THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 1: Age of Mechs

They called this era the Age of Mechs.

It was not as if the introduction of mechs replaced other weapons of war. In the galactic war against the alien races that sought to wipe out humanity, warships and weapons of mass destruction still played an essential role.

Yet a nuclear bomb was too destructive if used against humans. Alien races could easily pick up a bargain if humanity constantly weakened themselves to settle internal grudges.

These pointless wars would only end when humanity united all of its separate fiefs. Many visionaries have attempted to do so, and succeeded, up to a point.

Peace never lasted.

The human race had an inborn tendency to fall apart. The grand enterprise of unity failed time and time again.

So people separated, still loosely allied by their common ancestral heritage, but with nothing else in common. Wars continued, but a complex web of treaties limited the destruction of essential war materiel. The human race stood a better chance of resisting alien incursions once it stopped destroying their own settlements and warships.

"It’s all fine and dandy to conquer your neighbor’s planet. At the very least, don’t bring out the big guns and please lease the expensive stuff in space intact."

Not the best solution, but somehow humanity muddled through.

With the stagnation of naval battles, ground warfare took on new significance. Infantry, tanks and artillery enjoyed a resurgence of popularity as the fractious human race fought over their own territory.

Naturally, any invaders didn’t have it easy. Forced to operate on enemy soil, the conflicts often devolved into wars of attrition.

Even if the invaders painstakingly triumphed over their enemies, was it worth the effort? They would find out in dismay that they lost more money from their army than what they gained in territory.

Most of the warmongers realized that waging war was a money-losing business.

"Just as planned." The pacifists thought as they patted their backs. The treaties had been extensively drafted for just such an outcome. Without the tools to threaten a planet into a quick surrender, the warmongers had to rely on old and inefficient technology in order to conquer territories.

It turned out the peace lovers celebrated too early.

Ever since the legendary Mack Liu first stepped on the battlefield with a giant humanoid machine called a ’mech’, war had changed forever. It advanced into a whole new paradigm.

Able to perform ably in even the most inhospitable planets, the first mechs made a mockery of the slow-paced and static way of war of traditional armies.

"The human body is the best weapon of humans." One of the lead inventors of the modern war mech remarked after the first models blitzed half a massive nation’s territory. "Everyone knows that infantry is flexible but fragile while tanks are tough but clumsy. So one day we thought, why not make a new weapon that takes the human form and simply scale it up?"

It resulted in a revolutionary weapon that charmed humans across the galaxy for its evocative look and inspiring capabilities.

Faster than infantry, more flexible than tanks and able to carry a variety of weapons, they nonetheless required much less supplies to keep them running. Their logistical footprint was a fraction of what a conventional army gobbled up. This alone ensured that mechs dethroned all other service branches.

The Age of Mechs unfolded into splendor. Broadcasts surrounding mechs earned record views. Online and offline games brought the masses closer the glamorized new machines. Major arms manufacturers invested in the rapidly growing mech industry. Countless startups offering their own unique takes on the mechs popped up like mushrooms.

The Age of Mechs seemed to herald humanity into a new golden age.

Unfortunately, only a small number of elites could step into the true world of mechs. The most basic mech models involved hundreds of patents and other proprietary knowledge that would cost a fortune to license.

Those interested in piloting an authentic war mech also needed the right genes. The highly arcane neural interface that allowed pilots to control their mechs as natural as moving their own bodies could only be piloted by a gifted handful. Those who ignored the warnings fried their brains.

It took a long time for researchers to establish a clear view of how many people possessed the right potential. From the latest statistics, only a mere 3.5 percent of all of humanity possessed the right genetics to successfully connect to a neural interface. These privileged elites, tested for compatibility from their tenth birthday, enjoyed admiration and worship from the 96.5 percent who were doomed to never step into a cockpit.

Not all of the 3.5% would actually go on to pilot a mech, but even the poorest potentate from the most backwater planet had to undergo training. Once they gained a basic proficiency in piloting, they were added to the reserves. Just in case.

Ves Larkinson was born with the conviction that he belonged in the cockpit. His father was a mech pilot. His grandfather also piloted mechs. He could name at least nine direct ancestors who all served honorably in the Bright Republic’s renowned Mech Corps. Most of his aunts, uncles and the rest of the extended Larkinson family had a long history of piloting mechs.

"Dad, what’s it like to be a pilot?"

"It’s dangerous, but it’s also the only time I feel alive."

His tenth birthday changed his life. His entire world crashed down on him once the doctor from the Republic announced the results. His genetics marked him as one of the 96.5 percent. In other words, he was a plebeian, a norm. No matter which word was in vogue, Ves became a commoner doomed to never to enter a cockpit in his life.

"There’s nothing dishonorable about having different genes." The doctor reassured the young Ves. He had already crushed the dreams of countless kids. One more hardly fazed him at all. "No one is good at everything. The rest

of the 96.5% get by just fine. Find some passion in your capabilities. Not everyone is destined to follow their father’s footsteps."

His father, Ryncol Larkinson, half-hearted patted the young Ves’ back as he gave him an ice cream. What else could he do? His frequent tours of duty left Ves to wallow in his depression alone.

And so Ves turned from a precocious boy who dreamed about mechs into a sullen teenager drowning himself in games and partying. With a deceased mother and a father absent from frequent tours of service, no one could rein Ves in. He graduated from high school with less-than-stellar grades.

"What now?"

Ves finally pieced himself together once he considered his future. He couldn’t waste away his life forever.

"I’m not a pilot. I’m never going to be a pilot. All I really know is mechs. If I am never fated to pilot a mech, then I can still do something else. I’m still a Larkinson. Mechs are in my blood."

Ves narrowed his goals. If he couldn’t pilot a mech, then he’d be the one to make them.

In the Age of Mechs, a mech designer led the development of mechs. Just as crucial as mech pilots, they came up with innovative designs of mechs and shaped them into reality. Some of these designers were just as famous as the aces who achieved incredible feats with their mechs.

Some of the most prestigious designers worked for the major arms manufacturers. They were able to deftly spit out a casual new design that would be sold a million times.

These were the star designers, the superstars who had CEOs and head of states at their beck and call. Even a casual sneeze could impact the stock prices of the companies they worked at, for they were just too influential. Many of the larger human states relied on their exclusive designs to give them an edge in conflicts involving mechs.

Then came the middle class of the mech designers, the entrepreneurs with at least a complete series of mech designs. Adept in all facets of what constituted a mech, these seasoned engineers could take a pile of random

parts and come up with unique designs that filled most of the conventional roles any decent client demanded. Some designers focused on churning out loads of mechs at the most affordable cost, while others might spend their whole lives on a single model.

What was left was the bottom heap. About ninety percent of all designers fell into this category. This included the fresh graduates, the failed entrepreneurs and the washed-out old timers with outdated knowledge. They couldn't design anything other than ripoffs or blatant copies of more successful models. Most of these dregs were doomed to served as faceless cogs, working behind the scenes to repair or maintain other people's mechs.

The lucky ones still get to be involved in mech design by fulfilling a niche in customization. They took existing mechs and changed them in little ways, or licensed an old, existing design and added their own flair to it. The cutthroat competition in the saturated market didn't allow many to stay afloat for long. Only some got by with this business model.

Ves hoped to be one of them. With his so-so grades, he could forget about attending a prestigious university. He only managed to scrape enough merits to attend a program offered by the Rittersberg University of Technology, an average institution from the Bright Republic's capital.

All he got five years later was a bland degree from a bland institution. In other words, he was worthless in the eyes of employers.

That was okay. His father Ryncol supported him all the way through. He even spent much of his time gathering the capital to kick start his son's business.

They both had a plan. They would start a one-man mech boutique with enough automation to print its own parts and allow Ves to assemble a mech from scratch. Ryncol would refer him to his buddies in the service for cheap jobs and let Ves dip into the world of customization step by step. Once Ves built up his reputation, he might be able to move on to designing his own variants.

All those plans came crashing down when Ves returned to an empty home back in Cloudy Curtain, their home planet. Ryncol enjoyed a good salary as a mech pilot, so he could afford a grand townhouse in the suburbs. He recently sold it in order to scrape enough cash to acquire a workshop just outside of town. It only offered enough space for a small living area.

The workshop could use a makeover. The modular, prefabricated structure looked second hand, as if it was salvaged off a battlefield or scrap yard. With the amount of rust and scratches its exterior sported, it was a miracle it hadn't fallen apart.

When Ves stepped inside, he sighed in relief. The essentials were still in one shape. The insides looked fairly clean. All of the valuable machines needed to run his enterprise were present, if second hand. His dad might not know his stuff, be he knew plenty of people who did.

"Where are you, dad?"

After weeks of silence, Ves had to face the fact that his dad was missing. That shouldn't be a cause for alarm. His dad had been assigned to a regiment stationed at the border between the Bright Republic and the belligerent Vesia Kingdom. Any incidents that might flare up could cause his father to be recalled.

When Ves called his father's friends, he found out he never returned to duty! After contacting the police, it seemed that Ryncol had never shown his face elsewhere. All the galactic calls and electronic messages sent to his father fell off a cliff. No one could find any trace of his presence.

The Cloudy Curtain Planetary Bank quickly came knocking. It turned out the workshop components such as the spiffy 3D printer had been bought with a loan. A 3D printer was an essential machine that turned raw materials into factory quality mech parts.

His father had to borrow over 330 million bright credits in order to finance the acquisition of assets. With this much money, anyone could buy half-a-dozen advanced mechs!

Ves could spend his lifetime working for an average mech manufacturer and still not earn enough to pay back the huge debt. He instantly fell into a cycle of distress and panic when he read through the bank's polite but impersonal note.

"What kind of mess did my father drag me into?"

The bank took three pages to state that all of the debt was in his name. He would have to hand over the workshop and all of its valuable machinery in case he missed a single annual interest payment.

In short, Ves had to scrounge up about five million credits in the next three months in order to meet the next payment. He lifted up his armband-shaped communicator and activated its miniature projector. A screen came into view that displayed a menu. He hopelessly switched to the credit account linked to the device.

His account only held a measly twelve-hundred credits. That was his spending money for the month.

Ves had little means of earning the required amount of money. With his dad gone missing, it was questionable whether Ves was entitled to the life insurance and other benefits his father arranged. Ves followed up his father's insurance policy because he needed every penny he could squeeze out of the system.

Nothing came out of the meetings. The insurance company was as obstinate as a dog chewing a bone.

Ves swiped away the latest messages from the bank. "I'm broke. I can't even scrounge up the credits to buy the raw materials I need to fabricate new parts. How am I suppose to do business?"

Within a day, he called the bank, the insurance company and the government. What he got back wasn't good.

The bank had already written Ves off. They wanted to get their claws on the workshop before Ves screwed something up and depreciated its value. The only useful thing he received from the bank was a package that Ryncol stashed at the bank in case he got out of touch.

The insurance company claimed that Ryncol was merely missing in action at worst. As an active serviceman, he might return months or years later, so Ves was not entitled to a single penny until the company received solid proof that he had died. If not, the money would only be released after a period of five years.

The government was its usual bureaucratic self. Ves only heard lots of incomprehensible jargon before he plainly hung up. He'd get nothing useful there.

Ves was alone.

His dad had gone off to the deep end, leaving Ves to pick up the pieces. His father only left him with a lousy package with a casual note pasted in front.

"To my son Ves, in case I'm not home."

Opening it up, Ves was mildly surprised to pick up a secure data chip. Most data transfers today occurred entirely wirelessly. People only used data chips when they absolutely had to keep their contents secure.

Ves turned off his comm's connection to the galactic net before accessing the old data chip.

It took three seconds to load its contents, which was unusually long for a chip this size. An unknown program suddenly took over the holographic projection.

"Initializing the Mech Designer System. New user detected. Initiating deep scan in 2400 minicycles. Please prepare properly."

"Wait, what?" Ves asked the program, just before the comm released a huge shock. Ves passed out in an instant.
And so began his journey as a mech designer.