

### Chapter 271 Money Crunch

So far, Ves visited two very different mech manufacturers. Vaun Industrial prioritized efficiency above all else while Vikaris Mechs possessed an abundance of heart. That said, neither seemed like the right fit for the LMC.

Gavin partially echoed his findings. "I can understand your doubts about Vaun, but I thought you'd be sympathetic for Vikaris. They employ lots of people and they all seem to care for their work."

"Well, it all seems a bit too harmonious. The people there seem happy, but Frederick Yang is just a patsy. Someone else is pulling the strings in the company."

"Now that you think about it, Mr. Yang doesn't seem very assertive for a CEO. You've got a bright eye for taking of that."

Combined with the overly generous contract terms, all of it seemed suspicious. Ves refused to entertain any further thoughts of cooperation with Vikaris Mechs unless they became more forthcoming on their background.

"Another thing that bugs me is the apparent charity that's going on." Ves continued. "It seems to be built on a fragile base. What if some of those workers harbor sympathies for the BLM? It's incredibly easy for a single infiltrator to sabotage an entire production line, or worse, cover up any instances of defects."

"I didn't think about that. You're right. There's too many people going in and out everyday. All of that security around their complex won't be able to stop a determined saboteur who already has free access to everything from the start."

Ves ran a business, not a social project. The main goals of the LMC should be to advance his interests and make a profit. He couldn't care less about the

plight of the citizens of Haston. Bentheim's government should be cleaning up their own messes.

"Let's move onto the next destination. Who are we visiting last?"

Gavin turned to his data pad again. "We'll be dropping by a company called Elemental Mech Engineering. EME is actually a company founded by a reasonably successful mech designer called Andar Neverland. They currently only operate four production lines, but they're fairly modern and capable."

This sounded like another distressed manufacturer. "Is Mr. Neverland still alive?"

"Oh, he's alive and well. He even has a daughter who's a bit younger than you who's studying mech design at Ansel. From what we've gathered, EME has been chugging along great until their licenses expired."

This happened fairly often to mech designers. They budgeted out their earnings and saved up money for a license renewal or a net set of licenses, but something happened along the way that caused a gap to occur. The key here was finding out why Neverland couldn't acquire another set of licenses.

It didn't take too much trouble for Gavin to look up the reasons. "Sales of Neverland's designs have slumped in recent times. A huge transgalactic mech manufacturer entered the market with a fantastic design that outperformed Neverland's own products on both price and performance. Now he's facing a budget shortfall of several billion credits due to the fact he borrowed a lot of money to get his hands on quality fabrication equipment."

"Sounds like EME is Neverland's private playground. Does his company have any experience with doing contract work?"

"Not really. They're scrambling for work but their lack of pedigree in this field of business means that not a lot of clients are tempted to work with them. It also doesn't help that they're asking a lot of compensation for their efforts."

Out of the three parties the LMC had their eyes on, EME offered the least attractive terms. They only agreed to hand over 2.5 million credits per sale, half the offer of Vikaris Mechs. In exchange, EME offered smaller concessions in other areas, such as letting the LMC keep a close eye on their activities.

The shuttle reached the industrial district of Ansel and landed at a cramped and densely built complex that bore the logo of EME. As Ves and Gavin exited the shuttle, they met with the founder and lead designer inside a lobby.

A middle-aged man greeted them with much aplomb. "Mr. Larkinson! It's a privilege to meet you in the flesh! You're a famous mech designer now. The industry is buzzing about your rise to fame."

"You flatter me." Ves casually laughed in return. "My accomplishments pale in comparison to yours."

In his opinion, experts in the mech industry hardly took any notice of Ves. They considered his duel against Dumont to be as trivial as two ignorant toddlers fighting each other over a shiny toy.

Mech designers like Neverland deserved a lot of respect for elevating his company to such a height from scratch. Even if he failed to hedge his bets in recent times, he was still very much ahead of the game compared to someone like Ves.

"I haven't heard much about you. Please tell me about your designs."

Neverland looked eager to talk about his own work. "The pride and joy of the EME is the Klamson series. The Klamsons are a line of striker mechs with varying loadouts, from flamethrowers to shotguns. I've even supplied some of the remote Planetary Guard units with Klamsons armed with fluid projectors."

"Can I take a look at the design?"

"Oh sure! They're archived in the MTA, so it doesn't hurt for you to take a look."

Ves received a data pad that contained a couple of abridged design schematics. He skimmed over the documents and inspected the wireframe schematics with an eye for attention.

In his eyes, the Klamson design didn't look very fancy, but neither did it attempt to overreach its capabilities. It was a simple, workable design that had matured over the course of a decade. The Klamson mechs also benefited from fairly premium third-class components.

Still, despite their qualities, it wouldn't be too hard for a competitor to come up with a better design. They'd have to take some risks and be more skilled, but it could be done without resorting to more expensive components.

In a way, the EME treated the Klamson series like a cash cow. Neverland probably rested on his laurels thinking that a couple of minor updates every year would suffice to keep the design competitive.

He made a big mistake and fell behind as a result. It didn't help that Neverland invested a lot of money into expanding the EME's production capacity just before his sales followed a downward trajectory.

Ves didn't mention anything unflattering and kept his comments positive. "I like what you did with the weapon holsters. Even an unskilled pilot would easily be able to stow his mech's weapons without a fuss."

"That's been a persistent problem in the earliest versions of the Klemsons." Neverland explained. "Some of my early customers used the Klemsons as training mechs, and a lot of inexperienced mech pilots broke their holsters trying to stow away their shotguns. They're not as slim and delicate like laser rifles, so mistakes happened often enough for me to figure out a better solution."

"What made you decide to commit to striker mechs? They're not the most popular archetypes around."

The older mech designer shrugged. "It's all I inherited from my mentor. He's a fanatic about strikers and I took over much of his enthusiasm. There's a lot of charm in striker mechs. They combine some of the best parts about knights and medium-ranged mechs into a single, durable package."

Ves could see some of the appeal. "Still, it must be hard to design a striker."

"Oh, not at all, actually. People who approach the archetype with the mindset of designing a knight or rifleman in a different form will come away disappointed. Strikers demand an entirely new approach. Outsiders always place too much emphasis on accuracy and precision. They weaken the frame too much in order to chase after a dream."

"Don't they require a minimum amount of accuracy?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

If the Blackbeak picked up a laser rifle and decided to use it, it would be liable to hit its own squad members. Such was the danger of neglecting accuracy.

"Mr. Larkinson, the reason why strikers are armed with wide area weapons is because poor aiming is built into the archetype. What they lack in accuracy, they make up for it in strength. Standard doctrine says that strikers should avoid melee combat whenever possible, but in practice they often resort to their bayonets or backup swords to fend off an opponent up close."

Their conversation halted when they reached the fabrication floor. It didn't look as clean as the floor from Vaun, but neither did it look grimy like the floor from Vikaris. The look and feel of EME's floor resembled an upscaled workshop, much like the one owned by Ves.

Recent expansion has left the floor a little cramped. An abundance of shiny new production equipment sat idle. With the lack of demand for the Klemsons and no other contracts to fulfill, the expensive machinery sat dormant.

As for the workers, most of the mech technicians walked back and forth in a daze. They counted their inventory for the umpteenth time or simply sat back and played some games over their comms.

"As you can see, our state-of-the-art production equipment will be able to handle anything you can throw at it, including your wonderful Blackbeak design." Neverland bragged, who willfully ignored all of his idle personnel. "Don't think we are worse than others for maintaining only four production lines, the production speed of these machines will surely be a feast for your eyes!"

Ves didn't recognize the individual production models, but all of the printers, compressors, CTMs and assembly systems looked impressive enough to back his boasts. The EME should be able to produce enough bronze label Blackbeaks to meet demand, if only just.

As Neverland kept boasting about his production capabilities, Ves formed his own judgement on the man and his company. The EME must have landed in fairly dire straits. The fact that his negotiators insisted on retaining as much money as possible should be because the EME's creditors must be knocking on their doors.

If Ves looked closely, the personnel looked like they had already given up. They expected the EME to fold in a month or two, upon which they'd be free to work for someone else. They only stuck around because it would look bad on their records if they quit on their own accord.

"Thank you for allowing me a visit. You've been very candid to me. I appreciate that." Ves said to Neverland when they came to the end of their tour.

Neverland wiped some sweat from his brow. "I figured I wouldn't be able to hide anything from you. The EME is down on its luck, but we only need to

shore over this difficult time before we can pick ourselves up. I hope you entrust the mass production of your Blackbeak design to us. Striker mechs and knight mechs have a lot in common, so we can instantly start production."

"I'll consider it carefully!"

Ves and Gavin returned to their shuttle. Now that they finished their field trips, the shuttle turned around to Dorum so that they could return to the hotel near Marcella's brokerage.

"Mr. Neverland is a desperate man." Gavin remarked after a moment of silence. "He's extremely eager to enter into a contract with us, more so than Mr. Yang of Vikaris Mechs."

At least Vikaris had been able to stay afloat by accepting a bunch of tiny short-term contracts. EME's vacant track record in this business segment made it much more difficult for it to do the same.

Still, that might change once people find out about their modern production equipment. EME just had to get past their acute dearth of liquidity.

"Mr. Neverland comes off rather fishy as well, but in a different way from Mr. Yang." Ves stated after thinking back on his visit. "He's a little too sincere, if you know what I mean."

"Do you think it's a calculated ploy to arouse your sympathy?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that he genuinely loves the craft. His eyes light up whenever he talks about the Klemson or the Blackbeak."

"Then what are you apprehensive about?"

"I feel like Mr. Neverland wants to steal the secrets to the Blackbeak design." Ves concluded. "He'll come up with something identical or apply what he's learned from me to his own design once the EME is done with the contract."

"Oh. That sounds plausible. We probably shouldn't give them the opportunity to steal your hard work, then."

Ves shook his head. "If it's a choice between Vaun, Vikaris and EME, I'd pick the last one any time. Even if they're greedy, they're well worth the effort."

He already made his choice, and not just because he had a bad impression of Vaun and Vikaris. Gavin missed out on a couple of reasons which made EME the most suitable manufacturer for the LMC to collaborate.

### Chapter 272 Gratitude

Out of the three mech manufacturers in consideration, Ves had already picked his favorite. Vaun Industrial and Vikaris Mechs both had their benefits, but Andar Neverland's Elemental Mech Engineering took the cake.

Unfortunately, his board didn't think so. When Ves returned to Marcella's conference room next day, he encountered a bunch of bewildering stares as he laid out his choice.

Even Marcella seemed dumbfounded. "Ves, EME is the least attractive partner by far. They have the least amount of production lines and they pay out the least in terms of credits. It doesn't make any economic sense to go with the worst offer."

According to the licensing terms they negotiated up to this point, EME promised to pay the LMC only 2.5 million credits per Blackbeak. This contrasted sharply with the 3.5 million credits per mech offered by Vaun and a whopping 5 million credits per mech offered by Vikaris.

"If you've visited all of their production facilities with your own eyes, you'll know that EME is better than the rest. Mr. Neverland's company offers a number of benefits that the other two manufacturers won't be able to realize."

"Let's hear it then, Ves."

"First, and most importantly, quality control." Ves raised his finger to emphasize this priority. "Even though the bronze label Blackbeaks are our lowest tier products, they will still sell for at least 50 million credits per copy. Such a price demands we ensure that every mech is up to snuff."

The director from Bentheim shook his head. "That's not a sufficient reason to choose EME over Vaun. Certainly, the Haston-based Vikaris Mechs has a spotty track record in terms of quality, but Vaun has a lengthy track record of producing high quality mechs at an extremely fast rate of production. Right now, the spike in demand for the Blackbeak won't last, so it's imperative we push as many Blackbeaks into their hands before the hype runs out."

Most of the other directors agreed with his reasoning. Vaun Industrial possessed the scale and professionalism to meet any of their client's demands. With a seemingly endless amount of production lines spread over three massive complexes, they could increase their production on a dime if the Blackbeak turns out to be an enduringly popular model.

Ves shook his head. "Is Vaun able to maintain a consistent output? No doubt. Yet their production lines aren't configured in a way that brings out the best qualities of the Blackbeak. I designed my knight to be assembled one by one, which is the production method that EME used for their own mechs. It's a bit slower, I can admit that, but it preserves some of the craftsmanship the Blackbeak is intended to convey."

Nobody really understood his point. The goal of mass producing the Blackbeak was to produce as many copies as possible at the lowest price for a given level of quality. That Vaun used a matrix of production equipment to assemble their mechs should be to their benefit.

Marcella tried to explain the rationale to Ves. "The bronze label is meant to present accessibility and cost savings. It's okay if a couple of parts don't perform as expected. They also won't care about the craftsmanship put into

their products. They simply want the best performance without going bankrupt."

"Vaun Industrial is a massive manufacturer as well." Someone else said. "If our most optimistic projections of the Blackbeak's demand turn out to be true, then EME will be hard-pressed to squeeze out more mechs than they are already pumping out. Four production lines don't amount to much."

"We can always contract a second manufacturer if needed." Ves waved away the excuse. "If the Blackbeak turns out to be a bestseller, then our negotiating power will obviously be higher than now. We'll easily be able to impose a higher licensing fee on our next partners."

His grandfather added a rare word of support. "Ves is correct. Right now, nobody is able to determine for certain whether the Blackbeak possesses any mass appeal. It's a mech that sells for a premium price, so even with all of the heightened interest in the model, we won't be selling thousands of copies at an instant."

Someone with a marketing background echoed those words. "A high level of attention doesn't automatically translate to a high number of sales. A new model like the Blackbeak still has to prove its worth in the field. The duel was a good start, but it's only a single incident. At this price level, many buyers will be reticent on purchasing an expensive mech without a substantial track record."

Not everyone agreed with that assessment. The board split in half whether the Blackbeak would sell the most at the start or down the line.

Marcella turned back to Ves. "You haven't finished laying out your reasons for choosing EME."

"Thank you, Marcella. Let me tell you the second reason."

He activated a projector and showed them all a summary of Andar Neverland's biography. At first glance, it didn't contain anything of interest, mainly due to the mech designer's continuous obsession with improving his Klemson striker design. He had never expanded his catalog with anything other than variants of the original Klemson.

"What are we supposed to look at?"

"When I visited EME and talked to Mr. Neverland, I noticed that he doesn't spend much time talking about his roots. He only briefly mentioned that he got his passion for Striker mechs from his mentor. Look at this biography. Can you spot who his mentor might be?"

"It's the Honorable Alazar Crux!"

"The Senior Mech Designer?"

"It's him!"

Everyone took notice of the illustrious name. Officially, the Bright Republic didn't retain any Master Mech Designers, so those at the rank of Senior pretty much called the shots. In the hierarchy of Bentheim mech designers, Alastar Crux pretty much sat near or at the top.

In turn, it was a big deal if the Honorable Mr. Crux mentored Andar Neverland.

"To be honest, I got the feeling that Mr. Neverland is only a passing student of Mr. Crux. A mentorship isn't as intimate as an apprenticeship." Ves cautioned them all. "Still, a definite link exists between the two. I can feel the subconscious pride radiating from Neverland whenever we spoke."

"If Neverland only possesses a loose relationship with Crux, then how does that affect us?"

"The reason why Mr. Neverland is rather stubborn about the licensing fees is because he doesn't actually feel much urgency to go into bed with us. If worst

comes to worst, he can go back to his mentor and beg for a bailout. The only reason he hasn't done so yet is because it would be a humiliating stain on his record."

"And that matters because...?"

Ves raised his palm. "It matters because if we're able to tide the EME past their liquidity crisis, we'll be doing both Mr. Neverland and the Honorable Mr. Crux a favor. Don't forget that a failing former student also reflects badly on Crux. After all, couldn't he have brought up Mr. Neverland in a better fashion?"

The mech industry judged mech designers who started their own businesses with a different standard than eccentrics that only pumped out designs all day.

The success of a mech company reflected well on a mech designer. After all, if his designs generated a lot of sales, then that meant the mech designer must be good. Vice versa, if sales plummeted for some reason, then the mech designer must be awful.

In a sense, Andar Neverland wasn't a good mech designer because his Klemson design couldn't compete against the mainstream models in the same class. Ves took what happened to Neverland as a cautionary tale of depending too much on a single design line.

Someone asked the critical question. "Will the Honorable Mr. Crux actually acknowledge our efforts if we aid Mr. Neverland?"

Nobody truly knew the answer. Perhaps the old man never took notice of the troubles his former student accrued. Still, Ves believed that Crux cared a lot about his reputation, especially since he had reached the zenith of what a mech designer could achieve in the Republic.

"Don't forget that Mr. Crux is highly influential in the upper echelons of the mech industry." His grandfather added. "He's not only a professor emeritus of

the Ansel University of Mech Design, but he also sits on the Bentheim Mech Court."

A couple of people nodded seriously. Even though the MTA oppressively interfered with the trade and use of mechs, the Bright Republic also maintained their own regulatory systems. The Bentheim Mech Court was the ultimate arbiter of disputes between mech designers and mech pilots in the Bentheim region.

Beyond issuing rulings between quarreling parties, the Bentheim Mech Court also worked closely with the government and the Mech Corps in other matters.

Most importantly, the Mech Court decided who to draft and where to allocate them in the event of war. Thus, having Crux owe Ves a favor might contribute to a cushy assignment once the latest Bright-Vesia War broke out.

Even if the board didn't care about his posting, they did care a lot about the future of the LMC in the event of war. The Mech Court also worked closely with administration to determine which mech manufacturers deserved support and which companies should be left out in the lurch.

The discussion basically ended at that point. Opportunities to establish a connection with a Senior Mech Designer didn't come very often. Ves wanted to seize the moment and sign a contract before anyone else heard about the hole the EME had fallen into. They lucked out that Neverland approached them first.

Certainly, not everyone agreed to the decision to rule out Vaun Industrial, but the board could squawk all they wanted. Even without his grandfather's support, he could make whatever decisions he wished as long as he held a majority of the LMC's shares.

Ves left the conference room with an upbeat pace. Marcella followed him out with an expression of doubt.

"I'm not sure you made the right choice there, Ves." She said. "It's rather optimistic to expect gratitude from Crux. The man can be a bit of a codger. It's doubtful whether he'll bother to return the favor at some later point in the future at all."

"You're right, but remember that's only one of the reasons why I chose to go with EME. Out of all the manufacturers in consideration, only EME has the heart to appreciate mechs. The other two manufacturers merely see their production as a means to an end. That's not compatible with the LMC's philosophy."

Marcella blew out her lungs in exasperation. "Philosophy doesn't mean anything compared to cold hard cash. Don't get caught up too much in your marketing speak. Make sure your company is able to earn a profit before you chase after unicorns."

Her words reflected a vast amount of experience seeing many mech designers fail due to trying to fulfill a fanciful goal, to the point of running their businesses to the ground. Ves was aware of those examples, but he had his own principles to uphold.

"A mech designer has to be flexible sometimes, but those who go too far and abandon all propriety end up as outcasts. I don't want to become a person who mindlessly chases after profits."

He bid goodbye to Marcella and left the brokerage with Gavin. He relayed a number of instructions through his assistant. The LMC had to conclude its negotiations with EME and finalize a contract at the end of the week. Ves wanted production to start as fast as possible and he didn't see any point in dancing around the issue any longer.

"I'll deliver my design for the bronze label Blackbeak as well. I want every formalities to be done by the time we sign the contract."

The LMC had a lot to do. Ves still needed to fabricate nineteen gold label Blackbeaks in order to fulfill the orders he received during his debut. Ves hoped to proliferate his best mechs as widely as possible so that more people would hear about its strengths.

"The war also isn't very far away from breaking out. The Vesians can begin their invasion at any time."

Once the Vesians pulled the trigger, all hell would break loose.

### Chapter 273 Calcardon

The LMC moved quickly in the next couple of days. They hammered out an agreement with Elemental Mech Engineering while Ves finished deriving the silver label and bronze label versions of the original Blackbeak design.

Both of the mechs featured near-identical specs to the gold label version. Ves mainly simplified the complicated sculptured exterior into straight, smooth surfaces that wouldn't be as much of a challenge to produce.

More specifically, he tweaked the silver label Blackbeak to go well with the Dortmund printer. He knew the capabilities of his equipment best, so he could easily retain any features that his company could still achieve on their own.

On the other hand, the bronze label Blackbeak truly represented a simplification of the original design. He not simplified the exterior even further, he also adjusted the internals to reduce the rate of errors.

For both designs, Ves did his best to retain their original X-Factor. Even though they'd lose much of their strength during the fabrication process, Ves still saw hope of some spark of survival in his products.

That was also an important factor why he went with EME. They offered the best hope of keeping the X-Factor alive.

He did his work on the flight back to Cloudy Curtain. Ves saw no need to remain at Bentheim. He wanted to get back to the workshop and start on processing his latest orders as soon as possible.

Three days later, the Barracuda landed at his home planet's spaceport. Ves and his entourage entered an armored shuttle that brought him back to home.

He idly played with Lucky while Melkor stared out of the viewscreen. Meanwhile, Gavin quietly corresponded with the office the LMC recently established in Bentheim.

For now, the branch in Bentheim focused on marketing and liaising with EME. Ves expected the branch to hire a lot of people to manage all of the responsibilities on its shoulders.

That reminded Ves of Raella's lengthy absence. "Where is Raella now?"

"She's having the time of her life, I bet." Melkor sighed, rubbing his visor with his palm. "Her parents won't approve of her boyfriend. Dietrich isn't exactly an upstanding citizen."

Ves shared his cousin's concerns. "I don't get what Raella sees in him. She can do much better."

Neither of them really understood girls, so they merely scratched their heads and remained clueless.

At least they understood mechs. Ves turned his attention back to his designs. The silver label and bronze label designs acquired the code names BP-B-01 and BP-C-01 respectively, making it clear where they placed in the hierarchy of the Blackbeak product line.

"Melkor, you've been keeping touch with the other Larkinsons in our generation, right?"

"I am. What do you want to know?"

"What do they think about the upcoming war?"

"It's an opportunity to make their mark." Melkor stated, as if the horrors of war meant nothing to him. "We've been raised on the stories of our parents and grandparents about the glory they earned from the battlefields of yesterday."

"So you think it's your turn now. Aren't you all afraid of losing your lives along the way?"

"If we die, we die. No Larkinson has shied away from death." Melkor stiffly declared. "It's our greatest responsibility to fight on behalf of the family and the Republic. No matter how tough it gets, we will never falter."

Ves had never underwent the kind of training that the potentates in his family had received. He found the blind devotion a little disconcerting.

It reminded him of Barley's unyielding loyalty to the Exilis Domain.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget that mechs depended on their human pilots. It didn't matter if a state boasted huge numbers of high quality mechs. Without a motivated fighting force, all of those mechs would collapse at the first blow.

In the endless wars that had been fought during the Age of Mechs, plenty of upsets had occurred. There were even times when a loose alliance of third-rate states had turned the tables against a technologically and numerically superior second-rate state.

These examples showcased the importance of raising everyone's morale. Ves realized for the first time how deep his family had committed to the Republic, and how much he missed out due to his inability to pilot mechs.

The shuttle eventually arrived at the workshop. Ves strode straight to the workshop with Lucky in his grasp.

"The boss is back!"

"Congratulations for your win, boss!"

The mech technicians laid down their work and applauded Ves like a hero who achieved glory on the battlefield. Ves considered these men and women to be his closest employees, so he took his time to smile and speak some words about his experience.

Eventually, he sent them back to work called over Carlos and Chief Cyril.

"I heard about the licensing thing from administration." Chief Cyril spoke first.

"Are you truly willing to let the Blackbeak be produced by someone else?"

"Missing out on those potential sales is even worse. It's best if we can do everything in-house, but if not then there's nothing wrong with leaning on a third-party manufacturer. These kinds of arrangements happen all the time."

Chief Cyril shook his head. "They happen all the time, alright, but they don't always end well. Mechs are highly complicated products that require the right equipment and the right people to produce. I can tell you a dozen horror stories at the top of my head where mech designers got duped by unscrupulous manufacturers."

"We've done our due diligence." Ves replied. "The contract we signed with EME is also fairly strict about these matters. They won't get away if they decide to pull the wool over our eyes."

EME's persisted in keeping their licensing fees as low as possible. Perhaps aware that their offer wouldn't be attractive, their negotiators relented on everything else, so long as it didn't lower their potential earnings.

"About those contract terms, I'm going to need a senior hand to keep an eye on their production." Ves pointed at Carlos. "You're it."

"Why me?!"

"Because Chief Cyril is indispensable. I need him to watch over my workshop. As for the other mech technicians, they're too junior to be of any value. That

leaves only you. You're my best man. I won't have any concerns about EME if I know you're there."

Carlos slumped in defeat. "Okay, you're right. I'll do it then, but I don't want to be stuck there forever. I already did a stint at quality control, I don't want to end up doing the same job again."

Ves weighed the matter for a bit. "Two months should be long enough. By that time, they'll have gotten used to the standards I've imposed. We can set a regular rotation where some of our local mech technicians get to go on an extended trip to Bentheim to take over your duties."

"I'm not sure whether they're seasoned enough to spot any funny business, but that sounds like a good idea." Chief Cyril nodded in agreement. "Our mech technicians haven't seen much of how far mech manufacturing can go. Allowing them to experience a bigger company's production facilities will do wonders in broadening their perspectives."

Even though EME had idled all of their production, Ves still got a good impression of their work methods. Andar Neverland cared a lot about his mechs, to the point of going deep in depth to upgrade and expand his fabrication equipment. Unable to come up with something better than his Klemson design, he instead focused on improving his production lines.

"Hopefully, everyone will be able to get a turn. I hope the LMC will be able to expand its production lines in the same manner as the EME."

Chief Cyril bumped Ves on the head. "Mr. Neverland is how many years old now? He's in the business for at least thirty years. You've got a lot more potential than him when he was your age. Aim for something higher."

Ves appreciated the vote of confidence. The chief also reminded him that he shouldn't get too caught up in the present. The Blackbeak was merely the first of many amazing products coming from his hand.

"Alright, enough dilly-dallying around!" He clapped. "Let's get to work with fabricating those gold label mechs!"

Everyone released a minor cheer. Even though most of the mech technicians wouldn't be doing anything important, they would still get to witness their boss at work. Ves also hoped his mech technicians paid attention because he planned to sell only silver label Blackbeaks under his own company's auspices from this point onwards.

While Ves started pulling up his sleeves, light-years away from Cloudy Curtain, something momentous occurred in the depths of interstellar space.

A small convoy of trade vessels escorted by a trio of mercenary carriers quietly plied the trade routes between the Bright Republic and its neighbors. Trading directly between the Republic and the Kingdom was prohibited, but a lot of traders got around that restriction by stopping by a couple of neutral states before they reached their destination.

The convoy transitioned into FTL a couple of days ago, and had reached the midpoint of their final leg of their journey to the port system of Bentheim. At the head of the convoy flew the biggest carrier, the Calcardon.

The carrier owed her size due to her origins as a decommissioned cargo hauler. A Republican mercenary corps called the Barbed Lynxes bought the old vessel at a bargain and converted her interior to hold a mix of landbound and spaceborn mechs.

The Barbed Lynxes did well for themselves after they acquired the larger vessel. Although the Calcardon's speed left a lot to be desired, she excelled in convoy missions where she escorted fully-laden trade vessels as sluggish as the converted carrier.

Inside the bridge, the captain of the ship yawned in boredom. "Nothing ever happens on this trade route. Where have all the pirates gone to?"

"Knock it off, Captain Spencer. You're tempting fate with your talk. I'd rather we finish our mission without a fight."

"Oh, come on Commander Leife, I was just joking. It's just that you hear about the pirates stalking the trade routes and ambushing anyone who emerges into a remote system. It makes my hair stand on ends for months now."

The old grey-haired commander crossed her arms. "I'm close to retirement already. I'd like to get out of this business by the end of the year and leave the Komodo Star Sector before everything sinks into chaos. I'd appreciate it if you don't test our luck."

"Aye aye, commander!" The captain saluted her in a lazy manner.

Not a lot of officers manned the bridge right now. Nothing ever happened to the Calcardon during FTL unless the crew messed something up. Half the consoles faced empty seats.

An alert sounded out from one of the consoles. The officer in charge of sensors and communications woke up from his daze and blearily looked at the alert the Calcardon sent out. "Skipper, the gravitic sensors are glitching out again. They're telling me that we're about to enter a planet's gravity well!"

Captain Spencer adjusted his captain's hat and sat up straight from his seat. He pulled up a projections of the sensor readings in front of him. "Goddamn those yard monkeys. I told them to replace the sensor modules! They must have polished up the old ones while billing us the cost of installing some new ones! Those scam artists!"

"Uhm, skipper? What do I do about the sensor readings? Should we drop out of FTL as a precaution?"

"Out of the question! We'll have to halt the entire convoy as a result, and we have to wait for hours until our FTL drives go through their cycles. We'll also

waste an enormous amount of fuel in the process. Remain in FTL. There aren't any planets or star systems on this route.."

The junior officer reluctantly dropped his caution, but his console suddenly lit up as the Calcardon received a number of messages from the other ships in the convoy.

"Skipper! The other ships report that they're detecting a gravity well in front of us too! We're getting dangerously close now!"

This finally woke the captain up. "Damn it! Some kind of stellar mass must have wandered into our route! Commander Leife, our FTL drives aren't calibrated to swing past that gravity well!"

"Then stop the convoy! Pull us out of FTL!"

After the commander passed the word, the entire convoy lurched out of FTL and transitioned into realspace. They drifted about aimlessly, half-clueless why they had to interrupt their sleepy journey.

Inside the bridge of the Calcardon, the captain called the entire crew to battle stations. Officers poured in from the hatch and hopped behind the empty consoles. They all furiously worked to figure out what happened.

"Skipper!" An officer called. "We've analyzed the sensor readings. According to our calculations, we're five light-hours away from a rogue planet!"

The captain cursed for a bit. Rogue planets basically consisted of planets that had been knocked away from their solar systems for some reason or another and traversed a wandering path, sometimes interfering with FTL travel. Most of the time, these rogue planets consisted of frozen rocks or gas giants.

"Sir... new readings have come in! The planet is glowing! If our analysis is correct, the entire planet is riddled with exotics!"

That single announcement changed everything.

## Chapter 274 The Glowing Plane

The entire convoy went up in arms about the sudden discovery.

Cargo ships and carriers converted from cargo ships generally didn't possess great sensors. If they all detected strong readings of exotics at a distance of five light-hours, then the planet up ahead must be riddled with highly active exotic substances.

So high, in fact, that it must be worth as much as the gross domestic product of an average third-rate state like the Bright Republic.

Commander Leife, the woman in charge of the convoy, convened a hasty conference among the ship captains and senior mercenary officers.

She gazed at the eyes of Captain Spencer before glancing at the various projections of the other men and women. Almost every ship belonged to a different owner, complicating her efforts to rein in their impulses.

She reserved the most wary looks to the other two mercenary commanders in the convoy. Both of them rode in medium-sized carriers that would be able to overwhelm the Calcardon if they teamed up against the Barbed Lynxes.

"First things first. You all shut off your quantum entanglement nodes, right? It's not enough to flip a switch. I hope you all disconnected the hardware from the rest of your ships."

All of the captains nodded seriously. They all knew that as soon as they discovered something valuable, the first thing they had to do was to prevent it from spreading all over the galactic net.

Turning off their quantum entanglement nodes had been their first or second actions upon receiving word of the momentous discovery.

"Alright folks, we all know why we're here. Let's talk about the Glowing Planet."

They called it the Glowing Planet, for its very visible luminescence that lit up the planet like a star. At this distance, it could be spotted from the naked eye, which was very rare for a rogue planet drifting in the middle of interstellar space with no nearby star to reflect its surface.

It was as if a juicy pheasant decided to put on a coat of bright lights to make it more attractive to another predators that wanted a taste of its flesh.

Captain Spencer began to summarize the estimates the entire convoy had made so far. "The Glowing Planet is about the size of a small planet or a large moon. We're not quite sure if it started off as the former or the latter before it got pushed out of its star system. Whatever the case, the trauma of the event has warped the planet to the point of tearing up its entire shape."

A projection appeared of the Glowing Planet in question. The planet took on a slight egg-like shape as if it had been stretched by a pair of god-sized hands. The stretching caused the entire crust of the planet to crack, which inadvertently revealed rich deposits of exotics.

A mercenary officer rudely interrupted the briefing. "Let's skip all of the nerdy stuff and get to the real question that matters. How valuable are those deposits?"

"Not as much as you'd think." Captain Spencer cautioned. "The planet likely originated from the galactic heartland instead of the galactic center, so it mostly contains junk exotics."

Everyone's faces started to fall. So-called junk exotics referred to valuable materials that ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy of exotic materials. While they held significant value in even smaller quantities, they couldn't be relied on to construct a quality mech without pairing them up with other, more valuable exotics.

That said, the planet still represented a floating mound of cash in space. Captain Spencer passed around a list of exotics they detected so far. "There isn't anything exciting in this list, but what's notable is that all of these exotics are getting harder to import from the other Star Sectors. This means that the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony will be sending out a massive fleet to secure the Glowing Planet as soon as they hear about its existence."

That sent much of the people present in a tizzy. The two dominant second-rate states of the Komodo Star Sector often took what it wanted by force.

Commander Leife already made her decision. "Considering the spotty history of those two states, I suggest we don't sell the coordinates of the planet to either of them. The planet is valuable, yes, but not so much that they will feel obliged to thank us for the tip."

None of them objected to her decision. The Hexadric Hegemony was famously hostile to outsiders while the Coalition was too fractured to present a united front. Some of the more despotic partners might even decide to kill them all off in order to keep the coordinates under wraps.

"Who can we turn to then to sell the coordinates of the Glowing Planet?"

The question resulted in a brief tug-of-war as the captains and mercenary officers proposed various possible powers. Complicating the matter was that nearly every ship in the convoy came from different states. This allowed them to cross various borders without problem, but it also complicated the decision on who to approach.

Commander Leife personally preferred to sell the coordinates to the Bright Republic, but another captain who hailed from the Vesia Kingdom insisted on approaching them instead. Various rivalries came to the fore as each captain wanted to take this opportunity to earn kudos from their home states.

"This is getting nowhere." Captain Spencer slammed the table with his fist. "I don't think we'll be able to sell it to a single state without pissing someone off. Who can tell if any disgruntled captain won't go behind our backs and reconnect their quantum entanglement nodes again?"

"Then who should we sell it then?"

"Maybe someone neutral, like the MTA or CFA. They maintain a standard policy concerning these kinds of discoveries. They always keep their word."

"Yeah, but the rewards they hand out amount to nothing more than a pittance!"

Spencer nodded in a grave manner. "It's just a flat finder's fee instead of a percentage of the gains."

Nobody could hide the greed in their eyes. Who hadn't heard of stories where entire crews grew rich overnight by discovering a lucky find and negotiating a share of the profits of the resulting venture?

It was one of the stories that always perpetuated into legends. Every space farer hoped to stumble onto a find like the Glowing Planet.

Some of the more conservative captains expressed support at the idea of approaching the MTA or CFA, but others who wanted a bigger payout clung on to alternatives. The entire discussion reached a deadlock, with no possible compromise in sight.

Commander Leife tiredly rubbed her eyes. She knew as well as anyone present that if they tried to impose a decision, that there'd be rebels who would secretly try to sell the information behind their backs. None of the mercenary corps in the convoy maintained any significant security officers aboard the cargo transports to maintain sufficient control.

"Alright, this is clearly getting nowhere." She said, interrupting the latest argument between two rival ship captains. "Instead of picking one state over the other, why not sell the coordinates to as many states as we can? Heck, it doesn't even have to be a state. Sell it to a major corporation or a pirate group, I don't care."

"That's a great idea." A rival mercenary commander remarked. "We can all earn our paydays because the people who we are trading with won't want to let the other states know about the coordinates."

"We can't keep selling the same coordinates over and over to anyone we approach. The people who are negotiating on behalf of their states aren't stupid. They'll force us to sign a non-disclosure agreement."

"Then make it clear that you're only selling the coordinates on behalf of your own ship or mercenary corps! That will surely hasten their urgency, since the longer they try to stall, the sooner their rivals will send out a fleet."

That last bit proved to be a little bit controversial, but eventually everyone adopted the idea. Without a central leader to impose total control, it was best to let the individual leaders try to earn their own paydays.

As soon as the meeting ended, every captain scrambled to reconnect their quantum entanglement nodes. Aboard the Calcardon, Captain Spencer already left the conference room in order to race down the decks to supervise the procedure.

As for Commander Leife, sent a mental apology to her home state. The Glowing Planet had currently drifted into the nominal borders of the Bright Republic, and would only depart from their territory a couple of years later.

With the heightened state of tension between the Republic and the Kingdom, she suspected that this discovery might end up being the spark that blew up the tentative peace between the two. She felt as if she betrayed her home.

"I'm sorry, but I just want to earn a fair share."

While the convoy started to sell the valuable coordinates of the Glowing Planet, back at Cloudy Curtain, Ves proceeded to reduce his backlog of orders.

He wiped the sweat from his brow as he left the cockpit of his latest Blackbeak. He fabricated it in record time, having managed to reduce the time needed to complete a copy down to two days instead of the three he needed from the start.

Of the entire fabrication process, Ves always loved the very end, where he entered the cockpit in order to affix the gold labels underneath the center console and affix one of Lucky's gems in place.

He could have left the job to a simple bot, but Ves enjoyed the personal interaction between himself and his mechs. Every machine he completed in this manner solidified the direction of his nascent design philosophy.

Slowly but surely, Ves began to lean towards a lifelong quest to maximize the value out of every single mech produced from his hand.

"How many mechs have I made so far?"

"This is the tenth copy out of the current batch." Chief Cyril answered as he arranged to transport the newly completed mech from the workshop. "You've got nine more to go before you're done."

Less than a month had passed since the duel. Much had changed since that time. The outcome of the duel had far-reaching effects for the LMC.

First, the Blackbeak proved to be an enduring success. When mech portals managed to get their hands of the rare and exclusive gold label Blackbeaks, they gave out universally positive reviews. Even if their price leaned on the

higher side, the gold label mechs remained consistently in reasonably high demand.

Unfortunately for Ves, the bronze label versions received a mixed reception. The first copies of the Blackbeaks fresh off the EME's production lines proved to be rather rough. Neverland's company faced a stiffer learning curve than they expected due to the difficulty of working with the alloys used to form the Veltrex armor system.

EME actually lost more money than they gained due to being forced to replace the defective armor plating after they already sold the mechs.

Ves silently cursed the greedy Mr. Neverland. If the third-party manufacturer had caught the defects before they sold the mechs, they would have been able to recycle the faulty plating and recoup the majority of the costs. But no, Mr. Neverland skimmed on the quality control in order to cash in as quickly as possible.

"How is Carlos doing at EME? Has he finally managed to get a grip on their quality control?"

"He's been trying." Chief Cyril replied. He regularly kept in touch with Carlos in order to mentor him about how to enact changes without being too direct. "It's difficult to suggest any meaningful changes without stepping on their toes. Neverland is very self-absorbed for a mech designer, but what works for his Klemsons doesn't always fit with the Blackbeaks. Their armor systems are just too different from each other."

Ves considered laying down his work to take another trip to Bentheim. "Carlos has to find a way to get Mr. Neverland to listen."

"That's a tall order for Carlos. Neverland isn't inclined to listen to a failed mech designer."

"The man should know that Carlos speaks on my behalf. I expressly insisted in the contract that the EME should seriously consider any suggestions made by any liaisons we send out."

"Good luck trying to enforce those terms without pissing Mr. Neverland off."

Despite his grumbles, Ves was reasonably content with the arrangement. He already expected some hiccups at the start.

The EME already managed to produce a total of thirty mechs since the LMC extended the license to them. That was already far more than what the LMC could achieve at it best. The third-party manufacturer's four production lines pumped out enough mechs to satisfy the most urgent demand for now.

Quality went up with each additional mech they produced as well. Reviews started to turn positive again, to the point where demand for the model increased.

It would have been better if Dumont didn't come back from the dead.

#### **Chapter 275 Money In Money Ou**

Ves took a small break after finishing up the latest mech. After that, he stopped by the office to speak with Gavin about the competition.

"How is Dumont doing these days?"

"He's very aggressive in trying to sell the Havalax." Gavin replied, and called up a projection of the ads that had popped up recently. "If you look closely, most of the ads emphasize the Havalax's amazing price-performance ratio. The standard price has dropped to 50 million credits, but a number of buyers are taking advantage of discounts that can go as deep as ten percent off."

The aggressive promotion coupled with the heavy discounts and price cuts served to slow the bleeding of Dumont's company. After losing a whole bunch of orders after losing the duel, the rival mech designer actually gained enough new orders to sell as much mechs as he could produce.

"I guess a month is long enough for memories of the duel to fade. If you leave out its recent history, the Havalax is a pretty decent design, so I shouldn't be surprised that its starting to sell again." Ves disgruntledly concluded. "Still, its production costs should be higher than the Blackbeak. I'm nearly certain that he's making a loss if he sells his mechs for 45 million credits."

"It's not about making a profit at this point. Dumont is trying to make everyone forget about the duel by putting as much copies of his Havalax in circulation as possible. All the stories his buyers spread as a result will slowly push away the past into obscurity."

Clearly, Dumont's strategy worked. He had essentially overwritten the collective memories of the public with a more positive message about his mechs.

The revitalized competition forced the LMC to up their game and boost their marketing. They already coordinated with Marcella to flood the Bentheim region in all kinds of promotions that raised the profile of the bronze label and silver label Blackbeaks.

The sad thing about it was that the LMC spent far more on these campaigns than what they got back from the EME in licensing fees.

"That's going to change in a couple of months." Gavin predicted. "The marketing is a bit heavy-handed because the public has only heard about your exclusive gold label mechs, which are very hard to obtain. We still have to let the market know that there are cheaper and more abundant alternatives available."

Ves didn't argue about the need to invest in marketing. He simply found it disconcerting to be throwing millions of credits away each day.

Still, unlike Dumont's company, the LMC earned far more money than they spent. Much of it could also be attributed to their new contract with Marcella.

She kept her word and devoted a lot of her own money in helping to promote the Blackbeak.

"By the way, Calsie's been wanting to meet with you. A lot has changed on this planet as well."

Ah. With all of his attention directed to Bentheim, Ves forgot about his backyard. He did hear a few things from his employees on how Cloudy Curtain felt a lot of pride for his recent achievements. Still, he didn't hear too much beyond that considering he holed himself up in his workshop trying to finish his batch of orders as quickly as possible.

He nodded to Gavin. "Send her to my office. It's about time I received an update on the situation on the ground."

Ves took care of a couple of other matters, like feeding an increasingly radiant Lucky. He could clearly feel his pet had almost reached the point of saturation before he triggered another evolution.

"Eat well, but not too much, okay? I'd still like to cuddle you in my arms once in a while."

"Meow!"

Lately, there hadn't been many threats for Lucky to take care of. The security detachment from Sanyal-Ablin easily took care of the occasional fans and crazies trying to sneak into the workshop. They also caught and disabled most of the microscoping spy drones sent in their way.

Fortunately, Lucky possessed keen enough senses to sniff out the remainder that proved to be too advanced for the workshop's current security suite to detect. Ves held off on upgrading his security package until the company moved to a larger site.

Ves winked at his pet before heading to his office. The cramped office attached to the workshop building became increasingly more crowded lately as the company started to do more than making and selling mechs.

It gladdened him to see he built his company up to the point where it could be called a genuine medium mech manufacturer. If Ves factored in the EME, then the goal of selling more than a thousand mechs in the LMC's second fiscal year would definitely be met.

"Ves! It's been some time since I last saw you."

"Haha, my apologies for that. I've been busy, as you know. Have you finished your studies yet?"

"Yup. I wasn't able to rush my courses as fast as Gavin, but I'm all done now!"

"That's great to hear. Even if Maisie Duval has taken over much of your duties, I still prefer to deal with someone I trust like you. I'll be depending on you to keep an eye on our home planet."

Ves rarely talked to his managers these days. Jake and Primrose kept everything running smoothly without his input, just as he intended. He didn't wish to be bothered by trivial minutiae that his underlings could take care of by themselves. He was far more comfortable in the workshop than the conference room.

He only made an exception for Gavin and Calsie. They were around the same age and they had been with him from the start, so Ves didn't feel the need to watch his words around the two.

"Let me brief you on what's happening on the streets."

Calsie handed him a data pad that contained a mix of local news articles. They all profiled the the shift in public opinion with regards to Ves and the LMC.

"THE LIVING MECH CORPORATION: A HOMEGROWN SENSATION - PUTTING CLOUDY CURTAIN ON THE MAP."

"TOTAL MECH MANIA AS ENGULFED THE YOUNGER GENERATION! MECH HATERS MUST GET LOST!"

"FRESLIN HAS OVERTAKEN ORINOCO AS CLOUDY CURTAIN'S TRENDIEST CITY - MECH FANATICS FLOCK TO THE HOMETOWN OF VES."

"THE POLITICAL WINDS HAVE TURNED! THE GREENS AND THE WHITE DOVES ARE AT WIT'S END!"

That last headline seemed especially important. "Tell me about the people at the top. Is the ruling coalition still thinking about raising taxes?"

"They shelved those plans for an indefinite time right after you won your duel." Calsie reported. "You don't have to worry about any new threats on that front. You and your company have pretty much become the public mascots of our planet. It's political suicide to propose any bill that hinders the growth of the LMC."

The LMC didn't pay much taxes to the local government, so it didn't actually benefit the local citizens directly. Maybe a couple of years from now, the LMC's profits might reach the point where it represented a significant chunk of Cloudy Curtain's GDP.

Still, the citizens mainly cared about pride. The LMC became the planet's standard bearer in a way the two major farming consortiums achieved. Calsie showed him plenty of indicators that noted this change of heart among the public.

"That's good to hear." Ves nodded. While he didn't need the public's love, it certainly didn't hurt to benefit from it. "What about the Pioneers? I've only been hearing good things from them lately."

Calsie had a strong connection to the Pioneers, so she should know best what went on with them these days. "The Pioneers recently became embroiled in a power struggle. The old guard wanted to stay aloof while the younger members supported more proactive policies."

"I take it the latter won the power struggle?"

"Yup. Most of those stubborn old goats got booted out of the member rolls by the new leadership that swept into power. Some of them retired, but a significant chunk defected to the White Doves."

"Is that bad?"

"Not really." Calsie dismissed any worries. "Sure, they know a lot of secrets, but by now most of what they know is obsolete. The Pioneers have transformed into a dynamic young movement now. And you can bet their main priorities is to see the LMC grow, thereby dragging the rest of the planet out of its squalor."

"That's a bit strong, don't you think? People are hardly starving on the streets."

"Neither are they finding any better opportunities. Lots of farmers are doing the same work their parents did, who in turn have taken over the work of their own parents. Social mobility is practically glacial compared to the glitzy Bentheim!"

Ves became a little worried at Calsie's enthusiasm. "Bentheim isn't the best role model for a planet you want to live on. The best cities like Dorum and Ansel cost a fortune to live in. Some time ago, I promised my cousin Melinda a penthouse in downtown Dorum. Do you know how much money I ended up spending? 15 million credits!"

"Still, the suburbs are-"

"It's even worse there. Places like Haston have become notorious for the breakdown in society there. It's not a coincidence the Bentheim Liberation Movement initially rose up from that town."

"Look, Ves, that all sounds worrisome, but Cloudy Curtain is not about to turn into a second Bentheim. With smart leadership at the helm, we'll surely be able to swim past the rocks in the river."

"Aspirations like that have a tendency to be derailed." He shook his head.

"Anyway, it's not my business to meddle with the Pioneers. They have nothing to do with me."

"Your relations department doesn't think so. They've been cautiously discussing some cooperative initiatives with the Pioneers."

Ves forgot about that. He ordered the relations department to maintain friendly ties with the local power players. Mrs. Duval must have taken that as an order to move towards an informal alliance with whoever was willing to play ball.

"Look, no offense, Calsie, but I don't trust the Pioneers, even if they have a new coat of paint. It's not in the LMC's interests to get in bed with someone who can have a change of heart the next day."

"If you say so, sir."

This discussion went nowhere as well, so they quickly changed the topic. Still, Ves reminded himself to check with his chief relations officer and make it clear he wanted the LMC to remain neutral.

"What else is on the agenda?"

"There's the plans to expand to a new site. Several architects in collaboration with Sanyal-Ablin have selected a suitable site further away from Freslin and drew up a final architectural plan."

Calsie handed out another data pad, this time a thicker one with more enhanced security features. Ves actually had to authenticate his identity before he got to look at the drawings of the new manufacturing complex.

If Ves had to describe it, he'd call it ambitious. The schematics of the exterior defenses

reminded him of the star-shaped walls of the forward base on Groening IV. Sanyal-Ablin's influence could be felt throughout the architectural drawings. Everything had been designed to survive and repel a minor planetary raid.

"I see that much of the most important production occurs underground."

"That's correct." Calsie nodded. "As per your wishes, the surveyors have scanned and tested the terrain and found a site that provides a decent amount of buffer against limited orbital bombardment. It will hold out for a week at least."

Much of the construction above the ground consisted of gleaming office buildings that Ves intended to serve as the LMC's headquarters. Ves wouldn't have to deal with cramped corridors anymore by the time they moved into this new place.

Ves nodded in satisfaction after a couple of minutes. "I'm fairly satisfied with these plans. Still, it's obvious that I'll be paying a premium for all of this safety. What's the price tag?"

"Well, the architects have loosely estimated that it will take at least 500 million credits to construct the barebones version of the plans."

"Half a billion credits!"

His teeth already started to ache when he heard that sum. Just when he thought he could catch a break and rake in the profits, it turned out that he

had to give the money away again if he wanted to prepare for the future. The LMC desperately needed to move out of their increasingly crowded location.

### Chapter 276 Blood Claws

A pair of light mechs matched blows against each other in a grungy underground mech arena. The skirmisher mech wielded a pair of knives while the swordsman mech wielded a single blade.

A rowdy crowd exulted in the reverberations of the high speed impacts between the dueling mechs. Only the thick but cracked and worn out transparent panels protected them from the splintering shards of plating that the mechs shaved off from each other.

One thing to note about the people was that they all wore similar color motifs. The lower ranked crowd wore shirts of red striped with diagonal black lines. The ranks above that made do with armbands of the same look, while the handful of leaders at the top wore exotic alloy rings that glistened in alternating red and black.

More interestingly, the mechs, which featured the same coating of red with diagonal black stripes, consisted of outdated models. Neither their armor nor their speed could keep up with currentgen mechs, but that also made them cheap and easy to fabricate on the fly.

From the reckless way in which they dueled, neither pilots gave a damn about conserving their machines. They danced at the edge of death in their reckless attempts to overpower their opposition.

"Come on Raella!" Dietrich hollered. "Go for Mackarel's left! He's half-blind in that direction!"

Like the others, he wore an armband bearing the colors of the Blood Claws, one of the most infamous gangs in Bentheim. Even though his main affiliation lay with Walter's Whalers, he answered to the same boss as the rest.

The skirmisher mech pulled out of the melee after leaving behind a criss cross of knife marks on the enemy mech. Raella's voice emerged from the speakers. "You're getting rather slow, aren't you?"

"I got much more in store for you than that, lassie!" The man inside the swordsman mech broadcasted as he urged his mech to pursue his opponent.

The swordsman mech hadn't fared very well so far. Its pilot was older and more experienced than Raella, but he couldn't match her in terms of technical skill.

Raella deftly swerved her borrowed skirmisher mech to dodge the incoming hack. Her mech went in to leave behind another nick, only for her mech to receive a punch that pushed it back.

"Get her, Mack! You can do it!"

"Watch out for the legs as well, girlie!"

That advice proved to be telling as Mackarel's mech lashed out in a dangerous flurry of kicks. Raella's mech barely dashed out of reach, and swiped its weapons forward to slice some layers off the extended leg before it drew back.

That last attack had bit a little deep, causing the swordsman mech to suffer from unsteady footing. Raella took advantage of her opponent's preoccupation and went all-in, shoving the unsteady sword aside before surgically stabbing the weak points of the vulnerable mech before it could recover.

A huge cheer sounded out as the swordsman mech practically lost all of its connections to its limbs. The hapless mech collapsed onto its back like a puppet with its strings cut off.

The ringleader enthusiastically announced the end of the duel. "And the winner is Raella Larkinson! She's shown herself to be as capable as her famous cousin Melinda, but prettier by far!"

The battered skirmisher mech opened its cockpit, allowing Raella to jump out and float down with her anti-grav clothes. She approached the cockpit of the fallen mech and waited for its cockpit to open up as well.

A grizzled man wearing an armband and covered in tribal tattoos climbed out of his immobilized mech. He shook his head, trying to recover from the trauma of being inside a mech that fell onto its back. "If all the Larkinsons are like you, no wonder your family's so renowned."

"If you think I'm a big deal, you should see my uncle Ark."

They shook hands, showing no hard feelings for each other. The hierarchy of the Blood Claws largely revolved around strength. They respected any man or woman who had the skills to back up their talk, and Raella proved herself in spades.

The young woman quietly shook her head. Even though she trounced a cadre of the Blood Claws, she'd still be known as Melinda's relative. Her cousin in the Planetary Guard had become a planet-wide phenomenon recently after she somehow made it through a grueling duel against a captain of the Mech Corps.

Raella returned to the stands while the arena operators hauled away the mechs. Once she reached Dietrich's side, he held out her hand. "Gimme my cut."

Even as he handed over a credit chip, Dietrich swept the woman in his arms and engulfed her in a kiss.

"Get off! I'm sweaty!" Raella punched her handsome boyfriend away with her strong physique.

"I don't care, babe. The more sweat, the better."

Dietrich kept grinning at her as he attempted to keep the feisty woman in his embrace. Raella didn't appreciate being treated like a doll and forcefully punched his stomach until he finally let go.

The Blood Claw members sitting besides them laughed at the spectacle. "Can't control your woman, Dietrich?"

"Oh shut up Tumra. I don't see you with a girl anywhere."

"That's because I have a different one in my bed every night!"

Despite the crude talk and occasional roughhousing, Raella enjoyed her time with the Blood Claws. Even though she knew the Blood Claws did a lot of shady stuff out of sight, Dietrich's presence opened up a lot of doors, while her strength earned her a lot of respect.

The pair remained in the arena and watched the other fights that followed.

Not all of the pilots consisted of Blood Claw members. A fair amount used to be mercenaries or mech athletes who fell into debt. The only way they could earn back their pay was to fight in an arena without rules.

Sometimes, the pilots played rough to the point of targeting the cockpits of their opponent's mech. The underground arena operated by the Blood Claws didn't care about fatalities as long as it didn't involve their own members.

In fact, Raella already witnessed three fatalities so far. Compared to her initial revulsion at the sight of death when she accompanied Ves to Moira's Paradise, this time she had grown hardened enough to shrug off any sympathies.

As the night went on into the wee hours, Raella started getting sleepy. She stood up and wanted to drag Dietrich back to their accommodation, but a sudden broadcast stopped her in her tracks.

The ongoing duel between a pair of fist fighting light mechs halted abruptly. Everyone dropped their conversations and no one moved a muscle as they recognized the voice.

The gruff, hoary voice of Monty the Beheader himself broadcasted in the arena and everywhere else the Blood Claws reigned over. "Are you having a good time? Are you enjoying yourselves? Then cut your vacation short, because we have a job to do. There's word out on the streets that there's a fabled rogue planet is coasting along near the border of the Republic. They call it the Glowing Planet, and it's named that way because it's filled with so much riches that we can dine like kings until the heat death of the universe if we harvest it all."

The sudden news landed like a bomb. Like any gang, the Blood Claws loved nothing more than to acquire more wealth, by any means possible.

"The only downside is that every power in the Komodo Star Sector got their hands on the coordinates of the Glowing Planet. The Bright Republic, The Vesia Kingdom, hell, even the uptight Coalition and Hegemony are aware of its location!"

Could they even compete if that had been the case?

"You might be thinking what the Glowing Planet has to do with us. Well, even if it's glowing like a bulb in space, it's hardly a pinprick compared to brown dwarfs. The lack of a star also makes it hard to zero in an FTL drive to the planet unless you get within a dozen light-years or so. Do you know what that means?"

Most of the Blood Claws scratched their heads. Stellar navigation had never been their strengths.

"It means we're closest, and therefore get to be there first! Sure, the Mech Corps and the other gangs will be sending out their fleets as well, but the Glowing Planet is big enough to let everyone grab a piece of the pie!"

Now they understood what an opportunity this represented. Raella felt excited as well, even though she hadn't formally joined the Blood Claws. She looked to Dietrich, hoping to join in on the action, only to receive a stern gaze.

"This is far above our league, Raella." He whispered. "Something like this... there's going to be a lot of fighting."

"I've never shied away from a fight!"

"This is different from a duel! The entire planet will be engulfed with greedy mech pilots who won't be playing fair."

The voice of Monty resumed speaking. "Since everyone that matters already know about the Glowing Planet, the big boys upstairs have hashed out an agreement. The Coalition and the Hegemony will both be preparing fleets of mech carriers to fight over the Glowing Planet. Since they're far away and need some time to mobilize their forces, they've given everyone else a carte blanche to mine away for seventy days."

A lot could be done in seventy days. Depending on the value of the exotic ores and how easy they could be extracted, a substantial mining expedition could easily harvest billions of credits worth of materials out of the ground.

The people in the arena grew stoked at the idea of picking up a fortune off the ground.

"Sharpen your claws and ready your mechs, because the Blood Claws will be grabbing a piece of the action! We set off in three days!"

As the broadcast ended, everyone went wild at the prospect of taking part in this enormous venture.

In the meantime, a lot had to be arranged. Monty's organization had to decide who to send and who to hold back to defend their territories. They had to prepare their carriers and acquire other ones to accommodate all of the mechs and mining equipment they intended to bring along.

The leaders already buzzed about as they received their own instructions. As for Raella, her eyes turned into swirls as she imagined the adventure of it all. She wanted to be part of the expedition. She stood up and climbed up the stands, heading straight towards the circle of leaders.

Dietrich hastily followed after his girlfriend. "Raella? Don't go up there! It's dangerous!"

The guards who stood in the way noticed her approach, but instead of halting her in her tracks, they wordlessly moved aside. Raella walked straight past their heavily-armored forms and drew attention from the older generation of Blood Claws.

A bald man wearing the biggest ring of red and black looked over her pilot-suited form. "Ah, we have a distinguished guest. Miss Raella Larkinson, what can we do for you?"

"I want in."

Dietrich finally reached her side and gripped her arm, but he didn't dare pull her back. He failed to stop her in time.

The bald man looked wordlessly at Raella while the other leaders waited for his decision. He only considered the matter for a couple of seconds before he nodded. "Why not? You're in."

The brief exchange of words had sealed her fate. Dietrich minutely shook his head as he drew her out of the circle. Once they gained some distance, he scolded her for a fair bit.

"That was dangerous as hell! Do you know who he is? He's the left hand of Monty the Beheader! He could have decided to cut your head off on a whim!"

"He wouldn't dare." Raella smirked. Being a Larkinson had its perks. "Besides, I just showed everyone that I can pull my own weight. The Blood Claws will thank me for saving their hides."

For the rest of the night, Dietrich remained concerned about Raella. He regretted taking her with him on a tour to Bentheim.

While Raella jumped into her bed and fell asleep, Dietrich hunched over the other side of the bed and held up his comm. His finger hovered over the name of Ves.

#### Chapter 277 Get Rich Or Die Trying

Over the next two weeks, Ves quickly finished off the remainder of the orders. Twenty-four gold label Blackbeaks had been forged from his hands. The only one that remained unsold was the first production model which still awaited repairs.

He didn't even know whether he should restore it to its original condition. It might hold more value in its damaged state as a piece of mech history.

With each delivery they made, the money started rolling in. The LMC finally reached a state where they possessed a steady amount of liquidity, though much of the funds would soon be drained after they received approval to construct a new manufacturing complex.

"How much did the mech technicians progress in their studies?"

"They achieved a fair bit while you worked. Everyone has seen you do the same thing over and over." Chief Cyril reported as he supervised the preparation to shift over the production lines to fabricating the silver label Blackbeaks.

As for the Mark II? The LMC already retired the model from the catalog. Its cheap price and outdated components didn't fit in the company anymore.

"What's their success rate?"

"The average results hover around ninety-three percent in the simulations. Most of them stumble when they have to fabricate those finicky armor pieces. The margin of error is too slim, but it helps that you don't hide your methods. Lots of mech designers can be rather secretive. With the ample amount of recordings we've made, I don't think they'll have any excuses if they botch those parts."

The real secret that distinguished his gold label mechs from the cheaper labels was the X-Factor. The interaction between Ves and any of his mechs and designed occurred entirely within the mental planes. Unless someone stuck him in a neural interface, no one would be able to figure out what went on in his mind when he worked on a mech.

The gold label Blackbeaks in the hands of his customers already led to rave reviews. Even if few if any of his mechs had been tested in an actual battle, the piloting experience was almost unsurpassed. Both the X-Factor and the insights he applied from his Mastery led to a small but decisive advantage.

"Last I heard, your design is even up for nomination for some awards at the end of the standard year. The only problem is that most copies in the wild consists of bronze label Blackbeaks."

Ves pressed his lips. "I truly hope they don't take the bronze label version as the standard. Has the EME shored up its quality by now?"

"Carlos tells me that some of his lessons have penetrated through Mr. Neverland's thick skull. The quality of EME's latest output has reached the bare minimum, more or less."

"More or less?"

"It's good enough for the buyers, but you'll probably claw your eyes out if you take a deep look at the mechs."

"Then you'd better not let me see one in the flesh."

His obsession over quality and craftsmanship had grown more severe over time. It had been a conscious decision of Ves to fan the flames in this area because it had a measurable impact on his work.

He started to understand why design philosophy held the key to advancing to a higher grade of mech designer.

Ves hung around the workshop and kept an eye on the mech technicians, who started putting their learning into practice. Even if they did the simulations a hundred times, working with the real thing always went wrong one way or another.

The absence of Carlos had a significant effect on the productivity of his workers. Ves frequently mentored him, and he also continued to study on his free time. All of that added knowledge turned him into a qualified, if junior fabricator.

Perhaps Cyril could do a better job, but he had to supervise the entire workshop floor, so he couldn't do the work himself. The general lack of experience exhibited by the mech technicians disheartened Ves somewhat. It would take years to get them to the level of a trained technician of a major power.

His comm suddenly chirped. Ves bent down and saw it came from Dietrich of all people. Ves quickly left the workshop and entered his office before accepting the call.

Dietrich looked awfully tired from the projection that appeared over his comm. "Ves, I've got bad news for you."

"Is something wrong with Raella?"

"You could say that." The Little Boss said, and began to explain what happened at the arena yesterday.

Ordinarily, Ves would get angry if he heard that Raella ran off to engage in a series of highly dangerous underground duels. Yet what Dietrich said about the Glowing Planet turned all of that into something trivial.

"This Glowing Planet... you're saying it's valuable to the point where the Coalition and the Hegemony will come to duke it out?"

"Not immediately. It takes a lot of time to gather their forces and prepare them for a lengthy occupation. I reckon that the route where the Glowing Planet is zipping past will turn into a no man's land when they arrive."

That sounded very serious. A long occupation by the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony or both meant that the war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom could become collateral damage.

Complicating the matter was that both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom maintained some ties with the Coalition. That might be enough of an excuse for the Hexadric Kingdom to steamroll over both third-rate states if they believed the Coalition benefited from their continued existence.

"This is turning into a storm of epic proportions." Ves remarked while he rubbed his head. His brain threatened to overheat from all of the predictions he made. "Okay, have you tried to get Raella to change her mind?"

"That's the problem. She can't back off. She personally went up to a big shot and demanded to take part in the Blood Claw's expedition. In our line of work, once you do something like that, you always have to keep your word."

Ves closed his eyes. He didn't grow angry. He was already past that point. A sense of fatalistic helplessness emanated from his body as he thought about the huge numbers of mechs the Glowing Planet would host.

Each and every one of them would very likely fight to the death for riches and honor. Ves understood what it was like to fight over a portion of an untamed planet's vast mineral wealth. He already went through a harrowing ordeal at Groening IV.

"What will the Whalers do?"

"My father's been called up as well. Monty wants to bolster his numbers and our gang recently came into possession of a lot of carriers."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is, but Monty's always been good to those who answer his call. We'll get rich, or die trying."

Ves had the sense those latter words applied to everyone else who set their sights on the Glowing Planet. Truly, the allure of an entire planet of exotics was sufficient to throw any star sector in the galactic rim into a tizzy.

"What should we do, Ves? I'm sure if you run up to your family, they can get something done."

"No. That won't work." He shook his head. "Raella always held dreams about going on an adventure in the stars. She won't agree to back out on embarking to one of the most hotly contested planets in this star sector."

A small part inside Ves faintly hoped that Raella would see for herself how awful actual war looked like. Once she disabused her romantic notions of what a treasure-hunting expedition should be, she'd surely return to her guard assignment without complaint.

Dietrich and Ves bandied about a few possible course of actions, but nothing seemed remotely helpful.

"I'll go with you guys."

"Say what?"

"Family should stick together." He said. Even though Ves hadn't been very close to his extended family, he still felt it was his duty as Raella's cousin to see her through the fighting that would continue until the end of the seventy-day grace period. "Besides, I'm sure the Whalers could use a mech designer. Planets with high concentration of exotics usually exert a destructive influence on machinery. Let me join up with you guys and I'll make sure your mech remain in tip-top shape."

The offer sounded very attractive, and Dietrich didn't hesitate to accept.

"You're right. We could sure use your help. I figure my father planned to take up guard duty in space, but if we have you with us, then we can help the Blood Claws capture more territory. That will really increase our share of the profits."

The main issue with Raella was that she pledged to fight alongside the inner core of the Blood Claws. She basically turned into an honorary Blood Claw herself, which let her pilot a Blood Claw mech maintained by their own logistics.

Meanwhile, Ves lacked the familiarity to help out the Blood Claws directly. He hadn't proven himself in front of one of their leaders like Raella did. Therefore, Ves could only hitch a ride with Walter's Whalers.

"Tell your dad I'm joining their fleet with my Barracuda."

"I'll do that. He'll surely welcome you with open arms. In the meantime, I'll send you some files about the people we can expect to meet at the Glowing Planet."

They cut off the call after Ves received the files. He skimmed them over, but quickly became overwhelmed when the amount of local powers surpassed a hundred. "And that's not even factoring small fries like Walter's Whalers!"

The Glowing Planet attracted so much greed that the local states wouldn't be able to hold back their citizens from having any ideas. At the very least, both the Republic and the Kingdom didn't even attempt to rein in their gangs and mercenary corps.

"There must be over a thousand different outfits looking to fight over a bunch of rocks."

Ves predicted that the smaller outfits would seek refuge under the umbrella of a major power, such as the Bright Republic's Mech Corps or the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion.

Larger outfits like the Blood Claws possessed enough strength to stand on their own. While they wouldn't fight directly against the military of another state, they'd surely attempt to occupy a less attractive piece of land.

Too bad that there were too many mechs and not enough land to go around. Conflict was bound to happen.

Before Ves prepared for his impromptu journey, he gathered his closest circle of friends and workers. Melkor, Cyril, Jake, Primrose, Gavin and Calsie all streamed into the conference room, which already projected the busts of Marcella and his grandfather.

"I've got something to announce." Ves began his meeting while holding onto Lucky. He proceeded to explain what happened and how Raella ended up in the thick of it. Once he reached the part where he said he'd participate as well, the entire room exploded.

"You're crazy, Ves!" Jake yelled. "You're a mech designer! You have no place on the battlefield!"

"I might not even be touching down on the planet. I can do most of my work aboard a carrier ship."

"Even then, there's going to be so many different fleets in orbit that your ship won't be any safer!"

The administrative types like Jake and Primrose simply didn't understand his decision to throw himself head-long into danger.

However, he received a surprising word of support from Marcella. "It's up to him whether he wants to participate or not. All I can say is that a mech designer can be a lot of help to the Whalers. His presence will save a lot of lives."

"They're just a bunch of half-criminals. It's not worth the risk!"

Ves turned to his grandfather. "What about you. You haven't spoken a word yet. What do you think?"

"I don't like to be put on the spot." Benjamin replied. As a retired expert pilot, he had gone through a lot of battles over the years. "As a man, and as a Larkinson, I applaud your decision. I would have done the same. Yet I also believe that your COO has a point. It's not fitting for you to volunteer yourself to an extremely treacherous free-for-all. I wish I can tell you more, but I'm not allowed to tell you anything."

His grandfather worked at the Ministry of Defense, so he knew best what might happen at the Glowing Planet. Ves didn't begrudge his grandfather for holding back the details. He guessed that the Republic must be monitoring this conference call right now.

"Do I have your blessing to take part?"

"You can have it, for what it's worth. Go forth and be a man, but remember that you don't have to hold yourself to the same standard as a mech pilot."

His grandfather's words reflected the conflicting set of values running through his mind. Every Larkinson had been raised with tales of daring, heroism and sacrifice. With every Larkinson able to pilot a mech being sent off to war, the family suffered a lot of casualties over the generations. That was why Benjamin didn't discourage his own grandson for taking part, even if he didn't really belong on the battlefield in the first place.

"Melkor, will you come with me?"

"Of course. What will the family think if I let you go without my protection?"

That settled it. At least three of the Larkinsons would set off for the Glowing Planet. Ves faintly predicted that even more of their family might end up at the battlefield. The Mech Corps was all but certain to play the main role in the coming campaign. Perhaps he might meet some of his other relatives who served in the divisions.

#### Chapter 278 In Your Blood

While Ves decided to do head to the Glowing Planet to help out his cousin Raella, he might as well accomplish something more. However, he still faced considerable pushback from the company. How could they allow the founder, CEO and lead designer of the LMC to stroll into an active warzone?

"What's wrong with you?" Jake hissed at Ves as he cornered him. "Are you some kind of adrenaline junkie? Why do you throw yourself into danger at the first opportunity that knocks at your door?"

"It's not about chasing after a thrill! I'm doing it because I have to help my family."

"We both know damn well that's not the only thing on your mind. Haven't you always said that you had an awful time in your last adventure and never wanted to do anything like that again? Aren't you working so hard to become

an established mech designer so that when the Republic drafts you, you'll be sent to some cozy lab away from the frontlines?"

"What's your point?"

"You're too much of a Larkinson. I've witnessed this behavior of yours plenty of times with the other Larkinsons who don't have the aptitude to pilot a mech. They're so inured in the warrior ethos of the family that they feel they have to prove their courage even more."

Jake should know what he was talking about, since he managed plenty of stores for the Larkinson Estate. He must have interacted with the business-minded side of the family for decades and gained a keen insight on their overall culture.

Ves fell silent for a moment. Did he feel the need to prove himself? Not particularly. His rapid advance in the mech industry already earned him enough respect that it didn't matter if others branded him a coward.

Was it about the thrill? Seeking fortune amid chaos and death? His heart started to beat faster at the thought. Despite being terrified at the prospect of battle, it enervated him as well. His eyes shook in anticipation. Fear and fright seemed to have conflicting effects on his body and mind.

"The blood runs too deep." Jake softly whispered as he shook his head.

"You're made in the same mold as your grandfather. Did you know that Benjamin distinguished himself in the previous wars by volunteering for some of the most critical and dangerous missions? Just when you thought he'd meet his death, he'll crawl away with the skin of his teeth. It's the main reason why he advanced to expert pilot so young."

He knew the stories. Every Larkinson who reached the exalted rank of expert pilot possessed something remarkable to be able to break through the bottleneck that stopped countless pilots in their tracks.

Some had been gifted with exceptional neural aptitude. They easily pierced the bottleneck like a needle through cloth.

Some started off average, but grinded themselves past the barrier through relentless training.

Some, like his grandfather, fought at their best when they put their lives on the line. Benjamin Larkinson rose like a rocket, but a single incident late in his career had finally been the straw that broke the camel's back. The venerated war hero had been forced to put aside his profession when he sustained irreparable damage to his body.

So maybe the blood did run thick. Even though his father didn't inherit any of Benjamin's grit, perhaps it had to take another generation for another daredevil to emerge.

Ves began to smile. "All of what you said makes sense. I don't have to go to the Glowing Planet. It doesn't make any logical sense. Yet my heart and mind is urging me to seek my fortune there. Don't forget that this company had been built from the rewards I gained from exploring the stars."

He salvaged the highly productive Dortmund printer from an old facility. He obtained the rest of his equipment along with a slew of rare and valuable licenses by completing a mission from the Society.

That reminded him to check out their Mission Hall. They might have issued another set of missions concerning the Glowing Planet. Even if the entire Coalition moved in after seventy days, they might want to test the waters first.

He had a feeling that the two dominant second-rate states deliberately took their time in claiming the planet. Any stellar body with a huge number of exotic mineral deposits always played havoc with man and machine. Any number of unimaginable dangers might lurk beneath its glowing facade.

And that was where Ves planned to find his fortune.

Even though Jake tried to convince his boss to stay, Ves would have none of it. He was dead set on being among the Whalers as they attempted to obtain a slice of the Glowing Planet's many riches.

He moved quickly that day. Ves hurried up with loading the Barracuda with Melkor's packed Stanislaw along with a set of high quality tools and critical supplies. He also got in touch with Walter's Whalers and let them know he was coming.

Arranging all of that work took little time, since his workers did the actual work. Ves thought about what he brought to the table, and found it rather lacking. He wanted to bring one of his mechs as well and present it to the Whalers.

"The problem is that I don't have any spare mech on hand."

Ves had to complete his contractual obligations first. The LMC immediately shipped all of the gold label Blackbeaks that he fabricated up to this point. He didn't have any spare mechs left, and he couldn't fabricate a new one from scratch in time to join up with the Whalers.

"Still, I do have one frame collecting dust in my warehouse."

It was his first production model. As his very first Blackbeak, it the mech had special meaning to him. The MTA validated his very first original design based on that copy. Melinda also piloted it to victory in the duel against Captain Vicar.

Many mech designers treated their first production models like a piece of art. They cherished them like children and waited for the right time to auction them off for an incredible sum of money, perhaps multiplying its value by hundreds of times in case of extremely successful designs.

Ves didn't want to risk the loss or destruction of his first production model, but circumstances forced his hand. If he worked quickly, he'd be able to repair the

damaged mech in less than a day, which gave him sufficient time to catch up to the Whalers.

"Let's do it."

Once he gave out the orders, the mech technicians went into action. Even if they never repaired an existing mech before, they all knew the basics, courtesy of Chief Cyril's training. They brought the damaged mech out of storage and placed it in the assembly system, which carefully cataloged and disassembled the damaged portions of the mech.

Meanwhile, Ves cleared the production line again and started fabricating replacement components. In order to save time, he decided not to replace the lightly damaged components, but handed them off to his mech technicians so that they could attempt to repair the parts themselves.

Not all of them proved capable of doing so, but he expected some fumbling. Any successes went right back in the mech. Parts that proved more difficult to restore passed on to Ves, who put it in the Dortmund and used some of its more advanced functions to restore the component.

Not everything could be recovered to their original state. The armor plating proved impossible to repair with the equipment that the workshop had on hand. Ves had no choice but to fabricate new ones from scratch.

At least they'd be able to sell the broken plating to a professional recycler, allowing them to recoup the majority of the costs.

As Ves started making progress in the repairs, he constantly focused on the image of the Black Phoenix. Even though the mech had already gained a solidified mental presence, Ves used some of the insights he learned before to overlap its existing traits with a higher emphasis on toughness and endurance.

From what little he learned, the battle for the Glowing Planet would be fought over many battles under extremely hostile terrain. Supplying the mechs on the ground would be a huge challenge since all kinds of carriers vied for orbital supremacy.

His Blackbeak had been designed to excel in wars stretching for years. This presented a problem for him because he initially assumed the Blackbeak would fight a lot of skirmishes but only a couple of full-blown battles over the course of its service.

Thus, Ves consciously deviated from his initial design in order to harden his mech against a succession of intensive battles. He didn't take the time to form a new design and test whether the changes introduced new flaws. He eagerly modified his mech on the fly, relying nothing on intuition and some invisible guidance from a changing black phoenix.

Ultimately, the changes only led to minor differences, but Ves found the experience to be worthwhile. Acting on another whim, Ves decided to coat the feather pauldrons in a shade of red. He also changed the settings of the cloud generators to emit red vapor instead of varying shades of grey.

The added color looked spectacular, and gifted his mech with character.

"It's a damn shame you're sending it off to battle." Chief Cyril whistled in appreciation at the newly enhanced mech. "It's practically an heirloom of the company, you know. It's a piece of living history."

Ves sighed with regret. "I know, but when I'm short on mechs, I'll grab the first thing that's available, living history or not. What it can earn us down the line is not as important as satisfying an immediate need."

He knew that despite his good relations with Dietrich, he never really built any ties with the rest of the Whalers. Ves wanted his first meeting with Walter to

be on good terms, and nothing expressed his sincerity better by gifting him one of his company's pride and joy.

A hauler arrived at his workshop and picked up the mech. Ves entered an armored shuttle as well and rode it to the lair of the Whalers. He brought no one else along but Lucky.

A few hours later, the hauler and the shuttle and its escorts touched down an expansive but haphazard base on the outskirts of Orinoco. It looked like a half-abandoned shell of its former self, as the Whalers already shifted much of their mechs to the carriers orbiting above the planet.

Ves stepped outside with Lucky following close behind. The cat meowed in confusion as the smells bombarded their noses. The smell of rust, alcohol and urine blended together in a unique ensemble that forced Ves to pinch his nose.

He hurried forward and met with some guards, who guided him to a gathering of senior Whalers. They looked at him as he approached.

"Ves Larkinson, at your service."

A bushy white-bearded man with a barrel of a chest and kegs for arms stepped forward. Ves recognized him at an instant. This was nothing less than Walter himself, who reigned over the Whalers since before he was born.

The man eyed him with a critical eye. "You've got guts. At least you look tough enough. Good, but you need more than that to make it out alive."

"I came bearing gifts, Mr. Walter."

The hauler unloaded the recently modified Blackbeak at that point. All of the Whalers around Walter gasped in surprise and admiration at the sight of the striking mech.

"Is that your new mech?"

"It's the very first production model, in fact. It's the strongest and most finely tuned copy of my original Blackbeak design. It's the mech that Melinda Larkinson used to beat Captain Vicar."

The Whalers might not be fully aware of what the Blackbeak brought to the table, but they all knew about the duel. The veterans erupted in a flurry of whispers.

"And you're giving it to us?"

"It's all yours from this point onwards."

Walter's face cracked into a smile. "I can't say no to a free mech, especially one of this caliber. You're in, Ves. Welcome aboard."

Ves successfully cleared the first hurdle.

#### Chapter 279 Walter

As the leader of the biggest and only gang on Cloudy Curtain, Walter ruled over his men through strength and restraint.

Unlike most members, Walter grew up in Bentheim rather than Cloudy Curtain. Nobody knew about his background and what he experienced growing up, but it must have been a difficult childhood, seeing as Walter never showed any inclination for higher education.

From what Ves could gather from his initial meeting of the man, Walter exhibited a slight Haston accent. He imagined Walter as something of a bully who stole food and earned respect on account of his sturdy body and his ability to master the art of intimidation.

Whatever Walter had endured, he obviously did well enough to be noticed by the local gangs. Nobody knew which gangs he previously ran with, but at some point Walter got in touch with the Blood Claws.

History got a little spotty here. All the public knew was that at one point Walter split off to form his own gang called Walter's Whalers and tried to vie for territory.

They lost the battle.

Defeated and demoralized, the remnants of the newly established Whalers tucked their tails between their legs and departed from the port system in a hurry. They sought refuge at any hole they could find, and eventually ended up in Cloudy Curtain.

The previous gang that claimed the planet as their own turned out to be more pathetic than the Whalers. Their outdated, atrophied mechs didn't stand a chance against the Whalers and their dented arsenal of cheap but modern mass-produced frontline mechs.

Since then, the Whalers settled in and licked their wounds. Eventually, they recovered to their former numbers, but Walter himself never considered going back to Bentheim. He would rather reign over cats than live like a dog among tigers.

"Good choice." Ves thought as he woke up the next morning on the Happy Jelly, the flagship of the Whalers.

As flagships went, the Happy Jelly didn't receive much care. Like most carriers, the ship had started out as a heavy hauler, and once she became too slow and worn out to make a profit, her owners sold her to a shipyard. There, the Happy Jelly received a second life as some of her most worn-out components had been replaced and her massive cargo space had been reconfigured to carry combat-ready mechs.

The only problem Ves had with the Jelly was that she was obviously pushing her age. The carrier audibly groaned as the Whaler fleet engaged their FTL drives.

Ves already missed his gleaming Barracuda. The sharp and nimble corvette always glided into FTL as if she dove into the water like a graceful athlete. The ship already went ahead of the main fleet to scout the star systems ahead.

The Happy Jelly on the other hand resembled an elephant being launched into the water with a mighty splash.

Occasionally, her entire hull groaned as if she was being stretched out like a noodle. One day, he thought, the Jelly would be the Jelly no more, leaving behind a debris field that stretches over light-years as they fell out of FTL in a haphazard order.

"You really need to tune your ship." Ves told Walter as he entered the main hangar. Rows upon rows of mechs sat dormant in their stables. Much of them looked like they had seen better days, but only a handful of technicians attempted to patch them up.

"My Jelly can take a few more trips. Don't worry about the old lady." Walter remarked as he stood in front of the red-shouldered Blackbeak. "Let's talk about business, shall we?"

Ves approached the boss as an equal but made sure to maintain a tone of respect. "As you know, I'm taking a lot of risks. I left behind a company valued at around ten billion credits in order to join your expedition. I've also gifted you with a priceless mech that's valuable not only for its history, but also its performance."

"What do you want in return?"

"A cut of whatever the Whalers manage to obtain. It doesn't have to be too much, and we can adjust the amount according to my contribution. Let's set the base at ten percent of total earnings."

That was a massive sum, but it also reflected the value Ves could bring to the table. A mech force without a mech designer watching over their machines would always be at a disadvantage compared to an opponent that did enjoy that advantage.

They bargained back and forth, but on account of his generous gift, Ves succeeded in setting the bar at ten percent.

"You look like you're eying something else. Get on with it." Walter spat, brandishing his massive arms in front of Ves.

"There are two more things I'm on a lookout for. First, if by some means the Whalers ever get their hands on something that originates from the core of the planet, I'd like to receive a hand-sized chunk."

"Fine." Not that Walter knew what something like that really meant.

"Second, I'd like to get a copy of all of the logs of the mechs on the field."

"For what reason?"

"A... client of mine wants to map out the environmental hazards your mechs might encounter in the field. It's for the Coalition."

"I see."

Walter obviously didn't appreciate sending off those logs to some stranger in the Coalition. Even if they'd never be able to use it against them, it still felt awful to air all of your dirty laundry.

In truth, Ves accepted the mission to submit the logs on his own accord at the Clifford Society. The mission dangled out a reward for 200 merits, which seemed too good to be true.

The mere mention of the Coalition had the desired effect, even if Ves played a trick on the boss. Walter acceded to the demand with gritted teeth.

In an effort to find something pleasant to talk about, Ves quickly moved past their discussion and walked over to the Blackbeak. "Have you decided whether you'll adopt this mech as your own?"

Walter shook his head. "My Urman has served me well so far. Only youngsters and fools chase after the latest toys. Your mech is a fine machine, but not a mech that's suited to lead the Whalers."

Ves glanced at the so-called Urman standing quietly to the stable up ahead. The mech turned out to be a brawler, an exotic archetype that basically fought with its fists.

Like its pilot, the brawler looked like it could withstand a lot of punishment. Ves estimated that all of its armor had actually pushed the mech over the medium weight class.

Normally, that was bad, as mechs like this didn't possess the level of protection enjoyed by genuine heavy mechs. However, some pilots simply made it work, and from Walter looked like he was one of them. Ves imagined their shared body types helped a lot with establishing a deeper connection between the two.

"I can see why you're attached to your mech. The Blackbeak is a mech that's suited for long-ranged patrols and lengthy battles of attrition. It can't deliver an immediate impact like your Urman."

Walter probably had ways to get around its sluggish speed and its subpar pseudo-heavy armor. If the Urman ever got close to a mech, it could punch a mech apart through sheer brute force with the help of its large powered gauntlets.

Another man stepped forth. He looked to be from the same generation as Walter, but thankfully his body wasn't so wide. "Walter! You called?"

"Come over here. Fadah, this is Ves. Ves, this is Fadah. He's my fourth-in-command of sorts."

Fadah snorted. "More like eight or ninth. You always change your mind. It's a wonder the Whalers are still in one shape."

"Hah! As long as everyone gets a taste of power, they'll know how much grief they have to deal with. That helps cut down the potential mutinies."

"As if we don't fear you." The skinnier Whaler shook his head. "Anyway, why did you call me over? I was in the middle of sorting out our roster. It's a real mess, you know."

"I called you here because you'll be piloting that black thing over there. You've always been nagging your ears about your piece of junk of a mech. Well, here's a brand new machine, and a unique one to boot. It's all yours!"

"But I'm a scout pilot! I pilot light mechs!"

"Light mechs, medium mechs, what's the difference! When you get down to it, they're both fast and hard to catch. They just differ in the amount of armor they're willing to carry. Besides, you're my most resourceful pilot. Only someone as hard to kill as you will fit this beast."

Walter didn't take no for an answer, and quickly walked away, leaving Ves and Fadah to stew by themselves.

"Is he always like that?"

"Yeah. He seems like he doesn't care, but he doesn't want to be bothered with managing anything."

"Then why do the Whalers stick with him?"

The older man grinned at him. "You wouldn't understand. The best I can describe it is... it's like a brotherhood. Walter's Whalers might not possess the

ruthlessness to survive in a place like Bentheim, but that's because Walter never pushes us beyond our boundaries."

Ves didn't really understand what he meant. He shook his head and turned back to the matter at hand. "For better or worse, you're saddled with my pride and joy. The Blackbeak is a fine machine. It will run as smooth as butter, I can guarantee you."

"Whatever you say. It's not a scout. Far from it. It's a knight." Fadah didn't appear to be taken in by all the hype, but he tried to make the best of it. "Let's get to work, then."

Any mech pilot that adopted a new mech had to go through a period of training and adjustment. Normally, a couple of mech pilots would be sufficient to tweak the mech to the pilot's preferences. Allowing Ves to do the adjustments on a design he knew on an extremely deep level was an extravagant privilege.

Fadah came from a light mech background, so the man mainly demanded ways to enhance the Blackbeak's mobility. In particular, Fadah harped on improving its response time and its range of motion.

"A light mech relies on agility to survive up close. The more you shave off a mech's response time, the better it will be able to respond to an opponent's move."

Ves felt deeply reluctant to make any drastic changes to the Blackbeak, but Fadah insisted on a couple of modifications that severely impacted the effectiveness of its armor.

As Ves tried to follow Fadah's suggestions, he became a little conflicted about maintaining its ability to endure. Many of the things Fadah insisted upon set back the Blackbeak's ability to survive the entire campaign.

"You shouldn't be beating your head over my style." Fadah said. "The whole point of light mechs is that they survive by not taking a hit at all. I know it seems kind of reckless for me to demand you strip a knight of some of its armor, but I can tell you that I'll be much better off that way."

"I still think you're going too far with this! The Blackbeak is losing its identity as a knight!"

"I don't want to pilot a knight!"

They remained at an impasse. Ves felt more and more like he was butchering the Blackbeak until all he had left was bones. The conflicting vision for the mech sometimes caused him headaches that forced him to halt his adjustment work.

That was bad, as the Whaler fleet would soon arrive at the outskirts of the space around the Glowing Planet. The crew members of the Happy Jelly already called the five light-hours around the planet the Glowing Zone.

The Whaler fleet was scheduled to rendez-vous at a point around one light-hour into the Glowing Zone. Monty the Beheader issued a call to arms, and every outfit that pledged allegiance to him had to heed his words.

If all went well in space, the Whalers would be touching down in a couple of days. Ves had to finish the Blackbeak and inspect some of the other mechs before that happened. He urgently had to find a way to solve his current logjam.

"What will it take to reconcile my mech with its pilot?"

#### **Chapter 280 Briefing**

His interaction with the crew of the Happy Jelly and exploring its compartments gave Ves a decent impression of Walter's Whalers.

Put simply, they lacked discipline and professionalism.

If Ves wanted to be blunt, he'd use the words lazy and stupid to describe their motley crew. While the Whalers at least invested a little in their mech crews in order to make sure they functioned normally, their ship crews left a lot to be desired.

Severely undermanned, the crew of the Happy Jelly only had the manpower to spare on maintaining the bare essentials of the ship.

They kept the atmospheric going so they wouldn't be freezing and choking from a lack of oxygen.

They kept the aging bridge and engineering running past their prime with a mix of ad-hoc solutions.

Sometimes, they replaced faulty parts with illegally fabricated copies of dubious quality.

It all looked ugly to Ves. Having seen a professional combat crew at work with his stint on Ark Horizon, the Whalers should be thanking their lucky stars the carrier hadn't blown up yet.

Even the aging complement of bots had been affected by the lethargy around them. All of them looked old enough to be present on the Jelly when she started off as a brand new cargo hauler. Lack of attention had degraded at least half of them into scrap, which forced the remainder of the bots to pull double duty to clean the ship and take care of smaller duties.

They obviously failed in that. Many low-priority corridors and compartments featured a build-up of grime and crusted vomit. If the Jelly had any cleaners on her crew, they obviously didn't bother cleaning these sections.

Right now, Ves had to pass by some of those filthy corridors in order to reach a rarely-used conference. Walter summoned everyone important on the ship to attend a briefing.

Around thirty old Whalers seated themselves on the hard, cheap chairs.

"I think everyone's here now, so let's get this started." Walter announced and turned on a flickering projection of the Glowing Zone. "The Blood Claws have been scouting ahead and made some plans. This is how it's going to look like."

The Whaler fleet would emerge at the edge of the Glowing Zone and make its way inwards until they reached the position of the Blood Claws. Once every outfit with a connection to Monty gathered in a massive fleet, they resumed their journey towards the deepest part of the Glowing Zone, eventually approaching the outer edge of an enormous armada made up out of several divisions of the Mech Corps.

"As you know, the Glowing Planet has landed within the borders of the Republic. The Mech Corps, in all of its wisdom, figured that since the Vesians and all kinds of scum will arrive in a couple of days, it's best to set aside our rivalries and form a common pact."

"Does that mean the Three Tyrants of Bentheim won't be duking it out?"

"Of course not, you dummy!"

The old chap wouldn't be blamed for thinking that Monty the Beheader might chose to attack his other rivals. They constantly warred against each other in the shadows.

"The Glowing Planet is big enough for everyone, at least in the first couple of days. The Mech Corps has mapped out the planet from orbit and carved a generous slice of territory for each of the major players to claim as their own."

A map of the planet showed up on the projection. Much of its intricate and dangerous terrain features remained unknown, but the Mech Corps somehow determined that the areas with the highest level of fluctuations probably contained deposits of the most valuable exotics the planet had on offer.

"These red areas are first-grade danger zones. They're extremely dangerous, as all of those wild exotic minerals are constantly changing the laws of physics around them. Time might stop, gravity might reverse, in short, all kinds of freaky stuff will happen around them. We can forget about mining those deposits ourselves. Only the Mech Corps has the means to extract those juicy exotics."

"What about us?"

"I'm getting to that. Around the red zones are the orange zones, which consists of the second-grade danger zones. The exotics there are much less destructive on their environment, but there's a lot of them so the entire area will be blanketed in a low level freaky effect. These are great places to mine junk exotics in bulk, and that's where the major powers of the Republic have divvied up for themselves."

The area allocated to Monty the Betrayer sat far away from any other claimed areas, and took up as much space as Dorum, Bentheim's capital city.

"That's kind of small. There's lots of free space on the planet."

"This is only the first phase. Do you really think the Blood Claws will be able to protect this stretch of territory once the Ducal Legions of the Vesians make landfall? Even a fraction of a legion is enough to wipe the floor with Monty and his men!"

The map changed now. Before, all of the Republican's powers had spread out over the planet. Now, they concentrated around the red zone occupied by the Mech Corps.

"In the second phase, every force from the Republic will work together to present a united front. Every major outfit like the Three Tyrants of Bentheim will be placed at the edge of the red zone occupied by the Mech Corps."

"It kind of looks like we'll be placed at the frontlines."

"They're using us as shields!"

"It's true." Walter said. "The Mech Corps isn't hiding the fact that they want us to be placed at the perimeter of their territory. Anyone who wants to attack the Mech Corps has to go through the Blood Claws or some other outfit depending on the direction of the attack."

"Seems like a crappy deal. What do we get out of it?"

"Protection, basically. The Mech Corps won't stand by if any of us gets attacked. They've promised to send out a relief force to repel the attack."

No one really took the Mech Corps at their word, but none of them had a say in the matter. Monty had already agreed to the deal. Ves strongly suspected that a couple of trades had been made on the side to secure everyone's agreement.

"Our precise role will vary. We brought plenty of mechs, but they're not really impressive, aside from my Urman and Fadah's new toy. The Blood Claws will likely put us on guard duty. It's going to get increasingly dangerous once the Vesians and the scum of the galaxy arrive."

Walter proceeded to assign his officers to various tasks. Ves took on the duty of leading a small team of mech technicians in charge of maintaining and repairing the so-called fast-reaction squad led by Fadah.

The fast-reaction squad acted as the troubleshooters of the Whalers. Walter basically gathered up some swift and mobile mechs and tasked them with rescuing any Whalers that had fallen into trouble.

"That's all we can plan for now. I still don't know if we'll actually be able to hold a chunk of territory of our own, but you can bet that we'll have to fight for every piece of ore the Blood Claws extract."

The Mech Corps made use of the Blood Claws, while the Blood Claws made use of the Whalers. Life was tough at the bottom of the totem pole.

Once everyone dispersed, Ves wandered back to the main hangar. While he hadn't figured out a way to reconcile the Blackbeak with a mech pilot eager to subvert the strengths of its design, Ves reflected on his previous choices.

"A mech won't always be matched with the right pilot. Its design might favor a defensive style of fighting, but if it's matched with an aggressive pilot, then something has to give."

He always assumed that his Blackbeaks would be matched by mech pilots that could bring out their brilliance. Yet this time, he gifted the Blackbeak out for free to a leader who never really stood out as a brilliant decision maker. In turn, that leader handed over the Blackbeak to a pilot who obviously desired to pilot something else.

All of this turned out to be a mess, and as the mech designer in charge of tweaking the Blackbeak to Fadah's tastes, it was up to him to untangle the knot.

Eventually, he made a decision.

"It's no good to hold on to my beliefs even if I think that Fadah is wrong. In a sense, he's my customer, and a mech designer should always be attentive to their customers."

If he reframed the situation into a relationship between a service provider and a customer, then the answer became clear. He had to set aside his narrow view of what was best in favor of accommodating the wishes of his client.

"Sticking to my guns obviously won't please Fadah."

Fadah wanted his mech to fit his style instead of the other way around. If the Blackbeak remained a sluggish semi-defensive bulwark, then the pilot would never be able to mesh with it as deeply as Ves and Fadah wished.

Even though Ves thought that Fadah made the wrong decision, it was better to follow his wishes, since at least the pilot had a chance of making it work.

In short, Ves had to believe in Fadah and his claims.

The realization came as a welcome relief to Ves. While the solution to the dilemma didn't truly eliminate every problem, the reasoning behind it gave Ves enough of an excuse to set aside his instincts.

With grudging acceptance, he worked together with Fadah to finish slimming down the Blackbeak. Ves let go of its original conception as an offensive knight and treated it as a fluid entity with no discernable role as of yet.

"Thinking in terms of categories is a trap in itself. Not all mechs have to fill into a single predetermined role."

That had been the other lesson he learned. The concept of roles and archetypes emerged after the first generations of mechs soon after the Age of Mechs came into being. It provided the nascent mech pilots and mech designers with a common understanding of what the new mechs had been designed to do.

It succeeded in bringing order to the mech industry. Both designers and pilots experimented with hundreds of different concepts, throwing away the more impractical ideas while embracing the most effective ones like knight mechs, rifleman mechs and more.

Yet sometimes those neat categories failed to adjust to the demands of the pilots. Walter's unusual Urman was but one example of a design that should not have worked according to contemporary standards. Yet Walter obviously managed, since he never lost a battle since he fled to Cloudy Curtain.

Ves had the sense that he was doing something similar to the Blackbeak. He shaved away a significant amount of armor, drastically reducing the mech's encumbrance until its weight reached a point below the minimum standard of a medium mech.

Now, the highly modified Blackbeak had become a mech that straddled the gap between a light and medium mech. In most people's eyes, such a mech would be an abomination. Yet Fadah found the result to be a marvel when he tested it out in a simulation.

"Fantastic! This is fantastic! The Blackbeak is so responsive now! It's still not as fast as I would like, but it's enough for me to pull off all of my moves!"

In the end, Ves had satisfied his client. Whether this ultra-skinny Blackbeak could actually put up a fight, he didn't dare to speculate any further. He just hoped that Fadah had been somewhat truthful about his supposedly awesome skills.

The work took way more time than he thought. Ves originally planned to make a pass at every mech on the Happy Jelly, but their impending emergence at the edge of the Glowing Zone cut that short.

Ves settled for taking a look at the other mechs of the fast-reaction squad.

When he finally visited their stables and looked at their frames, his mood tumbled to the bottom.

"How the hell do they still work?"

He'd seen junkyard scrap in better conditions than the light and medium mechs that consisted of the fast-reaction squad. Ves had a lot of work to do if he wanted to ensure they could survive the rigors they'd usually be going through on the surface of the Glowing Planet.