergency/duress button, Jered opened his microphone to address combat control. Nothing.

Jered and Judah came to a stop on a floodlit circle of the steel ring. Judah was now in

autonomous mode, but the external lights that signaled that condition were not flashing. Judah drew its large chain-saw sword and pointed upwards in a salute to Gatekeeper Mikralos. The distant red and white mech opposing him, bristling with cannon and missile launchers, did the same with the power claw on its left arm. The Gatekeeper's viewing box, an armored bubble high above the stadium seats, flashed answering lights in acknowledgment.

A strobing white pulse from every light in the massive building signaled the start of the match, and Jered Kramer smashed his fists bloody against his armored cockpit glass. No one saw him, though, as the thick blast shields slid over his transparent carapace, and he screamed his frustration to the dead control displays.

He pulled the ejection handles on either side of his headrest. Again, nothing. The skylights of the stadium returned to red. Horns and sirens sounded, and Jered moaned.

The opposing pilot boosted his mech's jets hard at the start signal, seeking cover behind one of the clusters of large granite rocks dotting the mile-wide floor. Small exhaust plumes flowered bright yellow from launch tubes on the enemy mech's armored back as it made its initial move.

Judah, still not under his control, sidestepped behind hard cover the instant before impact. The missiles tracked into the face of the wall barricades the twenty-foot-tall mech sheltered behind. Sharp explosions thundered, their echoes cascading from the walls and viewing shields. A half-dozen glowing spots appeared on the side of the wall facing him, the result of shaped charges that came just short of drilling through the two-foot-thick edifices.

Jered bellowed in fear and rage, yanking and bucking against his controls. The sturdy armor which had borne his family into conflict for years of faithful service continued to rebel. If he made it through this, he was going to kill his crew chief, Prath. The anti-sabotage checks were supposed to keep crap like this from happening.

Prath would have to wait, though. His hijacked mech popped exhaust nozzles from compartments in its lower legs, and Jered could hear the microturbines begin to spool up in the Judah's large backpack-like dorsal housing.

"No, no, Judah, what the void are you doing? Why aren't you listening? Hard boost this early? We'll be sitting puddleflaps! This is a gate-damned nightmare!"

"Je-red...This. Not...not...Me... >bzzt< Exterior Overri-" Judah's audio speaker managed to say in jerking tones between bursts of garbled electronic gibberish.

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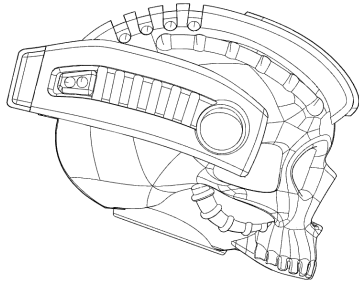
Judah's giant chainsword began spinning up, the whining keen adding to the flood of noise coming from the turbines. Jered felt the armor's weight shift, leaning in for a final assault. Reflex made him manipulate the dead controls, but it was to no avail. The massive combat robot's feet threw sparks as it slid across the floor. Its feet caught momentary purchase, and the killing machine rolled into a headlong controlled tumble. With a fearful blur of movement, its giant sword was now arcing overhead, as if to cleave the opposing mech-gladadiator's armor in two.

But the jets cut out short. Jered saw the distance was too far to engage in close combat. His armor began a stiff, overdone display of hacking and parrying at the air as it continued to charge on foot.

The enemy red and white mech brought its main gun to bear. There were no rocks, there was no barricade, no protective cover at all. Fatal ground, as his old man would say.

Time slowed. Jered could almost see down the cannon to the shell waiting to be fired. It looked as like a water pipe a construction crew installed near the family compound when he was a kid. The picture he kept pegged to his dashboard, the one of his kid sisters, rattled loose. His mech's furious and useless charge continued.

He reached for the photo. The cannon muzzle flashed. Jered's world filled with cold pain as he bucked against the seat's restraints. He looked down at the new hole in his control readouts. His lower body was a shredded wreck, and flame and smoke curled up within the cabin. The last thing he saw was the red and white power claw breach through the blast shields, through the armored glass, through the display screens, and through his chest. Blackness swallowed him as the crowd roared and Judah continued to jibber a mindless staccato into his dead ears.



CHAPTER 2

“...and in our countdown of the Top Ten most spectacular arena defeats in recent memory, here's number four, Jered Kramer piloting Judah at Berva Proxima.”

“That's right, Chred, we've all seen it, over and over, but let's look again at the footage. Experts are still perplexed to this day why Kramer, who came from the fighting clan of the Fourth Gate Kramers, just threw caution and tactics to the wind with a straight-boost charge to his death.”

“His fellow human, Masamune Kyuzo, was waiting for him, though, Denk, and the result was not pretty. They never recovered Kramer's helmet camera or interior cockpit footage, you know. It was completely destroyed when first the open-field cannon shot, then that power claw-”

“Oh!”

“Oh' is right, Denk, look at that thing sink into the cockpit, right up to the elbow. You can't even read the sponsorship stickers, Masamune's in so deep.”

“Truly dread, Chred. You hate to see a fighter as accomplished as Jered Kramer go out in a flash-and-crash.”

“Truly. Oh, that's not nice, pulling the corpse back through the hole and washing it down with the jets. That's got to affect one's afterlife, I don't care what you believe.”

“That's become one of Masamune's signature moves, Chred, and this is the match where he earned the 'Desecrator' nickname. Up next, arena fans, stay tuned for the top three in our countdown...”

Jessica Kramer was not in the mood for this bar, yet here she found herself, waiting for the next tap on the shoulder and the inevitable ethanol-breath challenge. For the next wink and nod between two mech pilots as they looked in her direction and murmured a joke. For the next snide remark about her brother or her now-fallen family name.

“The Fourth Gate Kramers.” It was once a badge of honor, a phrase that paid. *Feh.* That and a five-credit debitpress could get you a beer in a place like this. In a chipped glass, of course. Speaking of which...

“Jev, another, please,” she said to the bot-tender.

“Mech Pilot Kramer, you advised this unit that you are due for a match tonight at Red Iridium Arena. Your customer profile preferences indicate you are to be served only four beverages on fight day. Do you wish to override?” said the beverage attendant.

“Yes, please. I'll be fine, thank you, Jev.” She pressed her glowing thumb to the proffered data pad. It was easy to be rude to drones and bots, even though Jev's rudimentary AI appreciated the courtesy at some small level of semi-sentience. Being polite to a machine might be silly, but it showed humanity, which was a scarce quality in this little pocket dimension.

The glass was one of the models that filled from the bottom through a one-way valve. Jessica watched the level rise in thirsty anticipation. *This was the last one*, she promised herself. *Well, maybe the one after this one...*

Jessica's back was to the door, but she felt something in the room shift. One hand accepted the beer, the other went for the grip of the pistol on her rib cage.

“Sentients and sapient, I greet you in the Ways of the Old Code. May the light of the eight gates shine upon this establishment,” said an smooth electronic voice from the doorway of the bar. A large metallic pod filled most of the doorway, its gleaming body lined with low pulsing lines chasing each other. Two Model Nine bodyguards in heavy armor stood on either side of the pod, their weapons pointed at the bar patrons.

“We wonder if there are any among you gentlebeings from the house of Kramer, of the Fourth Gate?” the voice said, almost like a purring coo. “If so, we have a proposition of a business nature.”

Jessica smirked, and pulled her hand from the butt of her revolver, and looked over her shoulder to the Gatekeeper in his floating armored pod. Both of the bio-printed bodyguards trained their weapons on her. “Mikralos, is that you, you payment-stretching, Gate-damned pustule, after all these years?” she said, lifting her fifth beer to her lips.

The Gatekeeper floated to her spot at the bar. His reinforced life chamber was a gleaming pink fishbowl shrouded by the rest of the protective silver chassis. Jessica continued to drink, suppressing a shudder as she surveyed the grotesque little overlord.

The Gatekeepers were not an ancient race, not like the Szran->click< or the Redfolk, but they were a powerful one. They conquered Junctionworld and its Eight Gates, after all. Mikralos and the rest of the Gatekeepers looked like fat, distorted babies in a traveling artificial womb, but they each packed more firepower and advanced shielding than a

Concordium main battle tank. The bodyguards were almost for show; a status symbol, of sorts.

“Ah, daughter of the Fourth Gate Kramers, Jessica. We greet you in--”

“--In the Ways of the Old Code, yes, yes, Mikralos. Spare me the Gatekeeper formalities and 'Old Code' crap. What do you want?” Jessica said.

“Very well. Direct and to the point. Very Human. As you may know, we are still in possession of your sibling's combat armor. Well, what is left of it. Collateral for his unpaid debts, of course,” the Gatekeeper said. Jessica bristled and turned her bar stool to face the hovering overlord. Mikralos's bodyguards flicked off the safeties of their weapons with an energy-charged whine.

“Yeah, you still own what's left of the family ride, I know. Jered's death broke my father, tore the heart out of my mom, and busted us out. It's a sad story, sure. Get to the point,” Jessica said. She tried keep a nonchalant tone in her voice, but her knuckles were turning white around her beer.

“Not to mention the accompanying murder-suicide of your parents when insolvency collapsed your valiant and once-prosperous team. A series of regrettable occurrences, indeed, Mech Pilot Kramer,” Mikralos said. “We understand you're still piloting in the Light Exo Leagues? Limited Ordnance class, yes?”

She nodded.

“How quaint,” Mikralos said.

She wasn't sure if the reminder of her parents' deaths or her diminished status in the minor leagues of the mech fighting organizations stung more. She began to stand up from the stool, and the bodyguard weapons edged closer as she rose. “Why you encephalitic, atrophied waste of a--”

“--Consider your next words carefully, mech pilot. We have come to this base and loathsome place to conduct business, not to recount your tedious and pedestrian past miseries. Now, sit down, and consider this token,” the voice coming from the Gatekeeper's armored module said. A smooth metal claw emerged from the skin of the Gatekeeper's pod. It held a cylindrical object, scorched on one side, dented on another, with an array of wires and conduits sticking out of it. A small red light glowed in the middle of the scorched patch when it dropped into her hands.

“You...you pulled Judah out of the wreckage,” she said, slumping to her stool as she touched the blistered paint.

“Yes, pilot Kramer, the recovered command module from your family's mech. 'Judah.' Arkathan circuitry, from a time before they were wiped out. A very handsome component in both structure and capability. 'They don't make them like that anymore,' we believe is the parlance of your home world,” Mikralos said.

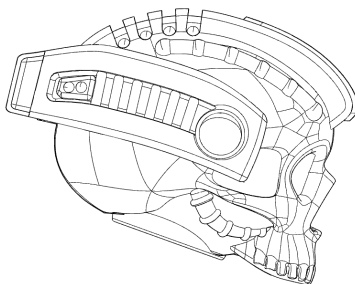
“I know, trust me. My current suit's brain can barely keep me walking and shooting at the same time. It's a basic module, but it's all I can afford. Barely semi-sentient. I haven't even bothered to--” Kramer said.

“We offer this to you, human, but not lightly. Do you wish to hear our terms?” Mikralos said.

Jessica took a long drink from her beer glass, draining it. She looked over her shoulder to the bar bot.

“Jev, set me up another, please. Put it on the kind Gatekeeper's tab, here,” she said.

She took the new glass, blew the foam off the top in the direction of the nearest Nine bodyguard, and said, “Let's hear it, Mikralos.”



CHAPTER 3

“Do not vex impatient for your chance for battle and glory, sapients and sentients. Everyone has their chance to bathe in the flames, soon enough. Not all will be found worthy, though. Take comfort in the fact that the fire that consumes you heats the engine of our continued prosperity.”

-Gatekeeper Polomius, Third GateLord, Proverbs Of Power

“No gate-damned way, blob. You want this done, you do it yourself,” Jessica said. She walked down the alleyway, away from the Gatekeeper and his bodyguards, and headed towards the back door of the bar.

“We would, pilot Kramer, but appearances must be kept. Protocols followed. 'The Ways of the Old Code,' and such,” the Gatekeeper said.

“You mean you get to clear the dark cloud hanging over your arena by setting up some disgusting, chintzy 'blood vengeance' match. That's low, even for a--”

“-Again, you test us with your words, when we offer only benevolence and good will to you. Besides, we both have something to gain. We are being more than generous in placing the services of a very distinguished design and fabrication facility at your disposal. We both have lingering questions, pilot Kramer, questions that can only be answered by the 'Judah' control module. A control module that only activates when in the presence of members of its controlling house,” Mikralos said. Jessica stopped, and turned.

“Yeah, I noticed the red indicator light. That's the first time he's woken up since Jered died, isn't it?” Jessica said. Mikralos's pod made an awkward bobble motion, and the lights on his pod's surface seemed to fidget and twitch.

“Well...yes and no. Your father sought an audience with us after your brother's death, demanding to analyze and question the command module. Mistakes were made on his part. We...could not accommodate his requests,” the Gatekeeper said.

“You mean, you wanted to extort a grieving father to access the data on his dead son's mech that might show what really happened. He told me you wanted half a million credits for your so-called 'accommodation.’”

“It is not as simple as you say, but yes, that small detail of the occurrence is accurate. Let it be known that his offer and our financial requirements were at odds. Knowledge is power here in Junctionworld, and power costs credits, pilot,” Mikralos said.

“Even though the incident made your place a joke, and nearly put you in receivership?” Jessica said.

A jagged series of pulses ran along the ribbons of light carved into the Gatekeeper's carapace.

“Our financial matters at the time, and since then, are our own concern, pilot. You needn't occupy your feeble mind with pondering that which you do not understand. You need only remember your place,” the Gatekeeper said. An edged grate was now in the smooth voice.

“My *place*? Oh, that's nice. Fine. So, what's changed? What's new, that this oh-so-generous offer is now on the table?”

“We have come into new information concerning your brother's death. Naturally, since his humiliating demise caused the gladiator sports media to cast aspersions on how our beloved Berva Proxima is operated, our ticket sales and subscriptions have suffered. The facilities are in disrepair. We have even had to resort to...to renting out the main arena floor for trade shows and sales conventions.”

“Mmm...'The Berva Proxima Mech Parts Swap Meet And Social Mixer.' 'Come one, come all, to the Transdimensional Insurance Agent Convention, hosted at the Berva Proxima Arena, the glittering jewel of the Sixth Gate.' I've seen the ads on the nets. Not exactly the high-profile, upper-crust stuff you're used to, is it, Mikralos?” Jessica said.

“It is a slow, sordid ruination, pilot Kramer. Tread carefully,” Mikralos said.

“Oh, I'm sure it's horrible, Gatekeeper, I mean...*wow*. You poor, *poor* thing--” she said.

The lights tracing over the Gatekeeper's pod froze and turned to black. A silver claw was around her neck, pinning her against the wall, her boots kicking at the air. Her hands scrambled to hold onto the slippery liquid steel noose. She felt her vision begin to close off. The veins in her eyes pounded. Her lungs burned for air.

“We have been more than patient with your clumsy verbal jabs and snide remarks, but do not start to believe you can *mock* us, *underbeing*. *Ever*,” the Gatekeeper said.

Mikralos lowered her to the ground and hovered away. Jessica kept one arm on the alley wall where he dropped her, coughing and hacking for air. The other hand searched for her pistol. The holster was empty.

She looked up, red-eyed and sputtering, through tears and snot. One of the bodyguards, the one she blew the beer foam at, had her revolver in his hand. The cylinder was empty, the pudgy 20mm cartridges dumped in the puddles of muck at his feet. He waved the weapon in an impatient manner, bobbing it up and down as he offered it to her.

Still trying to catch her breath, Jessica reached for the pistol. The Model Nine snapped the revolver's cylinder shut with the flick of a wrist and tossed it into a pile of trash bags ten feet away. The impact and noise sent a hidden den of octorats scurrying.

She spit, clearing her throat, and snapped a knife out from a sheath in her boot. The hum of its high-frequency blade drilled a hole in the air. The second bodyguard's energy rifle, its muzzle glowing, rose. The vibro-blade's position in her hand switched from hammer to icepick, the blade running along her forearm. She wiped her mouth with the back of her knife hand, and moved for her other blade.

"Enough! We have business to conclude, human. Control your savage impulses, or the deal is off. No command module. No vengeance match. No answers to your questions," Mikralos said, his voice more composed now. She stopped her advance, switching the vibro-knife off. Jessica spit at the feet of the Nine holding her at rifle point.

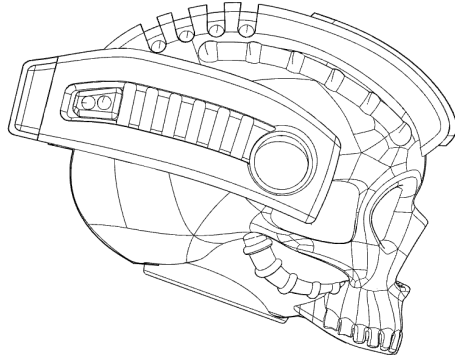
"As we thought. Walk with us, Kramer. Our conveyance is in a holding pattern overhead. We are summoning it now."

The Gatekeeper's transportation was a larger, sleeker version of its personal pod, a mix of limousine and anti-grav yacht. It glided into the alley without a sound, descending from the flickering gray skies over Junctionworld.

A ramp flowed from the rear of the craft, and Mikralos moved up the freshly-materialized incline. His bodyguards followed, their weapons still trained on her. He gave a command to the crew waiting at the front of the craft, and then turned to Jessica waiting at the bottom of the ramp.

"Tomorrow, at this same time and locale, we will send this transport unit for you. If you find the terms we offered acceptable, walk up this ramp, and you will be taken to a private fabrication facility, the best in Junctionworld. Together, pilot, we might correct this transgression. May fortune smile on you, Mech Pilot Kramer, at your match at Red Iridium," Mikralos said.

Her head still hurt, a combination of the beer and the choke-out. She watched the craft spirit away on silent, glowing grav-drives. Jessica looked down at her watch, and cursed. By the time she found and reloaded her revolver, she was running even later.

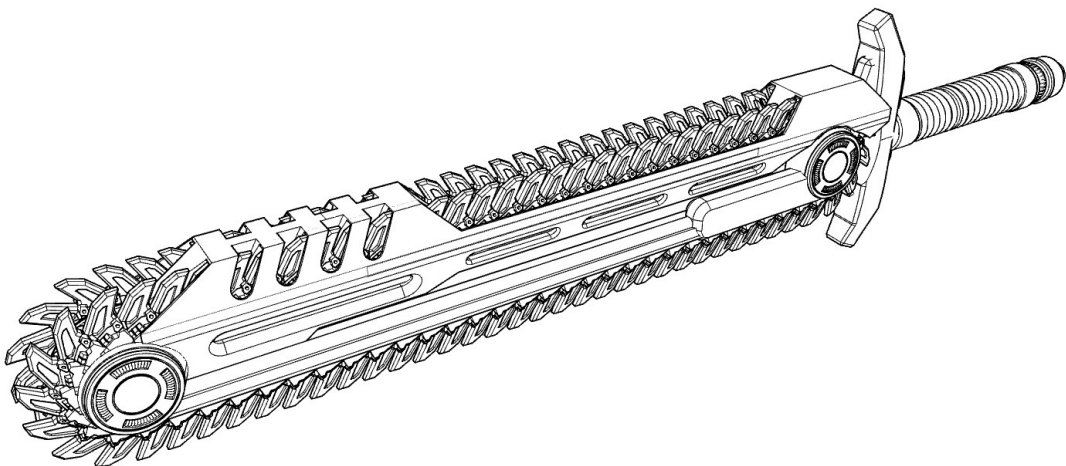


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm John Bear Ross, and I write and work in Southern Nevada. I've worked a variety of jobs, from delivering newspapers as a kid to carrying an M240G in the Marine Corps Reserve. I now work for the Department of Energy as a maintenance contractor, and write when I have ingested sufficient amounts of caffeine.

I'm married to my wife, Beautiful Rachel, and we have two kids together. My work is dedicated to them.

If you want to get ahold of me for feedback or to read snippets and other news from my writing, here are a few ways to keep track of me.

My public Facebook page is www.facebook.com/JohnBearRoss

My Twitter handle is [@johnbearross](https://twitter.com/johnbearross). I don't tweet much, but I'm on there.

My website and work-in-progress blog is www.johnbearross.com

For now, my writing will be direct via Amazon and Kindle Direct Publishing, since the service they provide meets my needs as a small-time guy. Also, if I make enough money for him, maybe Jeff Bezos will reserve me a seat on a Blue Origin flight.

This is John Bear Ross, signing off. See you in the arena, mech pilots.

Best,

JBR

