

## The Facade of the Dar'klairds (draft 2)

by Multiple Spiders

The school ballroom was adorned very nicely. Decorative banners hung on the pillars which stood at the room's perimeter and the chandelier shined in soft blue hues. The room was filled with the murmur of nobles and their heirs. While the students kept to their cliques, discussing schoolwork and mingling with their classmates, the adult guests of the ballroom were aflutter with gossip. The Dar'Klairs' sudden appearance was quite the shock to some, but there were some that (falsely) claimed that they knew that the old family had survived the tragic incident. The heir of the Dar'Klairs family, Drac, was quite the popular boy at this particular party. His father had his hand solidly on the boy's shoulder and led him through the guests to greet the other guests. Though Drac's cap impolitely adorned his crown and its semi-transparent visor hid his eyes, Drac was a very well-mannered guest. A couple asked about his cap, and Sir Dar'Klaird explained "He suffers from inoperable photo-sensitivity. A side-effect from living in space for so long."

"Oh, how terrible," a woman cooed. "It must have been so hard for you, forced into hiding among asteroid-miners and remote moons..."

"Nothing that we couldn't survive. We're putting things together, piece by piece. I'm just glad we're finally used to actual gravity again!" Sir Darklaird laughed.

One of Drac's teachers, Miss Caliber of House Remington, made her way towards the both of them. "Sir Darklaird, I'm glad to finally meet you!"

Sir Dar'klaird's eyes flicked up and down Ms. Caliber's attire greedily. Red jacket, tight tube dress and thigh-high boots. "Same to you..." His eyes subtly slid from her breast to a badge on her lapel and then to her face, as though he were looking at the sigil the entire time. "... Miss Caliber. I appreciate that you put aside your mechanized racing career to teach our kids. It's fortunate that he can learn from somebody of your," he smirked, "caliber."

Miss Caliber rolled her eyes. "Everyone's been saying that." She made a quick glance at Drac. "This upcoming duel is actually going to be recorded for the class. Drac's always been interested in radical designs, and everybody's been itching to see what he's cooked up."

"Really?" Drac winced.

“Yup! If I’m being honest,” Miss Caliber lowered her voice, “most kids’ mechs are whatever rolls out of their parents’ factories nowadays, if they don’t just use whatever mech is lying around their dad’s garage. I’m just glad that Drac’s trying something new instead of trying to reel in investors!” Sir Dar’klaird and Miss Caliber shared a laugh.

Drac excused himself, slipping past to the buffet table where he made a rather sizable snack platter, which quickly disappeared and was discarded. He poured himself some iced coffee and took a drought. Whoever made the coffee really needed to be fired, Drac had to force himself to drink the burnt-tasting, sour brew.

A pair of students sauntered over as he indulged himself. “Hey, Drac, you got a second?” Gerda and Carlin of house Riordan, from his class. Gerda enthusiastically began to ramble.

“Okay, you *have* to let us know. What did you do to get Perrine on your case? She’s been fuming for weeks, almost everybody’s been saying that she’s done nothing but grumble in between classes and hasn’t told anybody why she’s so pissed. Perrine’s easy to piss off, I’ve known her since middle-school, but I don’t really remember a time when she’s been this pissed before. She usually lets stuff go after a couple of days, sometimes a week if she’s really mad, but she does cool off after a while. And, I have got to say, this is the first time I’ve seen anybody start a duel with a slap. It’s probably the first time in years since anybody has slapped someone to start a duel. We’ve been *dying* to know.”

Carlin smirked. “*She’s* been dying to know. I just wanted to wish you luck.”

Drac coughed. “Well, I don’t think I should talk about it.”

“What? You can’t just leave me with that. You make it sound serious. Oh, wait, don’t tell me! You’ve been making moves towards Sassa, haven’t you?”

“No,” Drac stated bluntly.

Carlin nudged Gerda to the side. “So, do you know anything about the Luthier’s machine? I’m sure you’ve done some reading on their history.”

“I’ve done some,” Drac nodded. He hadn’t found much, Houses kept secrets inside like a body does blood. He saw what it looked like, and that was it. Armaments and loadout were easy. There were variants based on the Luthier’s prototypes to be sold and given to the military, of course, but those things were vastly different from the machine that Perrine was going to pilot.

Carlin smiled. “Well, I’ve been doing some digging around. The machine they have is quite the beast, one could only imagine what it would be like to fight it at full power, actual

armor and no mechanical limitations. Even in dueling conditions, it'll be an uphill battle. If you really wanted, I could let slip some... pointers. As a favor."

As a favor. Drac tugged his collar. "I don't think I'll need any help. It's just a school duel, after all."

Carlin's smile faded slightly. "Well, you're right. But still, the offer stands." He glanced away, and Drac briefly looked the same direction. A maid with a Riordan uniform was making small talk with Sir Dar'klaird. "We should take our leave. We wish you luck."

"Speak for yourself," Gerda leaned in close. "Drac, if you've done anything with Sassa, no amount of luck is going to help you – you're absolutely fu–"

"Let's go," Carlin snatched her by the shoulder and spun her around, leading her away.

"Hey, no! Wait! I'm not done yet!"

As a favor. Those words stung a bit. Drac wasn't sure why.

On his way back, caught in thought, he stumbled into somebody. Every other guest gave this somebody a wide berth, and there was an anxious silence when Drac walked into him.

"Oh! Pardon me!" Drac momentarily gathered himself. "Please excuse me, Sir Koranto."

Sir Koranto, of House Koranto. Koranto wore long orange robes, styled in an ancient eastern country's fashion. He stood upright and tall, his hands hovered near his hips next to the two swords tucked into his belt, and his gaze was steel. Scars covered his hands and face, with who knows many more hiding beneath his clothes; the most notable scar was a deep blue-black and jagged line that started at the left of his lower jaw, crossed the bridge of his nose and finished at his right temple, carved into his face by the quasar of a black hole. Koranto, the hero of two bloody wars. A knight-general who wrote his name in the annals of history in the blood of space pirates and terrorists. Sir Koranto, the Dragon-Eating Tiger.

He was the school's ethics and philosophy teacher.

He glanced at Drac and grunted. "It's fine." Koranto went on his way.

Drac's gaze followed Koranto for a moment. The guests parted as he approached, it seemed he was going to talk with Lady Perrine across the way. She was standing stiffly, being bothered by Gerda and Carlin. Perrine glanced in Drac's direction, and her face twisted into a scowl when she saw him. Drac ducked back to his father.

"... Oh, yeah. The factory."

The maid he talked to seemed annoyed. “You... don’t actually let him manage the factory on his own, do you?”

“Hey, I can’t baby him forever. Besides, he’s the one who asked to do it. I just... sit by the sidelines, help him out every now and then. If he asks for it.”

She blinked. “Well, that’s not too unusual, I guess. It’s just strange. You said that you acquired it from the *mob*?”

“Yeah.”

“And... Your son is managing it?”

“Yeah.”

Drac quietly motioned for Sir Dar’klaird to be quiet. It didn’t work. Sir Dar’klaird explained further. “It was destitute, really. The previous owner ditched everyone and left them in debt.”

She stroked her chin. “Ah. You’re helping them out, then.”

“Yeah.”

Drac cringed. He stepped to Sir Dar’klaird’s side. The maid (who was wearing a Riordan-house uniform, Drac noticed) didn’t acknowledge him.

“Well, hopefully he’s found time between schooling and managing the factory to spend some time to himself.”

Sir Dar’klaird laughed.

A valet began slipping by other guests towards them. Drac coughed. Sir Dar’klaird made a slight motion in the direction of the valet, but didn’t make any official recognition. “Well, I guess it’s that time,” Sir Dar’klaird said, placing his hand on his son’s shoulder and leading him along. The valet met them halfway, and guided them towards the hallway.

“We need you down at the garage. Half the guys don’t have a goddamn clue what they’re doing,” he whispered to Drac.

“What do you mean? They built the damn thing!” Sir Dar’klaird hissed.

“It’s their first time prepping it for combat! Plus, they had to strip everything off to make it fit these bullshit duel rules.”

“It’s fine,” Drac said, half-believing himself. “We just need to keep calm—”

As they turned a corner, they crossed paths with another party. It was the Luthiers, the parents and sister of Lady Perrine. Sassa Perrine blinked. “Oh, hey Drac!”

“Oh, hi.”

There was an awkward silence.

Sir Dar'klaird broke the silence with a smile. “Mister and Misses Luthier. It's a pleasure.”

Mrs. Luthier coughed. “... Is it though?”

The valet stared daggers at the back of Sir Dark'laird's head.

Sassa stepped to the side, nudging past Drac and his valet. “Well, it was nice seeing you again, Drac!” The Luthiers followed. “I hope you don't get too hurt during the duel!”

“Don't worry, I'll make sure Drac's wearing his seatbelt,” Sir Darklaird chortled.

Once the Luthier's were gone, the valet slid up next to Sir Dar'klaird and hissed, “What the actual hell are you doing?!”

“What did I do?”

“Will you two chill for just one second?” Drac urged them to follow.

In the hangar, the valet tossed aside his vest and began looking around rapidly. In seconds, he was gone in the hustle of mechanics and moving forklifts. He could be heard barking orders and giving directions. In the center of the hangar's business was a massive, man-shaped machine reclined on a massive platform.

The mech was thin, lanky even. With the exception of several components making up its torso, legs and the back-mounted wings, which were fairly sizable, its silhouette was incredibly minimalist. Even its weapons were built into its arms to reduce any thickness; they folded neatly beneath its wrists and were ready to fly out at the flip of a switch. An outside observer would look at it and think if it moved with any urgency, its limbs would snap from the forces involved. Anybody with professional understanding of mechanical engineering would stop and think that an idiot forgot to give it armor. Drac Dar'klaird, who designed it, thought he could stand to make it thinner.

A grease-covered mechanic called out. “Eeeey, Sir Drac! We need ya! Gettova' 'ere!”

“You're up, kid,” Sir Dar'klaird said, giving Drac a gentle push. Drac began looking over the shoulders of the crew. Mostly everything had been done right, but for a couple of things he had to roll up his sleeves and show them how to finish. When everything was ready, he ducked into the washroom and changed into the flight suit.

While in the cockpit getting ready, the valet clambered up the scaffolding and peered inside. “Are you sure this will work?”

“Positive.”

“But what if something goes wrong?”

“Nothing will go wrong,” Drac insisted.

“In a duel where two giant robots are trying to beat each other senseless?!” He almost shouted.

Drac took a deep breath. “The last thing we need is to panic, all right? Just... Keep an eye on Phil and make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

The valet groaned. “Too late for that. Good luck.”

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Sassa was helping Perrine with her flight suit. Lots of small parts needed attention, mostly safety gear and monitors to make sure the pilot could handle some roughhousing. Normally a servant or maid would help, but Sassa wanted to talk for a bit. “So, are you actually gonna kill him?”

“I won’t try to hurt him too much, but if something happens, it happens,” Perrine stated bluntly.

Sassa glanced to the side. “I mean, you’re not going to try to kill him, right?”

Perrine fiddled with her gloves. “Our weapons and armor have been modified so that a killing blow is near-impossible, Sassa.”

“Yeah, but you can always... smash him. With a rock, or a tree...”

Perrine rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to try and kill him. Besides, what’s it to you if I did?”

“You’d be arrested, for one,” Sassa said. “Second, you’d be committing murder in front of Koranto.”

That gave Perrine a pause. She didn’t didn’t want to think about it. “You think I would actually do that?”

“I mean, you did try to get a boy run over by a train back in middle-school.”

“He shouldn’t have been touching you that way.”

Sassa put her hands on her hips. “We were holding hands!”

“Before marriage!” Perrine snapped. “You know that you shouldn’t be doing those things with boys yet!”

Sassa tossed the flight helmet to Perrine. “I get you’re trying to protect me, but you go too far sometimes.”

Perrine rolled her eyes. “I’m not gonna kill him, OK? I’m just going to smash up his mech and send him back home crying.” She tied her hair back and then slipped the helmet on. After double checking her gear, she sighed. “I guess we’re ready then.”

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The designated dueling ground had been set. Rolling green hills, dotted with occasional copses of trees and derelict buildings. Sirens across the chosen campus rang – “Duel alert, clear the section; Duel alert, clear the section...” Camera drones flew in and set themselves in key positions, ready to livestream the duel. In the ballroom, one of the walls slid away to reveal an entire station of televisions of varying size, from massive TV’s to make good on the upcoming action to smaller periphery screens meant to observe less important shots. It was next to the buffet table, so the guests could eat and view at their leisure.

However, Mr. Luthier was having difficulty consuming anything other than the glass of wine he gingerly held. He kept glancing up at the main screen. A large black-and-white mech had crossed over to the starting position – a foreboding machine that held a long rifle at the ready, and bore large conical devices on its back, arranged in a way that made it look like it had wings. The Checkmate loomed over the grassland, patiently awaiting the bell. Mr. Luthier sipped from his glass, nervous. He knew for a long time his little girl was one day going to pilot his machine, but it didn’t change the growing pit in his stomach.

Sir Dar’klaird stepped beside Mr. Luthier. “Hello again,” he said with a smile. “What a beaut,” Dar’klaird pointed at the Checkmate. “Your daughter’s gotta be one hell of a girl to have a handle on that thing, eh?”

Mr. Luthier edged away from Sir Dar’klaird. “Shouldn’t you be more focused on your son?”

“Please! I get to see the Spiderhawk almost all the time. Drac spends almost all of his time drawing things up and doing the math for that thing. I actually have no idea how he can juggle that and his homework,” Sir Dar’klaird chuckled.

Mr. Luthier scoffed. “What is wrong with you?”

“What?”

Mr. Luthier turned to face Sir Dar’klaird. “Our children will be fighting and you dare be so flippant? Are you not worried for Drac at all?”

“Oh, come on, I’m not heartless. I’m worried as all hell that something will go wrong and somebody will get hurt. But that’s life. Sometimes you just have to take your lumps. Besides, the ammo they’ll be using are hollow cases and the engines are throttled so their punches can’t even breach their core-blocks. So long as our kids are wearing their seatbelts, the worst that can happen is that they’ll be thrashed around and get a bloody nose.”



Mr. Luthier scowled. “Even so!” He took a draught of his wine.

The air was thick between them. Sir Dar’klaird briefly glanced around before returning his gaze at the Checkmate.

“So... did Perrine ever tell you why she challenged Drac to a duel?”

“No, actually.”

Sir Koranto stepped forward. The room became quiet as he walked in front of the view screens. He was handed a microphone, which he tapped twice to test. “All right, it’s almost time to start the duel.” A butler tried handing him a small card with the official duel commencement ceremony’s instructions written on it, quietly urging him on. “I’m not reading that.” The butler awkwardly slinked away.

“Lady Perrine is in the Checkmate, on station,” Koranto stated. He looked to the other starting position. Empty. He motioned to the butler. “Where the hell is Drac?” he whispered.

The butler ducked away for a moment, before coming back in a rush. “They had some technical difficulties, he’s moving out now,” he whispered back. The dark blue, lanky shape of the Dar’klaird’s mech stepped out and onto the starting point. Its bright orange wings shimmered in the afternoon sun.

“About damn time,” Koranto said a little too close to the microphone. “All right. Lady Perrine Luthier and the Checkmate are on station. Sir Drac Dar’klaird and the Spiderhawk are on station.”

Between the two mechs was a kilometer distance, with a tall building between them blocking their view of each other. Sir Dar’klaird quietly made calculations. The Checkmate was a really mean machine, but it was heavy. It didn’t have the maneuverability to fly for any meaningful period of time, Perrine would likely want to stick to the ground and use cover where she could. The Spiderhawk could dance around the thing without getting scratched... if not for the cones on the Checkmate’s back. Those were the deciding factor of the fight. Hopefully Drac was as good in the machine as he was in the simulator...

Koranto turned to the screen and hit a switch on the microphone. “Duel start, in five... four... three... two... one...”

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The duel began. Perrine hit her thrusters and swung around the building. She caught a glimpse of the Spiderhawk flitting across the landscape, hopping over hills and trees. The Checkmate raised its rifle and fired. Hot red shells flew across the plains. The Spiderhawk ducked and used a hill as cover. The earth burst where the shells struck. Green beams flew out from behind the hill. They struck the Checkmate across the front. Minimal damage, Perrine noted. "... Really, asshole?"

The Spiderhawk hopped out of cover, firing rapidly as it moved across to another building. Many hits, none seemed to do anything to the Checkmate. The heavy mech stomped its way over the grassland firing off a couple of shots that only just missed the Spiderhawk as it slid behind cover again. "Don't you hide from me, Dar'klaird..." Perrine hissed.

In the ballroom, onlookers were unimpressed. "It's fast, but... is that all it can do?" There was a slight murmur about the room.

The Spiderhawk continued a spray of suppressive fire towards the Checkmate through the open windows of the building. "Come on... come on..." Drac groaned. Tiny bits of concrete shrapnel flew into the Spiderhawk's side as 30mm rounds collided with cover. The Checkmate drew close, then Drac realized that it was plowing straight forward. The Spiderhawk leapt back – the Checkmate crashed through the structure. Perrine dragged the Checkmate forward, ignoring the flashing damage reports and firing wildly. Drac fired the verniers in the Spiderhawk's legs, thrusting high into the sky.

"Crap!" Drac slammed down a lever at his side. The Spiderhawk doubled over on itself. Its legs withdrew up to the hips, the torso folded forward and its head drew back between its shoulders. The arms came together across its chest, completing the transformation. The Spiderhawk, now a jet, rocketed off away from the Checkmate.

Perrine gaped. "Oh, you son of a bitch!" Running through that building did more damage than the Spiderhawk's particle-blasters, and Drac was still running away... No, wait. The Spiderhawk was swinging back around.

Drac's hands fought against g-force as he fumbled with controls. He set the power output back to regular levels, and the engine buzzed. The blasters blared, and the green blasts hit much stronger, more concentrated and powerful. The mock-armor across the Checkmate's shoulder was shorn off. If Perrine hadn't moved forward to give chase, she realized that she may have lost her mech's arm.

Meanwhile, Sir Dar'klaird nodded at the viewscreen. Drac baited Perrine well. Those shots weren't meant to damage the Checkmate, but to get it to follow him. Get it close to an area with less cover. Sure, he could have started at high power, but the moment that happened Perrine would have started using cover, too. Instead, she wrecked the nearest building in kilometers, and with it, her advantage. The Spiderhawk had her in its claws. Sir Dar'klaird finished his glass of wine and motioned for a server to refill it, taking satisfaction at the surrounding clamor of excited noblemen.

Perrine fired her thrusters and moved the Checkmate forward. The Spiderhawk flew past overhead. "Got you now, asshole!" She flipped a dozen small switches then began sliding her fingers across a touch-screen below them. The cones on the Checkmate's back detached, then began flying off in almost every direction around the mech. The tips of the cones opened up and the spinning barrels of heavy-machine guns emerged.

"What?" Drac looked back at his radar. The Checkmate's heat signature suddenly became shrouded by a field of ten separate flying missiles. The Spiderhawk tucked into an aileron roll and dodged a hail of gunfire. Oh, that doesn't feel good, Drac thought as he was pressed into the back of his seat.

Mr. Luthier managed a smile as the Spiderhawk was pursued by the Attack Vectors and their complicated formation. Sir Dar'klaird managed a chuckle. "Nice." Mr. Luthier glanced at him from the corner of his eye. Mrs. Luthier and Sassa walked up to meet him. "How's she doing?"

"She just deployed the Vectors," Mr. Luthier said in a hushed tone.

"Nice." Sassa leant over, eyes bouncing from screen to screen.

The Spiderhawk lurched over, barely rolling past a Vector which flew over his right wing. "Oh, great, they're everywhere!" Drac thumbed the toggle on the side of the joystick, then glanced back at the radar. "Now!" The Spiderhawk launched flares – even if they weren't actual missiles, they still followed the sudden heat signatures that flew out close to them. He managed to make a turn and make an intercept towards the Checkmate. Shells flew past as the Spiderhawk approached. The Checkmate zigged and zagged, making a beeline towards another building.

Drac fired thrusters and drove towards the Checkmate in a low approach. Perrine turned, and then gasped. The Spiderhawk changed back into a mech in an instant – the blasters of its arms folded down and long green sickles of plasma extended from their barrels. The Spiderhawk

flung its arms forward like a mantis. The Checkmate recoiled backwards, the blades just barely missing. The Vectors veered about and reached an angle where the Checkmate wasn't in danger of getting hit. The Spiderhawk leapt up into the air and transformed again before a volley of shells struck where it stood.

Perrine deftly directed the Vectors into wider sweeping formations, chasing the Spiderhawk from multiple positions and filling its path with bullets. She looked down at the status screen, realizing that the Checkmate's rifle was sliced by the Spiderhawk's attack and was now useless. "Bastard!" The Checkmate dropped the rifle's pieces and then moved back towards cover.

Sir Dar'klaird smiled and took a sip of wine. That Checkmate is more maneuverable than it looked, he thought. Taking out the rifle was a good move, but the Vectors still gave it a lot of firepower. Hopefully, Drac had a plan other than maintaining simple hit-and-run tactics... He peeked over at Mr. Luthier's wine glass, sitting on a small side table. Sir Dar'klaird quietly glanced around, then swapped out his empty glass for the half-full one before returning his focus to the duel.

"Jeez, that thing's fast. What's it called again?" Sassa asked.

"Spiderhawk," Sir Dar'klaird replied. "It's named after the tarantula hawk, an Earth insect which its paint-job is based on. They were a species of wasp that would regularly hunt spiders almost double their size."

Sassa watched the Spiderhawk's wings as they gleamed in the light.

"Miss Sassa," Sir Dar'klaird turned towards her. "If you don't mind me asking, do you know why your sister challenged my son to a duel?"

Mr. Luthier cocked an eyebrow. "Actually, I was wondering the same. What did that boy do to offend her so much? She looked as if she was going to shoot him dead, earlier."

Sassa froze. "Oh, I... Uh..." She cleared her throat. "So, Drac kinda... fell on me."

"What?" Mrs. Perrine was appalled. "What do you mean, fell on you? Do you mean to say he touched you, and tried to pass it off as an accident?"

"No... His head kinda flopped over onto my shoulder during class. Then he kinda shot back up once I nudged him off."

Mr. Luthier gave her a look. "Are you joking?"

Sir Dar'klaird looked at Sassa, then at the duel, then back at Sassa. "Another, please," he raised his empty wine glass towards a nearby waiter.

The Spiderhawk flew in wide loops and winding turns. The Vectors buzzed around like a swarm of bees in pursuit, winding and making intercept paths and firing whenever they had a clear shot. Drac fired off more flares. The Vectors briefly veered off but were almost immediately back into the chase.

Drac swung back around to the Checkmate. It had made it to cover behind a building. "Crap!" The Spiderhawk fired its blasters. The green blasts ripped the building apart, but the Checkmate was unharmed and flew out from cover. The Vectors flew into the Spiderhawk's six-o'clock. Drac fired at the Checkmate but only grazed its armor. Before he could fire again he had to dodge and weave away from the Vectors once more.

Perrine hit the controls of the Vectors. Three locked into the Spiderhawk's tail and maintained pursuit. The rest began making long arcs around the battlefield, making quick hit-and-runs at the jet. Flares were fired, but the only ones stunned were the ones directly behind him. The intercepting Vectors were at a distance that the flash didn't disorient their sensors. Drac thrashed the joystick in every direction to dodge the oncoming barrage.

Gears turned in Drac's head. He began to notice that the Vectors were faster than him, but handled poorly. He could use that. The Spiderhawk braked and dove downwards and made a u-turn. The Vectors dove after him, but overshot and had to drag themselves back into pursuit. Drac narrowly dodged an intercepting Vector. He lined himself up towards the building which the Checkmate was hiding behind.

Drac pulled back and made a sharp turn. A line of gunfire made it dangerously close to the Spiderhawk's wing, but the Vector wasn't agile enough to avoid slamming into the building. The building was shaken by the resulting explosion and collapsed. A quick snap-turn, and The Spiderhawk twisted around to face the Checkmate and opened fire.

The Checkmate's thrusters fired and it dove to the side. The Spiderhawk fired its flares and closed in. The Checkmate caught a couple of blasts to its side. Perrine was thrashed in her seat as the mech attempted to balance itself against the attack. The Spiderhawk changed form and lunged forward with its energy blades.

Perrine tapped on her controls. A Vector rocketed from the Checkmate's side, getting between the Spiderhawk and the Checkmate and was cut in two. The Vector exploded and the

Spiderhawk was thrown back. Drac was rattled, damage indicators flashed on the screens. It can't even take another indirect hit like that, he realized.

The Spiderhawk jettied away. It transformed, but as it did so, error messages flashed on screen. The left arm wasn't able to properly connect forwards. Drac cursed, attempting to fly away as the Vectors closed in. He reached over for the manual controls, jostling the joystick back and forth to guide the arm into the chest's socket to complete the transformation. The Spiderhawk lurched left and right as Drac tried to fix the problem. The Vectors fired, and Drac had to accelerate in order to dodge the incoming spray of bullets, but more Vectors began to close in.

The Spiderhawk climbed upward suddenly. The Vectors clumsily attempted chase but weren't able to maintain proper heading. That bought me time, Drac thought. He fought with the controls once more, and finally brought the arm back into place. The Spiderhawk still had an awkward lean to it. Crap, the frame's bent! Drac cursed under his breath.

An alarm from his watch went off. He hit the snooze button mindlessly.

Perrine watched her Vectors attempt to chase the Spiderhawk. Before the fight, she modified them to be faster and track targets from further away, but it looks like she lost their maneuverability in her effort to extend their effective range. And he figured that out quickly, Perrine thought. "You want to get close? Fine!" The Checkmate's thrusters fired and it lunged over to a nearby tree, almost as tall as the Checkmate itself. The tree splintered where the giant metal hands gripped it, the earth trembled and split as roots were dragged out of the dirt.

Sassa nervously leant over to Mrs. Luthier. "Is she allowed to do that?" The room was filled with concerned murmurs. She looked back towards Koranto, but if Perrine's actions were a foul in the eyes of the duel, he made no obvious objection. It was hard to read the face of a man who's default expression was half-interested glare.

Drac started to recognise patterns in the Vector's flight path. "...And... there!" One Vector would play decoy – dart overhead pretending to attack, while one from further out would lead its shots towards the Spiderhawk. The Spiderhawk made a sudden twist and a hail of gunfire missed by a wide margin. The decoy Vector was now right in front of the jet's weapons. Drac fired, and the Vector was destroyed.

The alarm from his wrist watch went off again. Drac briefly glanced at it. What was it this time? He already did his homework... Still needed to finish one essay, but it wasn't due until later. He already ate at the party... Wasn't that.

Another artful dodge with a couple more flares, and the Vectors were off his tail again. Drac lined up with the Checkmate. He fired off a couple of shots towards it, but they shot wide and missed.

Perrine held fast. The Checkmate carried the tree low and behind its body, hiding the giant club from the Spiderhawk's sight. The Vectors were switched to a new attack pattern – one that would lead the Spiderhawk right where she wanted him.

The watch went off again. Drac looked down at the small screen, then turned white as chalk. Oh, right, he thought. The Spiderhawk began to lean to the right slightly...

Perrine hit the thrusters, launching the Checkmate forward. It had raised the tree above its head and was ready to come down upon the Spiderhawk in the instant it transformed. But wait, Perrine realized, it's not transforming – and it's still going full speed? Oh dear god, we're going to–

The Spiderhawk and the Checkmate slammed into each other at full-force. Parts flew every direction, the thrusters burst into explosions as the fuel-tanks were compromised, and the escape pods barely managed to slip out as the two mechs crumpled into each other. The two metal heaps spun in the air before crashing into the dirt and exploding.

The ballroom was chaos. Koranto lunged forward and began making orders almost before the mechs even touched the ground. Mrs. Luthier fainted into Sassa's arms, and when Sassa looked for Mr. Luthier's help she found him falling backwards towards her. "Help!" She moaned, pinned down by the weight of two adults. The lords and ladies were shouting and gasping at the scene, almost certain that both Drac Dar'klaird and Perrine Luthier had been smashed into jelly. Sir Dar'klaird laughed hysterically.

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She was going to kill him. Perrine unbuckled herself from her seat, kicking through the inflated airbags and thrusting herself towards the escape hatch. The hatch blew, and she clambered out of the cockpit. The hills were covered in various pieces of debris and less than a kilometer away was the smoking crater where the two mechs melted together in a heap. Over at the bottom of the next hill was the escape pod of the Spiderhawk. Perrine stormed over, stepping over the hot metal and overturned mounds of dirt. She drew a knife from her belt.

The hatch to Drac's escape pod was tightly shut. Perrine twisted and kicked at the hatch until it popped open and she could throw it aside. She looked inside, pushing aside airbags to get a better view. "Drac!" She shouted. But then she paused.

Drac was hanging against the harness of his seat. He was snoring, completely asleep. His cap had slipped from his head, and she could see the deep dark circles beneath his eyes. She also saw how thin he was – his suit was thickly padded, but his waist and shoulders were much narrower than she had thought before. He looked half-starved.

Perrine was struck dumb. It was all an accident, he fell asleep during class. Was he even taking care of himself? He was so confident at the start of the year – how did he let himself get like this?

Drac's watch began to ring. Drac gasped and snapped awake. "Wha-?" His gaze flipped between the static viewscreen and Perrine. "What happened?"

Perrine crawled inside and cut Drac out of his seatbelt. Perrine carefully dragged him out of the hatch. A hovering vehicle crested the hill and swerved to a stop before the two. It lowered itself and the doors opened. Medical staff began pouring out, grabbing the two and pulling them inside. They were brought back to the hangar, where a large crowd of concerned nobles waited with bated breath. The two of them were brought out and a great sigh of relief washed over the hangar bay. Koranto stormed forward, squaring himself at the two with bared teeth.

"What the hell was that?" Spittle flew from his mouth as he bellowed. Before they had time to answer, he was already going off on them. "You were only supposed to use weapons you brought to the fight – did you actually know if the Spiderhawk's cockpit would have survived if you hit him with that? If you had killed him with that tree I would have personally executed you for murder! And you! What were you thinking? You almost got both of you smeared across the field in that stunt! Were you even paying attention? Are you stupid?" Drac and Perrine couldn't



reply. The furious Koranto had them squashed under his shadow. The best they could do was whimper. “You’re stupid! You’re both stupid! Get the hell out of my sight!”

Koranto watched them scuttle as quickly as possible back into the arms of their parents before stomping off, directing staff to retrieve the remains of the mechs. Drac collapsed in his valet's arms. Sir Darklaird chuckled, red-faced, patting Drac on the back. “I told ya, you guys’d be fine wearin’ your seatbelts! Ha!” Their valet cursed as he helped Drac carry himself down the hall, towards the entrance where their car was parked.

Perrine, between the hugs and the kissing from her mother and father, looked at the Dar’klaids as they left. The pieces clicked. That wasn’t his real father. Without Drac’s cap, it became clear. They had only a passing resemblance, with the dark hair, but Sir Dar’klaird's face was too wide, Drac's too narrow. And nobody would treat their own son so lightly – he acted more as a friend than family. And a terrible friend at that. And their valet. Their valet was always close behind, but not as a dutiful servant but with the hustle of somebody desperately trying to keep something from falling apart. The rush of a child rushing to fix something before their parents noticed. And Drac himself... Tired, underfed... At the start of the year, he looked much better, much more socially active, strong and handsome even. But he became more stoic as time went on, and then his valet appeared, and then his father became more involved... just as he began to need their help, they... conveniently appeared.

Perrine felt her gut twist upon revelation. They weren’t nobles. Perrine was too tired to speak any further that day, but even then, she’s not sure if she could have said anything about it. The Dar’klaird family was truly dead and gone – no heirs to claim, with a ragtag team parading the facade of a recovering house. Drac had hired the valet when he realized he needed staff to look the part, and his ‘father’ was brought in when he realized that it was too suspicious that Drac was doing so much by himself.

But why? Why would these three do such a thing? Prison was more than likely for any layman impersonating a nobility. Some might even have them discreetly killed for it. What was in it for this ragtag band to commit to such a scandal? Perrine had to put it aside for later. She was tired, and went to bed the minute she got home.

\* \* \*

Phil helped Andrew into bed. “We’ll be in the kitchen, just holler if you need something.” Andrew nodded, sinking into the mattress and pillow. What a kid, he thought as he closed the door behind him. Phil was starting to admire what they have done so far. The planning, the scheming, even just getting them a roof over their heads. It was a really nice place, this Noble school temp-house... thing they managed to nab. He even had his own room! Much better than living under the bridge. Playing the part of old daddy dearest was worth it. He met with Oswald in the kitchen. He was still dressed in that fancy vest and bowtie. He was angry.

“What the hell were you doing?”

“Oh come on, you’re still on about that?”

“You were terrible! We were supposed to hype-up the factory, not spill the beans that it’s going to crap!” Oswald began pacing. “We should have never brought you into this...”

Phil pulled a can of beer from the fridge. “Relax, kid. We can still sell the company later.”

“Are you serious?” Oswald slammed his fists onto the kitchen table. “My dad couldn’t sell it to anybody, even back when it was actually profitable. With the guys moving to unionize, there is no Noble insane enough to buy it!”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong.” Phil flipped out a dozen business cards. “Peruse.”

Oswald blinked, holding up one of the cards. Each one was marked with a symbol of a noble house. “How did you get these?”

“I talked with some nobles in the ballroom about the factory, and when we whipped out the mech they were impressed with what your boys could do with practically nothing.” He leaned in. “They’re investors. You and Andrew took a company that’s destitute and built a combat-ready mech that was able to fight a Noble’s custom-job *to a tie*. Plus, kicking in the Luthiers probably helped some. They’ve been close to the Royal Family for a very long time, and have made a lot of rivals over the years. A lot of people are willing to pay to see them get tossed around some more.” Phil leaned back in his seat, smug.

“Jeez,” Oswald shook his head and tossed the card into the pile. “How much can we get from this? Wait, slow down.” His mind began to race. “The plan was to make just one mech, sell the factory and hightail it off-world.”

“That would’ve never worked, kid. Nobles aren’t *that* stupid,” Phil rolled his eyes, “Besides, ‘Drac’ is still in one piece, the duel is over, and it’s not like the mech won’t be repaired later. We can just spritz-up some things and –”

“Are you serious? How can we just ‘spritz-up some things’ to make this alright? What they brought back from the Spiderhawk was in a *pile*. My guys have been waiting on paychecks for longer than a month now. We’re trying to pose as a noble family that’s been dead for decades, hoping to god that nobody notices that we don’t have the deeds to any planet to actually prove that we are nobles. And – oh, right! The kid who started this bullshit fell asleep in the middle of a duel! And we’re now talking with investors?! Does that sound like we can keep this up for much longer?”

Phil shrugged. “It’s nothing we can’t handle.”

“You can’t be serious! What is with you?”

“What?”

Andrew leaned heavily against the doorframe, listening from down the hall. The conversation devolved into arguing, insults and deflection. He slipped back into the room and closed the door behind him. “Back... to work.” He groaned. Andrew opened his computer and began looking at the schematics he made for the Spiderhawk. He squinted, the light made his photo-sensitive eyes ache, even with the screen at its lowest brightness setting. He was too tired to fish his glasses out from his bag or pick his cap off the floor. “Thinner... less armor... quicker...” He began making notes and scrawling on a notepad on the side of the desk. Hours passed as he prepared modifications and specifications to the Mk. II Spiderhawk. Repairs weren’t enough. His hypothesis on dual-form mechanized armor was flawed. He had to rework everything. “Energy output... what was that again?” Andrew opened up his email, Oswald sent him that file earlier... Andrew winced. Dozens of emails from his classmates and teachers sprung up in his inbox.

“Great fight dude!”

“Jeez, I thought that Perrine was gonna wreck you – well, I guess you both got wrecked! Lol!”

“We got good footage of your fight. Be ready to answer some questions when we bring up the video in class this week.”

“what was that ending? lmao i thought you said your mech was going to be good”

“Turn in a physical copy of your Ethics paper before 1900 Hours on wednesday.”

There was a message from Carlin. “The offer is still available, if you plan to fight the Luthiers again.” Andrew deleted that one.

A new message popped up. From mom and dad. Andrew stopped. Right, he forgot to write to them last week. He quickly wrote and sent a brief message just to let them know he was still alive, and lied about being busy at the space station... Just like how he lied about going off-world for an apprenticeship on said station. How he lied about how he was saving up. How he lied about getting ready to get his spaceship-piloting license. How he lied about how he was doing OK...

Tears began spilling out of Andrew's face. He was not doing OK! How did it get this far? Mechs? Nobles? Being yelled at by the most dangerous man alive?! The plan was to seduce some Noble daughters, leave and break their hearts to spite their parents – get back at them for taxing the Laymen for the wars those noble fops started. Andrew didn't realize that he had to work this hard to keep up the disguise. How was he supposed to know that he was expected to have a mech on hand? How the hell did the loan he took out to buy the factory even get accepted? How did he manage to wrangle Oswald and Phil into this mess? How did he lose control to the point of having investors, and being a step away from being a part of inter-House intrigue? Was this what failing upwards is like?

Andrew looked at the time. 1:30 PM. There wasn't any more time to work on this anymore. If he worked until morning again, he'd fall asleep in class. The coffee wasn't doing much anymore, and he wasn't sure if energy drinks would do any better at this point. God knows how much trouble he could have caused if he had fallen asleep on anybody else's shoulder. God, what would have happened if he had fallen asleep in Koranto's class? Andrew pushed those thoughts aside. Sleep, I need sleep. Sleep... He wiped his face and fell into his bed.