

### Chapter 261 Validation

Someone rang the bell in front of the entrance to his stateroom aboard the Barracuda.

"Come in!" Ves called out.

The armored hatch slid open and let in Melkor. Wearing his trademark visor, his nephew's expression had always been hard to read.

"What brings you to my office, cousin? Is it about Raella?"

"Raella's a big girl now. She can take care of herself." Melkor waved away his concerns. "I'm here for you right now. I've been hearing that you aren't holding up so well these days. You're letting your nerves get the best of you."

Ves had to admit he fell into a hole of endless worry and consternation. He constantly came up with worst-case scenarios that threatened to ruin his debut and threaten his career.

"Don't you think mech pilots have it worse? Everytime we get deployed, we risk our deaths. Even those who man the security mechs assigned to routine patrols have to worry about madman trying to tear the whole place down. The galaxy isn't safe."

He understood Melkor's underlying message. How many Mark II's had the company sold all this time? Thirty? Fifty? More? Ves didn't keep track of his customers anymore, but he guessed that most of them employed them as warmechs.

The coming years of war would test his designs like nothing ever seen before. Not just the Mark II, but also the original Mark I could see a lot of combat. With the imminent introduction of the Blackbeak, Ves pushed even more mech pilots onto the battlefield with his creations.

His face adopted a rueful smile. "So many mech pilots will struggle to survive. Who am I to lament about falling flat on stage? It's not the end of the universe for me."

Even though a poor debut had a depressing effect on the rest of his career, as long as he worked hard enough, he could eventually redeem himself. Even Jason Kozlowski turned into a respectable mech designer nowadays despite having released the bloated Caesar Augustus.

The short talk woke Ves from his spiral of doubt and uncertainty. He thanked Melkor, who left once he did his job, and stood up from his seat to stare at a projection of the Blackbeak.

"I have all of the ingredients to succeed. I'll make sure you will get the recognition and use you deserve."

His sixth sense fluttered a bit, indicating that the black phoenix had been paying attention. Ves found it interesting how the black phoenix would evolve once more models began to proliferate.

The rules of the imaginary realm boggled his mind.

From what he guessed, a single black phoenix king ruled over the entire BP-A-01 line, while paler duplicates of the imaginary entity occupied the individual mechs.

These individual images possessed a growth element, so they grew over time, adapting to both their mech pilots and their shared experiences. This in turn fed back to the king of the mech line, allowing it to grow into an even more majestic creature that elevated the entire design to a higher level.

"It's going to require a lot of energy to accomplish such a thing, if something like that will happen at all." He suspected.

His inclusion of a growth element in his design had far-reaching effects that he didn't quite yet understood. His findings on the X-Factor only scratched the surface of what it could do.

The only downside was that it took a long time for the fruits to bear. Ves had to debut the Blackbeak when the design had only just broken out of its shell. He felt apologetic about that.

"Reality isn't always so perfect. I have to work with what I got."

He spent the rest of his journey preparing for the upcoming event. Through the galactic net, he coordinated with the marketing department on Cloudy Curtain and the envoys sent ahead to Bentheim. With the help of Marcella's brokerage, they secured a suitable venue to show off all six current production models at once.

"All of this is contingent upon the MTA approving the Blackbeak design for release." Gavin cautioned.

Ves knew his design. There was no way it could get rejected. "The Quality Assurance Department won't hold up our design. It's nowhere near those crappy designs that some of my competitors slap together in a couple of weeks. We specifically tested the limits of the prototype at the testing grounds to catch any remaining flaws that the MTA could use as an excuse to disqualify its design."

They did their due diligence. Some designers never even bothered to subject their mechs to any physical tests, thinking that the simulations would be lifelike enough to qualify.

When the Barracuda finally touched down at the spaceport, Ves met a representative from the MTA's QA Department. "Mr. Larkinson? We have a secure package for you."

A couple of security officers in MTA uniforms proceeded to confirm his identity. Once they made sure that he wasn't a body double, a robot, a clone or some brainwashed schmuck, the rep handed over a couple of fancy data pads.

As the people from the MTA boarded their shuttle and left, Ves glanced over pads with apprehension. Everyone else gathered around him to stare at the gilded pads. Their ceremonial appearance made it clear that their contents contained an official judgement from the QA Department.

"Open it up."

He activated the first pad. It took a few seconds for them to get a grip on the cover letter of the only document in the pad.

"...We are pleased to validate your submitted design, code name BP-A-01, as a battleworthy mech..."

"...Your submitted design exceeds the minimum standards of quality set forth by our Quality Assurance Department. It has been deemed worthy enough to be added to our archives..."

"...Your submitted design will be available for licensing as soon as it is commercially released. If your submitted design is not commercially exploited by any party, we will make your design available for licensing after one standard month..."

"...Our appraisers have determined the value of a standard ten-year production license of your submitted design to be 3 billion bright credits. If you wish to dispute this estimate, you are free to lodge a formal objection..."

"We did it!" Carlos yelled and raised his fist. "The MTA approved of our design!"

Everyone held a miniature celebration. The last roadblock ahead of its introduction to the market had been cleared. Even if Ves expected the MTA to give out their stamp of approval, even he didn't know for sure.

"The Blackbeak's license is worth only 3 billion credits." Ves sardonically said. "I don't know whether to feel glad or insulted. The license for the Havalax is worth 3 billion credits as well."

"Cheer up, Ves." Carlos clapped his back. "Even if they don't recognize your mech is better, at least it's in the same league."

Ves didn't think it likely that someone would license his design in the current generation. The huge sum mainly served as bragging rights.

For a third-class mech design, a valuation of 3 billion credits wasn't shabby at all. Ves sometimes heard of awful designs receiving a licensing value of only 500 million credits.

In that regard, he did quite well, though he heard of some geniuses managing to achieve a value of 4 billion credits.

"If I only had more time and better component licenses."

Now that the Blackbeak officially entered the records and became an MTA-approved design, their preparations entered a fever pitch. Ves shuttled back and forth between Marcella's brokerage and various offices in order to insure that nothing went wrong.

In the meantime, his back office continued to persuade more publications to come and cover the press conference without throwing too much money at them. That had proven to be quite a challenge.

Time passed in a blink, and the date of his debut had finally arrived. Ves woke up with all of his mental burdens gone. Somehow, he felt as if he already did his best.

After a short breakfast, Ves joined up with his entourage and left for the venue of his debut. They reserved an upscale exhibition hall in downtown Dorum that other mech designers frequently used to introduce new designs.

Beyond the palatial double doors, six gleaming Blackbeaks stood at a row behind the podium where Ves would make his speech.

"Wow."

Five of them stood just behind the first production model like an honor guard. All of their collective X-Factors resonated with each other to produce a remarkably strong aura that even took Ves aback.

Carlos whispered in appreciation. "With mechs like these, who's going to remember the Havalax?"

"Indeed."

Their view quickly cut off as a couple of bots covered the mechs with cloth. The bright white covers allowed spectators to get a glimpse of the silhouettes, which teased everyone's imaginations.

"Alright, folks! This is the big day! Let's make sure it happens without incident!"

Every preparation had already been made, but it didn't hurt to check. The exhibition room had been spruced up with banners featuring the LMC's iconic logo. Lucky meowed at the tall tapestries depicting a stylized version of himself longing atop a cartoonish cloud.

"That's you, buddy."

"Meow!"

His cat didn't seem so pleased at his appearance in the logo. Ves may have gone a little too far in making him appear cute and innocent.

"Oh come on, just look at that cute face of yours, with such big eyes you'll surely be a hit with the ladies!"

Lucky hissed and scampered off, not wanting to hear anymore nonsense from his owner. Ves merely shrugged his shoulders and went back to his final preparations. He already had a speech planned out which not only acknowledged his achievements, but also laid out a bold vision of the future.

Half an hour before the start of the conference, the first reporters arrived with a fanfare of hovering recorder bots. The reporters already staked their places before podium, hoping to occupy the best positions for their bots to transmit the press conference to their employers.

After that, security cleared a number of spectators. The LMC sent out a lot of invitations in the last couple of weeks. Those who decided to attend consisted mainly of industry insiders and previous customers.

Besides the expected guests, Ves also decided to open up his conference to bystanders. Plenty of people who walked by the exhibition hall must be wondering what all the commotion was all about.

This led to a fairly boisterous scene at the rear of the hall. Everyone pointed at the six covered mechs, hoping to get an early peak of what they hid underneath.

Time went by until it reached local noontime. Conversations faded out as Ves stepped forth onto the stage. Garbed in his anti-grav clothes, he cut a sharp figure as a mech designer.

"Welcome, everyone. Thank you for attending this press conference. Today, I will be introducing my first original design, a model which will revolutionize the way its pilots will be able to survive the coming battles!"

Ves waved his hand and a projection appeared of the LMC's logo. Lucky quietly meowed in objection at the back, but no one heard his complaints.

"Let me begin by introducing my company. Founded on the quiet planet of Cloudy Curtain, the LMC aims to elevate the sleepy rural planet's economy and bring more employment opportunities to its citizens. We already employ a substantial amount of mech technicians and office workers, and with the introduction of my upcoming design, I expect the company to expand even faster!"

The projection shifted to footage of a large number of decisive historical battles. They all featured a number of iconic mechs that enthusiasts could recognize in their sleep.

"You may be wondering what the LMC stands for. It's short for Living Mech Corporation. I named my company this way because I believe that mechs are more than machines. With all the love and passion surrounding mechs, we don't always appreciate their contribution to humanity."

He raised his hand, pausing the projection to a fateful clash between two top-tier cutting-edge mechs.

"Think about it. How many lives are depended upon mechs? The entire course of the galaxy is constantly shifting due to the tireless contribution of mechs of all shapes and colors. They deserve our appreciation, and the LMC is my way setting forth my principle that mechs can be alive as well!"

"That's a bold statement, Mr. Larkinson!" A reporter rudely interrupted his speech. "But we didn't come here to be lectured about mechs! We know our business, so can you please move on to your new design?!"

Ves maintained his smile before the cameras. The reporter happened to be representing The Republican Mech, one of the Bright Republic's most widely read news portals on mechs.



Instead of snapping back with a verbal quip, Ves snapped his fingers. The cloths clinging over the mechs suddenly moved away, revealing the Blackbeaks in their full splendor.

"Is this what you wanted to see?"

### Chapter 262 Unveiling

No matter how many times Ves showed off his hand-crafted mechs, he never got tired of their dumbstruck faces. The snappy reporter from The Republican Mech practically dropped his jaw as he experienced the full brunt of their overlapping auras.

Nothing prepared his audience for this experience. Even those who witnessed his limited editions models at the Vintage Festival thought that Ves had could only achieve such results through herculean efforts.

The Blackbeak models right in front of them proved them wrong. Though they consisted of limited-issue gold label mechs, their powerful X-Factor exuded so much impact that even bots might fizzle out for a nanosecond or two.

"Impressed?" Ves asked the silent crowd. "This is just the start."

He snapped his fingers again, causing the mechs to come online. Their eyes glowed menacingly red while the feather-shaped shoulder pauldrons glowed in various shades of grey while leaking out a faint trace of dark vapor.

It took a lot of wrangling with the exhibition hall to pull off this stunt, but it had been worth it as the audience received a double whammy. Much like the rolling cape for the Marcus Aurelius, the miasma leaking off the Blackbeak drastically enhanced its visual presence.

The gloomy tones of black and grey made it look like the Blackbeak had emerged from the depths of the underworld to haunt the living in an inexorable march. The sword and shield affixed to their arms added an additional feeling

of threat, and the phoenix-themed engravings on their surface only reinforced the myth.

"This is the Blackbeak BP-A-01, an offensive knight mech I've designed as the culmination of my experiences and insights into knights." Ves declared in front of the still-stunned crowd. His words served to pull them back from their fascination and hang onto his words. "It is a design that embodies the will to survive by any means possible!"

A new ensemble of projections appeared. They consisted of highly realistic combat simulations that showcased the Blackbeak's performance under a variety of conditions.

In one projection, the Blackbeak dueled against a swordsman mech. The latter mech had the edge in power and speed, but its sword failed to circumvent the Blackbeak's moon-shaped phoenix shield. The offensive knight grinded down the hapless swordsman mech over the course of a couple of minutes.

Another projection showed the Blackbeak as the forward element of a long-ranged deep-strike squad. They encountered a hostile patrol of defending mechs and became entangled in a fight. The Blackbeak showcased its defensive prowess by enduring a withering barrage of long-ranged fire with its shield and its armor. The Veltrex armor system held up long enough for the squad to gain a decisive edge.

Yet another scenario proved to be the most compelling. It showed a time-lapse of the mech being used in a low-intensity war. Each time the Blackbeak deployed on the battlefield, it gained additional scars and battle damage. Each time it returned to a workshop, the mech technicians fixed it up with ease.

Such a sequence of events didn't sound so interesting, but it kept repeating over and over. The battlefields changed, the allies it fought alongside

changed, but the Blackbeak remained the same, bar a few choice customizations it picked up along the way. Over the years, the frequent cycle of deployments and repairs had morphed the original model into a formidable beast.

The Blackbeak evolved over time. Rather than degrading due to faltering integrity and heavy wear-and-tear, the mech's robust internals allowed it to soldier on. Just when you thought it reached the point of no return, the mech technicians figured out a way to keep it running.

"Featuring the leading second-class Keltrex armor system, the Blackbeak is a formidable knight that is capable of withstanding enormous amounts of punishment without flinching. Its lean construction along with the revolutionary Trailblazer engine delivers performance on par with Coalition mechs but at the fraction of the cost."

The scenarios faded out and a simplified wireframe schematic appeared over Ves. The lines denoting armor system and the engine blinked in green for a moment before he addressed the other components.

"The fuel-based power reactor runs on medium-density mech grade fuel, enabling the Blackbeak to operate on the field for an extended amount of time before requiring resupply. The design's overall energy efficiency is top-notch, and it will take substantial effort to force the Blackbeak to run out of fuel."

"The energy cells are optimized to carry medium-density fuel and can withstand a lot of punishment before they break. There is almost no chance of explosion since the mech is programmed to eject any fuel cells if their integrity is at risk."

"The artificial musculature is of a highly durable make, and is meant to last under substantial abuse..."

"The cockpit is a safe design that features additional armor and enhanced ejection systems..."

"The second-class ECM will dominate most other targeting systems on the battlefield..."

"The embedded shovel integrated in its back can be detached and used as an impromptu entrenching tool..."

Ves ran down the specs one by one. The second-class components impressed the crowd the most. Even the industry insiders found it noteworthy that a young Apprentice Mech Designer got his hands on so many quality licenses. They already started to change their appraisals of Ves, figuring he gained substantial backing from his Master or some other wealthy patron.

Meanwhile, the spectators standing behind the reporters and the distinguished guests remained rooted to the ground. Only half of them understood the jargon, but it didn't take a mech expert to understand the Blackbeak represented something special.

The extensive blending of Coalition tech with Republican practicality delivered a package that performed like a champ but kept its costs under control.

"A major issue with mechs that incorporates a lot of second-class components is that they're expensive! They often required expensive imports of rare exotics if they need to be built or repaired."

The crowd nodded in agreement. Such mechs suffered from inflated price tags and ruinous maintenance costs.

"The Blackbeak doesn't suffer from that problem! I'm a Republican mech designer at heart, and I know what you want. I went above and beyond to insure that all of the highest performing components can be sourced from within the borders of the Bright Republic!"

Throughout his speech, Ves set forth the Blackbeak's value proposition. It had been designed from the start to grow alongside its owners and users over a grueling conflict that everyone had been worrying about in recent times.

The specter of the latest Bright-Vesia War loomed over them like the Blackbeaks casting their shadows over the audience right at this moment. Hard times were coming and only a durable could see them through.

"What you are witnessing are the Living Mech Corporation's exclusive premium line-up of mechs. We will be selling at least three different lines, two of which consists of a basic silver label edition and a higher-quality gold label edition that's been hand-fabricated by myself. The mechs standing behind me consists of the latter, so you already know what you can get."

A guest that looked like a wealthy collector raised his hand. "When can we buy a mech?"

"Good question, sir." Ves clapped his hands, summoning up a pricing table for his new design. "Starting from now, the LMC will be taking orders for the first production run of twenty-five gold label Blackbeaks on a first-come, first serve basis at the exclusive price of 80 million credits a piece. Subsequent production runs of the gold label edition Blackbeaks will be priced at 75 million credits, so if you are tight on credits, then it's best to wait!"

"Does this include the first production model?"

"The first production model is a mech that carries an inordinate amount of value. As a result, it's scheduled for auction at a later point in this year."

Who was he kidding. Ves wanted to hold on to the first copy because the design had only just started to pick up hype. If he auctioned it out right now, he'd be lucky to get 100 million credits. If he held onto it for half a year or more, he'd likely be able to jack up the price to 200 million credits or more.

Ves even considered keeping the model for himself, but he threw that idea away. Besides his display models, each of his mechs had been built to serve their purpose in the hands of his customers.

Whether they employed them on the battlefield or paraded them in front of guests, his buyers brought meaning to his products. Only in the hands of others did his mech fulfill their intended purpose.

"When will your more affordable silver edition mechs be available?"

"They will go on sale as soon as the first production run is finished, which will take a month or two. The silver label Blackbeaks will be sold for 60 million credits. Do note that the silver label designs will feature cleaner appearances in order to achieve these cost savings."

"Are they worse than the gold mechs?"

"They deliver the exact same performance as the gold label mechs. Both of them are near-identical designs and are made out of the same raw materials, so if you are looking for the maximum amount of benefit for the lowest cost, then the silver label Blackbeak is a compelling choice."

Ves answered a large number of questions from the reporters and the industry experts. Sometimes, their questions cut very deep.

"Mr. Larkinson, your design looks too good to be true. There's got to be a catch, right? What are the weak points of your mech?"

"I have never claimed to have designed the perfect mech." Ves tried to laugh, though he couldn't hide the awkwardness in his voice. "If I can name the most obvious weakness of the Blackbeak, it's that it isn't supplied with a ranged weapon! As a purely melee-oriented design, the Blackbeak isn't suitable for any form of marksmanship."

Some of the people in the audience wanted to pound his head. Who couldn't tell that a knight sucked at shooting? Stating something like that was as obvious as telling people that grass was green!

When he saw that the crowd didn't take his answer well, Ves relented a bit. "Okay, the Blackbeak is a design that's optimized to run all day, but it comes with only average heat-shunting capabilities. We do not recommend the Blackbeak to be deployed in places that limit heat-venting even further such as vacuum or high-heat environments."

"How well will its defenses fare compared to a defensive knight? Can it be employed to replace a defensive knight entirely?"

"The Veltrex armor system covering the shield and the frame is fully suitable to absorb impacts and shocks. That said, the Blackbeak is not intended to be employed as a low-mobility mech. Mech pilots will only bring out its full strength if they take advantage of its considerable mobility."

Ves addressed a few other difficult questions like that. He always managed to reply in a similar vein using a circuitous answer that allowed him to avoid leaving behind a record of saying something bad about his mech.

By understating the weaknesses and emphasizing the strengths that resulted from proper use of his design, Ves painted a rosy picture of his mech as the ultimate high-mobility knight. It could fit in nearly every squad composition and could even serve as a decent solo unit.

Just when he thought he could breeze through the rest of the press conference, a commotion sounded out at the entrance of the hall. The double doors slammed open as a young man stampeded past the cowed security guards.

"Heya, Ves! What's going on!? You're introducing a new design? Why didn't you invite me!"

"Hello, Michael. It's good to see you. Shouldn't you be busy selling your own mech right now?"

"Oh, my company is already taking care of it. The Havalax is selling like hotcakes! I've sold more than a hundred copies so far in the first month alone!" Michael Dumont grinned like a shark. "You've got to step up your game, Ves. How can you still call yourself a mech designer if you're only able to deliver half the amount of mechs in double the amount of time?"

"I put quality above quantity. The first production run is entirely produced from my hand, because unlike you, I'm not too lazy to wander into someone else's party."

Michael dropped his grin as he struggled to hold in his fury. "I didn't come here to celebrate with you. I came here to issue a challenge. You see, we both designed an offensive knight, and we both released them in the same market. As far as I'm concerned, the market isn't big enough for the both of us. Let's say we duel it out."

The gauntlet had been thrown, but Michael hadn't been content with that alone.

"Let's spice it up while we're at it! Like you, I'm also hanging on to my first production model. Rather than letting them collect dust in some warehouse, why not have them duke it out?"

The stakes had been raised.

### **Chapter 263 For Want Of A House**

Out of several possibilities his competitor could choose to go with, Dumont chose to go with the classic design duel. When two mech designers had a beef, they let the strengths of their mechs do the talking.



In truth, Ves had brainstormed several ways that Dumont could retaliate against him with his team. They came up with possibilities, such as price dumping, regulatory harassment, industrial sabotage and more.

A design duel had been well within specifications. The only snag was that Dumont conditioned his challenge by setting forth his first production model. Considering the brisk sales of his Havalax design, his first mech already accumulated an enormous amount of value.

More than risking a huge chunk of potential cash, the duel also put their reputation at stake. Nobody among the crowd could say whether one design was superior over the other. Both the Havalax and the Blackbeak designs had their own merits. Some would argue that they didn't even compete in the same space.

Yet the prospect of a rivalry at play triumphed over logic. A few bystanders already started to egg Ves on. "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

The pressure mounted on Ves to accept the duel.

"I already reserved an arena, so you don't have to go to the trouble of arranging a venue." Dumont added. "Five days from now, there's an open time slot in the match between the Dorum Velvet Fists and the Haston Grease Monkeys. We'll get to prove the worth of our designs in front of a full crowd of mech fans!"

It must have cost him quite a bit of money to arrange such a highly-valued slot. Ves mulled over the offer for any traps. The mech arena shouldn't be able to get away with any tricks, but who could tell if they did?

"I'll only accept if there's official MTA representation."

Dumont waved his hand dismissively. "Fine!"

Requesting the presence of an agent of the MTA didn't come cheap, but it insured that nothing funny went on. If Dumont or the arena operators tried to cheat in any way, then the MTA would come down hard on their heads.

As the challenger, Dumont was obliged to pay for it all, which saved Ves a lot of trouble since his company's liquidity didn't look all that great. Ves also had the privilege of setting some additional conditions such as the duel environment and the pilot criteria.

Ves chose to go with the most advantageous circumstances for himself. "I want the dueling ground to consist of rocky terrain with plenty of line-of-sight breaks."

His Blackbeak excelled in dragging out the fight while the Havalax sought to end the duel as quickly as possible. By making the terrain as difficult as possible, the pilot of the Blackbeak would be able to extend the pursuit.

"Fine, but don't think you can run away all match. I don't think the public will appreciate a mech that can only stand a chance by acting like a coward!"

"As for who will drive our mechs, let's set the bar to advanced pilots no older than thirty years old."

"Agreed."

Advanced pilots could be found everywhere. If Ves didn't set such a condition, Dumont might have been able to persuade a rare expert pilot to fight in his stead. He set a relatively low age limit in order to prevent him from finding some grizzled war veteran who could pull off dozens of tricks in quick succession.

By posing all these limits, Ves made the duel more dependent on the machine rather than the person. He had faith in the quality of his Blackbeak and strongly believed in its performance despite the naysayers.

They hashed a few conditions before Dumont left in a confident whirl. He already accomplished his purpose, so there was no need to stick around anymore.

The impending design duel spoiled the rest of the press conference. Ves noticed that most of the reporters briefly notified their editors about the sudden challenge. The spell of had been broken, and nothing could pull them back into his trap.

Ves decided to wrap up his press conference.

"Thank you for attending, and I will see you five days from now at the arena!"

Word spread quickly. The duel between two young promising Apprentice Mech Designers should be one of the more exciting events that took place next week.

The constant hype surrounding their rivalry didn't peak the interest of every mech fanatic, but it definitely raised their profiles. Both the Havalax and the Blackbeak received a surge of free publicity.

Many publications that had snubbed the invitation to attend the Blackbeak's unveiling must be feeling green with regret right now.

News portals such as The Republican Mech published bold-faced headlines accompanied with high-quality footage of the confrontation between the two designers. Even if they went a bit too far with their creative editing, the dramatized retelling of that day served to put their designs to the forefront of the news.

"We've already sold out our first production run!" Gavin exclaimed as he met Ves at a private dining hall in a hotel next morning. "Our buyers are practically knocking down Marcella's doors right now. We had to limit our sales to one copy per customer. Demand is through the roof!"

"The free publicity is nice, but it's only a temporary phenomenon." Ves pointed out while eating his breakfast. "Whoever admits defeat in the upcoming duel will see their demand crater overnight. No one wants to buy a mech associated with failure."

The worst thing about the duel was that the format favored the Havalax. The raw specs didn't lie and the Blackbeak's advance in endurance would never be able to come into play in a duel that only lasted thirty minutes at most.

In hindsight, the Blackbeak made for a very poor dueling mech, while the Havalax practically thrived in these circumstances.

"Do we have a pilot lined up?"

"I have someone in mind." Ves leisurely replied as he moved on to drinking his cup of tea. "There's a reason why I set the age limit to thirty."

The door to the dining hall slid open to allow the entry of a familiar face.

"Good morning Ves!"

"Melinda! Good to see you again. I didn't want to call you up for this, but I really need your help."

Melinda Larkinson took a seat at the table and poured herself some tea. She dressed casually this time, but her powerful movements and predatory expression couldn't hide the fact that she was a mech pilot. "Who's this?"

"That's Gavin, he's in charge of marketing. We were just discussing some business before you arrived."

"Your mech business must be doing well." She remarked. "You're practically the talk of the town! Ticket prices for the match between the Velvet Fists and the Grease Monkeys have tripled overnight. Even the VIP rooms are fully booked!"

The mech duel attracted a lot of interest due to hype. Most people probably didn't know too much about Ves or Dumont. They just wanted to witness a historic rivalry between two similarly talented mech designers.

Ves started to compose himself. "About that. Melinda, out of all the cousins I know who are here in the Bentheim region, you're the only one who's proficient in piloting knights. I'd like to ask you to be my champion for the upcoming duel."

The entire room plunged into silence. Even Gavin almost spurted out his coffee. He expected Ves to tap a professional mech athlete, or some kind of elite academy graduate.

"Why me?"

"Because I trust you. Because you're a Larkinson. Because you're both."

He didn't need to say anything more. As a Larkinson himself, he knew how much the family prized their potentates. Every Larkinson with the aptitude to become a mech pilot had received a vigorous amount of training from the start. The family ensured that every Larkinson began their piloting careers with a solid foundation along with a couple of fully developed specialties.

For example, Raella excelled in piloting skirmishers and light mechs, while Melkor turned into a killing machine if he piloted a rifleman. Besides hard work, much of what they accomplished could be attributed to the training they received from the family.

Melinda looked dead-serious now as she weighed the offer carefully. "I'm not too sure about this. Sure, I know a thing or two about knights, but I'm more of an all-rounder than a dedicated knight pilot. Law enforcement mechs are a whole different beast, you know!"

Ves still remembered the mech she piloted when she rescued him from an assassination attempt. Her law enforcement mech consisted of an aerial hybrid knight that exchanged a sword for a fluid projector.

"It's not a bad thing if you're not a pure knight pilot. The Blackbeak is an offensive knight, so it performs at its best if you take advantage of its mobility. It's still a knight, but it's got several things in common with more agile knights like skirmisher mechs."

No matter who he approached, Ves still wanted to persuade Melinda to take up his cause. She was family, and family was meant to stick together.

"This is a lot to take in, you know." Melinda breathed deeply. "I'm not a stranger of duels, but the stakes are awfully high. How much money is at stake?"

Ves gestured to Gavin, who supplied the latest estimate. "The first production model alone can be worth as much as 300 million credits if you manage to win. Collectors are willing to throw money at any mech that carries such a great piece of history!"

"Sheesh, Ves! You're sticking me into a mech worth 300 million? Why not deposit a few billion credits in my cockpit while you're at it!"

"Actually, Miss Melinda, the outcome of the duel has far-ranging effects on the demand of the Blackbeak model. If we win, we can expect strong sales to deliver additional revenue the tune of two or three billion credits over the next year. If we lose, we'll be lucky if we can get the production line running at all..."

All of this piled more weight onto Melinda's shoulders. She had never been made responsible over so much potential gains and losses in her life. Her face turned numb at the dizzying amount of money being bandied around.

"My salary is only around 200,000 credits a year. I really don't know, Ves. I'm a decent pilot when I'm on assignment for the Planetary Guard, but I've never performed in front of the entire Republic. Do you know how many fans are tuning in to the match between the Fists and the Monkeys? That's one of the most popular dueling teams in the Republic! And I'm going to be showing off my skills in their half-time break!"

Obviously, Melinda couldn't handle the pressure like a seasoned mech athlete. Ves wished that Raella hadn't wandered off with Dietrich, because he could sure use some help in reassuring his cousin.

"Competing in public is not that scary when you're good. I know you're good. Think about it as an opportunity to wave the flag for the family. Show the Republic what a Larkinson can do! If you win the match, you'll not only help me sell more mechs, but you'll also boost the careers of every Larkinson in active duty!"

When Ves joined the family's Steering Committee and attended their annual meeting, he learned that one of the family's priorities was supporting the careers of their younger mech pilots.

Many of his nephews and nieces joined the Mech Corps with dreams of making it big. It took a lot of money and effort to distinguish themselves from the other talents in their units.

"Consider this as well." Ves continued. "The Larkinson Estate owns twenty-five percent of my company. A win will directly boost my company's earnings, to the point where the family will potentially earn billions of credits in dividends down the line. Think of what the family can do with all of that money. We can increase the pensions for the widowers and provide better training for the young."

Not every Larkinson prioritized giving back to the family, but Melinda showed signs that she was receptive to the idea. She owed a lot to the family.

" I'm even willing to give you a fair share of what we gained. Have you ever thought about moving into a glitzy penthouse in the middle of downtown Dorum? I can pay for all of that."

This time, Melinda didn't hesitate any longer. "Okay, deal! I'll do it! I'll pilot your damn mech in front of a circus! Just get me that penthouse!"

### **Chapter 264 Captain Vicar**

As the center of landbound mechs in the Republic, Bentheim featured a lot of mech arenas. Ves himself had witnessed the famous Leviticus vanquishing over another opponent at a privately-run mech coliseum. That enormous venue only found enough space to operate by setting up at the outskirts of Dorum.

Their upcoming design duel took place at a massive stadium operated by Bentheim's local government. Its central arena took up the same amount of space as the domed arena he visited at Moira's Paradise.

Ves entered the chamber that held the first production model of the Blackbeak. The mech looked as pristine as ever, courtesy of the mech technicians scouring over its surface right now.

In the days since Melinda accepted to duel in his stead, a lot had changed.

The lack of major events at this time prompted many publications to blow up the rivalry between Ves and Dumont. They turned a minor scuffle between competitors into the battle of the century.

All of this raised the profile of their mechs. Interest in the Blackbeak surged, with many laymen clamoring to pilot its virtual version. Ves vetoed the release of the virtual model, as he didn't wish to let his competitors study his design.



Although its specs had already been published, that was different from getting a solid feel for the mech. Any decent mech designer could easily spot a dozen weak points in any design if they spent at least an hour with any random design.

Dumont must have gotten a good glimpse already when he issued his challenge, so Ves had already fallen behind.

On the other hand, the Havalax had already started selling. While Dumont withheld the virtual version to the public, footage of the Havalax in action already started to appear on the galactic net.

This, along with other articles published over the last month provided Ves with a wealth of information on his competitor's design.

While he tried to figure what made the Havalax tick, Melinda trained with the Blackbeak as if her life depended on it. She applied for leave at the Planetary Guard and moved full-time into his first production model. The only time she left the mech was when she had to sleep or wanted to practice her more advanced maneuvers in a simulation.

Currently, Melinda sat at a nearby table and held her head in her hands.

"Are you ready to go on stage?"

Melinda groaned at his question. "How full is the arena?"

"It's completely packed. There's more than half a million spectators out here. Win or lose, you're bound to become a celebrity."

"Yippy." She replied flatly. "You know, my comm has been flooded with messages from our fellow cousins. They're all envious as hell that I'm able to display my skills in front of so many people. I bet they'll sing a different tune if they're in my place."

"Melinda, it's going to be fine. You've been spending a lot of hours inside the cockpit. Have you gotten a good feel for the Blackbeak."

This time, she released a brief smile. "I don't know how you did it, but your creation is one of the smoothest mechs I've ever piloted! It's like I'm donning a second skin, but larger. Best of all, it doesn't have any of the pet peeves that ruin my day!"

Experiencing the full majesty of a gold label mech was a unique experience. Melinda practically broadened her perspective on how far a mech could go to deliver an immersive piloting experience. The strong X-Factor in the Blackbeak's frame resonated within her bones each time she interfaced with the mech.

In addition, Ves applied everything he learned from acquiring his initial mastery into knights. Ves noted everything that Barley had grown frustrated about and made sure those elements didn't show up in his own design. This smoothed out the piloting experience and enabled Melinda to focus more on beating her opponent and less on trying to make her machine move as she willed.

Ves glanced up at the clock. "The last duel between the Velvet Fists and the Grease Monkeys before the break should almost be ending. If you're still having second thoughts, you can still back out now. Some of my underlings brought a couple of replacement pilots, you see."

"That won't be necessary." She shook her head. "I'm used to the first production model, and it's gotten used to me as well. You can't replace me at this point, not if you want your Blackbeak to perform at its best."

He shrugged. "Very well, then. Don't forget that you are risking your life out there on the field. If the duel is heading into an awful direction, don't hesitate to concede. I don't want you to risk your life just to drive more sales for my

mechs. I can always figure something out if that happens, but there's no way for me to revive you from the dead."

"I'm not Jackknife Jake, Ves. I know my limits. In the Planetary Guard, we learned how much we can push a mech."

Minutes went by until the faint commotion above faded out. The latest duel must have come to a conclusion. An arena guide appeared from a side entrance.

"Mr. Larkinson, time is up. Please come with me. Lieutenant Larkinson, please enter the cockpit. Your mech will be lifted onto the arena as soon as we rearrange its terrain."

"Roger that."

The arena personnel guided Ves up a lifter platform which brought him out in the open. The recorders zoomed in on his face.

"Up next is one of our Republic's homegrown mech designers, a superstar who emerged out of nowhere! Give it up for the nerdy half of the Larkinson duo, Ves Larkinson!"

Ninety percent of the spectators had never heard of him before. Even if they caught a glimpse of his designs, the kind of people who attended mech duels cared more about the people piloting the mechs than the designers who made the machines.

Nevertheless, that didn't diminish the momentary enthusiasm of the crowd. With all the hype surrounding this duel, its anticipation had surpassed the outcome of the match they originally came to attend. The Velvet Fists and the Grease Monkeys had completely turned into sideshow characters at this moment.

The lifter platform reached at an elaborate open tribune. Despite its size, only two seats had been placed at the center. Michael Dumont already sat at the seat to the left, leaving Ves to take the one on the right.

"Ves."

"Michael."

They didn't exchange any other words. At this point, no amount of talk would change anything. Both of them let the minutes tick by in silence until arena finished its reorganization of the dueling grounds.

It was a wonder to witness how effortlessly the battleground morphed from a plain tiled surface to a decent imitation of a rocky canyon. Large amounts of rocks, cliffs and other debris carted in from below and cluttered up the field until it became impossible to see the other end of the arena from ground level.

Once the arena finished its rearrangement, the mechs started to appear.

"First to enter the stage is Michael Dumont's Havalax! Coated in resplendent white, this offensive knight can run as hard as it can hit! While it possesses a decent set of armor, the Havalax excels in hacking down its opposition through unrelenting aggression! Armed with both a sword and a handaxe, the Havalax has a plethora of offensive options to dismantle anything in its way!"

A projection of the mech pilot appeared over the sky. Ves took one look at the man's uniform before his face began to fall.

"Piloting the Havalax on behalf of Dumont is Captain Jaimie Vicar! Captain Vicar is one of the greatest talents to emerge from the Republic in recent times, and he has won a number of prestigious awards before the Mech Corps snapped him up! Nowadays, he leads his own unit as the youngest captain in our homegrown 3rd Infernal Hellhounds Regiment!"

Captain Vicar's handsome face and curvy blond hair made him a hit among the ladies, who all started to shriek like they lost all of their intelligence. Ves didn't care about that, but he did grow worried about Vicar's capabilities.

The Mech Corps held themselves to a higher standard than the Planetary Guard. They recruited the best of the best and anyone who reached the rank of captain at such a young age must be someone with a lot of promise. At the very least, the Mech Corps must be feeling hopeful that Captain Vicar had a decent chance of advancing to expert pilot someday.

The Blackbeak appeared next. Unlike the Havalax, the Blackbeak's strong X-Factor and dark appearance caused the crowd to grow a little muted. Even though they saw a couple of projections of the models in ads and promotions, it was different now that they encountered it in person.

"Emerging from beneath is the inventively-named Blackbeak! It's an offensive knight that's made for war! Featuring top-notch endurance and a running time that lasts for days, it's the perfect mech to deploy if you wish to drive the Vesians mad! Mr. Larkinson has promised that the Blackbeak is a mech that will grow with its pilot and is able to last an entire war. Hyperbole or not, the Blackbeak makes for a striking sight!"

Compared to Vicar's enthusiastic reception, the crowd reacted with considerable less attention when Melinda began to be profiled. The announcers briefly went over the highlights of her career, which wasn't much considering she spent much of her time in training or walking the beat in a rather boring law enforcement mech. Still, no matter how plain her biography looked, it didn't detract from the sheer amount of time and effort Melinda put into her training.

The two mechs approached the center of the complex battlefield until they were ten seconds apart. Formal duels of this nature mandated that the mechs had to be within line of sight from the start.

A number of inspection bots bearing the logo of the MTA started to scour the battlefield and the mechs. The delegation from the MTA occupied a different platform just above the heads of Ves and Dumont. Even though the projections didn't introduce them in any way, their presence was very much felt due to their reputation alone.

The bots cleared the arena once they failed to detect any signs of foul play.

"Let the duel commence in ten seconds!"

A timer counted down from ten.

Ves gripped the handholds of his seat. It felt frustrating to sit so far away while parading out his favorite niece to fight in his stead. He knew how dangerous a duel could turn out. Even though a duel between knights rarely led to fatalities due to their considerable defensive prowess, a single stab of a sword could puncture right through a cockpit if the chest armor had been weakened.

"Please don't go too far, Melinda. Just endure the opening moves. Don't try anything fancy."

The countdown ticked down to zero, and the duel officially commenced!

"FOR THE HELLHOUNDS!" The Havalax's speakers broadcasted in the air. The white mech immediately sprinted forward with its kite shield up in front. It aimed to close the gap to the Blackbeak with its superior speed.

Melinda kept her cool. She knew the Blackbeak couldn't run as fast as the Havalax, but she ran anyway in order to force her opponent to burn through its energy cells. The more the Havalax expended its power, the sooner its reserves ran out.

In response, the Havalax started to overload its systems, putting a lot of strain on them in exchange for a momentary surge. Captain Vicar decided to start

the engagement with an axe, having sheathed the sword behind the Havalax's back.

Once his mech reached the lagging Blackbeak, it began to bash with its shield while simultaneously chopping its target from above.

The Blackbeak turned at the last moment and absorbed the shield bash with its own moon-shaped shield. As for the axe strike, it only managed to put up a hasty guard with its sword, which clearly didn't fare well against the power behind the offensive weapon.

The Blackbeak's sword arm strained to absorb the impact, allowing the Havalax to slip in a low kick that destabilized the black mech's footing. This opened up the Blackbeak to another attack!

Melinda immediately faced a crisis!

#### **Chapter 265 Duel of the Firsts**

She knew it was a bad idea. Yet her obligation to her family and her friendship with Ves urged her to step up and make the Republic remember the glory of the Larkinsons.

The amount of people flocking to the arena made her falter a bit. Melinda had never been shy, but that didn't mean she felt eager to embarrass herself in front of a crowd of half-a-million spectators. If that wasn't bad enough, the entire match would be broadcasted to billions of viewers watching at home.

One misstep and she would never live it down for the rest of her life.

"Is this what mech athletes have to go through?"

She found poor comfort in her cousin, who kept blabbing on about the strengths and weaknesses of the Havalax. As if she cared about those details.

The only thing she needed to know was that the Havalax possessed a lot of strength but couldn't keep it up. She merely had to outlast it with her

Blackbeak, which unfortunately struggled to match up to the Havalax's power.

Strangely enough, every time she interfaced with the Blackbeak, her doubts and worries faded away like they never existed. It was as if she was a little girl who returned to the embrace of her father.

The mech enveloped her mind and elevated it into an invisible network at the heart of the mech she controlled. Melinda had never had the pleasure of piloting a mech that treated her like a queen. Most other mechs she came in touch with treated her intrusion like an unwanted house guest.

"It's as if these mechs aren't made to be controlled by someone else."

It sounded crazy to hold such an outlandish opinion. Yet the difference became stark when she began to grow accustomed to the Blackbeak's welcoming embrace. Her nephew's mech simply possessed some kind of charm that revolutionized her piloting experience.

"Are all mechs that are worth 300 million credits like this, or is it just me?"

She felt regretful that she had to bid the Blackbeak farewell after the duel. She had warmed up to the first production model, and wished she was as loaded as her cousin. "I should have asked for this mech instead of a penthouse."

The floor suddenly started to lift the Blackbeak onto the arena. Melinda cut short her musings and shifted her focus back to her mech. She tested out the movements of her mech, finding the Blackbeak to be as responsive as a second skin. Nothing appeared to be broken. Ves made sure that her mech was in its best state possible.

Once her mech arrived at the center of the arena, Melinda didn't even flinch at all of the yelling and name-calling. The crowd meant nothing to the Blackbeak, so Melinda followed suit and tuned them out.



Her console chirped as her mech received a private communications request from the mech opposite to hers. Melinda shook out of her mantra and opened the channel.

"Miss Larkinson. It's a pleasure to meet you." Captain Vicar greeted her with his annoyingly attractive voice. "It's a shame to meet as opponents instead of colleagues. I have a lot of respect for the Bentheim Planetary Guard. It must have been hard to keep our planet in line."

"Not as hard as taking the fight to the BLM." Melinda coolly replied. She tried not to let her fangirl instincts get the better of her. "Did you participate in one of the assaults?"

"I did. The rebels put up a poor fight in one of their asteroid bases. For a movement that pretends to be strong enough to fight off the Republic, they sure didn't last very long when pressed into a corner. But anyway, I didn't open this channel to talk about old times. I just wanted to apologize to you."

"For what?"

"For beating your mech into a pulp!"

The countdown to the duel reached zero. The Havalax stormed forward at a rapid pace, catching Melinda off-guard. Her short flight backwards didn't prevent Captain Vicar from reaching her mech before she could get away.

The channel between their mechs remained open. "No offense to you, Miss Larkinson, but you don't stand a chance!"

Melinda gritted her teeth as she desperately fended off another chop of the Havalax's axe. "That's Lieutenant Larkinson to you!"

The axe was a supremely offensive weapon that transferred a lot of force with every swing. Melinda tried to redirect the force at an angle to prevent her

sword and shield from chipping away, but Captain Vicar moved too quickly for her to adjust.

The damage quickly piled up. The axe bit into the Blackbeak's moon-shaped phoenix shield, parting the laser-resistant upper layer like a knife through butter. It encountered much more resistance from the middle layer, but each subsequent hack degraded the integrity of the armor, especially when the Havalax kept focusing on the same narrow area.

"Have to disengage!" She reminded herself, and tried to work together with her mech to push the Havalax back.

Melinda utilized her excellent control over the Blackbeak to shift the mech to the side. Her mech raised its shield to absorb the next attack square against the shield. A deep trench had been carved into the shield, but the Blackbeak successfully managed to bounce away from the murderous Havalax.

"You're not getting away so easily!"

The Havalax raised its power back to full and thundered after the fleeing Blackbeak. This time, Melinda paid attention to her environment. She guided her mech towards a large pile of rocks. While a mech could brush one or two aside, the sheer number of obstacles posed a significant threat if it wanted to straight through.

Her connection with the Blackbeak heightened as she took in all of the sensor input of her mech and processed them in a way that allowed her to keep track of the Blackbeak's footing. The black mech possessed enough responsiveness and flexibility to navigate the field of rocks without losing too much speed.

The Havalax turned out to be less proficient in navigating this kind of terrain. Michael Dumont designed it with a completely different paradigm in mind.

Captain Vicar had to cease his opportunistic attacks in order to struggle his mech past this treacherous terrain.

The fundamental differences between their frames became evident. The Havalax was very much a momentum-based mech. It derived its superiority from its high powered engine and power reactor, allowing it to move faster and strike harder despite being clad in thick layers of armor.

Compared to the Blackbeak, the Havalax possessed a higher top speed, but this came at the expense of flexibility. Even a mech pilot as amazing as Captain Vicar struggled to make an elephant dance.

The majority of the crowd cheered for the more charismatic Vicar. Even the announcers sounded like they rooted for the Mech Corps Captain.

"Look at the Havalax navigate around those boulders! Even with these hindrances, it's hardly losing a sweat! It's a testament of his skill that he hasn't widened Miss Larkinson's lead! He's even closing in!"

They soon reached the end of the rock field, and Melinda desperately tried to reach the narrow miniature canyons up ahead. However, her mech first needed to cross a small stretch of open ground, and that was when the Havalax began to make its move.

A handful of boosters embedded into the back of the Havalax started to burn. Though they chugged a lot of the white mech's limited fuel, the extra thrust gave the mech a powerful hop that allowed it to close the distance within seconds. It raised its axe again, prompting Melinda to turn around her mech and raise its shield.

CRACK!

Captain Vicar put the Havalax's considerable forward momentum into the heavy blow. The axe managed to cut through the damaged upper portion of the moon shield and split that portion apart.

Melinda hastily ducked her mech to dodge the remaining swing of the axe. She tried to drag the Blackbeak away from the deadly axe, but Captain Vicar would have none of that.

His relentless aggression matched the Havalax's own as they collaborated to deliver his promise to dismantle the Blackbeak. The powerful knight stuck to Melinda's mech and began to rain down a hail of blows.

"Lay off a girl, will you!"

"Man or woman, it's all the same to me!" Vicar yelled over the channel. "The moment you enter a mech, you've turned into my prey!"

The Havalax had completely taken over the initiative in the fight. Vicar left no opening for Melinda to attack. His oppressive offensive started to achieve solid results when his axe began to bypass the Blackbeak's shortened shield and dig into its armor.

The audience showed little sympathy for Melinda. Instead, they egged Captain Vicar on. The man seemed to feed off the attention and upped the tempo of his offensive.

Even as the Blackbeak's armor started to suffer rents and tears, Melinda tried to keep her cool. She knew that the Havalax's hyperactive performance came at a cost. It wouldn't be able to sustain such a level of performance for more than fifteen minutes at most.

The only problem was that her mech wouldn't last more than five minutes at this rate. For all of its prowess as a knight, the Blackbeak hadn't been designed to duel against an elite knight like the Havalax.

The main problem was the compromises Ves had made in consideration with its armor coverage. Its Veltrex armor system could absorb a lot of punishment, but Ves hadn't been generous enough to apply very thick layer.

This was supposed to provide the Blackbeak with additional mobility, and against most other mechs it might be able to pull a rabbit out of a hat. This time though, the Havalax possessed enough superiority in this front to neutralize Melinda's options.

Melinda knew she had to flip the table somehow. One of the principles behind the Blackbeak was it shouldn't be playing fair. So she frantically tried to figure out a way to break the current entanglement.

Her eyes darted back and forth before focusing straight ahead. "It's a long-shot, but I've got nothing else!"

She made her decision. The Blackbeak currently suffered from quite a number of armor breaches. Internal damage had been kept at a minimum so far due to deft piloting, but a few minutes more might exacerbate the situation. Melinda made her move before her mech reached that point.

The Havalax struck down with yet another chop while holding its shield close to fend off the Blackbeak's sword. It expected its prey to backpedal in order to minimize the damage. It became surprised when the Blackbeak headed straight into the blow.

An awful tearing sound echoed into the arena as the axe bit through the shoulder pauldron. Melinda ignored the damage reports and urged her mech to continue forward.

Captain Vicar instinctively pushed out with the Havalax's shield. It impacted the Blackbeak's phoenix shield and successfully negated the black mech's momentum, but not before its head darted forward like a woodpecker about to drill into a tree.

An awful crunching sound emerged from the Havalax as its frontal head component caved in from Melinda's pointy strike.

Ves had added in the beak to the head of his design as an afterthought. Despite the lack of attention put into the beak, it was sharp and heavy enough to crunch any opposing mech's head.

The attack didn't really cripple the Havalax, but it gave Melinda enough of an opening to disengage. Her Blackbeak suffered moderate damage to one of its shoulders, but it had been worth it as she bought enough time to slip into the nearby canyons.

The entire crowd didn't know what to think of Captain Vicar's mishap. After a few seconds of silence, they all erupted into laughter.

"Captain Vicar's mech got face-checked! Look at the Havalax now! Who would ever want to kiss this poor mech with such an ugly face?"

Most mechs relied on their heads to provide a human-like perspective to their pilots. The sudden loss of those sensors disoriented Captain Vicar, who despite his plentiful battle experience still had to get used to the changed perspective.

He silently cursed to himself for letting the Blackbeak get away. His Havalax could still navigate through complex terrain, but it was doubtful if it could ever catch up again. As he gloweringly guided his mech into the narrow cliffs and valleys, the duel transitioned into another phase.

"This is more like it!" Melinda grinned as her mech slipped into the gaps. The time had come to turn this match around. "I'm done being your punching bag."

### **Chapter 266 Superior**

Ves winced as his Blackbeak fell into a defensive posture soon after the start of the duel. The powerful Havalax started off strong and immediately pushed its advantage.

He knew it would be bad, but the Blackbeak lost the initiative and never got the opportunity to regain it. Pairing the Havalax with a captain of the 3rd

Infernal Hellhounds resulted in an amazingly powerful combination that put Melinda at her wit's end.

"You could have prevented this, you know." Dumont suddenly remarked from his seat. They sat close enough to talk to each other in private. "There's no reason to accept the duel when you know your design is at a disadvantage."

"You speak as if I had a choice. You just had to issue the challenge while I was in the middle of my debut. To refuse your challenge will show the entire Republic that I'm not confident in my own design."

Dumont erupted into laughter. "Hahaha! It's like the public considers us wizards who possess a whole host of magical powers. Just because we design machines doesn't mean we know how to use them!"

Even when you lacked the courage to fight, sometimes the situation forced your hand. All of the press he invited to attend his debut would have crucified him as a coward if he dodged the challenge.

People often held mech designers to the same standards of mech pilots despite their lack of commonalities. Besides being connected to mechs, one occupation dealt with fighting while the other preferred to tinker with machines. It wasn't fair to expect a mech designer to adhere to martial traditions.

Sadly, the galaxy ran on its own rules. A mech designer must have courage. A mech designer must stand by his product. A mech designer must defend his honor if challenged.

At least Ves had been allowed to choose someone else to fight in his stead. He was a non-combatant, after all. Even if by some miracle he could pilot a mech, he still would have made a fool of himself. Even the worst pilots needed a full decade of training before they become proficient enough to outperform a simple modern combat vehicle.

"Tell me, Michael. Did you challenge me because you're still sore about your loss to me at the YTE, or did Catelyn Ricklin push you into it?"

His rival laughed again, though Dumont couldn't hide his irritation. "My associates are none of your business. The Ricklin Family is one of my shareholders, but that is the extent of my relationship with them. If you believe we're conspiring to bring you down, you're mistaken. You never even registered on our radar if not for your new design."

His words sounded innocent enough for Ves to doubt his suspicions. Did he make a mistake? Then he considered everything Dumont had done so far. Coincidence or not, Dumont had certainly made himself out to be his enemy.

"I don't know what kind of game you're playing." Ves started to say. "I didn't set out to pick a fight with you and your backers. Yet the moment you came up with an offensive knight, it's a given that we've become competitors. So as one mech designer to another, I'll warn you that you shouldn't pick a fight you can't win."

"Is that a threat?" Dumont replied sharply.

Ves smiled at his guarded posture. "Not as such. I'm merely stating that I'm better than you in any objective measure. I'll prove it to you by winning this design duel, and I'll prove it again when my Blackbeak drubs your Havalax in the market!"

"Arrogant! Let's see whether your champion can overcome my own before you open your big mouth!"

Melinda's Blackbeak just managed to slip into the complex maze of caverns and cliffs. The difficult terrain hindered the relatively stodgy Havalax while providing an advantage to the agile Blackbeak. Despite the latter's lower power levels, its agility had never fallen behind due to its fairly slim design.



Still, her troubles hadn't ended yet. The Havalax maintained pursuit at stayed hot on her heels. If the Blackbeak stumbled even once, then Captain Vicar would be sure to pounce.

The final axe strike happened to have bitten deeply into one of the Blackbeak's shoulders. The overall depth and sturdiness of that portion prevented the axe from disabling the shield arm, but it had enormously weakened it to the point where Melinda didn't trust it to hold up against a full-frontal body blow.

Despite her dire circumstances, Melinda grinned, echoing the predatory anticipation of her mech. Her opponent made a big mistake by letting her slip away. It seemed almost comical how Captain Vicar didn't expect to be pecked in a face by a mech called the Blackbeak.

"Haha, can't catch up, captain?" She taunted her opponent over the open channel.

"Don't laugh so soon. I'm catching up!"

Time was running out for Captain Vicar. If he couldn't catch up to the Blackbeak in the next twenty minutes or so, his mech would run out of steam. His mech only carried a limited amount of energy cells, but before it ran out his internals would already overheat.

Pushing the Havalax's limits came at a cost. Vicar gambled on winning on his opening move, but it turned out that Melinda proved more resilient and resourceful than he expected.

"Why don't you be a good girl and turn around for me to whack apart?"

"Are you kidding, captain? You're the faster mech here! Come and get me if you're so eager to land a blow on my mech!"

Standard dueling conventions stated that the mech with the fastest top speed had to take the initiative. If not, it could use its superior speed to stay out of range and run out the clock. Such behavior went against the spirit of the duel so the rule had been introduced to force the duelists to fight.

A peculiarity occurred in this case when the so-called 'fastest' mech proved unable to catch up with the nominally slower mech. The Havalax possessed a higher top speed according to its spec sheet, but in practice it could only achieve those speeds in open terrain.

This rendered Captain Vicar helpless for the moment. Though he adjusted quickly and learned to move the Havalax more proficiently, it would take a long time for the gap to close. His mech expended an enormous amount of energy trying to keep all of its bulk on the move.

Knights never made for very good sprinters, though an exception could be made for the Blackbeak.

Still, Melinda noticed the Havalax gaining on her mech at an uncomfortably fast pace. If she was a better pilot, then she would have been able to push the Blackbeak out of reach.

If she wanted to change the odds, then she had to take the initiative and use her strengths.

As a Larkinson, Melinda possessed her own strengths. Besides her strong foundation, she also excelled in one other area. Her battle sense.

Many of her colleagues complimented her for her uncanny decision making in the cockpit. While Melinda had never excelled in swordsmanship, marksmanship and other flashy skills, she always managed to pull off a win by making the right decisions in the heat of battle.

Right now, her mind worked together with the Blackbeak to analyze her current surroundings. She kept her attention focused on both the Havalax and

anything she could use to her advantage. She quickly found something in the terrain up ahead and adjusted the course of the Blackbeak to guide her opponent to follow suit.

The Blackbeak stomped past an arched cliff. Just as it was about to pass through the narrowest spot, it struck the upper portion of the cliff with a quick raise of its sword.

A couple of rocks fell down the cliff and rained down right above the pursuing Havalax. Captain Vicar had to veer his mech aside in order to prevent the heavy rocks from exacerbating the damage to its head.

Meanwhile the Blackbeak had turned around to stab at its distracted opponent, only to come up short when the Havalax raised its shield to turn aside the blow.

"Did you think I would fall for that?" Vicar shouted. "Think again!"

Melinda fell into a spot of trouble when the Havalax recovered faster than she thought. Vicar landed a couple of good blows with the axe that dented the Blackbeak's already worn-out shield. She had to pull off a hasty dodge in order to slip out of reach again.

This pattern repeated itself several times over. Though Melinda chose to turn around and surprise Vicar several times, the captain's insane reaction speed insured that he would never fall into a permanent disadvantage.

"Annoying gnat! Why don't you stand still for a change!"

"Haha! Why don't you stop running yourself then?" Melinda taunted back.

Despite her repeated failures, Melinda kept up her hit-and-run attacks, making sure her mech would always be able to resume its flight before the Havalax pushed it into a corner.

Captain Vicar grew increasingly frustrated at this sequence of events. Even as he grew more adept at navigating the terrain, so did Melinda begin to master the art of hit-and-run. Her sword even managed to slip past his guard, though it only ended up scratching the Havalax's chest coating.

Still, his mech began to feel the toll. The running battles accelerated the Havalax's energy consumption and heated up the mech. He glanced at a couple of indicators in his cockpit and estimated that his mech could only hold up its current level of performance for another eight to ten minutes.

"No choice then!"

Vicar decided to do something drastic. First, he disengaged the locks holding the Havalax's kite shield in place. It dropped to the ground with a thunk, surprising both Melinda and the crowd in the arena.

Next, the Havalax quickly used its free hand to draw the sword from its back. The mech effectively abandoned the way of the shield in favor of wielding two weapons at once.

Abandoning the shield proved to be the right decision. A literal weight had been lifted off the white mech's shoulder, allowing it to gain on the Blackbeak with considerably more speed.

Melinda gritted her teeth as she realized that she couldn't get away. She turned her Blackbeak around in order to meet the incoming double chop. She parried the sword strike with her own sword while she took the axe strike with the remnants of her shield.

The latter almost splintered apart into smaller pieces after fending off the blow. People considered axes to be the ultimate shield killers, and this incident tested this maxim again.

Captain Vicar unleashed a hail of blows with the Havalax. Melinda frantically tried to disengage from the attacks, but the Havalax stubbornly stuck to her mech.

CRACK!

The Blackbeak's phoenix shield finally croaked its last breath and split apart into useless chunks. The sudden loss of the shield provided Vicar with an opening. He locked his sword with his opponents while chopping down with his axe along the Blackbeak's unprotected chest!

An awful rent resulted from that devastating strike. The axe had chopped right through all three layers of armor but stopped short from dealing any major damage to the power reactor. Still the attack exposed the Blackbeak's chest and left it open to a coup de grace.

The Havalax had run out of momentum after that last attack. This allowed the Blackbeak to bounce away and flee out of reach. The loss of its shield had liberated its speed as well.

Though the Blackbeak didn't gain as much speed as its opponent, it still proved vital in dragging out the engagement.

The two mechs ran in circles as Melinda desperately engaged in damage control. The Blackbeak not only lost its shield, but it also had to deal with various levels of damage to its frame.

Even if the Havalax started to run out of steam, Melinda wouldn't be able to put up a decent fight if she had to watch the rents in the Blackbeak's frame. The main issue was that her shield arm had become exposed. Without another shield, Melinda would be hard-pressed to survive against another barrage of swords and axes.

"Although... didn't this mech come with a shovel?"

## Chapter 267 On A Roll

Despite the battle damage the Blackbeak incurred, its shield arm remained somewhat functional. Melinda managed to retract the spade integrated in the back of her mech and hold it like a makeshift axe.

"Is that a spade?" Captain Vicar asked with bemusement. "Your arm is already falling apart. It won't do you any good!"

"That's for me to decide!" Melinda spat back as she moved her mech to meet the Havalax in battle.

The crowd turned ecstatic at the visceral exchange of blows. Both mechs dual wielded their weapons with a varying amount of proficiency. Unfortunately, Melinda fell into leeward due to her mech's damaged shoulder and her relative lack of experience in fighting with two weapons at once.

The Havalax showed off its might by batting away the spade with its axe. The Blackbeak barely held onto the spade and recovered just in time to deflect another swing.

Every time the Blackbeak seemed pressed, Melinda always managed to recover in time. Sometimes she even hit back in unexpected ways by lashing out with a low kick in between another swing.

"You're better than I thought." Captain Vicar grunted in frustration as he tried to peel away Melinda's defenses.

The problem for him was that he pressed his mech too hard for too long. All of that running had especially stressed the Havalax's power reactor. To prevent his mech from overheating, Vicar reluctantly dialed down its power levels and therefore the amount of power his machine could exert.

He had no other choice. If he kept operating his mech at its maximum power level, then he had to be able to end the match in the next two or three minutes.

Ordinarily, Captain Vicar wouldn't have hesitated to take the most aggressive option. Yet after trying and failing to take out the Blackbeak several times, Vicar developed a modest amount of respect for Melinda.

"I always heard you Larkinsons are tough as brass, but this is the first time I've seen it for myself! You should have joined the Infernal Hellhounds!"

Melinda often received such compliments in her career. "Sorry, Captain, but all of that traveling and military discipline isn't for me. I'm happily serving with the Planetary Guard."

Even though the Havalax dialed down some of its power, it still managed to hold the advantage due to the difference in skill. Captain Vicar's mech sustained little damage so far. Any blows Melinda got past his guard landed squarely on the Havalax's thick chest armor which easily blunted glancing blows.

Getting the Blackbeak's sword to punch through all of those layers of armor required specialized techniques which Melinda didn't practice very much in lately.

Any time she tried to put some weight into her blows by turning the Blackbeak's torso or moving the entire frame forward, she telegraphed to the whole world what she planned to do. It was child's play for Captain Vicar to read her movements and adjust his own.

Melinda made a risky decision. She feinted another serious attack, which prompted the Havalax to put up a defensive posture. The Blackbeak quickly interrupted its original movements and instead continued its turn while stepping away from its opponent.

"It's been fun, captain, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do!"

"Coward!"

The Blackbeak ran at full throttle through the narrow gaps between the cliffs. Even though it exerted quite a bit of strength and suffered from a few more telling blows, the mech's mobility hadn't been affected. It ran as fast and spry as in the beginning of the match.

In contrast, the Havalax suffered relatively little damage but exhibited the largest decrease in performance so far. For all of its upper-body strength, when it came to the engines and legs, the white mech didn't enjoy a substantial edge over its adversary without resorting to its boosters.

Captain Vicar bit his lip as he grappled with a dilemma. The Havalax didn't incorporate a lot of high-powered boosters in its back, and their fuel capacity left a lot to be desired. He engaged them once already, which meant the Havalax only carried enough fuel to boost it one more time.

He decided to bite the bullet. His mech would only start to degrade from this point onwards. All of that time spent chasing and fighting hadn't weakened the Blackbeak to its limits.

Heat and smoke started to emit from the overstressed Havalax as it began to run on fumes. The limited amount of boosters installed in its back flared with white as they pushed the offensive knight forward.

Melinda noticed the elevated heat signals emanating from the mech of her opponent, and she knew she was in trouble. Her eyes darted back and forth but she found no way to exploit the terrain to her advantage.

Her eyes drew down towards the weapons the Blackbeak currently wielded. Her spade hadn't been very useful so far. The damage to the shield arm had been too extensive to make efficient use of the limb.

She decided to throw it at her opponent. The Blackbeak made blind overarm throw that spun the spade towards the incoming Havalax. Captain Vicar



managed to cross his mech's armaments in time, which deflected the spade over the head of his mech.

The move momentarily slowed the Havalax down while allowing the Blackbeak to run a little faster. Still, the interruption didn't change the fundamental equation. The Havalax would be upon its prey in seconds before its boosters ran out of juice.

Melinda considered throwing away her sword, but changed her mind fairly quickly because she still needed a weapon to finish off her opponent. She needed to pull another trick if she wanted to survive this latest crisis.

"If you want a piece of me so bad, then here I come!"

The Blackbeak turned on its heels and ponderously halted its momentum. It faced the incoming Havalax with only a single sword in its hand.

Captain Vicar didn't expect his opponent to make a stand, but he welcomed it anyway as he pushed the Havalax to collapse upon the seemingly vulnerable Blackbeak with a double overhead chop.

Just before the Havalax landed the blows, Melinda abruptly jinked her mech into a ball. The Blackbeak hunched forward and began to roll, something which few mechs had been built to withstand! Ves practically stood up from his seat when he saw the move.

Wonder above wonder, the Blackbeak didn't collapse on itself during its rolling motion. Its armor largely held up, aided by the fact that the mech sustained most of its damage in its frontal areas.

What didn't help the mech was that the Havalax suddenly tripped over its frame. A messy impacted resulted from the sudden roll as Captain Vicar failed to adjust his mech in time. All of that boosting had forced his mech to rocket forward and fall into an undignified heap.

Both mechs suffered serious impact damage as the Blackbeak's back collided against the Havalax's legs.

The entire arena fell into silence as they wanted to find out which mech recovered first. Despite the collision, the Blackbeak managed to keep on rolling until it stopped in a crouch. Melinda carefully straightened up her mech while she suppressed all of the error messages.

A couple of fuel cells suffered catastrophic damage. Some of it had been ejected by the Blackbeak, but the deformities on its back prevented some of the cells from vacating their slots.

Besides the ruptured fuel cells, the damage to the Blackbeak's torso also affected its internals in other ways. Some of the delicate power channels turned inoperable, which affected the Blackbeak's already meager peak performance.

"It could have been worse." Melinda muttered as she brought her mech to an upright position. "How's it going, Captain?"

"Who the hell rolls a mech?! Don't you know how dangerous that is?!"

Vicar indeed had much to complain. The Havalax's legs suffered major deformities from the collision. The damage didn't cripple the limbs, but disabled enough systems to severely hamper its movements. The captain guessed that his Havalax would only be capable of jogging at most.

He let out a cry of frustration! Melinda's stupid roll managed to cripple his mech to the point it had no hope of continuing the chase! It was an abrupt and ignoble end to his chance of winning the duel.

Landing the deathknell, Melinda tested the Blackbeak's mobility. Despite the earlier collision, the black mech's overall toughness allowed it to shrug it off with only a moderate loss of performance. It could still continue to run at a fair

pace, which was a lot better than what the Havalax could manage with its half-crippled legs.

Melinda started to grin and began to stroll away from the Havalax with her mech. Even though it was a bumpy ride, the Blackbeak's integrity insured it wouldn't fall apart any time soon.

Meanwhile, Captain Vicar still hadn't given up. The Havalax's legs looked bad, but he hoped that the collision had affected the Blackbeak as well. With shaky movements, his battered mech climbed up to its feet. It then started to chase after its opponent yet again.

The next few minutes turned into a rather sad affair as the Blackbeak easily teased the lumbering Havalax along the battlefield. While Melinda felt playful enough to tease the movement-impaired Havalax, her common sense prevailed and she kept a healthy distance instead.

To all of the people expecting blood, the duel had turned into a boring farce. The Havalax didn't seem capable of catching up to the Blackbeak unless the latter mech suffered from another malfunction, which didn't appear to be happening anytime soon.

Melinda's legendary roll had already entered the annals of history as the spectators spread the news along with captured footage from their comms. The Larkinsons inadvertently gained prominence throughout the Republic even before the duel had formally ended!

Watching from above, Ves shook his head at Captain Vicar's dogged persistence. His belief in himself was admirable, but his machine eventually couldn't keep up with him. While he never expected Melinda to turn the tides in such an unexpected manner, he felt relieved that his faith in his niece had borne out.

"I think this sideshow has gone on long enough." Ves remarked to Dumont.  
"It's time to throw in the towel."

His rival mech designer deepened his glower. Of all the reasons for Dumont's mech to fall behind, it had been a simple roll that spelled the end for his ambitions. His entire plans had fallen apart due to that fateful roll. It was practically an iron-clad rule that mech pilots should never attempt to roll their mechs!

In truth, Ves didn't design his mech to accommodate a roll. However, he did strengthen his mech's internal structure around its back in order to make it easier for the Blackbeak to dig up hardy soil. All of that modest strengthening also happened to have mitigated much of the potential damage his mech might have incurred from the roll and the collision that followed.

Dumont let out a frustrated sigh. "I concede."

A tone sounded out throughout the entire arena, announcing the end of the design duel. Mech designers had the right to concede on behalf of their pilots because design duels tested the mechs rather than the individual pilots. Dumont's words definitely put an end to his challenge and his hopes of boosting his profile.

From now on, Ves could brag that he designed the better mech, and most people would believe him at face value. The public might not understand a highly technical spec sheet, but they definitely understood the outcome of a duel. For all of its advantages, the Havalax hadn't managed to prevail against a competing design.

Ves smiled for the recorders, which hopefully broadcasted his face throughout the entire Republic. This must have been something that Dumont had been looking forward to himself. Ves reaped all of the rewards, while Dumont had to contend with social and financial ruin.

## Chapter 268 Emergency Meeting

The manner in which Melinda achieved victory looked comical, but it happened to have worked out in the end. Nobody knew whether she decided to roll the Blackbeak on a whim or with calculation.

Even Melinda didn't know how to answer that question. At the time, she had entered a highly immersive state where the boundaries between herself and the mech had blurred. Even as she exited her cockpit, a horde of reporters tried asking her how she came up with the idea.

"I got hit in the head and decided to take a tumble!" She shouted randomly and pressed her way past the annoying people in order to head for the showers.

Her answer became headline news along with a recounting of the duel. Various publications put their own spin on it.

Some saw it as a classic David vs Goliath struggle. Piloting a lower-performing mech, Melinda did her best to hang on to the end where she found an opportunity to upset the balance between the Blackbeak and the Havalax.

Others saw her victory as a cruel joke. Both her mech and her overall skill as a pilot couldn't compare to the qualities of Captain Vicar and the Havalax he piloted. In any objective measure, the latter combination should have won against Melinda and the Blackbeak.

One factor that played a big role was the terrain. The rocky terrain and the various obstacles played to the Blackbeak's advantage in agility. As the slightly lighter mech, it had been able to neutralize the Havalax's edge in speed by leading it through narrow terrain. This delayed Captain Vicar's one-sided thumping and sufficiently expended his mech's reserves.

The disparity in their performances led the pundits to take a closer look at the designs. They not only compared the spec sheets, but they also took a look at

the publically available schematics, hoping to figure out what made the Blackbeak hold under pressure while the Havalax faltered in the end.

"The Havalax is a top-heavy design! It's the nature of a knight to be clad in thick layers of armor, but Mr. Dumont strangely decided not to strengthen the legs."

"That's not a fair characterization of his decision-making. The Blackbeak's legs are almost identical, but I don't see you raising any alarms about their lack of strength. What really happened was that the Havalax had run headlong into a stumbling block and crippled itself as a result. Anyech would wreck its legs at those boosted speeds!"

"That just shows how short-sighted Mr. Dumont really is! He piled up all of that sprinting capacity onto his mech without implementing enough safeguards His design would have been better off without those boosters!"

All of this discussion became moot, as the only thing that really mattered was that Ves had won against Dumont. The boost in credibility that he received could not be underestimated. All of the extra media attention that came with his victory also helped profile his design.

The Blackbeak had become an iconic sight. Its amazing appearance and its stubborn refusal to collapse had become etched in the eyes of the spectators of the match. Even if most of the Republic didn't witness the duel, word of mouth insured that a lot more people started to hear about the design.

Ves decided to strike while the iron was hot and answer some questions from the media down at the press area. He left the elevated platform to allow Dumont to wallow in his pity and took a lifter platform down to where the reporters congregated.

"Mr. Larkinson! How does it feel to be a winner?"

"Fantastic, although I always expect to win at the start. I never doubted my mech and my cousin could prevail in the end!"

In truth, Ves bit his lip and clenched his fists plenty of times throughout the duel, but he didn't admit to having doubts. He wanted to portray absolute confidence in front of the press in order to enhance his design's mystique.

"How did you come up with the Blackbeak's striking appearance? Did you hire a sculptor to shape its external armor?"

"That's all me!" Ves proudly declared. "The distinctive appearance of the Blackbeak denotes its premium status as the Living Mech Corporation's gold label product line, which are available in limited quantities as they are all hand-crafted by me. More accessible versions of the Blackbeak will be released at a later date."

He answered a few more inane questions from the media before he sought refuge at the backstage. Even then, a lot of people who managed to get in wanted to have a word with him. He finally pushed past the throng with his strong body and reached Melinda's rest room.

"Melinda! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She waved away her concern as she lay sprawled onto a sofa, looking to the world as if she was a dead pig. "I'm just exhausted, that's all. That duel took a lot out of me. No offense, Ves, but I never hope to parade myself in front of the entire Republic again."

Ves took a nearby seat and turned to gaze at his fellow Larkinson. Melinda looked sweaty and drained in her piloting suit. Even though the duel only lasted less than twenty minutes, the import of her decisions took a toll on her psyche.

"How did it feel to pilot the Blackbeak into battle?"

"It's... sublime." Melinda responded as she struggled to find the right words. "It's an unforgettable experience. I already got a taste of your mech during practice, but bringing it into an actual fight is something else. All the other mechs I've piloted in my career have never responded as smoothly as the Blackbeak. It's as if I reached a higher state of being. It's probably why I delivered my best performance as a pilot up to this point."

The Blackbeak worked as intended, then. Ves smiled at her. "That's the kind of product I've been itching to design from the start. I wanted to design a mech that can work together with its mech pilot. Too many designs out there promise to be the fastest or strongest mechs in their class, but ultimately lack too much balance to make them live up to their potential."

"Can I have a mech like that too?"

"Not yet." He shook his head. "I can't give them away like candy, you know. Ask me again a few years later."

Ves left Melinda to recover on her own and entered an armored shuttle that brought him back to Marcella's brokerage. He already received a number of important notifications on his comm including a request to attend an emergency board meeting to discuss the imminent future of the LMC.

He found it kind of annoying that the board decided to convene without his permission, but the circumstances really did call for a major shift in direction. Ves walked past the foyer and entered the elevator up to the mech broker's office.

"Marcella."

"Ves. You're here! The board is already waiting. Let's enter the conference room."

The conference room in her office looked swankier than his own. Various precision models of past models adorned the crevices in the walls. Ves paid



little attention to those details and took his seat at the head of the table. The projectors flared to life as soon as he did.

A total of eight people had gathered to discuss the the dilemma facing the LMC. Marcella took the word.

"As you know, Michael Dumont issued a challenge to Ves." She began.

"Unless you've been living under a rock, then you already know the outcome. Right now, both the Blackbeak and Ves have gained prominence throughout the Republic, but that won't last for long. With how fast the media works, any attention directed to us will fade by the end of the week."

"How are our sales faring so far?"

"We've sold out our initial production run of twenty-five gold-label Blackbeaks." Ves responded. "It will take a little less than two months to complete this order."

"That's not enough! Mrs. Bollinger, how high is the demand for the new model?"

"They're constantly knocking at my door. My estimate is that if we prepared five-hundred mechs, we could have sold them out within the day. This is only possible due to all of the hype that followed the duel. Our failure to meet this spike in demand will potentially cost us billions of credits in lost opportunities."

The news sounded very painful to Ves. By failing to build up a stockpile or declining to expand their production capacity, the LMC effectively waved away an opportunity to cash in on their fifteen minutes of fame. While they didn't actually lose any money, their lack of preparations effectively meant they flew past a pile of free cash.

"There's a way for us to salvage this situation." Another director stated. "I've proposed this before, and I think it deserves another chance. We should partner up a third-party manufacturer and leave the mass production of the

Blackbeak up to them. I know several parties in Bentheim that will be eager to enter a contract with us for the right to produce a popular design."

Ves liked to maintain control over his own products, which was why he rejected the suggestion out of hand. The director's ties to those mech manufacturers also seemed rather shady.

He shook his head. "I'm still have a lot of qualms about the quality of the products by an external manufacturer. Any major defects will reflect back to us, which will tarnish our reputation as a premium mech manufacturer."

Sadly, out of all the board members, Ves remained the sole holdout on this topic. Every other board member including his own grandfather indicated that they wished to outsource production!

"Ves, I understand why you treat the company that you founded like a baby, but you are stifling its potential." Marcella explained to him. "There is nothing unusual about contracting out the production of a design. That's why the license model exist. Any faults resulting from shoddy fabrication will mainly reflect on the contracted company. We'll only get the blame if your design is at fault."

The meeting somehow moved on to inspecting a handful of quick-thinking mech manufacturers that applied to mass produce the Blackbeak on the LMC's behalf. They all wanted to waive the massive 3 billion credits licensing fee in favor of slightly higher per-unit royalty fees. All of the manufacturers had low-balled their offers, but many things could still be changed when they entered talks.

They narrowed down the list to three possible companies, one of which had been recommended by director from Bentheim. The other two manufacturers possessed their own merits, as they had a long track record of producing various models on behalf of other mech designers in decent numbers.

"Maybe we should contract all three of them?"

"That's not a good idea. We don't know how the current tide in demand will last. The Blackbeak is still an expensive design. Even if you lower the price to 50 million credits, there aren't enough buyers in the local market to snap them all up."

"Then we should expand our reach throughout the entire Komodo Star Sector! The Blackbeak has proven itself in battle. I'm sure that we can find some foreign partners to work with to make that happen."

"Let's not move too quickly." Marcella cautioned the high-flying directors. "First, we have to solve our problems close at home before we can think of entering another market."

Despite the Bentheim director's clamoring to hand over a contract to his preferred firm, the board decided to pit the three companies against each other by allowing them to enter some kind of bidding process. The mech manufacturer that offered the most attractive conditions won the opportunity to enter into a contract with the LMC.

"What do you think, Ves? Do you agree with the plan we've hashed out?" Marcella gently prodded him. She knew how sensitive he could be about this issue. "The best way to go forward is if you establish another product category that sits below your current silver label offerings. Let's call it the bronze label. This can be an exclusive label that you can apply to mechs made by outside parties."

Ves had remained silent throughout the discussion. He still felt rather ill about the whole thing. Bronze label? He might as well call it the trash label. However, deep down he knew that his company would be better off if it could borrow the production capacity of another mech manufacturer.

He bent his head until his chin hit his chest and considered the matter deeply for a few minutes. Eventually, he gave up. "Alright. Let's contract the bronze label to a third-party manufacturer. I do want to add that the contract better include strict language on quality control."

The board had been waiting for that answer. With his assent, they formed a brief set of goals for the coming month. While Ves adjusted the BP-A-01's design for mass production, the LMC had to find a partner by the end of the week.

### **Chapter 269 Third Party**

The entire matter about outsourcing the production of bronze label Blackbeaks had spread throughout the entire company. None of the workers under Ves felt very concerned. In fact, everyone felt excited to be part of something big. The option to leave the heavy lifting to another manufacturer was seen as boon to the LMC as a whole.

"Look at it this way." Gavin told him next morning as Ves prepared to go on a field trip. "Up until now, most of your new recruits had nothing to do. The anemic sales of the Mark II generates so little paperwork that most of them felt useless."

Ves raised his eyebrow as he finished dressing. "Is handing over most of our production to a third-party manufacturer going to change anything?"

The way these outsourcing contracts worked in the mech industry was that a mech designer sold the rights to exploit a design to someone else. Often times, the third-party manufacturer also gained the right to sell the mechs based off the borrowed design through their own channels with their own branding.

This last point served to raise the profile of the third-party manufacturer while simultaneously isolating any faults from affecting the original mech designer. Only rarely did the mech designer insist on retaining his company's original

branding. That only happened if the two parties entered into a long-term alliance or if the mech designer owned a significant stake in the other manufacturer.

Essentially, it came down to control.

"Ves, just because the third-party manufacturer is going to do their own thing doesn't mean we're left in the dust. A strong surge in sales of the bronze label version will affect the popularity of the silver label and gold label versions as well. We aren't competing against our own partner for the same group of buyers."

Those that wanted to acquire more distinguished mechs could afford to wait for the LMC to produce their premium copies. Meanwhile, those who only wanted to buy the Blackbeak for its performance could order a cheaper copy with much less wait time from a third-party manufacturer.

"I admit, I'm not entirely sold on the idea. We don't actually get that much money from our partner as well. It's only a couple of millions of credits at most."

Gavin shook his head. "That's money that we basically earned for free. It doesn't cost us anything to extend a license to someone else. Sure, we need to keep an eye on them to insure they don't make shoddy mechs, but as long as they follow the agreement, we can sit back and relax while the money rolls in."

Some mech designers made their living licensing out their products. They setup design studios and focused solely on coming up with the best designs they could make. As for turning them into actual mechs? The third-party manufacturers handled all of that. They just went back to inventing newer designs while enjoying the steady stream of licensing fees.

Ves couldn't imagine working like that. He valued his designs and wanted any mechs built according to his schematics to be wholesome products that added genuine value.

To that end, Ves planned to go on a trip. "Gavin?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Please arrange an appointment with the three manufacturers we've entered talks with. I want to take a look at their production facilities."

"Why would you do that? The manufacturers have been very forthcoming with informing us of their available production capacities."

"It's not enough to know how fast and how efficient they can pump out mechs. I want to see whether they put their heart into their mechs."

Gavin scratched his head. "If you say so."

The LMC's various departments had been working at full tilt since yesterday. Marketing brought forward their advertising plan as soon as they secured a third-party manufacturer. They also released the virtual version of the Blackbeak onto all of the popular mech sims in order to ease some of the pressure that had been building up.

"The public is getting their fix for the moment. First impressions are very positive." Gavin reported as they sat in an armored shuttle. Ves was already on his way to the company's first potential partner. "We're hoping that will translate to persistent demand for the real thing."

"That will definitely happen." Ves nodded with a confident smile. Even though the virtual interface muted much of the Blackbeak's appeal, it should still convey some of the magic of its X-Factor. "Tell me about our destination. Who are we visiting first?"

His employee pulled up a data pad and browsed through its contents. "We're on our way to a major mech manufacturer called Vaun Industrial."

Ves remembered that company. The director from Bentheim always pressed the others to enter a strategic partnership with Vaun. It made Ves suspect that the two shared some sort of connection.

"Vaun owns three production complexes and produces a range of heavy vehicles and equipment. Still, two out of three of their complexes are devoted solely to producing mechs en masse. Their last public report states that they've been contracted to produce a number of models for seven different mech manufacturers."

They sounded like big players. A company like that should have been out of the LMC's league. "Does Vaun still have enough spare capacity to produce a sufficient number of bronze label mechs?"

"Well, Vaun has offered to dedicate at least eight production lines in the first half year. After that, they'll adjust their resources according to the winds of the market. If the mass-produced Blackbeak ends up being a hit, then they can easily shift their numbers to produce less of one mech and more of ours."

Gavin didn't mention that Vaun could also decide to go the other way. If sales of the Blackbeak slumped, then they could easily shift to more profitable alternatives.

To be honest, Ves already had a bad impression of Vaun. He merely decided to visit them in order to appear more impartial.

The shuttle landed after roughly an hour. Ves spent his time on tweaking a copy of the Blackbeak's design for mass production. He saved his current progress and stepped out of the hatch to the sight of a vast complex of factories.

"Welcome to our third and newest production complex! You must be Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves shook hands with a graceful looking woman. "My name is Melody Vaun, and I'm the director of this complex. Please follow me!"

They walked towards one of the enclosed production facilities while Melody narrated the history of the company. "Like many mech manufacturers, Vaun Industrial started out when my grandfather achieved a lot of success. He excelled in both mech design and business, so his company grew fast."

What followed next sounded similar to the stories Ves had heard before. Her grandfather became increasingly proficient at designing mechs, but his children proved to be a disappointment. They all grew up learning how to design a mech and how to run a business, but they pretty much only cared about money.

This gave grandfather Vaun a lot of grief, and due to some incidents that Melody quickly glossed over, he died an early grave.

His death presented a crisis for the company, which had expanded to the point where they operated five whole production lines for mechs. Without any new designs, Vaun would quickly fall into irrelevance. His children frantically sought another mech designer to take over in their grandfather's stead.

"We managed to enter a number of short-term contracts with various people and organizations that need things done. They never lasted more than a year or two, but it kept our company afloat."

Vaun Industrial never managed to find a mech designer good enough to produce as much sales as their late founder. A few years passed while the heirs kept accepting contracts, until they suddenly realized that Vaun Industrial didn't need to appoint another lead designer to survive as a business.



"When times became hard, we started cutting costs." Melody spoke. "We eventually became quite good at efficient mass production, to the extent that our company was able to reinvest our profits into expanding our production line."

Fifty years later, Vaun Industrial ended up as a large manufacturer of mechs and other heavy gear that worked with multiple mech designers every year. Melody bragged that the secret to their success lay in their pursuit of efficiency.

"Our production lines are some of the fastest on Bentheim." She claimed, though Ves doubted their veracity. "We're able to maintain some of the highest rates of production."

"What about defects?"

"They're barely noticeable. You just reminded me of their existence."

They finally reached the closest facility. After Ves went through a thorough inspection, he followed Melody inside a cavernous white hall filled with lots of white production equipment.

He immediately turned his gaze to the 3D printers, which appeared to be smaller but faster than the Dortmund in his own workshop. Ves immediately noticed that all of the machines had been dedicated to fabricating the same components over and over again.

Melody walked over to the nearest machine. The printer worked so hard it emanated a lot of steam. "We utilize a batch production system where we fabricate enough parts to assemble hundreds of mechs at a time. These printers are highly efficient and self-sufficient at their jobs. They detect most defects on their own and scrap their current progress if the deviation is severe enough to impact the quality of the end product."

That meant that Vaun retained the components with only minor deviations. Ves would have tossed them out regardless, but Vaun obviously thought differently.

After admiring the largely automated fabrication process, they moved on to the assembly area. Large amounts of half-built mechs stood at a row. Parts were being lifted into place by a combination of advanced anti-grav technology. This prevented the assembly area from being cluttered by a sea of lifter bots.

"Similar to our fabrication process, our assembly process takes advantage of the automation processes that we've developed in-house. Incidents are rare enough that only a single person is needed to look over the assembly of thirty mechs at once."

"What kind of incidents can happen?"

"Oh, you know, screw ups that our bots have difficulty processing." She explained. "Sometimes, the bots mix up the parts for one model for another. Other times, the anti-grav system acts up and drops a couple of components. This doesn't happen more than a few times a year, so don't worry about our capabilities. We never fail to meet our production targets."

Ves wanted to talk with some of the mech technicians that worked on the factory floor, but Melody strongly denied his request. He frowned at her. "Why can't I have a simple talk with them?"

"Our apologies, Mr. Larkinson, but we've already been generous to you by allowing you to take a look. Much of our success lies in our proprietary methods and we can't insure that our technical staff will know what to say and what to withhold. In order to maintain our trade secrets, it's company policy to never let anyone speak with our experts."

As an apology, Melody guided him to an office in which he could view a variety of different designs they produced over the years. Many of the designs came from promising Apprentice Mech Designers or newly advanced Journeyman Mech Designers who hadn't expanded their own facilities yet.

Ves didn't doubt Vaun's competence as a mech manufacturer. They worked with so many different designs that they required no adjustment time to master the production of a new design.

Vaun ran a tight ship. They could be trusted to take his design and produce hundreds of bronze label Blackbeaks without any sweat. Out of the three possible candidates to entrust his Blackbeak design, partnering with Vaun appeared to be the least riskiest option.

He still disliked them, though. Beyond the disconcerting level of automation, Ves hadn't been allowed to talk with the mech technicians or supervisors who operated the production equipment. The only person from Vaun he really talked to was Melody Vaun, who mainly tooted her company's horn.

Mentally, he already crossed them out of consideration. He'd probably have to argue against the entire board for refusing to work with Vaun. Hopefully, the other two mech manufacturers offered something better.

### **Chapter 270 Charity**

Dumont had been drowning his sorrows in his private mansion. He sent most of the the staff away, allowing him to avoid the scornful gazes of his own men.

"Here I am, a drunk and a failure."

Despite setting up the board in his favor, he failed to secure a crucial victory. Dumont put his own reputation at stake when he pitted his Havalax against Larkinson's Blackbeak. It should have been a slam-dunk win considering the Havalax's high performance characteristics turned it into an excellent dueling mech.

Nothing was ever set in stone.

He learned that lesson in the most painful way. Even a captain of the Mech Corps failed to account for the treacherous terrain and the bewildering decisions made by his opponent.

Dumont raised a glass at Melinda Larkinson's resourcefulness.

"People always say that the Larkinsons can't be messed with. They're the Republic's mangy wolves."

People called them wolves because they fought in a ferocious manner. They also called them mangy because they weren't really a big deal compared to the other military dynasties that held more sway in the Bright Republic.

Obviously, the emergence of a talented Larkinson mech designer changed the old equation. For the first time, it appeared the famous Larkinson Family gained some actual financial muscle.

All of that had nothing to do with him, of course. The highly placed folks who opposed the Larkinsons had secretly pulled some strings to allow the elite Captain Vicar to duel on his behalf.

"Hmph." He snorted. "What an elite he turned out to be."

"What happened yesterday is not his fault." An incisive female voice spoke from behind.

Dumont practically jumped from his seat, spilling his drink in the process. Tiny cleaner bots quickly cleaned up the mess, but that hardly calmed his heart.

"Heavens! How did you sneak up to me, Catelyn?"

"It's not that difficult to bypass your security systems when you dismissed most of your security." The Ricklin scion sneered. "Any two-bit thug with a gun can approach you before you notice it. And last I'm aware of, you don't wear a shield generator that can stop an attack."

"I figured it didn't matter if I put my mansion on lockdown." Dumont shrugged. "If you decided to get rid of me, nothing I do will matter."

Catelyn Ricklin shook her head as she tutted. "My dear, you always think the worst of me. Did you really think I wrote you off? Hardly. I've diverted a substantial amount of family funds to your endeavors. I'm not about to let my investment go to waste."

Wasteful spending and frivolous business decisions had caused the Ricklin family to decline. In Catelyn's eyes, Vincent Ricklin exemplified the degenerate old ways.

In any case, Dumont started to see the light again. He sobered up and faced Catelyn with his full attention. "You want to continue to collaborate? Even after half of my customers canceled their orders?"

"You're a businessman as well as a mech designer, Michael. It's not the end of the universe if you lose a duel. Certainly, all of the sensationalism surrounding your very public loss will depress your sales, but will anyone still remember you after a month? Just hunker down and ride the storm. Your prospects will surely improve after talk about the duel dies down."

"That still leaves an irremovable stain on my record. I'll hardly be able to climb back out of the pit I dug for myself. The Havalax is a tainted design."

"Then design a new mech! You shouldn't be pining over the fate of a single design! You should be expanding your catalog instead of putting all your eggs in a single basket. In the meantime, your company can muddle through if you sell the Havalax model at a discount. As long as your company stays afloat, there are plenty of opportunities to make a comeback."

Dumont nodded at her words. Earning an ample profit was a luxury at this point. "I get it now. As long as the price is attractive enough, buyers looking for a bargain won't care about the bad press."

The Havalax was still a fundamentally good design. Although its endurance didn't amount to much, the performance it delivered at the start made it suitable to be used as an elite mech. And despite the unexpected outcome of the previous duel, it still held a significant advantage in most situations.

Offensive knights couldn't display their full strength by themselves. They worked best if paired with other mechs, preferably rifleman or artillery mechs. The Havalax would really start to shine if it could do its job as a protector of other mechs.

"You've regained your senses now. Good." Catelyn nodded and turned around to leave the room. "For now, you should weather this crisis. We can make new plans after you stabilized your company."

As Dumont dreamed about reviving his prospects, Ves continued his tour of the potential partners he'd be working with to mass produce the Blackbeaks.

After leaving the industrial complex operated by Vaun, the armored shuttle brought him to the next mech manufacturer on the list. Gavin briefed him on the company.

"The next manufacturer on the list is a company called Vikaris Mechs. VM is a medium-sized family-owned mech manufacturer based in Haston. They started off producing spare mechs from salvaged fabrication equipment and expanded from there. Nowadays, they've grown to the point of running ten production lines. Also, starting from a decade ago, they entered into a long-term partnership with a big Journeyman Mech Designer."

Ves frowned at that news. "Sounds like a great deal for VM. If they partnered up with a Journeyman, then they should have been running their production lines at full capacity. Why are they turning to us?"

"They've fallen on hard times." Gavin replied without much sympathy. "The mech designer they worked with suddenly dumped them out of the blue. From

what rumors I've gathered, the mech designer wanted to work with a major mech manufacturer, but had to give up all of his existing contracts to seal the deal."

That designer must have decided to work together with a major mech manufacturer because they could handle more complex designs. Many small and medium mech manufacturers didn't possess the hardware required to fabricate some of the more sophisticated parts that Journeyman-level mechs often hosted.

"VM should have anticipated that something like that might happen. A Journeyman Mech Designer can be very exacting about their designs."

His assistant shrugged. "Well, they obviously didn't take precautions, seeing as they presented us with the most favorable terms. Their negotiators seem very eager to work for us."

Ves took a data pad that contained a document that outlined their latest offers. They indeed conceded a lot of ground during the negotiations. The per-unit licensing fee had somehow climbed up all the way to five million credits.

With an expected sale price of 55 million credits per Blackbeak, that didn't leave much profits for Vikaris Mechs in the future. Everyone expected resource prices to soar once again at the outbreak of war, so Ves didn't assume the current production cost of 41 million credits to stay the same.

The shuttle arrived at Haston after an hour of flight. The working-class city looked as dreary as ever from above. The Bentheim Liberation Movement often found eager recruits from the disgruntled unemployed masses.

The premises of Vikaris Mechs reflected the lack of confidence in public security. It featured high walls and a number of worn but very functional turrets. The armored shuttle and its escorts had to land outside the walls and receive a fairly rigorous inspection before being allowed through the gates.

A portly gentleman greeted him just inside the gates. "Mr. Larkinson, it's a pleasure to meet you. Let me introduce myself. I am Frederick Yang, and I've been steering this company for more than twenty years as CEO."

Frederick looked exhausted and overworked. His black hair started greying early and he didn't bother to use any of the modern grooming solutions to revive them back to their prime.

As Ves shook hands with the man, they walked over to one of the two great halls VM had built up. "I've heard you've recently lost a major client. Can you tell me if your facilities are still up to par?"

The blunt question took the CEO aback. He returned with an awkward smile. "We've parted ways with a major client for reasons unrelated to our performance. Our equipment is fairly old, but we have lots of experienced hands to keep them running smoothly. There is no reason to doubt our capabilities. We are able to fabricate virtually any kind of design an Apprentice Mech Designer might present to us."

They entered a stale and rather worn out fabrication floor. Ves noted a few touches of rust and grime in some of the corners, but nothing truly serious. The CEO guided him to an array of printers which churned out a variety of parts. Each machine had a serious-looking mech technician or fabricator at the helm.

"We operate all of our equipment manually. We believe in providing employment opportunities to the disadvantages communities of Haston, so we bring in those with talent and teach them the essential skills to become a fabricator or mech technicians."

Many of the people indeed looked like they grew up under harsh conditions. Ves found the initiative to be admirable. It must have been difficult to educate



a barely literate man or woman from scratch. "Do they have diplomas or certificates?"

"It takes too much money to send them out for examinations." The CEO shook his head. "A diploma doesn't matter too much in our circles because we already know what they are capable of. They don't need to prove themselves to us."

Ves bet that Vikaris Mechs deliberately discouraged certification for more selfish reasons. They spent so much effort bringing up their skills. If they actually gained a diploma, they'd be able to apply to other manufacturers that provided better compensation.

Still, even with this shady exploitation, the staff hardly looked aggrieved with their lot in life. They obtained precious opportunities to elevate their lives without paying any tuition at all.

As he toured the old and rusty alloy compressors and CTMs, Ves got the sense that Vikaris Mechs was a social project. They obviously didn't need to hire so many locals and spend so much effort on shoring up their skills. A score of sturdy bots could have taken over the jobs of as much as half of the people working in the halls.

"I'm very impressed with your setup, Mr. Yang." Ves cautiously praised. "Still, I'm a little concerned by the age of your machines. My design isn't very difficult to make, but Veltrex armor plating is very difficult to work with. Are you sure your gear and your men are up to the task?"

The CEO hastily nodded. "We have decades of experience with fabricating comechs. We can handle the majority of currentgen compressed armor systems. There is no cause for concern, no cause for concern at all!"

Ves nodded politely to him. From what he saw with his own eyes, the CEO didn't lie. As long as the alloy compressors didn't fall apart, they should be

able to meet his needs until the next generation arrived. Without a substantial investment, they wouldn't be able to keep up with the latest armor systems.

He wrapped up his visit by talking to a few workers. The CEO seemed unafraid the unsophisticated mech technicians would slip up. They probably didn't know anything important enough to matter.

Indeed, Ves didn't learn anything strange that could change his view on the company. Vikaris Mechs didn't do so well after losing their most essential partner, but they made do for now by performing small jobs here and there. The workers appeared hopeful that their company would recover its pride.

After bidding farewell to Yang, Ves and Gavin returned to their shuttle and left Haston as fast as possible.

Gavin appeared to be glad to get away from the murky town. "Ugh, all of that industrial smell is getting to me. Please let me stay in the shuttle if you want to visit Haston again."

Cloudy Curtain boasted exceptionally clean air, so it wasn't a surprise to Ves that Gavin disliked stepping foot into Haston.

"What do you think about Vikaris Mechs?"

"It's a charity case more than a business. I don't know if the owner is a bleeding heart or not, but you can hardly step forward without bumping into another worker. All of their gear also seems rather dated, but I'm not an expert on those things. The most I can say is that they don't look nearly as professional as Vaun Industrial."

At least they knew how pathetic they looked, because Vikaris Mechs offered the most attractive contract terms by far. Ves told Gavin as much. "They're cheap and they're dedicated. I think we can rely on their sincerity because we'll be their only major client for the time being."

"You get what you paid for. Don't expect consistent quality from these guys."

"True."