

Chapter 251 Black

Since the design phase required a lot of focus, Ves made sure that the company didn't need his presence for the next couple of weeks. He met with the officers and set a couple of goals.

"The new directors will be installed soon. You'll need to take some time off your project to introduce them to the company. You're wearing the chairman hat as well, Ves."

"I know." Ves replied in a sour tone. "I'll make time, but I trust you can take care of everything else?"

The LMC only offered a single model for sale, so many employees had little to do outside of dealing with the backlog in administration.

"There will always be decisions that you have to sign off. I'll present them to you weekly if able."

With that taken care of, Ves closed himself in his office and booted up the design suite. It was time to turn an idea into a concrete product.

First, the images. The base role received such a substantial boost from Barley's borrowed sentiments that it threatened to break its shackles. It wouldn't be very desirable if the base role gained absolute supremacy.

"Fight, phoenix! Survive! C'mon Jake, you aren't a top mech athlete for nothing!"

Ves distinctively gave the other two images a boost of strength to catch up to the knight. With the timely infusion of energy, the phoenix and Jackknife Jake started taking the offensive against the base role portion of the Triple Division Technique.

The battle took place in an abstract realm where imagination and intelligence formed the principal mode of struggle. This enabled the wily Jackknife Jake to

take an early lead, having cut a pound of flesh from both the phoenix and the knight at once.

The battle for supremacy tugged back and forth as none of the three images held their advantages for long. Any moment where one image gained a clear advantage, the other two images ganged up on them. The struggle transitioned into a battle of attrition, where momentary bursts of energy occurred less and less as the images began to ration their remaining reserves.

Slowly, the phoenix gained an advantage in this increasingly lengthy standoff. It came down to which side lasted the longest.

The knight possessed a lot of endurance and willpower. As a master of defense, the image relied on its durability to hold out the storm. The only downside was that the knight did not have any means to replenish its reserves once it ran out.

Jackknife Jake typified a top mech athlete in that he treated the battle like a duel. While he started strong from the beginning, his reserves began to flag once it dragged on for a longer stretch of time. Mech duels never lasted longer than half an hour because the audience would get bored by the waiting game. Jake became increasingly more feeble as the attrition dragged down his performance.

It was exactly in these circumstances that the phoenix gained supremacy. It only needed to endure Jackknife Jake's intensive attacks at the beginning. As for the knight, the image acted too defensively to put any significant amount of pressure on the totem animal. By the time the knight realized its mistake, the phoenix already enjoyed a clear superiority.

"The phoenix is unending."

Once its superiority reached a decisive moment, Ves started to feel his brain heating up as the phoenix burst out into fire! A massive inferno swept through his mindscape and swept every corner with cleansing flames!

The phoenix forcibly wiped out everything on the battlefield including its two rivals! Both the knight and Jackknife Jake could do nothing as the flames disintegrated their unique identities and subsumed their purified essences for the victor.

The phoenix had won!

A rich bird cry rang out as the flames turned into a shade of black. The sinister-looking conflagration swirled like a shrinking tornado that concentrated all of the fire into a single, black egg.

Deep, mystical patterns ran throughout the egg, their meaning and purpose unknown. Ves sat rapt with anticipation as he waited for the egg to mature. The patterns seemed to invigorate the egg as it started to grow hotter to the point it burst into the same black flames that formed it in the first place.

This time, the fire seemed more deeper and nuanced than before. The wild, untamed fire had turned into a carefully-controlled mantle that tightly protected the egg as it began to hatch.

The shell cracked quickly. Among the broken shell, a pillar of black flames rose to the heavens as it announced the rebirth of the phoenix.

"The black phoenix!"

It had evidently gained a substantial boost in strength. Its cleansing flames enabled it to absorb the essences of the two other images without risking contamination. The black phoenix only willingly absorbed the best part of its rivals, such as the knight's enduring willpower and Jackknife Jake's devious intelligence.

Stronger and more intelligent than before, the black phoenix seemed to stare at Ves before huffing at him in disdain. It was as if the arrogant bird told him that his mind was an unworthy home for him, and that he should hurry up and finish his design.

"Alright, alright, I'll work on it!"

While the battle took a toll on his mind, Ves gained a lot of inspiration from the vivid imagery. "It's exactly how I envisioned my design."

Neither pure aggression nor pure defence triumphed over endurance. Staying power, longevity and recovery ability granted the phoenix a great amount of superiority in battles of attrition.

"By all accounts, the upcoming Bright-Vesia War will definitely drag on for years. This should be the greatest stage for my black phoenix knight."

With the conflict between the images coming to a close, Ves focused on the victor and channeled it through his work.

He started with the internal frame or the skeleton of his design. Knights usually possessed very robust internal frames, but the thicker the internals, the more it impacted its mobility. It also took up a deceptively large amount of volume, leaving less space for the internal architecture.

Ves faced a dilemma at the very start. Should he utilize a thick internal frame that offered strong defense or a leaner frame that left more potential for mobility?

"An offensive knight should still be able to act like a defensive knight if the situation calls for it. On the other hand, a thicker frame will cripple its playmaking potential by slowing it down too much."

Rather than decide by himself, he closed his eyes and channeled the black phoenix roosting inside his head. The proud imaginary creature squawked

and lifted off into the air, circling around the mental representation of the design in his mindscape.

After regarding it with a critical eye, the phoenix released a burning black feather that landed on the design. The feather burned up once it reached the schematic and started to burn away some of the thickness in the internal frame.

Ves got the message. "If that is what you wish."

He could see the rationale for using a thinner frame. The black phoenix depended on its mobility, cunning and amazing endurance to outlast most opponents. Still, it knew when to stand its ground when the situation called for it. The phoenix did not carry over the noble mission of the knight, but it possessed its own peculiar pride.

"It's as if I'm designing a knight for mech pilots who hate piloting knights." He muttered, already foreseeing the controversy his black phoenix knight could ignite. "I would have missed this issue if I declined to purchase a Mastery from the System."

The value of his first Mastery already exerted itself. Ves consciously knew what to look out for if he wanted to deviate from the standard of a defensive knight.

It took an entire day to wrap up his design work on the internal frame. Ves wanted to pursue balance in robustness and mobility. It came down to how much cutting he could get away with. If he thinned a section too much, it risked turning into a twig that might snap at the worst possible moment.

"Let's move on to the internal architecture."

His goals for the internals determined its ultimate structure. Even with a simple frame like a knight, a lot of compromises had to be made in order to form an efficient architecture that could withstand the test of time.

"It has to be tough, it has to be easy to repair, and it also has to possess a high amount of redundancy."

The last priority demanded a lot of clever solutions, because increasing a mech's RF took up a lot of weight and volume. Ves had to keep them down in order to maintain his knight's mobility.

With the generic alloys he licensed from the market, Ves began to draw up his structure according to a specific method. He started with the major pipelines and channels and began to surround them with smaller components. All the while, he sprinkled his growing architecture with features that improved his mech's redundancy and compartmentalization.

The work involved a lot of tedium and repetitive iteration. Time flew by as Ves became absorbed in the problems of day. He leaned heavily on the Mech Designer System's advanced simulations to produce the most optimal results when his considerable intelligence and creativity failed to provide a solution.

"I'm glad I beefed up my Mathematics and Physics to Journeyman. I'm finally starting to tap into the potential of all those simulations the System has in store."

Even more advanced models awaited his use once he advanced his Mathematics to a transcendent level. For now, Ves made due with the workmanlike models that provided fairly realistic results at the press of a button.

The design work on the architecture dragged on for over four weeks as Ves faced the prospect of running out of space. He could always decide to bulk up the exterior of his mech to accommodate more internal space, but that would ruin his design's entire balance.

Strangely enough, Ves never got bored throughout the entire process. With the fate of his future career hanging in the balance, he worked at peak

efficiency throughout the day. Rarely did he need to take a rest due to an overburdened mind. The simplification of his images allowed him to dedicate his focus solely to the proud and relentless black phoenix.

"It's even showing signs of growth."

One of the main goals for his mech had always been the ability to foster growth. The black phoenix happened to be strongly connected to this concept, so it had been easy for Ves to emphasize that aspect. He just didn't expect the growth to start before he finalized the design.

A curious interaction took place as the design choices he made resonated with the image. In turn, the changing phoenix reflected its own desires back at the design. Ves served as the channel and mediator of this faint but clearly noticeable relationship. His role even allowed him to manipulate the interaction to suit his outcomes.

It felt like something unprecedented and profound took place in a plane beyond the material. Something that Ves had birthed out of nothing but his own mental energy took on a life of its own but colored in the perspective of his design. The black phoenix increasingly embodied the design, and the design increasingly echoed the phoenix.

"It's as if they are fated to be together."

In concrete terms, Ves made many design choices that seemed odd and out of place, but started to make sense once he put all the pieces in place. He did not design the most durable knight, but he sure as hell made it tough as bones. In order to increase his design's redundancy, he sacrificed a bit of everything, in particular his energy budget and his armor budget.

"My knight won't be outlasting or outdefending similar models as a consequence."

That sounded fairly... bad. Even with the excellent Veltrex armor system, if Ves did not employ too many layers, his knight would fall apart after a couple of alpha strikes.

"It's a marathon runner, not a sprinter. The endurance is still fairly good, and the repairability has remained excellent throughout the process."

The internal architecture crystallized all of his considerable insights in this area. His extensive development with the Caesar Augustus line taught him many ways to untangle its ungodly internal mess. Added with the fact that he designed a pure knight rather than a hybrid knight, the internals had been shaped into a form that hardly any Apprentice Mech Designer could top.

During his design work on the internals, Ves left out the layout of the artificial musculature. As knights relied on momentum and force to empower their blows, the question of forming the appropriate structure for his musculature could fill entire libraries.

Ves found to his consternation that his Battle Mechatronics Skill left him with an insufficient foundation to design a structure from scratch. Even his Mastery Sub-Skill didn't help that much, because the perspective of a knight only held a narrow perspective on the subject of something as complicated as the muscles of a mech.

"I'm going to need to read a book."

It was a good thing he saved some merits in reserve. It was time to take a break anyway, as Ves pretty much cut himself off from the rest of the universe for a month.

Once he stepped out of his office, he quickly wished he stayed inside. Jake arrived up his doorstep almost immediately with a very important message.

"The newly instated board members are eager to convene the board. If you will follow me to the conference room we've setup, you'll be able to meet them

and set some high level goals for the LMC. You are working with brilliant minds here. You best take advantage of their expertise."

"Oh joy."

Chapter 252 Sparring

The conference room projected his grandfather and five other board members in a lifelike fashion. All of them sat at the table with expressions of hope and anticipation.

After the formalities went out of the way, that optimism quickly disappeared as Ves did not approve of their suggestions.

A financial expert began to speak. "Entering the Bentheim market is a daunting venture that has broken many ambitious companies. We're going to need to build up a war chest. Right now, your various assets are tied up in a perplexing manner. There are ways we can leverage this situation to raise a lot of funds."

The man put up a snazzy presentation that entailed issuing stock and piling up debt. All of it sounded great, but Ves wasn't interested in a quick payout.

"I'm open to issuing a limited amount of stock, but I'm not a fan of complicating the ownership structure to this extent." Ves shook his head.

"Let's not put the cart before the horse. The LMC isn't short on cash right now. Let me complete my design and figure out how much we have to spend on marketing before we address the need to raise more funds."

The financial expert probably had ties to the very same banks and investment companies willing to get involved. The board member would increase his effective control over the LMC if his buddies held a lot of its equity and debt.

Ves could tell that people had been eyeing some of the exclusive licenses he obtained from the Clifford Society. If he wanted to maintain his advantage, he had to keep the licenses to himself and only to himself.

"Our company is running far below its potential capacity." A woman spoke up next. She turned out to be product expert. "Many licenses are time-sensitive and it will take who-knows-long until you finish your next design. It's best if we hire more mech designers and expand our catalog of designs."

"I don't wish to dilute my brand with designs that don't adhere to my design philosophy. I'm pursuing quality over quantity so I'm very exacting in the type of mechs I want to sell."

"Then setup a different brand. It's not that difficult to draw a line between your own products and those designed by others. You can continue to pursue perfection while our other crop of mech designers can aim for mass market penetration."

"I'm not open to hiring other mech designers. I founded the LMC to provide a platform to develop and sell my own products. I don't want to provide safe haven for a bunch of losers who can't make it in the mech industry on their own."

Any external mech designer that the company brought on might be using it as a springboard for their own careers. They'd use the licenses and production facilities that Ves had tirelessly accumulated and hop off his train after they achieved commercial success.

Another possibility was that these external mech designers might take over the company's direction. If they developed a lot of designs that collectively earned more, they could diminish the value of his own products.

"What will it take then for you to accept more mech designers?"

"They'll have to work under me for a long period of time. Right now, the only possible candidate is Carlos Shaw."

"I see." The woman replied while looking down at her terminal. "According to the records, he's an able but inexperienced fabricator who is unremarkable in

many ways. You can find many competent mech designers off the streets of Bentheim that can do a better job than a former classmate of yours."

"The difference is that I don't trust random bums off the streets even if they can design a bestseller. If they're actually that good, they should have started their own company or find someone else that can sponsor their work. It's not the LMC's goal to promote other mech designers."

After this, a mech industry expert started to tout his connections to Bentheim.

"The LMC may have put their roots in Cloudy Curtain, but limiting it to an agricultural planet will severely hobble its growth. Any mech business needs a presence in Bentheim. I can put you in touch with some of the regional powers that can facilitate a deal regarding the foundation of a second site."

Such a second site would likely become the main base of production for the LMC, effectively giving control of a major revenue source to the mech industry expert's buddies.

"A second plant is not in consideration at the moment. Our current production facilities are already capable enough to meet a fair amount of demand. Since I'm in the business of selling premium mechs, I see no immediate need to expand our production capacity for the immediate future."

Ves parried a few more traps couched in helpful suggestions. Once the board members realized that he wouldn't fall for their tricks, the conference meeting shifted into an awkward silence.

His grandfather Benjamin broke the silence by bringing up something that actually sounded constructive, a first for this meeting.

"At the moment, you've signed a contract with a Bentheim mech broker named Marcella Bollinger. I've read through the contract, and while it allows you and your company to outsource all of your sales and support to her, the compensation she demands is uncharacteristically high."

The other board members nodded in agreement. "The standard rate should be ten percent of gross profits. The contract you signed gives her a twenty percent cut."

All of the board members looked at Ves like he got taken advantage of. Which he did, but he needed the extra help.

"The contract is only valid for ten years. We can always renegotiate after the current term ends."

"We can do better." His grandfather added, surprising Ves. "Rather than see it as an exploitative relationship, consider the initial contract as an opening for deeper cooperation. Even if we build up our own marketing capabilities from scratch, we'll never surpass Bollinger's brokerage in terms of understanding the market and finding the best customers."

A few board members disagreed. "I know at least five great marketers who can be persuaded to head a marketing division in Bentheim."

Benjamin shook his head. "It's not worth the effort. Consider the amount of money other mech manufacturers spend on their marketing. It can suck up to a billion credits a day. That's only for the mass-market segment. The premium segments rely more on personal connections to make a sale, something which Bollinger is very adept at. Can we find someone as equally formidable as her in the Bentheim market?"

Someone with so many connections either joined larger organizations or ran their own businesses. Even a medium-sized mech manufacturer didn't enter their eyes.

"What are you getting at, grandfather?"

"The contract can't be breached without a penalty, but it can be renegotiated if both sides are willing to make adjustments. I think it won't be unreasonable to make a demand to lower your mech broker's cut in exchange for a longer

partnership. You've grown significantly since you first entered into a deal with her. Your future prospects is worth too much to risk being ditched at the end of a short ten-year contract."

His words sounded persuasive, and some of the other board members expressed approval at the suggestion. On the other hand, the remaining board members thought that the LMC should wait out the nine remaining years and run their own marketing operation from then on.

"Marcella has been very helpful throughout my career and I don't like to spoil that relationship." Ves decided after hearing out some arguments for both sides. "Even if my contract with Marcella ended, I had already been leaning towards renewing it with fairer terms. I guess we can try to push it forward."

It didn't risk much to make the offer. As long as he did well with his first original model, Marcella would have a gold mine in her lap. Thus, her acceptance depended on her estimation of his future performance.

The discussion soon turned to overall strategy. "You've repeatedly made it clear that you are targeting the premium segment. However, there are only so many rich customers in the market. I think it's prudent to evaluate whether it serves the company to offer a cheaper selection of models. Not immediately, but in the medium term."

"The Living Mech Corporation's mission is to bring mechs to life. I can't do that without a minimum standard of quality. I'm not interested in getting into a race to the bottom. Cheaper mechs means I'll have to start cutting corners, which I really hate doing."

The LMC could establish a different brand to take care of that problem, but Ves had already ruled that possibility out. However, the board member suggested another approach.

"I'm not saying the company has to be responsible for the production of these cheaper designs. Your design capabilities are impressive for a young man of your age. I'm sure it won't be a challenge for you to come up with some cheaper variants of your main designs. Once you finished your variants, you can license them out to other mech manufacturers, who will do the rest of the work on our behalf."

"You're suggesting that we engage in outsourcing?"

In the mech industry, outsourcing meant that Ves would offer his designs up for licensing with a very specific set of terms. The companies that bought his licenses had to abide by a number of very strict restrictions and wouldn't be allowed to modify his designs in any way. In exchange, Ves would waive the massive licensing fee, though he did take a larger share of per-unit revenue.

Mech manufacturers in possession of production hardware didn't always have the money to pay for a standard license. Producing mechs on behalf of another company was considered a way to make ends meet by these sorts of companies.

"Even though Ves didn't wish to cheapen his designs by developing severely hamstrung variants, he was open to the idea of offering up purpose-built designs. It would enable his work to penetrate the market and allow his reputation to spread beyond a narrow circle of wealthy customers.

Even if the licensees botched up the production, the LMC could terminate the license and find another manufacturer to do the work. The only issue was that his company earned far less profits than if it did everything in-house.

Then again, Ves had already shot down the possibility to produce any cheap models by themselves.

"The idea holds some promise, but only if the right manufacturers are interested in licensing my designs." He replied after careful contemplation.

"Right now, we only offer the Marc Antony Mark II, which is an aging lastgen design that's unsuitable to further cost-saving modifications. Let's wait until I've developed my new design before considering the matter in earnest."

Ves started to understand the appeal of a board. Even if they had no actual decision-making power, they had a vested interest in the company's success. The various experts lent their expertise to the various matters that the company faced.

Still, he didn't delude himself that they worked for the greater good of the company. They only had their own interests at heart.

Overall, their knowledge and ability to think at a higher level made them useful sparring partners. Compared to the company's officers, the directors turned up short in terms of depth, but they made up for it by taking the bigger picture into account.

"If I might suggest something." The mech industry expert spoke again. "Your search for a long-term supplier will not be successful. Even with a moderately successful design, the LMC will always be regarded as a non-entity. Even if you catch the attention of a supplier, it's doubtful they're willing to offer favorable terms."

"The CRO sounded much more optimistic when he informed me of the ongoing search for a supplier."

"Your CRO must be aiming to build a relationship with a distressed or desperate supplier. It's not a good idea to source your materials from a troubled seller."

The expert provided many reasons why it might go wrong. The supplier might have almost tapped out its reserves. It might have engaged in illegal labor practices. It may even serve as a channel for pirates to dispose their ill-gotten gains.

"Considering the impending war, it's actually best we don't rely on any single source to supply our most critical exotic materials."

"Why is that?"

"Because exotics turn into strategic goods over the course of the war. The Vesians will try to occupy or destroy the Republic's mining operations. They'll also prey on the convoys delivering those materials to the hungry industries it feeds."

That sounded very troubling. "I don't see why relying on the open market is any better."

"Because no matter how the war progresses, the open market will always continue to operate. Don't forget that Bentheim is a port system and that it serves a regional nexus of trade. Some of that traffic will diminish, but not enough to starve the markets entirely out of resources. You won't be dependent on the whims of the Vesians if you can accept the higher costs."

Someone else disagreed. "As long as the LMC insists on leaving out the exclusivity clause, it's free to trade with any other party. I don't see the need to suspend the search for a supplier."

"You can't have your cake and eat it too! You won't find a supplier who is willing to let the LMC retain the right to approach its competitors for business. The LMC isn't producing enough mechs to force a compromise. They'd rather decline a partnership than be taken for fools."

The issue of suppliers had always given Ves a headache, and the directors just made it worse. He banged his fist against the table. "Enough! This is going nowhere. Let me tell you now that I plan to let the relations department continue to find a supplier and attempt to negotiate a mutually beneficial contract. We can convene the board again to discuss whether it's worth it for us to sign it into the books."

Even though the discussion led to nothing substantial, it got Ves to think about what his company would do after the war broke out. He decided to raise the matter to the board.

"As you all know, the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom will likely be embroiled in a serious conflict. I'll likely be drafted by the Mech Corps, and so will some of my employees. How can we prepare the LMC so that it will continue to function during wartime?"

The directors made a number of useful suggestions, starting with his grandfather. "First up, the Republic provides a substantial amount of assistance to mech manufacturers affected by their wartime policies. If your administration is up to task, they should have already prepared the necessary paperwork."

"I'll check up on that after the meeting."

"You should also check with the bank." The financial expert said. "In some cases, they're obliged to freeze or even forgive parts of your debt in the event of war. Also, if the company is bleeding cash, it should be able to demand some compensation from the government, though they may demand some equity in return."

In truth, the government only offered a limited amount of support to failing mech manufacturers. It was content to let the weak ones close their doors while offering only a pittance to most medium mech manufacturers.

"The only way to receive better treatment is by contributing to the war effort." His grandfather added. "The Mech Corps has many needs. The LMC can best serve our fighting force by supplying them with high-quality replacement parts that are difficult to fabricate at military supply bases."

They formed a tentative plan around this suggestion. His grandfather even offered to pull some strings and lay down the groundwork for such collaboration.

At the end of the hours-long meeting, Ves left the conference room with a moderately satisfied expression. He patted Lucky's head once he entered the lounge.

"You did good, buddy. The directors aren't complete bastards."

His cat meowed lazily at him before turning around to resume his nap.

Chapter 253: Blackbeak

Ves resumed his work on his design after taking a break. The board meeting led to modest changes but gave everyone a lot of food for thought. One thing that struck him was that everyone pushed for mass production. They didn't believe the LMC could deliver the necessary quality to grow into the high end market.

"They're right, in a way."

He'd have to become a Journeyman Mech Designer to break into the top and most lucrative end of the market. That was still a long way off despite the help of the System.

"My various Skills have reached Journeyman-level, but I'm barely scratching the surface. I'm still short on depth and experience."

Ves vaguely estimated he would have to design at least five or six original models to gain the minimum amount of experience to advance. They also had to be distinctly different mech, so Ves couldn't get away with designing six identical knight mechs.

"Let's get back to work."

Ves thought about the implications of forming the structure of his artificial musculature from scratch.

"The more experienced mech designers can do this by heart. I haven't reached that level yet, even with the theories I've learned."

In such cases, it would be a shame to consult a reference book and adapt a expertly designed template that had been derived from examples of nature.

For example, knight templates often took their inspiration from studying the bodies of athletes and soldiers.

Ves chose to be fairly extravagant by borrowing a high quality reference book from the Clifford Society's Moon Library.

It took a couple of says for the fast courier to deliver the secure materials required to read the book. For a price of ten merits, the Society went out of its way to make sure that Ves didn't propagate its contents.

He didn't spend his time in vain during the wait. He re-read the textbooks on Battle Mechatronics and looked back on his old designs to study the way their musculature worked.

Mechs generally adopted simplified structures compared to a human made out of blood and flesh. In particular, they didn't require so much fine control for their toes, neck and head. Knight mechs also sacrificed a lot of finesse in their arms in favor of brute strength.

"Still, a strong pair of legs forms the basis of a sturdy knight."

Knights relied on the strength of their legs to build up momentum and withstand shocks. They also depended on their legs for balance.

The reference book he borrowed happened to contain a couple of templates for all the different archetypes. After a lot of browsing, Ves chose to go with the lightest knight template.

"It's the most responsive and agile out of all the medium knight templates. It's the only choice that conforms with my vision."

The black phoenix would never sit still like a rock for long. It wished to endure attacks only up to the extent for it to close in on its opponent and take it out.

A lighter musculature that facilitated movement over force enabled this choice of battle. Unfortunately, Ves also had to accept a substantial reduction in arm strength.

"My knight will never match the strength of a purely offensive type like a swordsman mech."

He accepted the compromise, since his mech's substantial defense made up for its lacking offensive prowess. It aimed to outlast its opponents by surviving to the end rather than killing them off first.

Ves made a couple of tweaks to the standard template.

He increased the range of motion of the shield arm to facilitate bashing with the flat or sharp end of the phoenix-emblazoned shield.

He also strengthened the back and abdominal muscles to insure they wouldn't overstain if his mech dug into hardy ground.

His inexperience with designing a musculature led to long nights of continuous work. The black phoenix remained demanding throughout the process, sometimes even forcing Ves to throw away hours worth of development.

The delays resulted in further refinements that provided greater strength without taking up too much space, which was getting very cramped by now.

He sat back in his seat with a satisfied smile after the latest round of modelling pronounced his work to be without any major flaws.

"This is the best I can achieve at the moment."

It helped that he licensed a fairly premium artificial musculature system from the Society. If he licensed a generic one, he would have been forced to bulk up his frame.

Still, the various compromises he made so far made it clear it didn't excel as a damage sponge. "It's leaning a bit too heavily on the offensive side."

Ves intended to use the armor cladding process as a way to correct this imbalance.

Much like the artificial musculature, the application of the armor system also came with a lot of complexity. Many mech designers either used a reference book or modelled the most optimal layout with sophisticated processors.

This time, Ves declined to borrow another reference book. His experience and his Optimization Sub-Skills should be sufficient for him to design an adequate armor layout.

The Veltrex armor system consisted of a minimum of three layers.

The upper layer consisted of various composites that worked best against directed energy weapons.

The middle layer consisted of heavier alloys that specialized in stopping kinetic weapons.

The lower layer mainly dispersed heat and force that went through the other layers. It also worked great in mitigating explosive damage.

The weakness of this armor system became apparent. If an enemy force stripped the upper layer with a ballistic weapon, it could easily penetrate past

the middle and lower layers. While their sheer thickness could still mitigate a certain amount of energy damage, it was obviously not ideal.

"I doubt my models will become prolific enough for enemies to know about this weakness."

Despite this wrinkle, the Veltrex armor system could withstand a surprising level of abuse for its thickness.

Some armor systems could be trimmed or thickened by adjusting the amount of layers.

The Veltrex system worked a little differently by adhering to the same three layers, only this time he could adjust the thickness of each of the layers.

Ves spent a lot of time with the fine-tuning of the armor layout. He adopted a fairly standard medium knight layout but trimmed some fat wherever he could get away with it. However, he didn't go too far, as a knight still had to withstand a lot of blows.

"Even if the internals are easier to repair, it's still not a good idea to make it easy to get past the armor."

He took his time in this phase, dragging it out over four weeks as he meticulously verified his design choices with advanced mathematical modelling. From chilly ice planets to desolate asteroids, Ves simulated every possible hostile environment he could come up with. His model performed surprisingly poorly in vacuum and hot environments.

"My mech doesn't generate as much heat as a laser rifleman, so I didn't put too many heatsinks in its design."

This limited its heat processing capacity. The only way his phoenix could shunt its heat was through shunting it from its feet or dissipating it through infrared radiation.

"Isn't it ironic for a phoenix knight to be prone to overheating?"

Ves decided to keep the current amount of heatsinks. Adding any more meant decreasing his mech's performance to an unacceptable level in his eyes. He took the Republic's geography into account as well.

"The Bright Republic doesn't have that many hot planets anyway, and spaceborn mechs are far more suitable to deploy in vacuum environments."

After making sure the armor held up in every other environment, Ves surrendered himself to his artistic fancies. He meticulously carved the upper layer of the armor with phoenix-themed reliefs.

He shaped the generic humanoid face into a phoenix's head. He carved up the shoulder pauldrons into a feather-like appearance. He added minor decorative lines throughout the torso to reinforce its association with blackfire and phoenixes.

The only downside to this 'extra' addition was that the carvings affected the structural integrity of the armor system. Ves had to bulk up many of the sections due to the weaknesses he inadvertently introduced.

"It's worth it, though. My design looks good, really good."

He already applied a coating of black and gold to his mech. The change in color amplified the connection between the design and the image in his mind. The black phoenix strongly approved of the phoenix knight's impressive appearance. It definitely possessed a strong level of gravitas that he only found in his recent Marcus Aurelius limited edition model.

What particularly stood out from its appearance was its underlying menace. The black coating gave his design a sinister association that Ves didn't see very often in knights.

The Marc Antony Mark II radiated aggression as well, but it always had a noble and flamboyant touch to it. The phoenix knight decried the brave charge, choosing instead to triumph over its opponent through a mix of guile and speed

"This doesn't fit with the knight ethos. Even offensive knights don't go this far."

Fortunately, Ves still had to design its shield and armor. He compensated for the menace by adding a slightly wider shield. He spent over three days perfecting the phoenix wing design on its surface. The asymmetrical look caused by the exaggerated curling wing gave it a distinctly exotic moon-like appearance.

As for the sword, Ves went ahead with designing it as planned. The winged guards and the phoenix body hilt gave the sword a fine touch, but besides that he didn't stray from standard doctrine. Together with the use of generic sword alloys, it was clear the sword would never be able to outshine the shield, which Ves had clad it entirely with premium Veltrex armor layers.

His mech came into shape after more than three months of design work. The seasons changed and the tension between the Republic and the Kingdom neared the boiling point. Despite the passing of time, Ves hardly noticed any of it as he became subsumed in perfecting his design.

He spent the final weeks in subjecting his tentatively functional design through a barrage of tests. Quite often, the simulations revealed a host of flaws in the interaction between the armor and the internals underneath. These flaws hadn't showed up when Ves tested those systems in isolation. Only when he put together every piece in a single package did the flaws come to light.

"This is still rather sloppy for me. It's taken longer to eliminate all these flaws than I thought.

Nevertheless, Ves successfully completed his first iteration of what he temporarily called the Blackbeak.

"Blackwing sounds better, but it's too bad my mech isn't capable of flight."

Perhaps he'd adopt the name for an aerial variant of his design. The base model possessed sufficient space in the back to accomodate a flight system, though he would also have to overhaul the internals to increase its heat-handling capacity.

"That's a problem for later."

Now that he finished a solid design with concrete specs, Ves thought about the next step in his design process.

"I'm going to have to fabricate a prototype and subject it to an extensive amount of gruelling tests."

This went doubly so for knights that specialized in long-term durability. Ves couldn't trust his mathematical models to reflect the actual truth. His design might still hide a small number of critical flaws.

"The thing about models is that they reflect a distorted version of reality. No single model exists so far that can simulate our reality with perfect fidelity."

Even the System's impressive models admitted defeat in this area. For an existence capable of materialization and time travel to express its inferiority in this area, Ves didn't delude himself that he could trust his models blindly.

"First, let's see what the others have to say. They must be brimming with anticipation with what I've been cooking up all these months."

He exited his office, only to encounter a worrying development.

"What's happening?" Ves asked.

"You should check the mech portals." Carlos replied as he passed him a data pad. "One of your competitors is one step ahead of you."

Ves glanced at the news article and found to his surprise that another Apprentice Mech Designer debuted an offensive knight design as his first original mech. Could this be a coincidence?

Then he recognized the designer.

"I know this guy."

Chapter 254 Competitor

Ves first became exposed to other promising talents at the Young Tigers Exhibition held more than a year ago. Mech designers around his age showcased their talents in order to achieve fame and recognition in the state they called home.

It mostly ended up as a comparison between who had the better foreign backer. Ves performed well at the event, only to be beaten by Edwin McKinney, who for some reason deigned to participate in such a low-class event.

Afterwards, Ves slowly realized that the geniuses who participated in the YTE likely didn't do very well abroad. They were mostly the equivalent to Squires in the Clifford Society, marginal figures that could never compete against the native mech designers of those second-rate states.

"Michael Dumont. It's been a long time since I last saw your name."

After being beaten by Ves, Dumont disappeared from the face of the Republic. Ves assumed that Dumont must have tucked his tail between his legs and fled back to the Coalition or wherever he called his second home.

Evidently, he returned, and just so coincidentally introduced an offensive knight design in his debut as an original mech designer. Ves played a recording of the clip.

"After months of intensive development and extensive testing, I am now ready to announce the release of my first original design, the Havalax!"

A medium mech slowly stepped into view. The reporters gathered at the press conference murmured with excitement as the ground under their feet thundered as Dumont's creation stopped in front of them. With its stylish white coating with triangular blue and orange patterns, it made for a vividly noble sight.

"The Havalax is a knight mech geared for offensive and defensive purposes. It's greatest strength is its speed, which is even able to match the sprinting speed of light mechs. As a fast and mobile knight mech, the Havalax excels in chaotic skirmishes and smaller engagements where battlelines often shift on a whim."

A projection appeared that showed the Havalax's performance in a number of realistic simulations, interspersed with clips of the first production model going through an obstacle course.

What stood out from Ves was that the Havalax showcased an impressive level of performance. So much so that he suspected the pilot must have overheated the mech soon after he completed his acrobatics.

"If you are worried about the Havalax's ability to function as a knight, then let me reassure you that it can take the hits as well as it can dish out. The armor system I am using is an exclusive development from a lab associated with my university in the Coalition. Its multifaceted composition employs a semi-modular arrangement where expended plates will fall after they degrade, facilitating even higher levels of mobility at the tail-end of a fight."

The rest of Dumont's speech detailed his design's strengths while glossing over its weaknesses. Some of the reporters did a good job asking about its endurance, which should have been quite awful for a pure knight design.

"The Havalax is a mech that is designed to make an immediate impact on the battlefield." He repeated. "There are hardly any mechs on the market that can compete with mine in these terms. Not at the price level of my initial models."

"How much will it cost?"

"Production has already started. You can reserve the first hundred copies by moving quickly and pre-ordering it at my company's portal for the generous price of 50 million credits. After that, you can purchase a standard model starting at 55 million credits. We offer many additional options and customizations at additional fees. Please consult the portal for the details."

Ves flipped the data pad and slammed it to the ground. Then he stepped on it with his foot, though he failed to make any cracks. Pads these days served as reliable information carriers under extreme conditions like battlefields and hostile alien planets.

"I don't believe this is a coincidence!"

Just when Ves prepared to debut the Blackbeak, an old rival released an offensive knight on his own. The Havalax differed distinctly from the Blackbeak by specializing in delivering peak performance, but that design choice would also enable it to inflate its spec sheet.

Frankly speaking, the Blackbeak's specs looked like crap compared to the performance that the Havalax was capable of pumping out. Sure, the knight designed by Dumont might only be able to keep running its systems at maximum capacity for a couple of minutes, but most laymen wouldn't know the difference.

In actual fact, the Blackbeak and the Havalax shouldn't even be direct competitors. Despite sharing the same roles, they excelled in different circumstances, so there should be very little overlap

Except Ves knew that many customers didn't think about less flashy criteria like endurance and longevity. They cared more about exciting stuff like top speed or arm strength.

Jake arrived quickly after Carlos. "It's fairly bad news. Early adopters already got their hands on the Havalax and they've been giving them rave reviews. Even some of the more reputable mech portals are giving it a thumbs up."

"How is Dumont able to produce so fast?"

"His backers bought out a failing medium mech manufacturer and repurposed it as Dumont's personal property in the Republic. There's rumors that the Ricklin Corporation has a stake in the company as well."

Figures. Both of them had a beef with Ves. Dumont's entry in the YTE had been cut short by Ves while the Ricklin Corporation suffered a devastating terrorist attack with the help of a mech that he designed and built.

Ves suspected that the Ricklin Corporation had been behind the various attacks on his person. Such threats had ceased to materialize in the last half year, which led Ves to believe the Ricklin Corporation quietly gave up on its attempt to hit back at Ves.

Evidently, they chose to retaliate by a different means. He admired the elegance of their plan. It wasn't illegal to give a helping hand to one of his competitors. Even if everyone in the Republic knew of their conflict, so what?

Right now, Ves was in big trouble. He could already sense an undercurrent of worry and despair among the employees in the office. They all thought that Ves would debut his Blackbeak too late. Even if it offered some redeeming features over the Havalax, demand for offensive knights had already been met by that time.

"Emergency meeting. Two hours from now." Ves said crisply as he stormed back into his office. "Bring everyone that matters."

Jake and Carlos watched the door slide shut. They both looked at each other. "Do you think he's resigned?"

"Not at all." Carlos replied. "That's his serious mode. Ves almost never makes an outburst. He's the type who lets his rage boil inside his mind. Don't let his flat face fool you."

Two hours later, the entire management team of the LMC poured into the conference room. The executives and pillars of the company like Jake, Primrose, Carlos, Calsie and Gavin sat alongside the oval table.

The rest seated themselves upon floating synthetic foldable chairs stored underneath the table. The 'planks' as people called them provided basic seating for everyone without taking up a lot of space when they returned to their storage compartments.

Ves stomped into the conference room a few minutes later. He slowly paced towards the front of the room and turned on the main projector. A full-throated projection of his first complete iteration of the Blackbeak appeared in front of everyone's eyes.

"This is the Blackbeak. It's a premium offensive knight that excels in endurance, longevity and energy efficiency."

He summarized its various attributes and emphasized its differences compared to a model like the Havalax. Still, half the crowd stopped paying attention to his words, because the mere sight of the Blackbeak consumed all of their attention.

Its sheer presence and artistic appearance dwarfed anything Ves designed before except for his most impressive limited edition designs. The sinister flavor underpinning the Blackbeak's X-Factor evoked both fear and admiration from the gawking crowd.

As Ves had been tinkering with his design for months, he'd grown used to its aura. He didn't expect it to have such a pronounced effect on his employees.

"Wow, Ves! Wow!" Carlos exclaimed. "If this is what you've been working on, then Dumont stands no chance!"

Several people agreed, but those who read through the Blackbeak's spec sheet quietly shook their heads.

"I have confidence in my design." Ves declared simply. It was important to emphasize his belief in his own capabilities. "However, that doesn't mean that it's a given that the Havalax can be dethroned. The first-mover advantage is a very powerful thing to have. The main issue is that our target segments overlap too much. The longer we wait, the steeper the hill we have to climb."

"Then what are we waiting for? You've already completed your design, so let's release it immediately while the Havalax is at its infancy!"

Ves shook his head. "I won't rush my design. I've thought it through, and the risk of missing out a critical flaw or two is too great. I can tell that the Havalax is a fairly rushed design as well. Dumont must have designed it when he received word that I had been planning to design an offensive knight myself."

Some people looked at each other with suspicion. "This was supposed to be kept under wraps. Someone leaked the news."

A brief argument broke out, but Ves forestalled any further shouting.

"Shut up! I haven't exactly done my best to keep my intentions secret. It's my own fault for letting too many people know. The important thing is that it's already done, so let's move on. As I was saying, the Blackbeak's development will stay on track. I will not rush its development just because a competitor is taunting me to hurry up."

"Why not?"

"Because the LMC stands for quality. It's in our mission statement. It will be a direct betrayal of the founding principles of this company if I set them aside at the first sign of trouble."

That said, in corporate warfare, expediency usually triumphed over principle. Ves merely believed he didn't have to go that far in order to turn the tables against Michael Dumont.

"Do you believe in our company?" He asked his employees.

"Yes!"

"We believe!"

"Do you believe in the Blackbeak?"

Everyone resoundly cheered.

"Then what's with all of the panic? We are better than Dumont!"

He succeeded in lifting up their moods. It felt good to inspire confidence in his workers. He needed them to work at their best in order to stand a chance against Dumont's well-funded vendetta against Ves.

As long as he could persuade his men, Ves also had a chance of winning over the market. They just had to remain rational and lay out the facts.

"It's important to note that offensive knight designs already exist on the market. Hundreds of thousands of designs already exists throughout the galaxy, though only a fraction is available for purchase within the Republic's borders. Likewise, demand for offensive knights is not a shallow pool that will drain quickly the moment someone cobbles up a decent design."

The threat the Havalax posed to their company distorted everyone's perspective on the market.

"I see now! We've been stuck in a tunnel vision!"

"The Havalax is still a competitor though. As long as it remains on sale, it will directly affect our own profits."

"We can still fight back when there's still time."

How much time did they still have? Ves wanted to take his time, but would all of that extra time pay off in the end? It all depended on their hard work and ability to succeed under adverse circumstances.

Ves clapped his hands to draw everyone's attention. "I've gathered you all here not to admit defeat, but to form a plan of action. We will not let Dumont have his satisfaction! We shouldn't fear his competition. He should fear us instead!"

He had unquestioning faith in the superiority of his own design. Ves hardly believed that Dumont progressed as fast as him since the last time they dueled against each other.

Along with the added advantage of a pronounced X-Factor, Ves possessed a final contingency should his design fail to match up to the Havalax. He tapped his fingers against his unassuming comm, which hid the option to super-publish any design once a year.

Chapter 255 Breathing to Life

In truth, Ves didn't wish to resort to super-publish option, as he considered it a cheat. Besides sullyng his reputation and demeaning the tradition, he wouldn't be able to get away with it anyway.

He already shared his development logs to the MTA. if Ves suddenly improved his design by a significant margin at the very end, the MTA would rightly question whether he had help.

"Let's form a plan and draw up a time table." He announced to the people gathered in the conference room. "I think it's not too late to release my latest

model a month from now. It's impossible for Dumont's company to have produced so many mechs in that span of time."

They hashed out a quick plan that mobilized the entire company.

Even though the Blackbeak hadn't been finished yet, its functional state allowed the workshop to grow familiar with its design. Chief Cyril and Carlos received permission to train the mech technicians with practising its fabrication in a virtual environment.

Meanwhile administration and relations departments laid the groundwork for logistics. Ves wanted the LMC to be amply supplied without being overcharged for the necessary raw materials. He also wanted the shipping to be reserved in advance in order to minimize delays and disruption in supplies.

"The current convoys between Cloudy Curtain and Bentheim won't suffice for our needs." Jake reported after making a projection on how many goods flowed in and out of the workshop. "The Barracuda has lately remained rather idle. Other than conveying some of our executives to Bentheim and back, the corvette is severely underutilized."

"Any shipments we make outside a convoy isn't insured by Sanyal-Ablin." Ves shook his head. "I don't want to tempt fate by putting millions of credits worth of goods in an even more expensive starship. The Barracuda will adhere to the current flight schedule. It won't attract so much attention if all it does is ship some of our marketing people back and forth. On that topic, how is the negotiation going with Marcella?"

"We've been making slow but steady progress in our discussions with your mech broker. From what we can tell, she values your ability to improve and thinks your worth will only increase in the future. Our negotiating team has been able to leverage this information into compelling her to agree to a

number of important concessions. However, our talks have stalled lately due to the lack of activity on our part."

Ves already knew why. "She's waiting for my design, I bet. Once I fabricate the prototype of the Blackbeak, I'll ship it over to Bentheim in order to take advantage of their extensive testing facilities. The MTA's Cloudy Curtain branch office lacks the hardware to put the prototype to its paces."

A few people showed alarm at his decision to do the testing in Bentheim.

"The port system is a powder keg waiting to blow!" Primrose warned with a shrill voice. "It's highly inadvisable to step foot on the planet with war tensions so high!"

"There's no other choice. I can't do without the sophisticated testing equipment that is only available on major planets like Bentheim. Don't worry, I've got Raella, Melkor and Sanyal-Ablin watching my back."

"We're also permitted to pilot our own mechs within city limits!" Raella raised her fist in excitement. "If the BLM wants to pick a fight, I'll gladly give them one!"

Once they finished their testing, Ves would return to Cloudy Curtain and apply the lessons on his initial design.

"Do we have enough time for another round of testing?"

"Likely not. There's a lengthy lead time required to submit an original design to the MTA. If we want to make the Blackbeak ready for sale in a month, we have to submit the final version along with a fabricated copy to the MTA's branch in Bentheim at least two weeks before the official release."

So in essence, Ves actually had three weeks to work with before he had to finalize his design. "We can't afford to undergo a second round of testing. We can only hope that one round will be enough to catch all the major flaws."

Marketing, once I show off the prototype to Marcella, please work together with her brokerage on a marketing campaign. Make sure to take various budgets into account."

A simple plan made all the difference. Getting his people moving again helped push back the negative sentiment. Everyone dispersed and went back to work. Ves himself took some time off. He wanted to be in his best condition before he fabricated the prototype.

Lucky meowed and climbed on his shoulder once he sank into a couch at the lounge. The cat didn't experience much excitement with Ves holed up in his office. His pet made his disaffection clear by batting his paw against his cheek.

"I know, I know, you'll get your fun soon. We'll be travelling to Bentheim again after a few days."

"Meow!"

Ves thought about picking something up at Bentheim that could keep Lucky busy. Then again, the amount of minerals his cat had eaten so far had reached a point where Lucky showed signs of evolving yet again. The glowing blue lines between its shiny bronze-like exterior glowed as bright as a flood lamp.

"You're stuffed with energy, aren't you?"

"Meorrww." Lucky lazily stretched his back.

"I wonder what you'll look like at level 3."

As Ves advanced, so did Lucky. It made him wonder what his cat had in store in the future. Perhaps he'd be able to traverse the stars, or fire a mech-grade laser from his mouth. Maybe he'll be producing gemstones that could double the performance of any mech.

He began to fabricate the prototype the next day. He skipped practicing the process in a simulation because he was short on time. Instead, he relied on his substantial fabrication skills to tide him over his very first attempt to bring the Blackbeak to life.

Chief Cyril gestured everyone away. "Everyone, clear out! The boss will be working on the prototype alone!"

Due to everyone's unfamiliarity with the new design, Ves demanded full control over the entire fabrication process. Only if he did everything himself would he be able to guarantee the quality of his prototype. It was vitally important that this early copy of the Blackbeak be a faithful reflection of its design.

Every mech technician halted their work and cleared their junk. The new production line stood ready to be used. Ves took a deep breath and centered his mind onto his continuously evolving image.

He opened his eyes, revealing a flickering glint in his eyes. "Let's make you whole."

Ves moved his fingers over the console of the Dortmund printer. He started working from the inside out, fabricating the innermost pieces first before working his way outwards.

The technical challenge laid mostly in his unfamiliarity with the process. He also worked with unfamiliar materials and entirely new alloys that sometimes strained his capability to solve problems on the fly.

"Still, the greatest advantage of designing a mech from scratch is that you have complete control over its complexity."

A hybrid knight like the Caesar Augustus possessed a lot of interconnected components that made a mess of things inside. Even if he substantially simplified its internal architecture in the Mark II, it still posed a lot of difficulties.

On the other hand, a pure knight with a narrow set of priorities carried a lot less baggage around. Ves prioritized on designing a simple, clean and easy-to-assemble internal architecture because he intended the Blackbeak to be repaired and worked on over many years in the field.

"Easier to repair also makes it easier to assemble."

He only encountered some genuine challenges when he formed the armor plates. Each of the three Veltrex layers centered around their own mix of highly valuable exotic minerals that might react unstable if handled improperly. Even with his Alloy Compression III sub-skill, Ves came across various close calls that could have been avoided if he practiced beforehand.

"I can't afford the time to take a trial run. I'm already in the race and there's no way but to proceed!"

The time pressure actually emboldened Ves to put his full effort in his work. The black phoenix also thrived in a crisis and became more active and engaged as the fabrication went on. The two synergised with each other and Ves started adding intuitive touches in his work at the prompting of the picky image in his head.

After his first slip-ups, Ves got the hang of working with each different formula. He smoothly applied the correct adjustments to the chemical treatment machine and the alloy compressor to ensure a near-perfect finish for each of the plates.

The most difficult work by far was adding all of the flourishes onto the top layers. Ves had to put the pieces back inside the Dortmund in order to utilize its precision carving module to neatly trace out the decorative flourishes. One wrong move risked threatening the structural integrity of the entire layer, turning it from an effective piece of armor into a clunky alloy plate.

"I definitely can't add something so elaborate in my silver label version of the Blackbeak." Ves concluded. "Anyone who's Assembly Skill is below the standard of a Journeyman can forget about doing this without leaving flaws."

The added difficulty of incorporating these engravings raised the value of his design. Ves put a lot of creative energy in their formation, granting them meaning beyond conveying a simple image. Ves even imagined the black phoenix blessing them with its own touch of vital energy.

"It's like they're acting as reservoirs for the X-Factor or some other kind of metaphysical energy."

By the time he finished decorative engravings, they appeared to glow in his sixth sense. The entire mech turned into something more than a simple machine by the time he started assembling the pieces into place.

His consciously simple design allowed him to assemble the various parts with greater speed and ease than with a hybrid knight. The Blackbeak hardly made a croak as its parts smoothly fit into place with the judicious use of bots.

"It's like magic." Carlos sighed as he compared the exquisite craftsmanship displayed by Ves with his own output. "How is Ves able to make his products with so much presence? The mech isn't even finished yet, but I can already tell it will be an exceptional work!"

Cyril chewed on a piece of stimulants as he formed a reply. "I've seen jobs like this a couple of times in my life. They're made by craftsman in the best sense of that word. They are passionate about their work and treat every individual mech like a separate art piece. You can tell that Ves is made from the same mold by the intensity of his focus. It's like we're not even here."

Even their low discussion didn't affect the meticulous work that went into fitting the more delicate pieces into their assigned positions. Once Ves attached the finished sword and shield to the back, the prototype officially came into being.

The black phoenix in his mind cried out triumphantly and spread its wings. It was just about to depart from his mind and enter the almost-finished Blackbeak's design, but Ves held the stubborn bird in place.

"It's not finished yet! Stay put!"

The phoenix took offense at his demand and tried to burst through the shackles holding it down. Ves cried out in pain and held his thundering head in his hands. His sudden collapse alarmed the mech technicians.

"He's exhausted He hardly took a rest over these three days!"

"Call a medic from the security group! They have one on-site, I'm sure of it!"

None of them suspected that Ves was waging a battle in his mind. The black phoenix he birthed into being had developed a life of its own. Like any child growing up, it sometimes tried to defy its progenitor. In other words, the black phoenix reached the point where it started to assert its own identity.

"It's not time yet!" He yelled, to the confusion of the worried technicians. "Stop your stupid tantrum and get back inside!"

Chapter 256 Responsibilities

His condition became so fierce that the medic hauled him to the tiny clinic set near the walls surrounding the workshop. By the time Ves recovered, he found out that everyone thought he collapsed from overwork.

"You worked for three days straight! Even with your abnormal body characteristics, humans are never meant to stay up for such a massive stretch at a time!"

"I'm okay doc. I'll be fine after a good night's sleep." Ves waved away their concerns and hopped off the cot as spry as an energetic child. "Let me see the prototype before I sign off."

He left the clinic and walked across the open courtyard to the workshop area. Once inside, he waltzed towards the other end of the hall where a crowd of bewitched employees gazed admiringly at the very first version of the Blackbeak.

"It's beautiful, and it's not yet even complete."

The blackbeak's dark coating gave the mech the illusion of an obsidian statue. The detailed carvings concentrated on its beak, its shoulder pauldrons and its symbol-laden armaments lent the prototype an air of gravitas.

"Well, you certainly did it." Chief Cyril slapped his back when Ves approached. "The Mark II is like a toy compared to this beast."

On the other hand, Jake looked a bit concerned. "I'm not so sure it will find its place in the market. It looks almost evil compared to your previous works, Ves. I don't know where you got your inspiration, but as it stands now, your design looks more fit for pirates than for mercs."

Ves belatedly realized that this might become a problem. "It will look better once the festive cloud generators underneath the shoulder pauldrons turn online. I've programmed them to emit some bright white vapor aided by some conveniently placed lights to add some life to my mech."

A knight was supposed to be a protector, a team player. Unlike the Havalax, the Blackbeak boldly bucked that stereotype by taking on an aggressive but subversive appearance. It won by staying alive, and it did so through a mix of grit and dirty tricks.

He decided to stick with its current appearance due to that reason. Dumont's Havalax could keep the white knights while the Blackbeak appealed more to the shadier crowd.

"Let's prepare for departure."

On matters as important as the shipment of a prototype, Ves didn't want to take a risks. He booked a berth at the next convoy shipment to Bentheim for the prototype and the mechs of his cousins. He also called ahead to Sanyal-Ablin to make the appropriate arrangements for his security detail on Bentheim.

A lot of prep work went into their upcoming visit. With the growth of the company, the LMC had to comply with a lot more regulations as well as take a lot of industry-specific standards into account.

The introduction of an entirely new design demanded even more compliance compared to variants. An incompetent designer could take an unknown mix of components and mix them together into a powder keg that could blow at any time

The MTA took no risks with regards to potential hazards to public safety. It was up to the mech designer to prove his new design was safe to use.

On the day of the transfer, a couple of executives from the LMC accompanied Ves and his entourage aboard the Barracuda. This time, the corvette joined the slow and lumbering convoy for safety purposes and to ensure their shipment of mechs remained safe.

As a luxury yacht, the Barracuda easily accommodated the extra passengers, though the executives had to bunk up in their cramped rooms. It elicited a lot of grumbling from the likes of Jake, Primrose and the people who originally came from Bentheim.

"Sorry guys. It's a small ship so you'll just have to make do." Ves apologised before turning to Captain Silvestra. "How's the Barracuda holding up these last few months?"

"The regular exercise has been great, sir!" The captain reported with a smile. "It's good to stretch our legs by conveying your people back and forth. The

frequent travel allows us to become intimately familiar with the gravitic geography between Cloudy Curtain and Bentheim. As long as we can keep this up for half a year, we'll be able to develop a fairly complete chart that will allow us to develop fast and circuitous FTL routes."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we'll stand a higher chance of avoiding blockades and ambushes if the Bentheim System is taken over by the Vesians."

"The Vesians have never pushed as far as Bentheim before. The Republic always fights tooth and nail the closer they get. We can't afford to lose our only port system."

"Be that as it may, sir, it's best to be prepared should the worst come to pass."

The prospect of a disastrous occupation of Bentheim weighed down in his mind. Even though the Vesians always failed to take the prosperous system in the end, it only took a couple of random mishaps for them to succeed.

Besides preparing for the release of a new design, the LMC also had to prepare for the inevitable war. That meant talking with the government, the suppliers, the security companies, the insurance companies and more.

"Do we have to bring so many people?" Ves quietly asked Jake.

As his COO, the Larkinson retainer had been very bold in expanding the company's payroll. "We're making a lot of appointments because our company hasn't made any existing arrangements against various contingencies. It's fine if you want to leave it for later, but once the war finally sets off, it's going to be a lot harder to get a hold of important people."

The LMC already entered into half-a-dozen agreements so far that granted them access to military convoys and strategic resource stockpiles.

Ves had to admit it sounded like a good idea to be prepared. He hadn't even heard of half the programs in the list that Jake passed to him. "I see there are limits to how much insurance is willing to cover us."

"The entire Bentheim region is beset by difficulties in obtaining insurance now that the war is on the horizon. In the eyes of the insurance companies, Cloudy Curtain is even less secure than Bentheim, as our only real defense force consists of a single gang. The Vesians don't have to allocate too many mechs to destroy all our infrastructure."

Implicitly, Jake questioned the need to base their production facilities on a poorly defended rural planet. Ves ignored those unspoken thoughts.

"Is it unusual for the insurance companies to close up like that for our region before a war breaks out?"

"It happened a handful of times throughout the last two centuries. It's a rough indicator on how bad the war might progress. The insurance industry is especially spooked by all the pirates and rebels running roughshod over the Komodo Star Sector."

That gave Ves a lot of food for thought. He spent his remaining time on his ship reading up on the various preparations the company had been cooking up. They even formed an agreement with Walter's Whalers to ship out their most expensive production equipment off-planet if the Republic failed to contain the Vesians!

The convoy touched down upon Bentheim more than two days later. They'd been delayed by additional security checks and the requirement to adhere to the speed of the slowest transports.

A guarded planetary transport waited them at the spaceport. Loaders carefully transferred the prototype in the cargo bay while Melkor and Raella entered

their mechs. Ves didn't expect any trouble, but it didn't hurt to be prepared. He also carried Lucky on his shoulders as an increasingly familiar custom.

Jake and a handful of mech technicians and aides accompanied Ves in an armored shuttle. His COO presented him with a secure data pad of the revised agreement between the LMC and Marcella's brokerage.

The entire contract looked awfully dense and Ves was not in the mood to decipher them. "I don't have time to read through these terms. Give me a summary."

"We've pretty much come to an agreement on this set of terms. Mrs. Bollinger is willing to accept a reduced commission of ten percent of gross profits for any product released after signing this agreement. In exchange, we'll assume responsibility for most forms of mass marketing as well as after-sales support. The latter change is a very impactful one."

"How so?"

"Mechs often get damaged, so they often need to be repaired as well. In extreme cases, the total cost of repairs have even exceeded the cost to buy a new mech, so you can imagine the potential earnings of this industry. Sometimes an outfit wants to modify a mech or add more armaments, and that takes a substantial amount of money as well."

"I see now. From the tone of your voice, you don't sound that optimistic. Marcella wouldn't have given us this concession without reason."

"Unless we grow large enough to form our own repair company, it's best to form a contract with an existing repair business on Bentheim. That means we have to form a branch office and hire some liaisons who can keep an eye on them. You don't want the repair companies to work without supervision. They'll rip you off in a thousand different ways if they think they can get away with it. Even a solid contract won't help that much."

"So they're as shady as salvage outfits."

"If you think about it, they're two sides of the same coin."

It turned out that the repair industry was plagued with a lot of fraud and pitfalls. A poorly managed repair scheme could easily pile the Bentheim division with a mountain of debt. Frankly, Ves admired Marcella for conducting after-sales support in his stead up to this point.

The entire agreement also hinged on Marcella's approval of his new design. Ves had managed to keep it under wraps so far. He wanted to achieve the maximum possible impact for her first impression, so he didn't even send along any documents.

The armed procession of transports, shuttles and mechs traversed away from Dorum and neared the mech hub of Ansel, which previously hosted the Vintage Festival. This time, they skipped the exhibition center and instead arrived at the doorsteps of the Ansel Precision Mech Testing Grounds, or APMTG.

"Mr. Larkinson! Welcome to the APMTG!" A sharply-dressed young man shouted over the all the thruster noise. The representative of the testing grounds greeted their arrival with a handshake and a smile. "Follow me to the labs! Our testing personnel has already prepared for the arrival of your new design!"

Ves looked upwards at the transport that carried his mech. "What about my prototype?"

"We're prepping our secure hangar for spying equipment before we allow your prototype to be transferred in our hands. At the APMTG, we take confidentiality as our highest priority! Our state of the art security systems is able to deter almost any spying methods known to the Komodo Star Sector!"

"APMTG is a mouthful."

"Just call us the testing grounds!"

Once they stepped inside, they entered a control room that overlooked an empty hall. A duty manager greeted them and showed Ves around. "This is our first testing chamber, where we will be measuring the basic parameters of your mech in order to get a baseline. This is not to say we believe your product is defective!"

Ves nodded. "I understand. Before you push my mech to the limit, you need to determine if the mech isn't already wrong from the start. It also helps calibrate your subsequent tests."

"Ah, thank you for your understanding. Do you have a background in testing mechs?"

"I know a thing or two about salvaging them, which does some of the same stuff you do."

That could be construed as an insult, as the salvage industry was well known for cutting corners. Fortunately, the duty manager didn't take any offense.

"Well, our testing process adheres to industry standards and is much more exacting than what can be achieved in the frontier."

They better be, because Ves paid over ten million credits for this service. He could get away with less if he took his prototype to the MTA, but it turned out that they had a waiting list over two months long.

At least the testing grounds performed a greater variety of tests, so Ves expected to get his money's worth.

"I can't wait to see how my prototype will perform."

As they waited for the prototype to be brought from the hangar to the testing chamber, Marcella arrived with a faux-angry face.

"The nerve of you!" She slapped his back with her artificial limb, only to be surprised by his ability to remain unfazed. "Well, I forgot you went through that ordeal in the frontier. You've grown some balls recently."

"Hey, we can always stick to the current contract."

"And risk letting you get away? No way! You're the goose who lays the golden eggs!" Marcella firmly shook her head. "Ves, even if your early work resembles dog turds, you've been getting better and better with each new model. Your progress is especially pronounced when you track the quality of your virtual models."

Since they basically fixed all of the terms of their revised contract, Marcella didn't feel any need to hold back her opinion. Ves got the sense that Marcella deliberately sang praises to make a better impression. It glossed over the fact that a mech broker like her more often posed as a ruthless shark.

They made small-talk while the testing grounds conveyed the prototype. Fifteen minutes later, the early version of the Blackbeak stood at the center of the testing chamber.

Everyone dropped their conversation and stared at its alluringly sinister frame in shock. His hand-crafted models always had that effect on those who saw his products for the first time, but even Marcella dropped her metaphorical jaw.

Eventually, she laughed. "When I heard you finally started working on your first original design, I didn't expect a monster! This is one of the most impressive designs I've ever seen, appearance wise alone! I'm tempted to sign the new contract right now!"

The testing grounds proceeded with their first tests once a test pilot boarded the Blackbeak's cockpit.

Chapter 257 Testing Grounds

The mech pilot proceeded to tread carefully in activating the mech. Ves noticed plenty of bots hovering at the sides of the chamber. They carried a number of emergency equipment such as fire suppressants and isolation materials should his mech start to malfunction.

Fortunately, the Blackbeak turned online as smooth as flowing water. The testing chamber's sensors and the diagnostics conveyed by the mech's internals conveyed no red flags. For now.

"All systems look green! Minor deviances have been reported with the power reactor. They are well within tolerances!"

Ves had a lot of confidence nothing would go wrong at the start. He meticulously checked the quality of his own work as he assembled it piece by piece. Still, he felt excited to see his hard work pay off by delivering a near-flawless performance.

The testing grounds performed a rigorous amount of testing in the empty chamber. The test pilot started making simple but meaningful moves. This could be something as simple as leaning forward or backwards, or as complex as balancing on one leg while extending out the remaining limbs.

That last move caused Ves to wince. The Blackbeak's leg had not been rated to handle all of that weight for long stretches of time. Still, his mech performed like a champ, taking the escalating levels of stress in stride. By the time the mech ran at full sprint while swinging its sword and shield back and forth, Ves relaxed enough to chat with the people from the testing ground.

"How large is the testing ground?"

"Oh, we have over twenty testing chambers and more than forty outdoor grounds and obstacle courses. Many of them are duplicates as we are constantly testing new designs. Our state-of-the-art equipment and galaxy-

leading methodologies is praised by everyone in Bentheim. We frequently receive the most confidential test models from various famous Journeyman Mech Designers."

Interspersed between the somewhat exaggerated marketing speech, the people of the testing grounds revealed a genuine passion of getting their hands on the latest toys in the Republic first. The truly prestigious mech designers sometimes sent out a batch of half-a-dozen mechs for the testing grounds to wreck while gathering as much data as possible.

"You guys must be wrecking a lot of mechs!"

"Oh, it's not that bad. Any destruction is always carefully controlled in a way the remnants can be fully salvaged."

Once they finished the basic tests, the testing grounds moved the prototype to a second chamber. This one contained various mech-sized dummies and obstacles for the Blackbeak to sink its teeth in. Ves even recognized some cheap exotic alloys that must have been salvaged and reforged a couple of hundred times.

The mech pilot slowly moved to attack a basic target made out of wood. The flimsy material split like paper, hardly putting up an obstacle against the alloys built into the sword.

That soon changed as the pilot started swinging the sword against a progression of increasingly formidable materials. Ves sighed in relief once they went through the final plate of armor, which mimicked the toughness of a medium knight's chest armor.

"The sword has largely held up."

Certainly, it wouldn't be a good sword if it became chipped or blunted after tearing through the armor of a couple of mechs. Still, even the strongest swords could snap like a twig if wielded by an incompetent pilot.

The testing grounds spent the next ten days subjecting the prototype to a variety of conditions.

They ran the mech through an obstacle course until it ran out of fuel.

They subjected it to a hellishly hot chamber before dropping the temperature to below freezing point.

They overloaded the internals to see how much mileage the prototype could extract out of that extra power, but they quickly had to halt their attempts. The mech reached the point of irreversible damage too rapidly to continue this particular test.

Most of the time, the tests consisted of hour-long sojourns into waiting for a component to reach its breaking point. The testing grounds left the more destructive tests at the very end, where they finally placed the mech in front of a couple of turrets and fired at it with sadistic glee.

"The toughness of your mech's exterior is really good!" The same duty manager praised. "What a great armor system! Its compartmentalization isn't too shabby as well."

"The Blackbeak is still a knight. It's designed to take a beating."

The one thing they couldn't test was how easy they could repair it back to full. Ves lacked the time to go through such a round and the testing ground demanded a substantial price for such a service.

During his ten-day stay at the testing grounds, he found it remarkable how far they went to keep their confidentiality.

The same crop of testing personnel manned to consoles and performed the testing. The various testing facilities had been carefully screened, and even the outdoor grounds had been fenced in by obscuring electric screens.

Alongside isolation, the testing grounds also employed a mix of active security that actively swept the grounds for spying devices and unwanted visitors. Considering the clout of their regular customers, such precautions were definitely needed!

"I must say, it's a pleasure to test your first original mech!" The representative gushed as he accompanied Ves to the shuttle pad. "Yours is one of the most aesthetically pleasing debut designs I've ever had the pleasure of seeing on our grounds!"

"Thanks for letting me witness the entire process. It always hurts to see your own creation get hurt, but I've learned just as much from my observations as I've had from the data you've compiled."

"It's our pleasure to serve you. We don't often see mech designers possess as much passion for the craft as you, to the point where you've stuck with us for the entire ten-day stretch!"

That inadvertently told Ves a lot about how the well-to-do mech designers treated their own creations. He gently shook his head. How far would he go before he started to treat his mechs as commodities as well?

"Well, I'm very satisfied with your services." Ves thanked the representative as he reached his shuttle. "I'll think about bringing my next designs to you whenever I come up with something new!"

"You're welcome, Mr. Larkinson. The APMTG always stands ready to find the limits of your mechs!"

While the pieces of the prototype would be shipped back to Cloudy Curtain, Ves had to make one more stop. Marcella left after the first couple of hours since the testing began, but she regularly kept tabs on the results by remote. By now, she must have gathered enough data to prove that the Blackbeak was a solid design.

"It's too bad your Blackbeak doesn't perform that well in certain extreme conditions." Jake commented to him. "Knights have always shown historically poor performance in hot and vacuum environments, but your model is particularly bad at it. That may not be a problem in the Republic's market, but it will be greater hindrance should you decide to publish it beyond our borders."

"I'm not considering any expansions beyond the border at this point. Even if I do, I'll likely develop a cold-weather variant instead."

"Don't go overboard on developing variants for your own products. If there's a viable need, other mech designers will license your design."

"That sounds fairly unlikely." Ves replied. "I'm merely an Apprentice Mech Designer, and my design is being published at the tail end of the current generation."

"True. Most mech designers have already given up on the current generation and are waiting for the next one to arrive."

They had a fascinating discussion about what mech designers did to stay in business during these trying times. The more established entrepreneurs could easily sit back and rely on their existing catalog to generate a steady income. Newcomers had it more difficult.

Once they arrived at Marcella's brokerage, they went up to her office where she awaited his arrival. "Ves, please take a seat. We have important decisions to make."

"So what did you think about my prototype?" Ves asked as he dropped Lucky to the floor to run around while he took the center seat. Jake took the seat next to him and brought up a data pad that displayed the revised contract their negotiators hammered out.

"I have to admit, I'm impressed." The mech broker said. "I didn't think you'd be able to exceed the quality of your most recent products. Out of all of the products I've worked with, none possess as much magic as yours."

"Don't forget about its performance. I've worked hard and risked my life to acquire a set of high-quality component licenses. My mech's performance is on par with other currentgen models that are priced around 60 million credits."

"One could argue that Michael Dumont's latest model is a much better bang for your buck."

"The Havalax won't last as long as the Blackbeak when all hell breaks loose."

"It will take years before that becomes evident."

"Well, that's what marketing is for, right?" Ves pointed out. "I'm sure the benefits of my model will become clear as long as we put out the right message."

After some small-talk, they moved on to the revised contract. Ves skimmed over the clauses and found nothing that stood out to him, though he only understood half of the terms.

Meanwhile, Marcella clasped her hands and added a last-minute request. "I've been thinking about the cooperation we had so far and what we can achieve in the future. I think you have promise, Ves."

"What are you getting at?" Ves looked at his mech broker with a guarded expression.

"I'd like to take a personal stake in your business. Say, five percent of the LMC's shares."

Ves dropped the data pad containing the contract. Even Jake looked taken aback at this sudden demand.

"I'm sorry, Marcella, but I'm not short on cash right now."

"Hear me out, Ves. The current contract states that we'll be working together for at least twenty years. A lot of things can happen during that time, especially considering the Republic will be having their generational spat with the Kingdom. Times may become difficult for us, and that's why we need to forge a stronger bond."

Jake didn't refuse the suggestion out of hand. He looked intrigued and asked a pertinent question. "What are you prepared to offer in exchange for a five percent stake?"

"It's difficult to determine the LMC's current market cap. You're keeping your books close to your chests." She explained. "However, I have my sources, and I've also made a projection of your company's future earnings. I think it's fair to offer around 1.3 billion credits."

"That's a lot of money." Ves immediately replied, but he also revealed his misgivings. "But that doesn't sound enough. My growth is extremely fast compared to my competitors. Ten years from now, the LMC will be a completely different animal."

"Aren't you a little too optimistic? You've never lived through the last war, and from what everyone tells me, the upcoming one will be even more destructive. I'm also on the hook if a disaster falls upon your workshop."

They negotiated back and forth. Ves truly believed his company had a brighter future than the value that Marcella ascribed to it. Meanwhile, his mech broker believed that Ves severely underestimated the challenges his company was about to face in the next ten years.

Eventually, Marcella switched up her offer and decided to pledge 1.9 billion credits worth of marketing activities in exchange for a five percent stake and a seat at the board.

"Don't underestimate the value of marketing. It's essential to sustain your company's rapid growth phase. As your catalog and production capacity grows, you'll need to develop other channels to sell your mechs."

Jake made a subtle indication to Ves. His COO thought that Marcella offered a decent amount of value for what she asked. Ves let go of some of his misgivings. Still, the question remained whether he should issue stock or sell the ones he already had in hand?

"The Larkinson Estate won't agree with the decision to issue new stock." He responded. Before he joined the LMC, he used to be a retainer for the Larkinsons. He still acted as their proxy in a way. "Issuing new stock will dilute their ownership of the company below twenty-five percent. That's not in their interest."

In the end, Ves had to part with his own shares, reducing his ownership of the LMC from seventy-five percent to seventy percent. They slowly went through the paperwork and signed all the contracts. At the end of the day, the LMC welcomed another shareholder to the fold.

Ves rubbed his tired face. "I don't know if I made the right choice or not, but welcome to the fold. I hope you can help us grow into a fixture of the Republic."

The new agreement entailed significant changes in their cooperation. For better or worse, both of their fates became intertwined with the success of the LMC.

Chapter 258 Finalize

The wrecked state of the prototype diminished its value immensely. Ves decided to scrap the pieces outright in order to recover as much exotics as possible and ship them back to his workshop.

With most of the company's envoys remaining on Bentheim to take care of business, Ves, Jake and his usual entourage decided to race back to Cloudy Curtain aboard the Barracuda. Without the shackles of a slow and lumbering convoy, the swift and agile corvette reached Cloudy Curtain in roughly a day.

Ves hardly wasted any time by returning to his office. The Blackbeak's ten-day crucible revealed a lot about its limits. "The simulations haven't been that far off."

The differences between the virtual models and the realspace testing didn't amount to much, but the details mattered. In particular, the testing revealed that the Blackbeak could use some improvements in terms of heat management and armor coverage.

"My mech runs too hot the longer it keeps running. It's not venting heat fast enough. The joints are also rather vulnerable."

Defensive knights featured very thick armor around their joints, making it difficult to exploit them as weak points. The Blackbeak demanded a certain level of mobility however, which limited the amount of armor Ves could put around its knees and elbows.

The testing grounds revealed that the joint armor degraded a little too quickly. The Veltrex armor system performed well below standards if Ves thinned its three layers beyond the minimum threshold.

Both problems demanded Ves to make a couple of unpalatable compromises. Solving the heat issues entailed incorporating more active heat emission elements, which took up valuable space. Increasing the armor around the joints meant that the Blackbeak lost a substantial amount of flexibility.

Could he plug both gaps while retaining the Blackbeak's current level of performance?

Ves crunched his head over the problems, but came up with nothing. He decided to consult the imaginary existence roosting in his mind. "C'mon, black phoenix, show me an idea."

The image hardly stirred. It didn't possess any intrinsic knowledge about mech design to suggest any solutions to the problems he faced. Ves had to solve the issue on his own.

He decided to punt on the problems and address the minor problems first. Ves corrected various minor shortcomings about his design by minutely shifting the placements of some components. It only took a couple of hours to enact all the changes, but Ves took three entire days to confirm they didn't result in any adverse consequences.

By that time, Ves made a decision about his design. "My mech is meant to stay on the field for long stretches of time. Both heat management and joint coverage are essential to extending the Blackbeak's operational time."

Though it hurt him a lot, he decided to cut into the Blackbeak's design in order to make room for further improvements. He made room by expanding its exterior to make room for a couple of heatsinks and some heat shunting mechanisms. He also clad the joints in thicker layers of interlocking plates.

Both changes profoundly affected the performance of his design. They also turned it into a slightly different beast, which forced Ves to rerun all of his virtual tests in order to insure he hadn't introduced any new flaws. This stretched on for two weeks.

The deadline to submit his new design to the MTA was only days away. Carlos knocked on his door and entered it when Ves signalled he could come in. Ves looked fairly haggard right now.

"I just came to tell you that our time is running out. You spent enough time on your design. I know you feel like you can always do more, but that's not how

the industry works. Don't be like those perfectionists who spend decades on a single design."

Ves snapped out of his obsessive gaze towards his design. "You're right. I doubt I can squeeze more performance out of this design. It's time to wrap it all up."

Compared to the prototype, the latest version of the Blackbeak looked more robust. Its slightly expanded frame and substantial joint coverage slowed down the knight, shifting it away from the fighting style of a skirmisher. In exchange, Ves plugged some of its weak points and slightly increased its capacity to absorb damage.

He found it hard to tell whether his design actually improved, but at least he made it a little more rounded. Strengthening the joint armor closed a potential loophole that knowledgeable opponents could exploit with contemptuous ease. Now they had to work a little harder to cripple his knight.

The closer his design reached completion, the more the black phoenix stirred. When Ves added the logo of the LMC on the upper left chest of his mech, the bird practically screeched with impatience.

"Not yet." He whispered, trying hard to contain his image inside his head. "There's still something missing."

Despite the wholesomeness of his design, Ves felt as if it lacked a final touch. "There's a line between a fine mech and a great mech."

All of the compromises he made had turned the Blackbeak into a fine mech. His extensive use of modeling gave him confidence that all of the major kinks had been worked out. His design shouldn't carry any major flaws.

Yet that didn't seem enough.

Ves paused for over thirty minutes over this road block. No matter how much he flexed his mind, he couldn't figure out why his design was still not complete.

He decided to step out and ask for the opinions of others. He first showed off a small projection to Lucky.

"What do you think, buddy? Is it a good mech?"

"Meow!" His cat batted the projection away.

"Okay, then."

He entered the workshop floor next and gathered Cyril and Carlos. The two supervisors hummed over the Blackbeak with serious expressions in their minds.

"It's larger than the previous version." Carlos stated. "The initial design looked graceful. That's not quite the case anymore with this newer version. It looks fatter somehow."

"It looks less like a light mech and more like a medium mech." Chief Cyril added. "Thin mechs look pretty, but they don't tend to last too long in the field. Your design looks perfectly suitable to rough it out."

They supplied some comments but didn't mention anything too pertinent. Ves took his design to the rest of the mech technicians who had even less of an idea of what might be wrong.

Carlos shook his head. "Really Ves, you're obsessing too much again. I know it's important to get your first design right, but it's already a great mech. Let it go, man."

"I'll regret it if I stop at this point." He replied and shut off the projection. "I know I can do something to make it even better."

No one could help him identify the problem, he realized. Even his closest friends never understood his design philosophy. They only saw the surface of his design.

Ves left his workshop and stepped outside. He looked up at the perpetual cloudy skies and noted the subtle rainbow colors reflecting off their puffy surfaces.

It took only a minute to figure it out. "Sentiment."

He often liked to disparage other mech designers as producers of soulless objects. Yet many mech designers injected their designs with sentiment and personal feeling. The Larkinson ancestor's Valiant struck the strongest impression in his mind. The iconic mech was a piece of living history that was capable of telling an interesting tale from its appearance alone.

What kind of story did the Blackbeak convey? Why did he opt for an offensive knight, and why did it end up with a sinister aura?

His memories cast back to the start of his career.

Arriving at his workshop with a mountain of debt hanging over his head.

Designing his first virtual mech out of two badly matched elements.

Participating in the YTE and reaching the finals with the help of Charlotte.

Developing and producing the Marc Antony Mark I, his very first production model.

Journeying to Leemar and partnering up with Cadet Lovejoy to become one of the finalists of the Open Competition.

Transitioning from Novice to Apprentice, acquiring the tutelage and patronage of a venerated Master Mech Designer.

Improving the design of the original Marc Antony that resulted in the much-improved Mark II, which provided a steady amount of income to Ves.

Founding the Living Mech Corporation, thereby establishing himself as an entrepreneur as well as a mech designer.

Taking part in Lord Kaine's treacherous expedition to Groening IV, harvesting both benefits and misfortune, only to escape by the skin of teeth.

Returning home, spending his newfound wealth in merits and credits, and laying the groundwork for his first original mech.

"The Blackbeak is the culmination of my personal journey up to this point." He whispered to skies.

Even if he didn't mean to, his design had been shaped by his past experiences. The Blackbeak, for all its beauty and darkness, exposed a portion that lay hidden beneath his heart.

"What does this tell me?"

The Blackbeak represented a subversion of the standard doctrine of employing knights as defensive bulwarks. He emphasized this design choice by applying a predominantly black coating.

The Blackbeak represented his response to the darkness of the galaxy. It had already swallowed up his father and threatened to grasp Ves in its clutches. To fight back, he had to bend the rules as well, using something as unconventional as the System to get a head-start.

He also developed the Blackbeak as a poignant response to the Caesar Augustus. The old lastgen design served as the debut of Jason Kozlowski. Perhaps Ves wanted to avoid the famous business scion's lack of success by trying to convey the opposite mood.

It also expressed his opinion that the next war would be won by survivors instead of heroes. No one knew the depths at which both sides could sink a couple of years from now. In these murky times, you had to think outside the box if you wanted to thrive.

"My mastery has something to do with this as well."

His brief but unforgettable journey into Barley's mind provided him with an essential understanding of a pilot of knights. Even if the Blackbeak looked as if it couldn't be trusted, it still possessed a bone of unyielding will. It could still be relied on to act as a defender if needed.

"I understand now. The Blackbeak is something that I had always wanted to pilot if I ever became a mech pilot."

Sadly, his genetic aptitude ruled out any possibility of piloting his own mechs. Only the seemingly omnipotent System might offer a way, but Ves never looked up the option. He had a feeling the price was much more than he could bear.

The momentary break helped him reflect upon his work and figure out what he missed. Once he finished his contemplation, he calmly went inside and returned to his office. He summoned up his projection and zoomed in on the cockpit.

The interior offered fairly luxurious furnishings for a cockpit. Ves spent a decent amount of time in prettying up the interior and making it more comfortable for pilots in it for the long haul.

He also added reliefs of the black phoenix. The different carvings conveyed a made-up story about the phoenix's origins and its eventual transformation into a black phoenix.

As a final touch, Ves didn't think of changing the functional design of his mech. He merely wanted to add his personal signature to his work. One could

argue that the label underneath the front console already sufficed, but Ves thought he needed to add a deeper meaning to his design.

A weight imposed on his mind, pushing him towards monumental decision. "You're the Blackbeak, but that's more of a name for a design."

If Ves considered his creations to be alive, then they deserved an intimate name that they could call their own. He felt like a father who was about to bestow a name to his recently born child.

With a couple of controls, Ves engraved the name of his design at the top of the interior of the cockpit.

"Your name is Akhran."

Ves let go of the reins of the image clamoring in his mind. The black phoenix screeched triumphantly as it escaped from the prison of its progenitor's mind and dove into the Blackbeak's intangible domain.

Even though he only witnessed a projection, Ves had the illusion that his design felt more complete somehow. The Blackbeak exuded a sense of finality and solidity that had always been lacking from the prototype.

"Hahahaha!" He laughed, finally letting go of the tension that had been crushing over his shoulder. "It's finished! I'm finally done!"

His very first original design was ready to be submitted to the MTA. Assuming everything went well, he would finally be able to advance his career and make his mark as a designer of original mechs.

He looked forward to competing against his upstart rival. An air of bloodlust momentarily infected his mood.

Chapter 259 Completion

The completion of the Blackbeak resulted in a cleansing of the mind. Ves never realized the black phoenix's presence took up such a heavy toll on his mind. Its departure freed up space he never knew existed.

His design possessed a definite spiritual element. He could feel it in his sixth sense. It distinguished his design from the vast majority of other designs publically available for licensing. No one would be able to tell why his design drew the eye, but it definitely possessed a seductive allure.

"It's pretty much a bad boy among designs."

The Blackbeak's appearance carried a dark mystique that made it a more natural fit among pirates and outcasts than upright mercenary circles. It was the kind of mech that appealed more to mech pilots with a lot of issues on their plate.

Even with these negative connotations, Ves still loved his design like it was his own child. In a certain sense, he indeed birthed it into this universe.

After Ves came off his high, he sighed and raised his comm before dropping it. Before he could get his evaluation from the System, he needed to fabricate a single copy of the final design. Taking such a step would leave a physical presence of his design.

"Onwards, then!"

He bounded out of his office and raced towards the workshop floor. The meandering mech technicians all looked up at his entry.

"Clear the production line!"

Everyone soon found out that the Blackbeak had been finished. The mech technicians wrapped up their projects and hauled every piece of junk to the side. They were about to witness the fabrication of the first production model, something that carried a lot more weight than the production of the prototype.

"Can we help?" Carlos asked. "We practiced on the prototype's design for several weeks. We're beginning to get the hang of it. The armor plates are still giving us a lot of trouble, but we can easily take care of the generic components."

Ves shook his head. "Not this time. It's not that I don't trust you, but my first production model is going to be submitted to the MTA. I can't afford to risk any deviations from the design."

His extensive Assembly Skills made him the most proficient fabricator in the workshop by far. This actually indicated that his workshop lacked a senior fabricator that could take over for Ves in his absence.

Such figures usually consisted of older mech designers who gave up on pursuing a career in design. Their background in mech design and their decades-long experience in fabrication entitled them to fantastic conditions. They easily earned millions of credits a year at some medium mech manufacturers.

Right now, Ves displayed the same amount of skill of a senior fabricator in his own workshop. He deftly manipulated the interface of the Dortmund to churn out part after part. His prior experience with the prototype allowed him to avoid many of the pitfalls he stumbled into last time.

Ves designed the Blackbeak to be easy to fabricate. Besides the complicated armor system and the elaborate surface carvings, the mech embodied the rule that knights should be a simple mech to make.

He even detected a faint resonance between the Dortmund printer and his work. He faithfully reconstructed the impressive machine out of a variety of salvaged parts. He understood the machine and felt connected to it in a way that he would never have with an off-the-shelf device.

The more he understood his tools, the better he was able to exert control over the process.

Even the armor forging proceeded with little incident. Once he got the hang of it once, he could reproduce the same steps in his sleep. The differences between the first version and second version of his design didn't lead to major shifts in paradigms, so he applied the same solutions as last time.

The Blackbeak's first production model slowly came together. Each bolt and plate had been made with loving care, as Ves channeled his full focus into making the most wholesome representation of his design into a physical presence in this reality.

The final step consisted of mounting a custom gem inside the cockpit. Like the Mark II, Ves turned the start button into a placeholder for a gemstone. He carefully opened a pouch and selected a pre-prepared gem that Lucky once produced some time ago.

[Black Diamond of the Night]

Increases the speed and armor of a mech by 10% at low light levels.

The dark diamond featured a compelling glint that matched the Blackbeak's mystique. While he didn't think his customers would employ his mech at night, it might provide a surprising result.

"Well, it's not quite certain my first production model will even see combat."

The mech market placed a lot of value on special or unique mechs. The abundant amount of money he harvested from the Vintage Festival was a case in point. Wealthy collectors constantly kept their eye out on mechs with noteworthy providence.

It remained to be seen whether the first production model became a rarity. It derived its value from the overall success of its design. The more copies he

sold, the more collectors desired to obtain the initial copy he completed just now.

After completing his mech, Ves gathered everyone at work and invited them to gaze at the brand new model.

Jake whistled in appreciation at the sight. "I don't know how you did it, but your first production model is even more hypnotic than the prototype. I'm only worried that the market might not be able to stomach it. Those who get a glimpse of your mech from a projection won't be able to experience its intensity."

Much like artwork, a recording or a projection wouldn't be able to convey more than a tenth of the intangible properties of his hand-crafted work. His virtual models should have deserved more appreciation, but because of the limitations in simulation technology, his customers only experience a pale imitation of his original intentions.

"That's the nature of our business. We just have to work with what we have."

Ves spent the final day wrapping up his documentation. He already sent more than enough proof that he worked on his design alone, but it didn't hurt to send additional documents. He mainly paid attention to justifying his design choices. It gave the judges from the MTA a glimpse in his mind.

He also assigned the Blackbeak design a model number. Every mech designer adhered to their own rules with regards to these codes. Ves kept it relatively simple in order to keep track of his growing catalog of designs.

BP-A-01 stood for Black Phoenix, Arkhan, first published edition.

If Ves wanted to update the design, he'd change the code for the Mark II version to BP-A-02. If he wanted to design an aerial variant, the code changed into something like BP-S-01. In short, every update or variant using the Blackbeak as a base began with BP.

While he tidied up his project files, he also sneaked in some time with the System and submitted his design to its discerning gaze. The program spat out its evaluation of the Blackbeak almost instantly.

[Design Evaluation: Blackbeak BP-A-01]

Model name: Blackbeak BP-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Offensive Knight

Armor: A-

Carrying Capacity: B-

Aesthetics: A

Endurance: A

Energy Efficiency: B-

Flexibility: C-

Firepower: D

Integrity: A-

Mobility: C+

Spotting: E

X-Factor: C++

Cost efficiency: C

Project involvement: 100%

Original component composition: 7%

Overall evaluation: The Blackbeak is a remarkable third-class offensive knight design that excels in lengthy conflicts. Its unusual balance between armor and design enables pilots to employ it in a variety of circumstances with abundant flexibility. However, its lack of notable strengths also demands a high level of skill and judgement to pilot the Blackbeak to its full potential.

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 500 Design Points for designing a mech with a moderate presence of X-Factor.]

"Damn it! I got so far and I still haven't broken through my previous record!"

His X-Factor score showed that he had reached the extreme end of the C range, yet it didn't enter into B territory. Ves felt a little bitter about that. Even though the growth element incorporated into the design should strengthen its X-Factor over time, it wouldn't be able to show off its potential at the time of purchase.

The System's lack of fanfare around his first original design felt a little off. It treated the Blackbeak the same as the temporary designs he slapped together during competitions. This should have been a major milestone for him. He at least expected a present or something.

"Can't you say anything nice for once, System?"

[User, keep working hard on developing your ability to design mechs. You are on the right track!]

Ves threw up his hands. "Whatever."

He forgot about the System and turned to his timetable. His administration already prepared the submission procedure. He only had to hand over his first

production model along with some hard copy documents to the MTA to begin the validation process.

The validation process was mainly a souped up certification process where his design and his physical copy would be judged according to a very strict standard. Once his design passed muster, Ves gained the right to exploit the design through MTA channels.

Some mech designers skipped the entire process. This was mostly the case with more renowned designers or those who worked for powerful entities like the governments of second-rate states.

Submitting a design to the MTA entailed revealing all of its strengths and weaknesses to one of the largest powers in the galaxy. For designs meant to turn the tide in a war, such a massive exposure could spell defeat for the design, so under these circumstances, the MTA never got to peek at their inner workings.

Quite obviously, Ves hadn't reached that point yet. In order to convince his customers to purchase his mechs, he needed to make its details more accessible. Ves even planned to add the Blackbeak's design to Iron Spirit in order to let the public get a taste of its wonders.

The design phase formally ended when they loaded up the design aboard a secure transport arranged by Sanyal-Ablin. The security company would send it over to the MTA's branch in Bentheim as soon as the next convoy left from Cloudy Curtain. Ves didn't have to be present at the MTA unless they called for him, so he remained home this time.

Ves sank into his sofa at the lounge with a tired sigh. "It's finally done!"

"I'm curious." Raella drawled as she sipped on a drink. She recently finished a routine patrol in her Vectrix. "When will you develop a skirmisher variant?"

"The Blackbeak isn't a good platform to develop lighter mechs." He replied, not even giving it a serious thought. "It's a bit difficult but not impossible to develop a rifleman mech out of the base model, but I'm better off designing a dedicated skirmisher from scratch."

"Oh. I guess you won't be giving me a new mech any time soon then."

"Don't feel too bad for yourself. While I'm attracted to the idea of designing a rifleman mech, I'm not sure I'll be up to the task."

"What's holding you back? I thought you knew a thing or two about laser weapons."

That was an understatement considering that Ves even knew how to build a graser rifle.

"The weapon isn't the problem. It's the musculature that's an issue. Rifleman pilots demand exact control over the movements of their mechs. I haven't taken these priorities into account when I designed the Blackbeak. So again, it's better for me to come up with a new design than try to pigeonhole a knight into a rifleman."

All of this went over Raella's head. She quickly got bored of the topic and finished her drink. She threw away the container, which a spare cleaning bot deftly caught in the air before it could soil the floor.

"Hey Ves, I'd like to ask you something."

"What's up?"

"I'd like to take a few days off. Nothing happens in this boring dump anyway and all of those spooky assassins seem to have disappeared into nothing. So I'd like to take a trip to Bentheim to have some actual fun."

Ves frowned at that. "I'm not too comfortable seeing you go out alone. Besides, we just visited Bentheim a short time ago."

"That was for business, not for fun. The only thing I did was sit in my mech all day waiting for someone stupid enough to piss me off. Just let me go, please. Besides, I won't be alone."

"Is Melkor asking for leave as well?"

"Nah, he's a straight shooter who can stand guard at the same post for years on end if needed." Raella shook her head. "I already made some plans with someone else. You see, I'm kind of dating Dietrich right now..."

Ves sat up straight at those words. "What?!"

Chapter 260 Spending Money Like A Drunk

He eyed his cousin like she was an alien. "You're dating the Little Boss? He's not a very good influence! I thought you hated lowlives like him!"

Raella held up her palms in a defensive manner. "Hey, he's cool once you get to know him! He's a great mech pilot and not like a country bumpkin at all, unlike most boys I've met on this farm planet."

Ves was not in a mood to play the parent, but he didn't want to leave it at that. Relationships with junior gang bosses had a tendency to entangle everyone close into a morass of intimidation and violence.

"I don't think the family will be glad to hear that. You know how they can get sometimes. We have a reputation to uphold!"

"Screw reputation! The Larkinsons will keep being the squeaky-clean military dynasty without me then!"

The argument devolved into a mindless back-and-forth that didn't resolve anything. Ves gave up on convincing Raella, since he obviously couldn't control her movements. "Look, if you want to go out with Dietrich, then go ahead, but please don't go off and join Walter's Whalers."

"Hey, I'm not that stupid. It's just a fling, man. Don't look at me like I'm off to elope with him! Sheesh!" Raella flipped her purple-dyed hair and scampered off.

He didn't know what to do. While he liked Dietrich as a person, one day he'd be sure to inherit his father's mantle. The buddy he knew may turn into someone he wouldn't be able to recognize anymore.

"Everyone changes over time."

After taking the rest of the day off, Ves returned to work in order to prepare for his upcoming debut. His company had already prepared for his public debut for months, having contacted various news portals and noteworthy experts to attend his press conference.

Every important manager in the company gathered in the conference room to report their preparations to Ves.

"Around twenty different publications accepted the invitation to attend Michael Dumont's debut." Gavin started to report. "Our goal is to surpass that number. However, the marketing department has found out that it's very difficult to get them to send out their reporters unless we cut some deals with them. Their demands range from exclusive interviews to free mechs. Some publications even demand we hand over the first production model to them!"

Ves was not amused. "I hope you refused those ridiculous demands."

"We put them down as gently as possible. With the help of Marcella's connections, we managed to secure the presence of at least fifteen different news portals and mech portals. They're regional names, mostly. You won't find any publication on the level of the Rimward Star Herald."

"They interviewed me last time. Did you send them an invite?"

"We did, but we only received a plain refusal. If I have to guess, they have bigger things on their plate than to cover some random Apprentice Mech Designer's debut. Thousands of mech designers around the rim are holding their debuts every day. It's too much to keep up with unless you already accumulated some fame like those direct disciples."

Frankly, Ves thought the RSH was making a big mistake, as his Blackbeak possessed a lot of noteworthy qualities for a third-class design.

"So do we have to spend more to get more publications to attend my press conference?"

"That's basically what it boils down to, boss. The reporters have to make a living too, you know. Don't think for a second that an independent news portal exists. We either cough up the dough or resign ourselves to parading your new design to a collection of smaller news portals."

"I've set a tentative marketing budget of 100 million credits. Can you cover the costs from that budget or do we need to shift more money around?"

Gavin fell into silence as he weighed the costs against the benefits. "It's only worth it to pay off the greedy publications if they have the audience to back up their big mouths. Not all of them have the viewership to support their boasts."

"I'm sure you can sort that out. Let's move on to marketing the Blackbeak. Fill me in on the plan."

His publicist turned marketing manager pressed a switch that called up a projection of the timetable. "The Blackbeak is a very compelling design, especially when you see it in person. The goal of our marketing push is to introduce the Blackbeak to public and rely on word of mouth to propagate its existence, hoping to stir up demand in the private market. Our plan is split into three phases."

Gavin briefly explained what the marketing people had come up with to make the Blackbeak famous.

His debut came first. The LMC would carefully keep the Blackbeak under wraps and avoid leaking out its appearance, its specs or its defining properties.

All the press would get to know for now was that Ves planned to announce a new offensive knight as his first original design. The marketing department wanted to rely on the wow factor to ignite the first round of buzz among the press.

The second phase consisted of fabricating ten gold-label Blackbeaks and display them in public at various locations around Bentheim. Their enthralling appearances should be able to elicit a lot of curiosity from the crowd.

"Wait a minute." Ves interrupted. "The plan sounds fine, but fabricating ten models without receiving compensation will drain my entire cash reserve. Does anyone know how much it costs to fabricate a single copy of the Blackbeak?"

Someone dug up the latest figures. "It costs 41 million credits for us to fabricate a single mech. The internals take up 13 million credits in raw materials, while the armor system requires 26 million credits worth of exotics to construct. The remaining 2 million credits consists of per-unit licensing fees to various companies who developed the components the Blackbeak is using."

Compared to the Caesar Augustus, the Blackbeak cost much less to produce, even with the recent level of price surges. It all had to do with his smart selection of components. Ves specifically licensed components that incorporated materials that the Republic could supply themselves.

The LMC didn't have to rely on expensive imports from distant star sectors to produce a single mech. That was one of the biggest advantages of designing your own mech.

Ves knew of the power of the X-Factor. Even with a rating of C++, the physical copy exuded a magnetic pull that definitely halted traffic. Still, he sounded a little skeptical about its reach.

"Ten models won't be enough to cover the entirety of Bentheim, or even Dorum alone."

"We don't hold any ambitions to reach the entire public. We only want to feed the hype surrounding the Blackbeak. Once people start to see it on the streets, they'll take recordings from their comms and send it to their friends and relatives."

The third phase began after that. Once the marketing department thought they created enough of a buzz, they planned to release the virtual version of the Blackbeak onto the simulation games. Iron Spirit stood out the most, of course, but Gavin also suggested making it available to non-potentate games so that laymen could get a taste of the offensive knight as well.

"Even if they're never able to pilot our products themselves, they might recommend our product to someone with the right aptitude."

This virtual release would be paired by a fairly extensive advertising campaign. Most of the marketing budget had been allocated to this phase. Working together with Marcella's brokerage, they aimed to make the Blackbeak into a momentary sensation.

"In the short term, we can rely on advertising to drive our product's appeal. We don't plan to keep this up for more than a month. After that, we can hopefully rely on positive word of mouth from our first customers to drive up demand. If not, we can always spend more."

The plan sounded risky, but Ves understood their intentions. He only had one major problem with the plan. "We don't have the liquidity to produce ten models at the snap of our fingers."

The LMC generated a decent amount of revenue in the last few months, but their overhead also increased. At their current state, they'd come up short if they wanted to buy enough raw materials to fabricate ten complete models.

"Why not ask Mrs. Bollinger to lend us the money?" Their relations officer suggested. Maisie Duval had been very busy keeping their various stakeholders in touch. "She already agreed to pledge 1.9 billion credits in marketing assistance, so she won't hesitate to advance the necessary funds."

"That's a good idea! Contact her immediately after this meeting. She'll be in charge of selling those mechs anyway, so it's not like the money is lost forever."

Like the first production model, the couple of mechs after that also held a lot of collector's value. With her salesmanship, Marcella should be able to sell the first production run at extortionary prices.

The rest of the meeting turned to logistics. Duval worked hard to establish a temporary but stable channel of exotics they needed to fabricate the Veltrex armor system. This insured that they wouldn't be subjected to sudden supply cuts if they ramped up their production in the short term.

"I'd like to emphasize that we haven't established any long-term relationships with our current suppliers."

"That's fine. As long as they don't jack up the price, we can afford to wait and wait for better offers."

After the meeting, Ves kept staring at the cost projections. All of these elaborate plans called for lots of spendings. Everyone was in an upbeat mood

after witnessing the final design. They treated it as a given that the Blackbeak would sell like hotcakes.

Carlos noticed his friend lagging behind. "What's up?"

Ves didn't feel so confident, however. "Will the market accept my design?"

"This again? Ves, at your age, you're one of the most talented mech designers in the Republic! The Havalax designed by that douchebag Dumont doesn't even come close to the Blackbeak. Besides, even if the market doesn't catch on yet, that's what all the marketing is for. As long as you throw enough money at it, even the ugliest piece of junk can become a bestseller."

That was easy for Carlos to say. He didn't risk hundreds of millions of credits on a potentially futile venture. Ves shook his head and left his seat. He had some more preparations to make.

Later that afternoon, Marcella agreed to send them a substantial advance. Combined with their existing cash reserves, they could easily afford the raw materials needed to fabricate ten Blackbeaks. After a few days wait, the shipment of materials arrived.

This time, Ves accepted the assistance of others, though Ves still took the lead. Their frantic production and constant learning shortened the time to fabricate a single copy from three days to two days.

They managed to fabricate five extra copies they could bring to the press conference. After the Blackbeak's official unveiling, Ves planned to leave the copies behind to be shown off on the streets while he returned to finish the production run before doing anything else.

As his workers packed up the mechs and sent them off to the convoy, Ves led a procession of senior management aboard the Barracuda. He planned to arrive at Bentheim ahead of the convoy shipments in order to prepare for his debut ceremony.

Melkor and Lucky would be joining his security detail as usual.

As for his niece, Ves constantly worried for her safety. Raella had already extended her 'few days off' into a weeks-long hiatus into the underbelly of Bentheim with her new boyfriend in tow. He prayed to the heavens that Dietrich didn't drag his excitable niece into something shady.

The Barracuda deftly transitioned into FTL. Ves constantly worried what could go wrong as the time of his debut neared.

Somehow, he didn't think Dumont would let him announce a competitor to his Havelax without a challenge.

"Dumont and the Ricklins have it out for me. If they're aware of my intentions from the start, then they should have already prepared a response."