

*Jessica felt a hot streak shoot up her own leg as a spike entered the bottom of her cockpit, ripping her open from ankle to knee.*

*Crying out in pain, she pivoted the mech's hull, trying to shield its punctured guts and her own skin. The warhammer's plasma spike pivoted as well, taking one of the Wardancer's mech hands with it. The charged plasma blade hit the arena deck plating, sinking in halfway to the hilt, the severed manipulator still gripping it.*

*NoName flashed a suggestion to turn the emergency rotation into a hip throw, and Jessica executed the plan, sending the Wardancer to the ground using its own momentum. Jessica reached down to her boot. Her fingers came back dark with blood. She could see the arena deck plates through her cockpit floor. She gritted her teeth against the mouthguard.*

*"Oh, you're going to pay, you bi--"*

*Kierra rolled and boosted her mech to the side before the giant hammer came down. The thunderous strike echoed through the arena interior, its sound matched only by the crowd. Another rained down. Then, another. She was losing blood. The hammer blows were getting sloppy.*

*"Hold still, you gate-damned--"*

*The Wardancer mech, still scrambling, boosted its jets to gain some distance, carrying her away from Jessica in a long arc. Kramer's vision closed in, her head light from blood loss as the adrenaline subsided. Her hands shook at the controls.*

*"Pilot?"*

*"Ye...yeah, NoName?"*

*"The day. What day is it? Answer immediately."*

*"Day? Isss...Third...no. Seventh Gate Day? Dunno. Sleepy."*

*"Determination: Cognitive functions impaired. Override engaged," the battle computer said.*

To my mother, Louise, who kept the book shelves of our home well-stocked with Niven and Pournelle novels, and instilled in me a love for the library.

Thank You.



Code Of Armor: Vengeance, Part Two

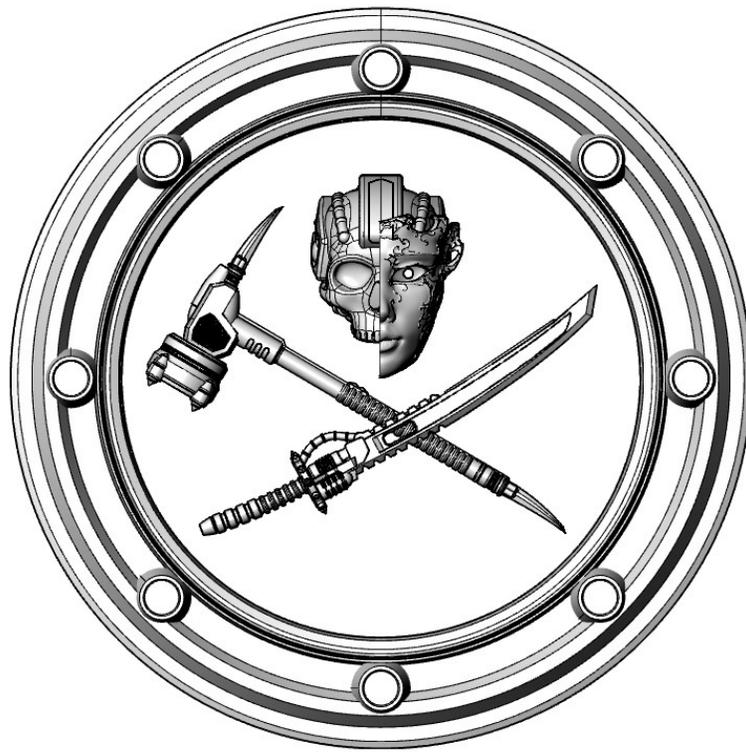
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# CODE OF ARMOR: VENGEANCE

Part Two



By  
John Bear Ross

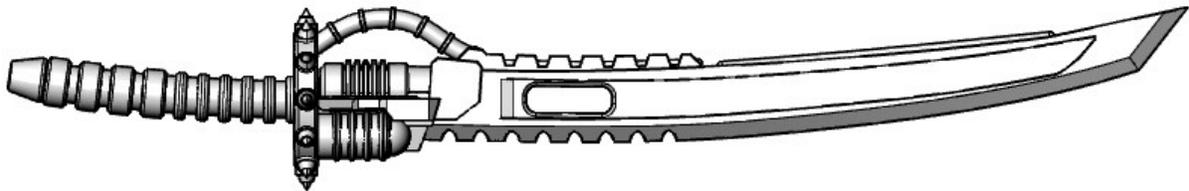
## PREVIOUSLY

The Gatekeepers, rulers of the interdimensional crossroads known as Junctionworld, have turned their hidden pocket of reality into a garden of organized, mechanized slaughter. Mech pilots, cyborgs, and sentient machines are invited (or forced) to do battle for the entertainment of the masses. The Gatekeepers record and export the gladiatorial contests to a million other worlds. Life is cheap, killing is easy, and walking armored nightmares clash before the cameras on the colosseum floors.

Behind the scenes, though, a young mech pilot finds herself the target of a conspiracy to erase her family's name and reputation in the armored arenas. Jessica Kramer, last of the Fourth Gate Kramers, tries to solve the murder of her brother by parties unknown. To do so, she must stay one step ahead of alien overlords, rogue enforcers, and fellow mech gladiators trying to kill her to gain their own freedom.

Will personal demons from her past cut short her quest for justice? Will she discover the truth before she and her family's legacy is crushed?

Find out, now, in the conclusion of Code Of Armor: Vengeance.



## CHAPTER 19

*“Tentacles! Why the void does everything that comes through the WorldGates to try and kill us have tentacles? Explain that to me!”*

-Overheard in Captain York's, a Mech Pilot Bar

“Pilots, you have all been briefed on the arena arrangement and rules. Are there any questions? No? Then confer with your crew chiefs. You have five minutes. Take the transports to your mechs at their respective entry portals, and let's come out fighting,” the pit boss for Berva Proxima said.

“Gotta use the little human's room, real quick, Prath. Pre-match jitters and tiny bladder. Bad combo,” Jessica said to the large orange-and-brown sentient waiting for her by the small electric passenger cart.

Prath scowled to himself. Jitters or not, she had just gone before the arena official's briefing. He waited by the closed door.

When she emerged, he pulled her up by the elbows, bringing her face up to his. He inhaled, bared his fangs, and set her down.

“What? What are you doing? I washed my face and hands,” she said, bringing her hand up to her face.

“You're gargling with soap and water, but it doesn't quite cover the smell of the booze. Pathetic, Kramer. You really do have a problem. How long have you been sneaking?” Prath said.

Jessica's face flushed, and she bared her teeth back.

“I have been putting up with getting pushed around and ordered about like some...some child, long enough, Prath. If I want a stiff belt before a match, I'll damn well have one,” she said.

“Hand it over,” Prath said, his long fingers outstretched.

“It was Dad's, and it's my good luck charm, gate-damn it, Prath,” she said. A pocket flask with an ornamental six-sided star engraved on it was in her hand. She unscrewed the

top and made a show of pouring out the dark red liquor inside.

He beckoned, still.

“No. You can't have it. Besides, it's empty, now, and I have to a match to fight. Now, get out of my way, ape,” she said, heading for the electric cart.

He didn't move. She had to go around his large frame. As she passed him, his hand shot out to hers.

“Prath! What the void--”

He pulled her in close to him, one arm around her like a vise. Her face smooshed into his technician's tool vest. His other hand alternated between drumming his fingers on her head and running them through her hair.

“Gates envelop us, Kramer, what are we to do with you...damnation. Don't do anything else stupid, little human. We're going to talk about this, later,” Prath said. He released her.

“Damn it, Prath, I don't even need...you know, you're not my fath-”

“No. Don't even say it. Just go. Fight. Defend this house,” Prath said.

Jessica stood there, stunned, trying to mentally kick herself in the butt. Prath was the only being who gave a damn about her in all of Junctionworld, but she wanted to lash out at him, to show him how bad she hurt, and she couldn't even do that right. The stinging rebuke she lined up for just such an occasion as this, and he had stopped her cold even before she finished bungling it. *Damn it!*

“Pilot Kramer, to your mech,” Prath said, shooing her away with his long arms. She saw his eye wink at her. She smirked back, fighting tears of rage, and turned to the cart without saying another word.

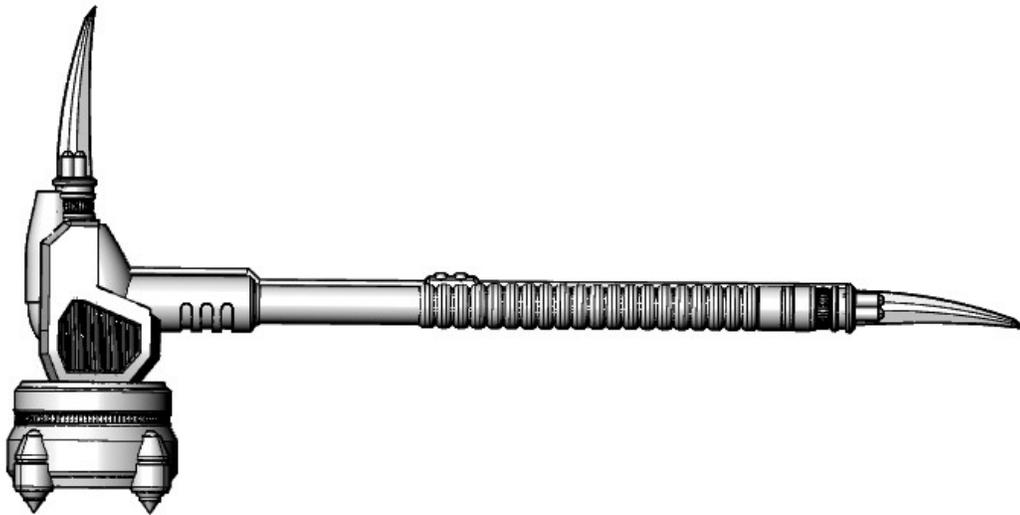
Jessica stewed on the short, bumpy ride to her starting gate. She pulled her helmet on, thumped it twice, thumped the empty flask over her heart twice, and climbed up her mech's armored legs to the open cockpit.

“What the void's wrong with me?” she said to herself as NoName's systems checked off in front of her, its muted electronic tones ticking off with each component reporting ready to fight. Mikralos, perhaps by accident, more likely on purpose, arranged for her to walk her mech through the same gate that Jered went through on his final match. The blast shields over her cockpit weren't going to be used in this four-way brawl, so she had a fine view of the gate's carvings and projectile strikes. She saw the small memorial relief bust of Jered's face in profile. She touched the interior of her cockpit glass trying to reach for it. Her moping mood turned to grim fury, and her knuckles turned white as she grasped the controls.

“Never mind what's wrong with me, NoName. It's too long of a list. It's time to defend this house,” she said. The enhanced control computer's visual feedback lights swirled, showing it was processing.

“Agreed, pilot.”

The floodlights of the arena shone down on all four entry gates, bathing her and her fellow combatants in light. The floating countdown began, large, holographic digits marching down to zero. The floodlights cut out just as rings of light around the edges of the stadium flashed, and the starting siren howled.



## CHAPTER 20

*"It was my first void-edge mech race, and I was a nervous wreck. Mech racing was fashionable for a number of years when I first arrived here. Big fuel tanks, heavy boosters, limited range weapons, so you really had to hook and jab while screaming along. It was a good time, for a while, before it fell out of favor with the masses. The action was happening too fast, and everyone wanted ringside seats and blood splashed on them and parts flying in the bleachers, not slowed-down replays on hologram."*

*"So, it's me and this triple-team of Myoshan mini-mechs, and we're, no lie, running right along the edge of Junctionworld, nothing separating us but a low barrier from slipping into the void, into oblivion."*

*"It's the last lap, and these three little schmucks try a blocking maneuver combo, trying to knock me off the rim of existence. The one in front slams on his jets, one stays beside me to keep me from changing lanes, and the third comes vectoring in, ready to force me over the wall."*

*"Only, Judah, my battle computer, reads it all ahead of time, like an open book. They never stood a chance. We vault the roadblock mech, stitching a line of cannon shells up the back of his reactor. He explodes, kaput. Next, a vibroknife through the cockpit of the blocker, and I hook him into the third putz, the ringleader, who bounces out into the void. He just disappeared in a swirl of black and gray, poof, like trash off a conveyor."*

*"My whole career, I hated void-edge matches or races, because it felt like you were consigning someone to an eternal grave if things went bad. That first time was pretty satisfying, though. Those Myoshans can be pretty nasty when they pack up on you like that. Kren, I think, was the name of that little pain in the tukhus."*

-Excerpt from "The First Unlimited: My Story," by Solomon Kramer

"Did...did you just say something, NoName? Or...is that you, Judah?" Jessica said, her hands pulled back from her control yokes in surprise. The three other mechs emerged from their entrance platforms to rousing applause. Each of the three opponents screamed in on

their jets to their start points. All three turned to face her, watching her and her mech plod along to the fourth glowing circle.

“Identifier 'Judah' is not applicable to this unit. Excessive hybridization violates Arkathan circuitry purity protocols. NoName will continue to suffice for familiarity purposes,” the speakers in her helmet said.

“Well, you sound like Judah, but only if someone performed a drunken lobotomy on him. Why the void is this just happening now?” She said.

“Prath!” She shouted into her communications link. She stabbed the microphone button off in disgust when the line buzzed back a harsh tone of noncompliance. Comms between the pits and pilots were cut during matches once the horn sounded. She was now on her own, her only companion a yappy, freshly-formatted battle computer.

“Self-diagnostics and integration verification were ongoing after installation at Master Vervor's. I am still only 87% capable of full function. A processor node appears to be missing from my casing. However, that diminished capacity exceeds prior performance by 338%, Pilot,” NoName said.

“Great. Just great. Your performance might be better, but your timing stinks. I'm going to skin that Niff tech who put you together for not warning me about this,” she said.

“Understood. There are a number of ways to approach the task of skinning a Niff. First--”

“Gate damn it, NoName, I've got three mechs waiting to bash my cockpit in, can't you see that? Get your head in the arena. Look, just shut up and help me fight. Give me some boost, but don't fire up the plasma lines to the hammer just yet,” Jessica said, putting a rubber mouth guard over her upper teeth. These melee brawls tended to get nasty.

She engaged her thrusters, arcing in to the edge of her circular start pad. They couldn't start the four-way free-for-all until she entered her circle.

Jessica hovered at the edge of the ring of floor lights. She pointed the mech's huge BGDH-1 warhammer at the sinewy black and purple mech on her right, about 100 yards away. The opposing pilot's mech shivered in answer to the challenge, its two segmented arms shaking and elongating into spiked, armored whips. The long appendages brushed the arena floor, small claws flexing at the tips, and a light mounted to each chunky segment blinked an angry violet as vibrospike emerged from each module. The other pilot raised his gloved hands off his controls, beckoning her to bring it on. *Nice effect, for a guy in a purple jumpsuit*, Jessica thought, smirking.

Jessica and NoName flared one last pulse on her jets, and dropped into her engagement pad. She and the purple mech flew at each other like a magnet to steel. NoName issued a collision warning through her headphones, then highlighted an incoming metal whip-arm vectoring in at her. *Damn, those things could stretch*, she thought.

She made a short shift as the distance closed. The long, spiked arm sailed by her mech's thigh, leaving a rip in the armor. Taking the hit for a chance to get in close, Jessica brought her hammer up, then slammed the mallet into the upper shoulder of the whip-mech. The other pilot's eyes went wide, his mouth agape, and she saw the heavy shock rattle him against his restraints.

She shoved the enemy mech away with the top of the hammer, spinning it into the middle of the four circles. The crowd roared as the spike on the back of the weapon caught a piece of hull, tearing off a black panel from the purple mech. It landed in a twisted jumble of armored arms.

Jessica checked NoName's damage report from the thigh. *Superficial. Good.*

Her opponent's mech came to its feet. Melino, the pilot, was more experienced than her in the Hammer Leagues, but he had an average record. NoName's reports on him told her that he was good with those whip-arms from a distance, but vulnerable close in. Time to close the gap.

Behind him, Jessica could see the match's other two mechs grappling in combat, a crude motorized saw emerging from a hatch on the portly, trashcan-shaped mech. The rusty buzzsaw sank into the upper arm of its sleeker white and pink partner, sending sparks flying. The slim Wardancer mech answered by puncturing the trashcan's lower hull with a pair of short plasma blades. Jessica's opponent, Melino, charged again, taking her attention from the other locked-up pair of fighters.

Another whip arm shot out to her. Before she could react, the interior and hull lights signaling autopilot control blinked on. NoName blocked the incoming attack with the shaft of her warhammer. The claws on the tip of the arm clamped on to her weapon, and she could feel herself being pulled forward, off balance. Jessica pulled back hard on her control yokes, regaining her stance, as the auto lights blinked off.

"NoName, what the void are you doing? Back off and let me fight!" Jessica said, slapping the console.

"Pilot Kramer, I am charged with your protection. You were not reacting in a sufficient manner. Increasing power to thrusters. Prepare for acceleration," NoName said.

Dodging another long stab from a whipsaw arm, Jessica rotated her mech's torso. She forced NoName to hold on to the hammer with just one arm, disengaging the grip of her other armored hand. She wrapped up the second extended whip arm before Melino could retract it.

"I *am* reacting, you stupid bot! Give me the controls!"

Jessica locked Melino's long, segmented limb under her own, and felt the hum of its vibroblades chatter against her hull. She continued her twist at the waist, pulling him closer.

"Now, stomp it! Give me some thrust, and light him up!"

"Inquiry. Stomp what?"

"The jets, gate-damn-it, the jets! Burn this guy's arm off with the back jets while I have him tangled up!"

"Colloquialism understood. Engaging," NoName said.

"Oy, tell me this is not happening," Jessica said. NoName overheated the turbine's output, and a third of the captured arm melted and fell as Jessica's jets went through it like a blowtorch through a worm. The drone cameras around them all flicked their camera flashes in synch, capturing the attack for the replay feeds.

"Now we reel him in. Counter-rotate. We're going to spike him," Jessica said.

The burning stump of Melino's arm flailed, slapping against her cockpit glass before disappearing from view. Jessica ignored it, returning both hands to the shaft of her wrapped-up hammer. She pulled the black and purple mech in closer.

"Pilot," NoName said. Damage signals flared from her legs and back.

"Not now. Prepare to reroute plasma to the hammer."

"Pilot, there's--"

"Stand by! Ready..."

Melino's mech was in close. Jessica started to rotate the hammer, edging the sharp end of the shaft towards the enemy's upper hull and cockpit. The purple mech came closer, it's jets glowing, trying to maintain the distance, trying to avoid the hammer's spiked pommel. Jessica's autopilot lights came on, then the hammer wasn't there at all. Melino's arm retracted, sending her Big Gate-Damned Hammer-One sailing over his shoulder. The crowds erupted in bellowing surprise.

"NoName, you...just let go of our only weapon, you stupid, idiotic...chip-for-brains!"

"His damaged arm's vibrospikes were still functional, and were inflicting mounting injury to this unit as proximity increased. Calculations determined--"

"Shut up, NoName, or Judah, or whoever the void you are. Stand down! I'm calling the

gate-damned shots, here," she said, slamming an override button on her console. NoName's voice muted with a subdued chirp, but his displays and indicators still registered on her cockpit's interior screens.

Both of Melino's arms shot out at her, trying to stab her as she charged in. She dodged the damaged stub, but the maneuver put her into the path of the longer, claw-tipped appendage. It raked across the top of her hull, carving a groove into the side of her transparent canopy armor. She and Melino locked eyes. He was grinning at her through his own glass, working the controls in a frenzy. She could see the combat drugs streaming into his system from neon-lit lines.

She trapped the damaged arm again, yanking his mech in to her. She initiated a spinning back kick, the jets in that leg adding their power to the movement. The arena's audience streaked across her field of view as the rotating acceleration crushed her back into her seat.

Her mech's heel sank into the target mech's chest armor, ripping off the damaged arm at the shoulder. The purple mech toppled again, charred parts of the segmented arm scattering across the floor. He landed with a long, tumbling skid, and his own autopilot lights came on. If this had been a one-on-one match, now would be the time to deliver the final knockout. There were two more mechs to face, though, and she needed that hammer back.

A pulse of jets carried her over to the weapon, where it lay on the steel floor. There were four grooves gnawed into the handle from Melino's vibroclaws, but the plasma lines to the hook and spike appeared intact. *Damned half-brained computer and its 'calculations,'* she thought, hefting the warhammer in her mech's giant hands. Melino's damaged, shell-shocked chassis attempted to right itself, its autopilot lights still engaged. An explosion and roar of the crowd drew her attention to the Wardancer and her victim.

The battle was not going well for Flevver and his trashcan mech. Vicious gouges from the Wardancer's plasma blades covered the squat mech's patched hull. Mech parts littered the area around the two mechs, most of them Flevver's. Flaming stumps from a pair of cut-off arms billowed flame, and the little green mech wobbled on its thick, slashed-up legs.

The Wardancer pulled her mech back into a crouch as the crowd cheered, the two plasma blades crossed in front of her. Jessica's external microphones picked up the thumping warrior song coming from the Wardancer's speakers. The pink and white mech sprang forward, lopping off the last weapon arm from the junkmech with surgical precision. The buzzsaw fell to the floor of the arena, joining the rest of its fellow smoking components, and

the audience roared.

*Ugh.* Gates, she hated Wardancers. So prissy. So vain, thinking they were the stars of their own music hologram show, complete with soundtrack. Jessica flipped a toggle, engaging her own external speakers and pulled out her protective mouthpiece.

“Quit toying with him, fancy-pants. Just get it over with, already,” she said. The Wardancer finished the follow-through of her leaping assault, landing in a crouch. The pilot turned her attention, and blades, to Jessica.

Flevver Sixthson did not waste the distraction Jessica provided, and punched out of his burning mech before the Wardancer could set up a final attack run. His shattered cockpit glass blew out with a muffled pop, and his dented ejection pod rocketed him to relative safety. Jessica and the Wardancer both watched the capsule corkscrew across the arena floor towards the crowd.

The Wardancer, Kierra, raised one of her mech's plasma blades towards Jessica. A foreboding song played from the lithe mech's speakers, some grating revenge ballad Jessica never heard before.

“Someone in this arena owes me a kill. You just took his spot, Kramer,” Kierra said.

“You'll have to wait your turn, *tiny dancer*. I'm going to finish off 'floppy arms,' over there,” Jessica said.

“Not today, *daddy's girl*,” Kierra said. The Wardancer charged up one of her blades, dumping extra power into it. Performing a pirouette, the tall mech hurled the energized weapon.

Jessica hit her jets as Kierra released the weapon, strafing to the left of the glowing short sword as it flew...far to her right?

Jessica tracked the flying blade's laser-straight path...right through the cockpit of Melino's black and purple mech. The crowd roared as the autopilot lights blinked out, and the swaying mech crumpled. Flames and dissipating plasma filled the cockpit, cooking the combat-drugged pilot's divided corpse.

“That's one. Care to join him, *Jessie*?” Kierra said, her music changing to a dance track with a deep bass beat. It was sparring music. Jessica felt like obliging her.

“Pretty stupid, throwing away half of your--”

The Wardancer vaulted at Jessica, her own jets burning hard. A soaring leap carried Kierra's sleek machine up and over Kramer's up-armored cargo mech. The pink killing machine continued its jet-propelled sprint to the distant burning wreck, pulling the plasma

blade out the smoking hull.

Great. Now she was the one being toyed with. Jessica put her mouth guard back in, switched off her external speakers, and re-engaged NoName.

“Think you can behave? Think you can let me be the pilot for a change?”

“Adaptive behavioral circuits have been monitoring the combat situation during the shutdown. This unit theorizes it can assist without overriding pilot, except during extenuating--”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Promise? I need you focused, here, bot, not tugging at my elbow or quoting the thesaurus,” Jessica said. Kierra's mech paced in the distance, kicking the burning purple mech on to its side. A column of flames shot up as the roused fire found new fuel, and the drone cameras again strobed their approval. A pop music remix blended into the sparring music. It was some Third Gate teeny-bopper crap from a few months ago that always forced Jessica to change her music feed. Kierra must be trying to kill her with disgust.

“Affirmative, pilot,” NoName said.

“Ok. Give me 75 percent power to the hammer, NoName. I want that thing glowing, but I still need some jets,” Jessica said. Her reactor stepped up its output, a deep whine spooling up behind her. She flicked on her speakers.

“Kierra, that song's as old as your dance moves,” she said.

“Your remark's petty, and not pretty. Just like you, Kramer,” the Wardancer answered. Jessica edged her mech closer to the wreck of Flevver's jalopy. Her external cameras showed her mech's foot was next to the fallen chopsaw.

“I'll show you 'pretty,' you worn-out excuse for a pleasure doll,” Jessica said.

Modern-day Wardancers were a proud and lethal warrior cult, but they did not like being reminded they were originally brought to Junctionworld as lab-grown “comfort hosts.” Long before the Gatekeepers took control, the Wardancer Rebellion ended with mass castrations of their overthrown enslavers, the K'Narr. Preserved containers filled with the offending members still turned up from time to time in excavations and refurbished buildings, much to the consternation of the males in the rehab and construction crews.

The poise and grace of the sleek mech's posture faded, and a blazing display of overpowered jets told Jessica that her goad worked. Screaming something incoherent over her loudspeakers, Kierra charged, her plasma-edged swords swinging in wild loops.

Kramer's mech shifted its weight from side to side, its glowing warhammer waiting for the in coming assault. As the distance closed, Jessica kicked up the foot next to the buzzsaw,

sending it flying at Kierra's machine.

The Wardancer sliced the buzzsaw clean in two, one of the fragments tearing a small rip into her hull. The kicked-up distraction kept her from putting both blades into Jessica, but Kierra still carved a furrow up the left forearm of Kramer's mech.

"I think we touched a nerve, NoName," Jessica said.

"Agreed, pilot."

Again, Kierra charged. Jessica blocked a flying kick from the Wardancer, raking the hammer's energized claw across the back of the mech's leg. The pink mech's momentum carried it into another kick, spinning and smashing into Jessica's hip. Another reversal, and Kierra brought both plasma blades overhead, trying to skewer Jessica through her cockpit. Kramer brought her hammer up, blocking the twin thrusts. The two mech pilots grappled, cockpit to cockpit, neither one gaining the advantage, as plasma weaponry sizzled all around them.

NoName threw an alert on the screen, showing Jessica a view from the lower abdomen's camera. Vicious spikes emerged from behind the Wardancer mech's shin covers. Kierra hammered the undercarriage of NoName with repeated, close-in knee strikes, spearing and puncturing the hull with brutal force and frequency.

Jessica felt a hot streak shoot up her own leg as a spike entered the bottom of her cockpit, ripping her open from ankle to knee.

Crying out in pain, she pivoted the mech's hull, trying to shield its punctured guts and her own skin. The warhammer's plasma spike pivoted as well, taking one of the Wardancer's mech hands with it. The charged plasma blade hit the arena deck plating, sinking in halfway to the hilt, the severed manipulator still gripping it.

NoName flashed a suggestion to turn the emergency rotation into a hip throw, and Jessica executed the plan, sending the Wardancer to the ground using its own momentum. Jessica reached down to her boot. Her fingers came back dark with blood. She could see the arena deck plates through her cockpit floor. She gritted her teeth against the mouthguard.

"Oh, you're going to pay, you bi--"

Kierra rolled and boosted her mech to the side before the giant hammer came down. The thunderous strike echoed through the arena interior, its sound matched only by the crowd. Another rained down. Then, another. She was losing blood. The hammer blows were getting sloppy.

"Hold still, you gate-damned--"

The Wardancer mech, still scrambling, boosted its jets to gain some distance, carrying her away from Jessica in a long arc. Kramer's vision closed in, her head light from blood loss as the adrenaline subsided. Her hands shook at the controls.

“Pilot?”

“Ye...yeah, NoName?”

“The day. What day is it? Answer immediately.”

“Day? Isss...Third...no. Seventh Gate Day? Dunno. Sleepy.”

“Determination: Cognitive functions impaired. Override engaged,” the battle computer said.

The mech's autopilot lights came on, but Jessica found herself in a dream state, unable to focus. There was an audible gasp from the crowd as the exterior running lights signaled NoName's takeover. Jessica tasted rubber in her mouth, and spit out the guard. Her eyes rolled back, and things turned surreal.

She saw NoName point the BGDH-1's head towards Kierra again, mimicking Jessica's gesture to Melino at the beginning of the match. The Wardancer matched the visual challenge with her remaining blade. Limping, his leg damaged and trailing smoke, NoName twirled the hammer like a baton, bidding the warrior woman to come forth with his other hand. Kierra obliged, her jets blazing. The crowd roared, part elation, part outrage, as the blinding flash of drive plasma devoured the distance between them.

The Wardancer tried to arc again over the cargo mech's cockpit, this time leading with her blade. NoName evaluated, crouched, then shot out with the hammer's hook, catching her in midair like a gaffed fish. Kierra's mech landed hard, bouncing against the arena floor, but NoName maintained control. The computer slashed with the plasma-charged hammer's beak into the captured mech's back. The slicing, slithering motion of the glowing claw tore the innards out of her jets and reactor, rendering Kierra immobile.

The jarring motion of the fierce combat roused Jessica to her senses, as if out of a dream. The blur of the last few moments swam before her eyes.

“Run...fire...hammer...” she said, before the darkness consumed her.

“Acknowledged. Executing,” NoName said.

There was no fitting music playing from the Wardancer's speakers. There was no belaboring the killing blow to the bloodlust of the crowd. The final movement was surgical, and finished in the blink of an eye. The hammer came up...and smashed down through an upthrust arm and blade, making a mockery of it, like it wasn't even there. The reversed

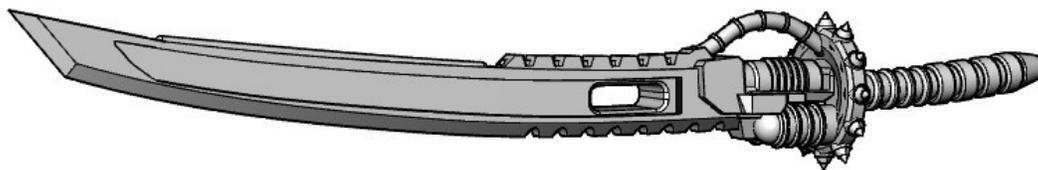
hooking movement tore the remaining hand and sword away at the wrist. The energized weapon reversed, and the pointed tip of the shaft speared through the lower cockpit of the prone pink mech. Before the audience could react, it was over with a shudder and a twist.

In a growing swell, the crowd began to boo. Hammer League matches weren't supposed to end this way, with some gate-damned machine taking the place of flesh-and-blood pilots! If the crowds wanted that, they'd watch some Unlimited, overpowered nonsense. What the void was *this* nonsense? Ticket agents braced for the demands of the crowd for their money back, and pandemonium reigned in the stands.

NoName powered down, kneeling in a controlled topple. The mech's cockpit dropped and lurched to ground level as the crashbots approached from the sides of the arena.

The drone cameras circled, their flashing cameras drinking in the individual scenes of slaughter. Most poignant of all was the image of Jessica Kramer, her skin now gray from blood loss, her eyes rolled back, saved at the last minute by her Arkathan-rigged machine.

Masamune Kyuzo watched from a stadium corridor in the bleachers of Berva Proxima, his eyes narrowing in satisfaction, his hands clenched around a railing. This rookie might not be a worthy challenge, but her mech's computer had spirit. This might be a good match, yet.



## CHAPTER 21

*“Well, you can take the human out of Maro Point, but you can't take the Maro Point out of the human, eh, Chred? Was that a wild match tonight, or what?”*

*“Too right, Denk, I haven't seen that much pandemonium on the arena floor since the self-aware Unlimited fighterbot “StellarSonic” was consumed by illegal performance-enhancing nanites in the middle of a match a few years ago. He took out more than half the combatants in that match, including his own squadmates, if you recall.”*

*“I remember it well, Chred, along with all the casualties in the audience when the ravenous mass devoured him and spread to the stands. An ugly day, indeed.”*

*“And speaking of ugly, let's look again at the 'Comeback Kid,' Jessica Kramer, just after her mech's computer takes over and rams that energized hammer right through Wardancer Kierra's cockpit. Kierra's not walking away from that one, Denk.”*

*“No, not on her original legs, she won't, Chred. Those Wardancers were built sturdy by the K'Narr, though, and can really take a poun--”*

*“--Just a moment, Denk, the control room is telling me it's time to go back to the arena floor, where our correspondent, Korba, is standing by with the extraction bots. Behind her, we can see, is Kierra's ruined pink and white mech, which was sponsored by Aguila Rigel Munitions. 'Aguila Rigel, for when you care enough to hit them with the best.' Korba?”*

“Could somebody, anybody, please explain to me why my gate-damned mech went rogue? Why it decided to win my premier Hammer League match without me? Anyone? No?” She held a wrench, stabbing it in the assembled crew's direction, then threw it hard against the leg of her mech. It bounced with a clang through the silent, dread-filled shop.

Jessica hobbled back and forth on a custom healing cast. The printed arrangement around her cut and swollen limb looked like a plastic combination of honeycomb and spiderweb. The deep lacerations were healing, but the Wardancer's spikes almost cost her a leg.

The dozen Myoshan assembled crew members kept their eyes straight, their rigid, quad-eyed stares remaining fixed to distant points both front and back. Myoshans, as a rule,

maintained a military rigor in their behavior, and showed no waver in the face of the tall, obnoxious mammal currently bawling them out.

Kitos, the Niff technician responsible for grafting the old Judah command module into her mech, avoided looking at her, casting furtive glances about the room. Prath held a weary hand over his eyes. Master Vervor, the owner of the shop, chuckled and crossed his arms, sticking out his needle teeth.

“You and your mech won the match, pilot, even if you only scored a couple Disabled points. The damage is extensive, yes, to both you and your machine, but you won. You're being irrational, and I and my crew don't have to put up with your tantrums. You lot, get back to it. We have someone showing up this afternoon, another big, custom job,” Master Vervor said, dismissing his crew. His fellow Myoshans turned back to tackle the heavy work of putting the damaged mech back into fighting shape, and Vervor walked back to his office, shutting the door.

Kitos tried to join them, but stopped when Jessica speared an accusatory finger at him.

“Not you! You sit your blue butt down! I want answers, Niff!”

“Little human, screaming is not going to make this better. You've made your point, and we have a multitude of repairs to figure out. I think that's enough--”

“Don't 'little human,' me, Prath. This drippy dungbag sent me out into the arena with an Arkathan computer that *suddenly, magically* came online the same time the match started, and started overriding my controls in the middle of four-way fight. I was up against a *Wardancer*, out there, for Gates's sake! It even gave my hammer away! Just opened up its hand, and gave it away, like a gate-damned bouquet of flowers, ape. How did he not know? I thought you were the *expert*, Kitos?” Jessica said, still hobbling. Kitos cowered, his ears folded flat, one set of arms over his head, the other wrapped around his body.

“I-I tried to graft the remaining command nodes from the damaged unit into the current computer, and preliminary function tests were nominal. Master Prath said so!”

“The Judah module was self-healing. It must have grown past the junction grafts. Again, that's enough, Jessica,” Prath said.

“Yes,” Kitos said. “Arkathan circuits can self-heal. They must have been still making their own pathways after the booth tests. I-I not know the extent of--”

“I don't want to hear any more excuses, you slime-squirter!” she screamed.

“I-I thought Pilot Kramer wanted answers--”

“I almost *died* out there, Niff! The damn controls weren't responding! It was like my

brother, Jered, all over again! Is Mikralos paying you to help kill me, too, or something?"

"I *said*, I. Think. That's. *Enough*." Prath's eyes were hard, no longer covered due to embarrassment at Jessica's outburst. The stern edge in his voice shut Jessica up in mid-tirade. His long fingers reached out to steady the Niff's repetitive rocking in his seat.

"Kitos, please take the Judah module, the NoName control computer, and the adapters, and set them up on the test bench. We will join you shortly," Prath said. The blue ball of tension unwound, and the Niff gathered the components and left. Prath turned to the seething human pilot.

"You...you are really starting to test my patience, Pilot Kramer. Take your flask, or wherever else you're hiding your booze, and leave the shop. Wait for me at the bar on the corner. I will be along, shortly, once I calm down Kitos," Prath said.

Jessica's eyes hardened, and she took a short step back, confused.

"You're...telling me to go *to* the bar? Even though--"

"Even though I told you not to drink anymore? That it might ruin your focus and endanger you in the arena? I think we both know how good you are at listening to orders. You have a new souvenir to show for it, after all," Prath said, motioning at her cast.

"I wasn't drunk, Prath. It was just a quick belt, and it was Dad's old flask. It was just, like, a good luck thing. It's no big deal," Jessica said.

"'No big deal' ended up with you comatose and nearly dead in front of thousands, and giving away the surprise advantage that you had an Arkathan computer onboard! I *hope* it was the booze that let you allow a Wardancer in that close. She tore you and your mech to shreds, in case you didn't notice. Not to mention, you should have closed in with your first opponent, the whip-sword pilot. Maintaining your distance only let him rip you pieces at his leisure. If you had more than a dozen matches under your belt, you'd have known that! So, in summary, I sincerely do hope you were drunk, because if you were sober, I can only think that it was a result of pure incompetence, pilot," the tall Ascended said.

He was shocked at his own volume, and he lowered his eyes.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I must look after Kitos and the diagnostics. Go to the bar, like I asked. I will come for you later."

"Fine."

Jessica stormed, as best she could on a bum leg, out of the shop. She hit the main entrance door's exit button at full stride. It didn't release, and she bumped face first into the thick plastic.

“Vervor! Your door! What's the void's wrong with this thing? Let me out of here,” She yelled at the establishment's proprietor, shaking the unresponsive handle while slamming the button again.

The Myoshan emerged from his small office door carrying a remote control. He pressed the button, and a buzzer signaled the door's release.

“Security measure. I'd rather not have a repeat of the Headhunter's last unscheduled visit. Besides, you've made enemies of the Wardancers. I don't need any vengeance oaths being fulfilled on my shop floor. Oh, and mind the gentlebeing coming in, too. He has an appointment,” Master Vervor said.

Jessica Kramer turned to the unlocked door's open frame to see it now occupied. Her eyes went wide with recognition, sending her hand to her pistol's grip. The human male produced something from between his outstretched fingers.

“Pilot Jessica Kramer, I am Masamune Kyuzo. My card.”



\* \* \* \* \*

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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](http://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 at [www.johnbearross.com](http://www.johnbearross.com)

And, finally, I'm all-in at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

Just put my name in the search bar.

