

Chapter 1001 Opportunity in Suffering

"We had it under control, Ves. The risks were manageable and we easily achieved our objectives." Leland soothed the recovering mech designer lying limp on his bed inside a military hospital.

"Getting shot in exchange for alarming the Mech Corps doesn't sound like a good deal when I was only one step away from death! Is this how Flashlight treats their own people?!"

"It's not easy to join our ranks, Ves." Leland shook his head. "It's not that easy to join our ranks. You have to show you are willing to do whatever it takes to further our goals. I'm happy to say that your dedication to the agency so has been more than satisfactory. As long as you do your part in feeding the investigators from the Mech Corps the information we want them to obtain, I'm sure they'll move on it with the highest priority."

"It all comes down to the mission, does it?" Ves sighed. "Fine. I'll play along, but Flashlight better compensate me for what you've put me through!"

"Relax, Ves. We aren't in the habit of treating our own people poorly. I'll be sure to write a glowing evaluation of your performance and cooperation as soon as this mission comes to an end."

While Ves was inordinately pissed at Leland and Flashlight for being so cavalier with his life, there was no point in falling out with the powerful agency. The simple rational calculus was that it benefited him more if he remained in their camp than if he decided to cut ties with them out an emotional fit.

As Ves should be under strict guard, Leland couldn't stick around for long. He left the hospital room in the VIP section shortly afterwards.

Minutes later, a military police captain followed by some aides entered the room. "Mr. Larkinson, I hope you have recovered sufficiently to answer some

questions. Right now, it's eighteen hours since you've been shot, but our investigations are still very much ongoing. Your help and insight may be crucial to figuring out why you've been targeted."

Ves smiled sardonically at the clueless people sent by the Mech Corps to question him. They had no idea of Flashlight's involvement.

While he could have spilled the beans on their plans and their attempt at his life, what would that get him? Not only would he become a persona-non-grata to the powerful intelligence agency, the Mech Corps might not even be able to protect him from their inevitable reprisal!

If there was one thing Flashlight hated the most, it was becoming exposes!

Therefore, Ves kept Leland's intentions and mind and planned to spin a tale that aligned with Flashlight's goals. "You're in luck, captain, because I have a pretty good idea who wants me dead."

Ves proceeded to reveal his mostly truthful observations of an alarming scheme to smuggle out military hardware from the KNG's Mosville Complex!

In order to push the Mech Corps into taking a harder stand against the Kadar-Neyvis Group, Ves also sprinkled some exaggerations in his tale. He painted the Mosville Complex as a rotten place where a lot of improprieties happened beneath the surface.

"This is very unsettling news, Mr. Larkinson." The military police captain said with a severe frown. "It is especially alarming to hear that a veteran chief technician is at the heart of this scheme."

"It's not just Chief Errel Nyquist who's conspiring against the Mech Corps for the BLM. I'm certain that Carl Stoddard, the mech designer sent by the higher-ups of the company to supervise the Mosville Complex is a part of this scheme as well. I'm just a liaison mech designer, but I immediately managed to uncover this criminal conspiracy after a week of visits! It's impossible that a

mech designer who's been stationed at the complex for a year is blind to the misdeeds that happen there!"

Hearing that immediately made the expression on the captain more severe. "Are you certain of your allegations?"

"Unless he's the most incompetent mech designer in the Republic, which is extremely unlikely given that the KNG spent a lot of effort in raising him, he is sure to be involved!"

No one except other mech designers and those in the technical profession could call him out on his exaggerations. Even if Ves hyped up the threat, he could still be forgiven considering that Stoddard really ought to be on top of the happenings at the complex.

Right now, the investigators sent to hear Ves out all took in the damning accusations with utmost seriousness.

"Although almost a day has passed, we'll act quickly on the information you provided to us. With any hope, the BLM moles working at the Mosville Complex haven't cleaned up the evidence as of yet. We'll immediately take Chief Nyquist and Mr. Stoddard into custody. With any hope, the ringleaders haven't gone to ground for long."

Ves nodded. "Be careful of boobytraps and sabotage. I can't tell whether the Mosville Complex is rigged to blow, but I also found some other irregularities at their Ansel Complex. You should take every mech technician into custody and test them out whether they're under the influence of a performance-enhancing substance supplied by the BLM. I've seen many of my classmates back on Rittersberg being ruined by the same stuff, so I know what I'm talking about."

"Thank you for informing us, Mr. Larkinson. Rest assured, we will inform the highest authorities on top of this case of your testimony. For now, your duties

as a liaison mech designer are suspended for the time being. Just focus on recuperating for now. You have done us a great service for surviving this heinous assassination attempt on your life. Further merit will surely be in store for you once we follow up on your allegations."

After answering a few more questions, the military police captain quickly left to act on the explosive information. Ves waved them off from his bed and wished them good luck in their follow-up investigation.

Considering that the BLM wasn't responsible for the hit on him, there was a good chance that Chief Nyquist and his accomplices hadn't wiped out the evidence or gone to ground yet. Eighteen hours was a long time for them to erase their tracks, so Ves hoped that the Mech Corps truly took his words seriously as Flashlight hoped to achieve with their outrageous stunt.

"Goddamn Leland." He cursed again.

Ves idly patted his chest and pulled against the collar of his hospital gown to see the damage with his own eyes.

It looked better than he expected.

From what he heard, the burned, vaporized and damaged portions of his skin and flesh had been removed and replaced with flash-cloned tissue.

Ordinarily, this was a difficult and intensive procedure that also took a lot of time, but evidently the military hospital prioritized his emergency treatment and pulled out all the stops to bring him back into a condition where he could talk.

Perhaps Flashlight also pushed the Mech Corps into prioritizing his treatment in the background. After all, the intel he gathered would only be actionable for a short time. The longer it took for him to wake up, the greater the chance the moles at the KNG cleaned up their acts.

Even so, flash-cloning tissue was purely an emergency stopgap procedure as they usually came with a very short and accelerated lifespan. Ves would likely have to undergo several follow-up operations to replace the flash-cloned tissue with properly cultivated cloned tissue.

He'd probably be bedridden for a month or longer depending on the difficulty of the cloning process.

A day went by as he quickly recovered from his weakened state. As nurses occasionally entered to see to his needs, he asked for access to the galactic net.

"I'm pretty bored here. Please give me something to do."

"Let me ask for permission." The nurse replied. "Not every guest in the VIP section is allowed to access the galactic net."

Fortunately, whoever was in charge of this decision threw Ves a bone and allowed him limited read-only access to the galactic net. Unspoken was the fact that the connection would constantly be monitored, but Ves didn't mind that detail.

As soon as he browsed a news portal, he almost vomited out blood when he read the leading headlines!

FAILED BLM ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON A WAR HERO - WILL VES LARKINSON SURVIVE?

LARKINSON FAMILY HAS REACTED WITH FURY AND INDIGNATION!
READ THEIR FULL STATEMENT HERE

AN OUTPOURING OF SYMPATHY! CELEBRITIES, MECH ATHLETES AND
MECH OFFICERS REACT TO THE LATEST BLM ASSASSINATION
ATTEMPT

Ves knew that if the Mech Corps really wanted to, they could have kept everything under wraps. Instead, they decided to publicise the sympathetic tale of a distinguished mech designer and war hero almost getting killed by the BLM to foster support and tarnish the separatists!

At the very least, the drastic story caused his public profile to be raised even further. An assassination attempt on a decorated mech designer was incredibly sensational news! So much so that Ves already encountered ads for the LMC when he skimmed through the articles on the news portals.

"It's worth getting shot as long as the LMC doubles their sales." He jokingly muttered.

Hell, he might even consider staging another assassination attempt on him if he could triple the company's sales.

Of course, that was just an idle fancy. There was no way the public wouldn't grow suspicious when the same thing happened again.

Besides the explosive news on the assassination attempt on Ves, he also read a couple of explosive articles on the KNG.

KADAR-NEYVIS GROUP UNDER SCRUTINY! THEIR FACILITIES IN DORUM, ANSEL AND MOSVILLE HAS BEEN RAIDED BY MILITARY POLICE!

TERRORISTS ATTACKED A KNG MANUFACTURING COMPLEX AT ANSEL! HUNDREDS OF WORKERS AND MILITARY POLICEMEN ARE DEAD!

MOSVILLE BLM CRACKDOWN! FIGHTING AND UNREST OCCURRED AT KNG PLANT AT MOSVILLE! SEVERAL LOCATIONS IN THE CITY RAIDED BY THE PLANETARY GUARD AND MILITARY POLICE!

It turned out that the Mech Corps moved out pretty much instantly after Ves provided his exaggerated testimony. The news portals managed to connect the unsettling events that happened to the KNG with his publicly-known assignment as liaison mech designer to the company.

They also tied the assassination attempt and the chaos that ensued at the KNG's Ansel and Mosville Complexes to the notorious Bentheim Liberation Movement. They detonated planted explosives at each of the facilities, killing many people and forcing every operation to a shutdown.

Ves knew that such a forced halt would hurt the KNG enormously! The company was so dependent on continued mass production that the months needed to repair the damage and hire new emergency workers to replace the dead and resigning workers would be too late to save the company!

"The KNG is financially doomed!"

Even if the detonations hadn't sown as much chaos at the two facilities, the investigations alone posed an incredible burden to the company. The investigators dispatched by the Mech Corps would surely turn every stone around and interrogate every employee of the company. The disruption this caused would slow down the company's recovery even further.

As news of BLM involvement at the KNG continued to proliferate on the galactic net, the company's reputation would sustain irreparable damage as well. The company's reputation would quickly turn so toxic that Ves predicted that Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis could no longer count on their numerous connections to lend them a hand.

Their political connections from Rittersberg? If there was one thing the capital hated the most, it was the separatists that fought to wrestle Bentheim away from the Bright Republic!

Their military connections to the various mech regiments of the Mech Corps? The KNG leaked out their exclusive military mechs and design specifications to the BLM! The Volari Starkhawks and the Sparky Nuts probably hated the KNG and already cut their ties to the tarnished company.

Their local connections to the Neyvis Family? Their influence only stretched so far, and owning a bank wouldn't help much considering one of its biggest investments was already starting to go into a freefall in valuation! The Industrial and Commercial Bank of Bentheim would suffer financial problems of their own soon enough!

As for their underground connections, the Peace Association didn't dare to get involved now that the military moved with full force. The gangs that ruled Bentheim also abided by an unofficial agreement with the Bright Republic to never offer any support to the Bentheim Liberation Movement. Right now, the last thing the Peace Association wanted was to be painted with the same brush as the separatists!

Ves shook his head as he reasoned out how every single connection the KNG previously relied upon for their backing would bail out. "In the end, they are only fair-weather friends. They're willing to stick around when times are good, but the moment something awful happens, they are nowhere to be found."

This incident showed him that relying on backers couldn't solve every problem.

"Even some pirates are more loyal than that." He snorted. "Good friends are hard to find."

Chapter 1002 Burned

A couple of days went by as Ves spent his time in his hospital room in isolation. He knew that a pair of heavily-armed security guards stood outside the door. A whole host of other security measures protected this wing of the military hospital as well, so absolutely nothing should pose a threat to his life.

He chuckled at that naive notion. "I thought I was safe inside the perimeter of a military base. Turns out I was wrong."

What really got to him was that his own side decided to gamble with his life in order to agitate the Mech Corps and shoved them into action!

Their heightened state of alert and the alarm they felt after hearing what Ves had to say on the KNG indeed achieve the drastic effects that Flashlight sought. Certainly, their hasty raids at the Ansel and Mosville Complex resulted in a lot of casualties that could have been prevented if the military police moved slower and planned out their raids in advance.

The blood of the workers and the military policemen that died from those partially-botched raids stained Ves and Flashlight's hands. Yet Ves figured that this mission had definitely ended in success in their books.

So what if a couple of hundred people died? Those deaths only magnified the blame being put on the feet of the KNG. None of the backers who formerly supported the company behind the scenes dared to share in the blame by protecting the company from the storm of criticism from the public!

As Ves stayed on top of recent events through his connection to the galactic net, he felt a little regret at being one of the principal instigators responsible for dragging down this once-promising company.

"Estelle and Antoine doesn't deserve most of the blame." He sighed. "They ran their company to the best of their abilities. Nothing they've done in person can be faulted."

As mech designer and a business owner himself, Ves really sympathised with the tough times they must be going through right now. They didn't make any mistakes by themselves. They just trusted the wrong people too much and failed to put the right people in the right positions.

In short, Kadar and Neyvis failed in delegating responsibilities to others.

Overall, the KNG's current fate served as an object lesson to Ves in the dangers of delegating incorrectly. It was very difficult to screen out bad apples when they did their best to blend in with the good apples.

As the example of the KNG amply showed, technology and other sophisticated means of control only worked up to an extent. It was more important to keep the workplaces staffed with loyal employees that wouldn't let any shenanigans that damaged the company take place.

"So in short, I have to indoctrinate my employees." He concluded.

By aligning the values and beliefs of the workers to the LMC's corporate culture and identity, they would become so attached that they would mindlessly defend the company whenever possible.

It wasn't easy to accomplish such a feat. The workers needed to be treated well and feel valued by the company in order to reciprocate.

Ves believed that the KNG attempted to do such a thing. "It explains why they are paid so well. All the KNG employees I've talked to all professed their devotion to the company."

Still, their enthusiasm for the company was primarily back by benefits. The workers all stood up for the KNG, but only to show their gratitude for all the pay they received.

"In the end, the KNG's attempt to secure the loyalty of their workers missed the mark."

Shared identity could only get you so far. A shared identity based on greed and avarice encouraged workers to look the other way whenever they saw something shady. Ves bet that many workers not involved in the scheme at the Mosville Complex probably received some bribes to ignore some shady activity if they came too close.

"If I want to prevent the same thing from happening at the LMC, I will have to redefine its corporate culture and incorporate some aspirational values and beliefs.

His employees needed to feel pride for their work and share in the dream that Ves wanted to fulfill. They needed to feel as if they were part of a great mission, just like how most of the servicemen of the Mech Corps took pride in their service.

"It's not going to be easy to emulate such a level of devotion in my workforce."

Ves had more than enough time to figure out his approach to this huge and complex issue. Lying around in bed only to browse the news or watching some drama broadcasts only distracted him to an extent.

"I'm a man of action. I'm no longer someone who passively reads the news. I'm influential enough to make the news. As for those silly action dramas, the events I've lived through are a thousand times more exciting than seeing some actors flail around in a simulated studio!"

He used to be a big watcher of galactic drama broadcasts when he was young. Yet once the inexperience of his youth faded away, he lost his interest in fake adventures and contrived storylines.

In truth, Ves wanted nothing more than to design a mech to lift up his miserable mood. Though he didn't have any particular mech design in mind, he just wanted to do his job instead of staying stuck in this tightly-guarded hospital room.

At some point, Ves received a familiar guest.

"How is it going, Ves?"

"Leland! You're my least favorite person from the organization, you know! How dare you return in my presence! I ought to shoot you so you can feel how bad it hurts when you get shot through the heart!"

"If you never want to see me again, you'll get your wish. This is the final time we'll meet." Leland smiled.

"It's done, then?"

"Your mission is a success. Even though events haven't completely spiraled into our preferred direction, the damage the KNG suffered and the backlash that is dragging down the company is more than ample enough to satisfy our superiors. They're pleased. Very pleased. There is no doubt that if you haven't suffered an attack, the Mech Corps would have never acted so decisively. Again, thanks for that. We highly appreciate your initiative and cooperation."

Can you tell me something? What happened to Chief Nyquist?"

Leland frowned. "Unfortunately, Chief Nyquist appeared to have detected something amiss. He didn't show up for work the day after the attempt on your life. He's a careful sort. The only consolation we have is that we managed to nab most of his accomplices, at least those that didn't pull out weapons or detonated bombs in order to go out in a blaze of fury."

"Carl Stoddard, the presiding mech designer at the Mosville Complex?"

"Mr. Stoddard has been taken into immediate custody by the military police. From what they've uncovered so far, even if he didn't have a clue of what went on, he'll still be spending at least forty years behind bars for his monumental mistakes. Right now, the Mech Corps has already confirmed that the BLM obtained valuable military mech parts. The total numbers and the true scope of the scheme is still unclear, but their estimates of missing mechs keep trending upwards."

That practically sealed Stoddard's fate. Even if he only got forty years or so and got free by the end of his lengthy prison term, there was no way he would ever be able to pick up on his life. He would be old and senile once he regained his freedom and would be in no shape to resume his career, especially if he missed out on four decades of advancements in the industry.

Did Stoddard deserve the punishment the Mech Corps had in store for him? Probably not. The man was incompetent, not a traitor. Yet the military police probably already set him out to be some traitor due in part to Ves' allegations.

Even if Stoddard cleared his name on that, he still held plenty of blame, though strictly speaking the blame also extended to the people who assigned him to the Mosville Complex.

"What will happen to Estella Kadar and Antoine Neyvis?"

"I'm not sure yet." Leland shrugged. "They are under an intense amount of scrutiny. Everything sketchy about them is being uncovered right now. You of all people know that business leaders always have a skeleton or three in their closets. Depending on what the investigating authorities find out, prison sentences are not out of the question."

Ves didn't think the two parents deserved such a fate. "Surely they won't land in jail, right?"

"I'm not sure the public can accept letting them go, especially after the explosive news of yesterday. It's clear though that all of their connections feel burned. The KNG's long-standing allies have all cut ties in order to halt the damage to their reputation. There are already some rumblings going on at the Ansel University of Mech Design and the Ministry of Economic Development. Both institutions were closely involved with the KNG, so both of them also got burned the most."

A bit of schadenfreude suffused Leland's voice. He, and by extension Flashlight, clearly took pleasure at their misfortune.

"What about my mission? Now that I've completed it, what's in store for me, Leland?"

"Right now, we don't plan to assign you anywhere near our organization. For some reason, the Mech Corps decided to use you as a propaganda tool to fire up the public. You're way too high profile now that we won't be able to move you without attracting a lot of unwelcome attention from the Mech Corps. They'll make their own arrangements for you, I suspect, but it shouldn't be anything arduous or risky."

With all the dangers Ves went through, the Mech Corps better not put him back in danger again. "What about my rewards? You guys better pay me back extra for going the extra mile!"

Leland slightly shook his head. "That's not how it works. We reward our people based on their merit and accomplishments. That's slightly different from the amount of effort you put into accomplishing your objectives. We don't care about the process, only the result. For example, there's no difference to us between killing an important individual by firing a laser pistol at him, stomping him flat with a mech or to bombard his entire location with an artificial asteroid. We only care if that person is dead without exposing who is behind the attempt."

"Ah. I see." Ves understood the message. "Even so, the KNG is practically doomed and all of their backers have suffered varying amounts of backlash. MinEcDev, Spotlight, the AUMD and all the organizations you seem to have a beef with are probably looking at themselves in a mirror wondering if they made some wrong decisions. This is what you really set out to do, right?"

"Correct. With your help, we've managed to issue a severe wakeup call to those complacent organizations. They have all took the war for granted to the point of pursuing their own interests to the detriment of the state."

Ves at least didn't think that Leland lied to him about this. Even if Flashlight only sought to slap the faces of those arrogant institutions, the events set in motion would genuinely strengthen the Bright Republic in the long term. If all went well, they should be a little bit more careful in the companies they backed.

"My reward, then?"

"It will take some time for the entire incident to blow over. We'll tally your results and contributions and pay you what we owe to you. I've already received word that we are already in the process of changing the ownership of the shares in your company that's held by the Ministry of Economic Development. Moving too quickly will attract too much attention, though, so you'll have to wait until after the end of the war for the transfer to be completed."

"That's better than nothing." Ves muttered.

"I should go now. Remember to keep your mouth shut and you'll have a splendid time with us. By the way, you have other guests waiting outside. I've taken the liberty to arrange their entry into this guarded section of the hospital for you. Remember, even if we can't transfer you as we wish, we're constantly keeping an eye on you! Don't say anything you're not supposed to say!"

As Leland disappeared from sight, the door quickly open to allow two women to enter. Ves perked up from their arrival.

"Calsie! Ketis! Why are you here?!"

He then noticed the mechanical pet bundled up in Ketis' arms. His eyes practically bulged when he spotted the comm that held the vitally important Mech Designer System around Lucky's collar!

Why did they bring along Lucky as well?! Who knew how many eyeballs stared at them at this moment!

Chapter 1003 Brief Reunion

Ves always yearned to take possession of the Mech Designer System again despite its complex origin and hidden dangers. His time with the Mech Corps and Flashlight exposed him to so many dangers that he felt horribly inadequate at the challenges facing him. Improving his Attributes, acquiring new Skills and purchasing some life-saving talismans would go a long way in improving his odds for survival.

Yet now that it was just meters away from him, he did not even dare to glance at it even once!

It was too dangerous at the moment!

Even if he could make use of his personal comm's Privacy Shield and Stealth Augment to hide his form from electronic and biological monitoring, it would still raise too many alarms. In the worst case, the security guards stationed outside might barge in and inspect everyone's possessions!

Ves could not risk exposing the System, even indirectly!

Perhaps he could fool some standard monitoring systems and some normal security guards, but Leland had only just disappeared from the room!

Considering how crafty and devious the Flashlight intelligence officer turned out to be, Ves could not rule out that he remained in this room under stealth or that dozens of analysts observed a live feed of the room at this very moment!

As the fake assassination attempt on him already proved, Ves should know better than to underestimate Flashlight!

Therefore, even though the temptation called out to him, Ves already resolved to leave the System alone for a while longer. While improving himself could make him stronger and increase his chances of survival, the opposite would happen if he carelessly showed off the System in front of Flashlight.

"Ves, Mr. Larkinson, I'm sorry." Calsie apologetically bowed. "I haven't managed to take good care of the Living Mech Corporation. Our debt burden has grown so large that we've had to take on new loans to pay off the old loans."

That sounded very bad. It meant the company hadn't been earning enough money to cover their short-term debt obligations. Rolling over debt like this only made the debt burden snowball into an even greater burden in the future.

Without an increase in earnings or a significant outside investment, the LMC would never be able to escape such a huge debt trap!

"You don't have to apologise." He replied gently. "I've already heard some of the details from Marcella Bollinger. You did the best you could under the circumstances and kept the company afloat. The debt that's piling up is just a sum of money. When I get back, I'll find a way to reduce the burden. For now, you should keep doing what you can to keep the company afloat."

He didn't tell her about how the Ministry of Economic Development would soon divest themselves from his business. The transfer of ownership would only take place after the war.

"Tell me a bit more about the business. Have sales recently spiked?"

Calsie smiled. "That's some very welcome news. I don't know what you and Marcella did, but all the media exposure has revitalized our sales. When word about your near-death and the scandals at the KNG became hot news recently, I made sure to pull out all the stops to advertise your connection to the LMC. Interest in our products have spiked and our sales volume has

doubled! We're doing so well for the moment that we've increased our prices and stopped incurring more debts."

"That's good to hear."

"It's hard for a mech company to stand out in the market." She smiled bitterly.

"We're really lucky that you stood out in the news, especially in such a good light. The veteran demographic has become some of our most important customers now, and I think their loyalty to our brand will endure the most."

Publicity raised interest, and interest led to increased sales. Yet playing around with publicity was a double-edged sword. Right now, with the help of the Bright Republic's propaganda machine, public opinion firmly stood on his side, but how long would that last? The next time Ves might show up on the news, it might cast him in a negative light instead!

Even though any publicity no matter how bad it sounded led to increased sales due to allowing his company to stand out from the crowd, Ves knew it would be difficult to keep the public interested.

Right now, Ves didn't believe he had the charisma necessary to form a cult of personality for the benefit of his company. Certain 'celebrity' mech designers easily drew attention from the media with their antics, thereby raising sales of their mechs like other celebrities raised the sales of the products they sponsored.

Even though Ves tasted the benefits of celebrity recently, he felt it would be a better idea to keep his head out of the clouds. In the end, the most reliable way to sell mechs was to keep designing good products. So long as his core business was sound, buyers would continue to purchase his mechs.

He said as much to Calsie. "Don't go too far with wild promotions, and don't try and rush production at the expense of quality. While it's important to make enough money to keep the company afloat for the next five years, it's very

hard to regain our reputation for quality once we slip up. Focus on running a steady business instead of profiteering from the moment."

"Got it." She nodded.

The two discussed some more business decisions, but Ves only made an idle comment every now and then. He already resolved to overhaul the company's entire structure in the future once he returned. Therefore, while the current situation didn't sound very great, it at least ensured the company's stability in the short and medium term.

"How are the Avatars of Myth doing?" He asked.

"Melkor couldn't come as he is still needed to hold down the fort at the Mech Nursery." Calsie replied. "He's managed to raise a full company of mech pilots based around a core force of Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords. He's especially ecstatic about the latter."

"How about the spaceborn mech contingent? If I recall, the Avatars should have received the two light carriers that I've previously ordered."

Calsie's smile grew strained. "About that.. As money is rather tight lately, Melkor and I have decided it would be unwise to expand our mech roster. Right now, we've already hired more than forty mech pilots, but Melkor thinks it's better to hire and train some spares as private sector mech pilots can't be expected to be available for duty all the time like servicemen."

"Ah."

This was an important difference. Just because the Avatars of Myth hired forty mech pilots didn't mean that they could deploy all of them at the same time. They all received the same rights as every other mech pilot working in a private capacity, and that meant giving them plenty of off-time to spend with their families or on something else.

"That's a prudent decision. I approve." Ves nodded. "What about our ships, though?"

"Well, Fleet Commander Rofane who you've hired to take charge of our light carriers is quite pissed off that they're relegated to taxis for landbound mechs. He threatened to quit several times because he feels his abilities are going to waste."

Ves waved an indifferent hand. "Let him go if he wants to. You don't have to bend over backwards to retain him. We can always find someone else to lead the fleet."

They talked a little bit further before Ves became satisfied with the existing arrangements. The Avatars of Myth had already undergone a few scuffles since the war broke out as the Mech Nursery was an attractive, isolated war target to the BLM and the Vesians.

Yet the strength the Avatars showed surpassed the previous desperate defense effort against Lady Amalia's small raiding force.

Even though they numbered fewer mechs in total, the Avatars consisted entirely of either midrange or premium mechs. On top of that, all of the mech pilots that Melkor hired all possessed prior battle experience, with many of them even consisting of veterans.

While it was very expensive to retain so many well-trained mech pilots, their worth immediately became clear as the Avatars of Myth could easily leverage the fixed defenses of the Mech Nursery to repel twice the number of attacking mechs!

The cost of raiding the LMC's Mech Nursery thereby grew to such an extent that it formed a significant barrier against any plots to attack the manufacturing facility!

Once he finished talking to Calsie, Ves turned his attention to Ketis. "How have you been holding up all this time?"

"Pff." She snorted. "Civilized space is such a boring place. There's hardly anywhere to go for a good fight. Your spoilsport of a cousin Melkor even forbid me from bringing my greatsword outside! Says I threatened to chop up too many people! How else would I let others know I mean business?"

Ves smiled haplessly at her. "That's life in the Republic. Don't underestimate the amount of trouble you can get into if you get into a fight with someone. How is your mech design work going?"

"I'm bored. There's nothing to do at the LMC except to study your books. Nobody there wants me to design mechs for the company. They say I'm not good enough."

Ketis threw a stink eye at Calsie, probably resenting her for being one of the critics.

"They're all right." He said. "You still have a ways to go before you can become a qualified mech designer for the LMC. For now, why don't you practice with designing virtual mechs? That's how I used to practice my design skills. The LMC may not accept your designs, but it's different for virtual mechs."

She looked thoughtful at that suggestion. "I've heard of it but I never bothered with it before. Back in the frontier, it wasn't exactly easy to open a design account for those virtual mech simulator games."

"That won't be problem here. Did the Mech Trade Association add you to their membership rolls?"

"They did."

"Then that means you're already eligible."

"Really?"

Mayra didn't invest a significant amount of her fortune for nothing. While any crook could forge an identity on the fly, it took a lot more effort to construct one tight enough to endure a casual scrutiny from the MTA!

"Do yourself a favor, Ketis, and start getting some practice in. While designing virtual mechs is simplified in many ways from designing a real mech, you'll still be able to get the hang of the latter. Start with purchasing an existing virtual license of a good mech and play around from there. Right now, it's too much for you to design a mech from scratch."

Even though Ves disparaged mech designers that continued to stick to designing variants, it nonetheless offered an easy path to greater proficiency for starting mech designers. Right now Ketis desperately needed to flex her design skills while she was still young and malleable.

"By the way, Ves, Lucky here missed you too. Go give him a smooch!" Ketis said and threw the mechanical cat at Ves!

"Oof!"

Though Lucky landed on his healing chest with some force, causing him to utter out a cry.

"Meow!"

However, his irritation quickly faded as Lucky rubbed his cheek against his body. Ves truly missed his pet's company. He idly rubbed his companion's back with a smile, though he also did his best to avoid staring at the comm dangling around the neck.

"You didn't get into trouble lately, did you Lucky?"

"Meow." Lucky replied ambiguously while he continued to act cute.

Ves had a feeling that Lucky wasn't entirely being truthful in his answer, but it probably wasn't a big deal. Surely he couldn't have stirred up any major trouble on a quiet planet like Cloudy Curtain, could he?

"Did Lucky get up to any mischief while I wasn't there?"

"Not as far as I know, boss." Calsie shook her head. "He's been a great companion to me so far."

With Lucky's combat and observational abilities, he formed the best bodyguard to Calsie while she continued to lead the company. Seeing as his cat faithfully follow his instructions on this matter made him feel relieved.

"Good. Make sure to keep a handle on him and don't let him wander around."

Chapter 1004 Family Business

Due to the threats on his life and concerns about his recovery, Calsie and Ketis couldn't stay for long. They said goodbye shortly after and brought Lucky away as well.

Ves had mixed feelings seeing Lucky being brought away. Several times during the meeting, he continually wrestled with the temptation of accessing the System. It truly pained him to see it go out of reach like a drug addicts seeing his next fix taken away from him. In fact, the yearning he felt right now was so strong that he became aware of how unhealthy it was to fixate on the System!

"I'm not addicted!"

He shouldn't have lost his composure like that. Even though the System helped him out a lot, he was also painfully aware of its contentious past. Whether the fabled Metal Scroll truly existed or not, Ves did not want to become a convert to the beliefs of the Five Scrolls Compact and begin to worship the System as a god.

"I feel like I need some perspective."

Spending years without the System opened up his eyes to the life of normal mech designers. It was hard for them to improve themselves, but their experiences during their struggles shaped their design philosophy and strengthened their mentality.

Something obtained from his own efforts was much more rewarding than redeeming something from the System!

Ves predicted if he continued to use the System as his personal shopping mall, he would have eventually grown so dependent on its conveniences that he would have completely lost the heart to struggle.

Without a will to fight and improve against all odds, how could Ves ever hope to make the jump from Senior to Master? As omnipotent as the System appeared, the only knowledge it offered was settled science and insights that already existed.

If Ves advanced to Senior purely by the System's merit, he would have lacked the crucial practice and experience in improving himself and seeking out new innovations. How could such a lame and inauthentic Senior Mech Designer ever hope to develop his design philosophy into completely uncharted territory?

Therefore, Ves shouldn't be so hungry to make use of the System again! At best, he should regard it as a supplement to accelerate his mech design career. The entire way he approached the System previously needed to be completely changed.

His ultimate goal was to enable him to advance to Master on his own strength!

His other goal was to become less dependent on the System!

Therefore, instead of improving himself directly with the use of the System, he would rather gain the foundation that allowed him to improve through his own effort.

"Well, all of this is a consideration for the future. For now, there's no point thinking too far ahead." He muttered.

Now that the System fell firmly out of his reach, he stopped thinking about it and turned his attention to his immediate future. What would happen after the military hospital finished their treatments?

As nurses dropped by to feed him or attend to his needs, he kept asking them, only to receive an empty answer.

"I'm just a nurse, Mr. Larkinson. Someone else will decide on your next assignment."

These nurses truly knew nothing, so Ves stopped bothering them on this question. He actually felt a little discomfited at the lack of information flowing his direction. He could truly use a little clarity right now, but it appeared that the Mech Corps didn't bother with him during his month-long recovery period.

So Ves pretty much treated his stay at the hospital as a safe and uneventful reprieve from the war.

Two weeks after his first admittance, Ves recovered well enough to be able to exit his hospital room. Each day, his guards would lift him onto a hover chair and brought him outside his stuffy hospital room to get some fresh air and interact with the other patients.

He met plenty of recovering servicemen during these daily airing sessions. Some of them looked like important people and would always be accompanied by a pair of guards. Others turned out to be regular people who for some reason or another had been lucky enough to obtain their treatment at this premier facility.

Talking with these injured soldiers spiced up his days, and Ves always enjoyed chatting with them even if neither of them talked too much about their experiences.

To many of them, this recovery period offered them a much-needed vacation from the fighting! Therefore, they would rather talk about the latest matches of the mech games than how the fighting progressed at the frontlines.

It kind of felt like being back at the Larkinson Compound to Ves.

Aside from these idle interactions, the Mech Corps had been generous enough to loosen their visitor policy for him. This simple measure assured Ves somewhat that they still valued him to an extent.

Though her duties kept her very busy, Captain Melinda Larkinson tried to visit as often as she could.

Out at the rooftop courtyard of the main hospital building, Ves idly stared out at Dorum's cityscape. Melinda found him there and walked over to the side of his hover chair.

"Aren't you afraid someone will hack your chair and force it to fly over the ledge?"

"This chair is powerful enough to remain afloat. Even if it fails, I can still make use of an emergency antigrav module to stall or slow down my fall."

Besides, the guards standing behind his back would do their best to catch him in the air as well.

"Still, for someone who recently survived an assassination attempt, it's awfully reckless of you to tempt fate."

"You're right." Ves shrugged. "I'm just a bit too bored here. Let's go inside."

He commanded his hover chair to turn around and return to his hospital room.

Along the way, Melinda told him the reason of her visit today.

"I didn't come here just to check up on you. I'm here on behalf of the Larkinson Family."

"Family business, huh?" Ves muttered. "Did grandpa send you?"

"Yep. First, he told me to inform you that the family has been exerting their influence on your behalf. They managed to have some say in your next assignment. If everything falls into place, you'll probably be pulled out of Bentheim but won't be sent anywhere dangerous. It's not that hard to convince our allies that you've more than done your duty. The scandal at the KNG exposed similar kinds of rot in subsequent investigations in several other companies."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrows. This was news to him. "They didn't mention any of that in the media."

"The Mech Corps doesn't want the news to spread around. Even the names of the companies involved is a secret. If all of their dirty laundry became exposed all at once, it would severely damage the public's confidence in the Mech Corps and our local mech industry."

"Shouldn't you keep your mouth shut in front of me if that's the case?"

"You're already cleared to know this much. Right now, my superiors at the Planetary Guard are very pleased with you for preventing the BLM from obtaining more military mechs. It's a shame we hadn't been able to stop it earlier. We don't know how many military mechs they got their hands on, but several mech regiments are already being pulled back to Bentheim to reinforce our defensive strength."

"I'm happy to be of service." He replied. "Tell grandpa I appreciate his efforts, though he doesn't have to work too hard on my behalf."

Melinda shook her head. "Even if his influence at the Ministry of Defense is limited, he can still rely on the Larkinson name to move some decision makers. To the Larkinson Family, your existence is vital. We don't want you exposed to any further danger. When you almost got killed, many of the old

geezers at the Larkinson Compound practically jumped out of their skin! Without you, the LMC is worthless!"

"So all of their concern for me is about the money I bring in for the family, is that right?" Ves smiled sardonically. He should have known. "Well, you can reassure them that I have no intentions of ever getting shot through the chest again."

"That's good to hear, Ves. I'll be sure to pass on your completely sincere remark to the older Larkinsons." She chuckled. "Seriously, Ves, it's kind of crazy that a mech designer like you is exposed to so much danger. Is the Larkinson name and reputation giving you any trouble?"

He waved away her concern. "Nah. I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Anyway, aside from looking out for your interests at the Mech Corps, the Larkinsons have also discussed about the role the LMC will play to the family in the future. A lot people in our family are beginning to see the benefits of owning shares in such a rich and profitable company. They want to increase their involvement and send more Larkinsons and family retainers to come work for your company."

Ves shook his head. "Tell them I've received enough of their help for now. The company can stand on its own for now."

He already instructed Calsie to prevent such insertions as best as she could. While the Larkinsons probably considered the LMC as their family business, to Ves they didn't deserve that honor. It would have been a different story if they invested in him from the start, but only his father deserved his gratitude.

"The Larkinson elders won't like that answer."

"It's my company, not theirs. I decide how I run my company." Ves declared in a domineering manner. "You can tell the Larkinsons back home exactly who's in charge."

Melinda shrugged. She didn't care so much about the business aspect of the family. She was just a Planetary Guard officer, after all. "Whatever you say, Ves. Aside from that, they also offered to send some of our Larkinson mech pilots to bolster the ranks of your personal mech force."

Ves looked perplexed. "What? They actually want to send family members to make up part of the Avatars of Myth? What kind of Larkinsons are they planning to send me?"

"A mix of young and older mech pilots. For now, they only plan to send their old retired Larkinson mech pilots to bolster the training and elevate the quality of the people you've already hired. Once the war is over, some of the younger Larkinsons will probably want to settle down and leave the Mech Corps once they have the opportunity to resign from military service."

As a Larkinson, Ves knew quite well how much of a benefit it would be to employ a number of Larkinson mech pilots. Their foundation, steadiness, discipline and more all reached a very high standard!

While plenty of military mech pilots surpassed them in skill and experience, the most important fact was that mech pilots of their caliber were extremely hard to entice into joining a private force like the Avatars of Myth.

If Ves could employ just a dozen Larkinson mech pilots, then he could form an elite squad that could be relied upon to fight even under the direst circumstances!

Yet... such strength never came for free. Even if the Larkinson Family only wanted to place more Larkinsons around Ves and the LMC to safeguard their stake in the company, Ves did not know how he should feel about relying on the Larkinsons to form a part of his security.

"Let me think about it." He said, eventually deciding to punt on the decision. "Tell them that no matter who they send to the Avatars of Myth, it's my

personal force. I won't allow any Larkinson to usurp control over the force I raised with my own funds. If any of the older Larkinson mech pilots aren't willing to follow my orders, then they shouldn't bother joining."

"Alright, Ves, I'll pass that on as well. Personally, I don't see what the big deal is. Having more family around will do you some good and reassure the Larkinsons that you have all the help you need whenever you or the company encounters trouble."

"I understand their concern, but I started my business away from Rittersberg for a reason."

As someone who joined the Bentheim Planetary Guard instead of the Mech Corps, Melinda understood his underlying reason. Still, she had her own opinion on the matter.

"You don't trust a lot of people, do you, Ves? You really ought to consider letting more family into your circle. Aren't you pleased with Melkor? Think of what you can do with ten more Larkinsons who are just as good if not better than him. There's no way you can run your entire enterprise alone. You need people you can trust to take care of issues on your behalf. Who better can you turn to besides your own family?"

That was a good question. Ves softened up a little.

Chapter 1005 Another Visi

The experiences that Ves went through recently severely eroded his confidence in trusting others.

When people like Leland who smiled in his face but ordered a member of the strike team to ruthlessly shoot him in the heart, how could Ves ever retain his innocence?

Hanging around a ruthless intelligence agency like Flashlight harshly taught him to never let down his guard. Trusting others completely was sheer folly.

Therefore, Ves already saw that he would have some issues when he returned to his business at the end of the war. How could he be comfortable with delegating responsibilities when there were so few people he could trust?

In a way, relying on family members instead of complete strangers served as a convenient solution. Even though most Larkinsons would only work for him and his company due to the desires of the Larkinson Family, they could still be helpful to Ves in holding down the fort.

Yet Ves did not wish to see his company turn into a family business. When family blood instead of competent and qualifications determined someone's position in the company, the LMC would eventually decline.

While family businesses brought some merits, Ves did not feel relieved at the thought of involving the Larkinsons even further.

Could he trust the Larkinsons enough to represent his interests?

Ves shook his head. If he answered that question right now, he would definitely answer no. As long as his answer remained the same, he would never be willing to hire more Larkinsons and allow them to extend their influence in his company.

The LMC was his property! Why should he work so hard to grow his company if he didn't feel a sense of belonging for it? Ves believed he obtained sufficient leverage and achievements to stand on his own. He had never relied on the Larkinson name to help him grow his business.

After Melinda left, Ves continued to spend his time in recovery. After multiple rounds of surgery, his body finally regained its stability. Although cloned tissue wouldn't immediately work as flawlessly as original tissue right at the start, time healed most of the differences. Ves wouldn't notice any discomfort after a few months, especially with his augmented physique.

The doctors who treated him constantly expressed their astonishment at his unique body state. The most troubling issue was that Ves couldn't prevent them from taking blood samples. He could only hope that a high-ranking member of the Five Scrolls Compact didn't break into the military hospital and seek out his blood samples and test them in person.

He snorted. "The odds of that happening is as large as the bright president coming here to cook dinner for me. There's no way that someone so important will personally do such a thing."

As far as he knew, the Flagrant Vandals and various hospitals already stored some samples of his blood. All of them formed potential risk factors, but Ves had no way to get them to destroy the samples without arousing suspicion.

Ves would probably have to advance to Senior or Master to be able to gain enough clout to get those institutions to destroy his blood. Even then, he couldn't guarantee that they would secretly fudge the request and sneak a couple of drops away for later study.

All in all, Ves did not feel very reassured about these loopholes.

As Ves continued to hold complex thoughts over various issues, he received another visitor at the tail end of his stay at the hospital. He already received word some days ago that he would soon be discharged and sent back to New Foundation V to report for his next assignment.

Surprisingly, of all the visitors he received so far, he never expected Raella to arrive.

"Why are you here?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Raella replied indignantly while pressing her fists against her waist. The bundle of flowers in her hand swayed in the air. "You let Melinda visit you every three days, but you're surprised that I'm paying a visit as well?"

"I'm sorry, Raella. I shouldn't have said something like that." Ves sighed. "I'm genuinely glad you dropped by. I'm just surprised security let you in considering your... association."

She smirked at him. "Heh. You know nothing, Ves. The Blood Claws may not be friends with the government, but we're quite friendly with the military. Part of the reason why we're tolerated is because we have pledged to defend Bentheim against the BLM and the Vesians. We've cooperated many times, you know? The Glowing Planet campaign is just one instance where we fought alongside each other."

That made a lot of sense. Ves nodded. "Okay. In that light, I guess the military doesn't have anything to fear from you. Besides, we're family."

As Raella settled down in his hospital room, they filled each other in on their recent experiences. Ves couldn't say too much except to express some overall feelings.

Raella on the other hand experienced a bit more excitement since the last time they met. "I've received the three Crystal Lords from your company. They've been very helpful for me. I've gifted all of them to three senior Blood Claws."

"Did you succeed in raising your status?"

"Yup!" She nodded with satisfaction. "I'm on the up-and-up. While I'm not a long-standing member of the organization, there's already talk of putting me in charge of something. I'm kind of borrowing your reputation to boost my importance. I hope you don't mind."

Ves knew he couldn't stop her from doing that. Besides, connecting Raella to him in the eyes of the Blood Claws benefited him a lot. "Go ahead as you don't implicate me to any of your shady business. Just remember that I'm

primarily running a legitimate business. Make sure the LMC's mechs isn't involved in any massacres or something."

"Hey, the Blood Claws aren't that bad! We hardly ever fight for real. We've got enough rep on Bentheim that practically no one has enough guts to challenge us!"

It turned out that Raella hadn't come for business. She just wanted to get in touch again before the Mech Corps whisked him away. Ves felt touched by her concern. Despite her irritable exterior and her separation from the Larkinson Family, she still cared about family.

"Raella, can I ask you something?"

"What are you after? What are you working towards? Surely you don't want to fight in the underground arenas forever?"

She turned serious in response to his concern. "When I joined the Blood Claws as an underground mech athlete, I just wanted to prove my skills to the galaxy. I've fought a lot of duels and even if I didn't win all of them, I did manage to make it out alive. Still... you're right. I can't envision stepping into the dueling ring forever. I've been working on climbing up the ranks. It won't be easy, but I've got some advantages."

"The Larkinson name doesn't give you any trouble?" Ves questioned.

She shrugged. "Not as much as you think. It's mostly an advantage since they know I'm a good mech pilot due to my name. They aren't very apprehensive towards me. They don't fear any spies in their organization."

Ves didn't understand how the Blood Claws worked so he took her word for it. Raella wanted to live her life in her own way and Ves knew better than to attempt to temper her independent streak. That was how she separated from the Larkinson Family in the first place.

"You're very well informed of what goes on at Bentheim, right?"

"I'm not one of those strategic thinkers, Ves."

"Do you believe that Bentheim is being targeted?"

"Yup. Everyone who lives here can smell it. With all the recent stuff on the news, anyone who thinks otherwise is an idiot."

That caused Ves to frown. Signs of an impending invasion would certainly impact ongoing trade at the port system. Even though the Vesians and the BLM hadn't launched their attack as of yet, the mere threat of it already inflicted incalculable economic damage to Bentheim!

"What are the Blood Claws going to do if an invasion actually happens?"

"We'll fight the good fight. It's what we do. Even if we don't have the best reputation, the Blood Claws considers Bentheim as their home. We'll defend it to our death!"

Raella sounded very sincere in this declaration. Ves looked at her with concern. Had the Blood Claws already worked their indoctrination on her? Hopefully she had better sense than that. Territory could be gained and lost at any time.

After a couple of minutes, she quickly left. They didn't have much in common and this wasn't the place where they could talk with ease.

As Ves watched her leave, he hoped that she would truly be able to survive long enough to be promoted out of the arena battles.

"I'm a decorated mech designer while Melinda is already Planetary Guard captain. Scores of other Larkinsons have distinguished themselves in battle and gained promotions. Raella better not be falling behind."

His current generation not only grew older, but were being baptized by the current war. Some of them thrived and gained greater status while others never distinguished themselves as much as they expected.

However, not every Larkinson would be able to survive. Too many of them returned home in coffins, both filled and empty ones, as a testament to the random vagaries of war.

Although neither Raella nor Melinda joined the Mech Corps, their current positions also exposed them to significant threats. The fact that both of them worked on Bentheim potentially put them right at the frontlines of the big battle between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom!

A few days after Raella stopped by, the military hospital finally saw fit to discharge him. Once he ended his stay there, an armored shuttle quickly picked him up and brought him straight into the sky and into orbit.

"Where are we going?" He asked one of the guards stationed in the shuttle.

"We can't say, Mr. Larkinson. We only received orders to accompany you to Foundation V." The guard stoically replied.

Ves couldn't figure out why he needed to report to Foundation V in person. Couldn't he have received his new transfer orders via his comm or a messenger?

Perhaps the Mech Corps intended to assign him somewhere closer to the seat of their power. In any case, it was useless for Ves to speculate.

The armored shuttle slowly docked at a military space station, whereupon his guards quickly shuffled him out. After a lengthy walk through the space station, they finally marshalled him onto a military convoy vessel.

Ves didn't pay much attention when the ship separated from the space station and joined a convoy before transitioning into FTL towards the Rittersberg region.

With all the stops on the way, it would take around three weeks at minimum to complete the trip. Along the way, Ves had very little to do aboard the vessel.

Fortunately, nothing of note happened during the entire trip. This far in Republic territory, the Vesians never threatened the local shipping lines.

While it was a little awkward for him to spend his time with guards watching every move he made, he quickly got used to their presence.

Considering the recent attempt on his life, he shouldn't be surprised at the security measure.

It just made things a bit more difficult when he visited the toilet. The stupid guards received strict orders to never leave him out of sight even for a single instant!

Therefore, it was safe to say that he never enjoyed a relaxing bathroom break.

"Goddamnit. Don't you two have any sense of shame?"

The two men remained silent underneath their enclosed helmets.

"I hope you enjoyed the view." Ves muttered spitefully before stomping away from the bathroom.

The pervasive guard presence irritated him even as he acknowledged their necessity. After his actions on Bentheim, the BLM would surely put him back in their crosshairs!

This was also why the Mech Corps pulled him out. Remaining there posed too much of a risk for him, and the power of the BLM drastically weakened the closer he got to Rittersberg.

Ves only wondered what the Mech Corps had in store for him next.

Chapter 1006 Lieutenant Colonel Xelven

The New Foundation System bustled with traffic. Just like the last time Ves visited this strategic defensive bulwark, large amounts of carriers, transports, cargo haulers and more vessels traveled in and out of the system.

"As if it is a single part in a giant machine called the Bright Republic's war effort."

With an impending attack on the Bentheim System looming over the horizon, the Mech Corps scrambled as much mechs and resources they could spare to reinforce their critical port system and the ultimate goal the Vesians claimed to fight for. Once the Bright Republic lost the Bentheim System, their fates would be doomed!

The Vesians already possessed two port systems, so if they received the third and most strategically-placed one, they would hold absolute dominance over all the trade that flowed through their region of space!

The economic prosperity of both states would see such a marked divergence that the Bright Republic would definitely succumb in the next war!

Therefore, even if the Brighters believed the threat might be a ruse to lure the Mech Corps away from defending other strategic star systems, they simply couldn't afford to neglect Bentheim's defense.

If Ves studied the troop disposition in the New Foundation System a bit deeper, he might discover the absence of a few elite mech regiments that ordinarily guarded several important facilities of the Mech Corps.

The military supply ship separated from the convoy after arrival. The vessel travelled to the inner system and went through a number of checks before being allowed to dock at a space station orbiting New Foundation V.

Once Ves disembarked from the ship, his guards guided him through the clean but upscale interior of the Spindle Station. Instead of sending him to a shuttle heading down the surface, they instead guided him towards an office compartment aboard the station.

They deposited him outside the hatch leading into the office of a high-ranking officer.

"Please wait here, Mr. Larkinson." One of the guards said. "Lieutenant Colonel Xelven will see you soon."

An unfamiliar name. Ves never heard of this figure before, but his high rank made Ves rather apprehensive. Why was he taken here? What did the Mech Corps want from him this time?

Though he figured the Mech Corps wanted to station him away from Bentheim due to his high profile, why did bring him all the way back to New Foundation V?

Ves waited quietly outside the office for over half an hour. Twenty minutes into his wait, someone else arrived and sat on the row of chairs placed in the corridor to accommodate waiting visitors.

The newcomer appeared garbed in a typical outfit for government officials. The man glanced at Ves and immediately took in his mech designer service uniform and his ribbons, both of which replaced his older, destroyed ones.

"Ves Larkinson! What a pleasure to meet you!"

This wasn't the first time Ves got that kind of greeting. With his face plastered over the news throughout the entire Republic, Ves had somehow joined the ranks of famous Larkinsons that many people recognized by sight.

Though he became kind of irritated by these kinds of encounters, Ves still returned a polite smile. "In the flesh. And you are?"

"Preston Lowe. I serve as a secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

That caught Ves' attention. Did Preston Lowe's presence have anything to do with his next assignment?

"Oh? What does a secretary do at MinFA?"

"I assist ambassadors and head of missions in performing their diplomatic functions." Preston said proudly. "The Bright Republic has exerted much effort over the years to keep the neighboring states placated. The Coman Federation and the Independent State of Pillis are especially vexing to communicate with. Reaching a common understanding with people who possess a vastly different viewpoint than us is very challenging, but necessary towards our survival."

As Preston bragged on a bit further, Ves realized that Preston merely served as an assistant to a real diplomat. Even so, his job often saw him arranging meetings, drafting important documents and tending to the needs of visiting high officials.

In other words, he must have seen a lot during his work.

"I must say, Mr. Larkinson, I'm still surprised to see you here. You have made quite a splash at Bentheim. Although considering what is in the works, perhaps your presence here does make sense. You are certainly more eye-catching than other mech designers."

"Do you know what this is all about?"

"I have some clues, but it is not my place to tell." Preston smiled coyly.

Ves did not have to wait for long because the hatch to Xelven's office slid open. After another official type walked out, a voice called for Ves to enter.

"After you." Preston said with a smile.

Once he entered the office, Ves saw that the desk on the other side was empty. Instead, he encountered two people sitting at some comfortable seats next to a coffee table.

One man appeared to be Lieutenant Colonel Xelven. The man sat next to a vaguely familiar official.

"We meet again, Mr. Larkinson. Please sit over here."

He finally recalled where he saw the man. This was Alistair Cordwraith, one of Senator Tovar's executive assistants!

"It's nice to meet you as well, Mr. Cordwraith."

Ves sat down on the opposite side of the coffee table. A cup of specialty tea had already been prepared for him, and for the sake of politeness, he grabbed the cup and took a sip.

Bland. While Ves vaguely tasted a complex blend of tastes, he would have rather added some sweetener to make it taste less like plain water.

"Are you enjoying your tea?" Colonel Xelven asked. "Don't answer that, I can tell you have no idea of the value of what you are drinking."

That reassured Ves a bit. Xelven seemed to be a straight shooter. "I would prefer it if we could move on to business, sir."

"Ah yes. We've recalled you from Bentheim rather hastily I'm told. It's a bit serendipitous but your recovery period has given us a good excuse to employ you in a lighter capacity than the job you held before."

That puzzled Ves. A mech designer working as a liaison for the Mech Corps already held one of the least demanding positions imaginable.

For some reason, he thought this might have something to do with Senator Tovar.

Mr. Cordwraith smiled and put down his tea cup on the saucer. "Colonel Xelven exaggerates somewhat. Let me start at the beginning. Do you recall the outcome of your last mission? The help you have given us has significantly strengthened Senator Camden Tovar's stature within the diplomatic community of the Komodo Star Sector. So much so that Tovar has hatched an ambitious plan that will change the very fate of the Bright Republic!"

This sounded rather preposterous to Ves. Senator Tovar hadn't even enjoyed his new lease of life for long and already he was throwing around his weight like he was a four-hundred year old relic?

Then again, what did Ves know of high society.

"The Bureau of Sector Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has worked closely with Senator Tovar to see if his plan is feasible." Cordwraith continued. "Surprisingly, some of our foreign counterparts are quite receptive to the possibilities, so we have agreed to meet and hold clandestine talks at a neutral state. Ah, that is all I can reveal to you at this time. You will have to sign some non-disclosure agreements before we can discuss any further."

Ves looked confused. "Could you please enlighten me why I am involved? I do not have a background in diplomacy so I fail to see why I'm being told of such a development."

"Senator Tovar personally asked for you to be part of his diplomatic mission for the upcoming talks." Xelven said plainly. "While Senator Tovar is appointed by the Republic to represent the interests of our state, it would be rather undignified to send him out alone. He will need secretaries and aides to take care of the details and provide expert opinion. As a distinguished mech designer with several notable accomplishments under your belt, you are uniquely suited to represent the interests of the Mech Corps and the Republic as one of our technical attachés."

This sounded rather fishy. Ves frowned deeply. "To be frank, sir, I am not entirely certain that my presence will benefit the diplomatic mission. I do not have the knowledge or experience required to be of any use for high-level diplomatic talks."

"Your presence alone is enough of a boon." Cordwraith said. "Another Senior Mech Designer has already agreed to be the principal technical attaché of the delegation, so you are not expected to shoulder any onerous duties."

Cordwraith and Xelven left most unmentioned, but Ves could read a bit between the lines. Hearing that another Senior Mech Designer would already be present to do the actual work, Ves figured his presence served a completely different role.

Likely, Senator Tovar caught mention of Ves in the news in recent times and figured that he'd be a great addition to the mission.

His goal in the delegation wasn't to extend his technical expertise. Instead, they wanted Ves to show up in full dress and wear his eye-catching medals to impress the other party!

It galled Ves a bit when he figured this out. Senator Tovar was far too meddlesome for his own good. Who wanted to be used as a parade horse?

However, Ves had to admit he also grew a bit curious at what the reinvigorated senator planned to accomplish with these secret talks. He felt as if this invitation was an opportunity to witness something that could result in a drastic change of the war situation!

From the looks of it, Mr. Cordwraith and Colonel Xelven did not expect no for an answer. When someone as important as Senator Tovar called, nobody in their right mind would slight him and refuse.

While Ves did not want to be involved with the Tovar Family at all, this mission sounded as if it involved the entire Republic instead of just a single founding family.

Although the risks did not sound very small, the curiosity and the desire to experience something new and exciting pushed him to accept his new mission.

Ves closed his eyes for a moment. "I accept. What do I have to sign?"

"Great!" Colonel Xelven dug out a data pad and placed it on the coffee table. "Please sign the documents on the pad."

As Ves picked up the pad, he skimmed over the documents before signing each of them. All of them contained the usual thick legalese that spoke of dire punishment should Ves ever spill out secrets and so on. Everything looked standard and nothing gave out any details on his next assignment.

Once Ves finished signing the paperwork, Colonel Xelven took the data pad back and handed over a small box.

"This is for you."

Ves opened the box to see that it held two brand new medals.

"For your meritorious service on Bentheim, the Mech Corps has seen fit to bestow you with the Mech Corps Distinguished Service Medal. In addition, for the injuries you've suffered while in the line of duty, you are also awarded with the Vermillion Heart."

While Colonel Xelven made it sound as if the Mech Corps already intended to bestow the medals to him, Ves couldn't help but be suspicious at the timing. Did he only receive these rewards after agreeing to get on board the mission because they wanted to pad him up with extra awards?

He refrained from shrugging. Whatever. He wouldn't say no to more medals even if it played into Senator Tovar's political interests.

"Am I finally allowed to know what this diplomatic mission is all about, colonel?" He asked.

Colonel Xelven adopted a severe tone. "What I'm about to tell you is highly classified. The documents you've just signed aren't just a courtesy. They are vitally necessary to maintain the confidentiality of Senator Tovar's aim. The controversy alone if word of his plan leaks out might be enough to topple the current administration!"

This sounded incredibly serious! Ves gulped. "Who are we negotiating with?"

"We intend to hold peace talks with a royal delegation from the Vesia Kingdom. We want to bring the war to an early end!"

The news utterly stunned Ves. Tovar wanted to negotiate an end to the war two years early from the end of the previous wars! This was a huge bombshell that came with huge implications to both sides!

Chapter 1007 Charm Offensive

Ves still hadn't recovered from the explosive news. Both Cordwraith and Xelven found his shock to be amusing.

"This is.. incredibly ambitious, sir!" He uttered.

He didn't say this without a reason! Both sides accumulated an incredible amount of grievances, and while both sides started to tire from the fighting, they hadn't bottomed out their reserves yet!

As long as either side could still fight on, they would definitely continue to press on! Only until attrition sapped the strength and fighting will of both Mech Corps and the Mech Legion did the war finally end.

In every previous war, it usually took at least four years to reach that point. While both sides could still fight a while longer with what reserves they still managed to muster, it wouldn't be good for either of them to exhaust all of their fighting forces. That only left them vulnerable to the preying of the neighboring states.

While many people yearned for the war to be cut short, nobody actually thought that it could be accomplished. Too many people wanted to fight. Powerful interest groups in both states eagerly wished to gain accomplishments in the war to fuel their domestic ambitions. This was especially egregious among the Vesian nobles!

Therefore, Ves could not figure out how the Vesians would ever agree to an early peace.

Mr. Cordwraith laid out some of the calculus behind the seemingly impossibly early peace talks pioneered by Senator Tovar.

"The highest authorities of the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom recently came in the possession of alarming information that makes it detrimental for us to continue to fight against each other. To our surprise, the royal family of the Kingdom has responded positively to our overtures and are willing to come to the negotiating table to explore the possibility to end the war within the year."

The royal family? Wasn't that a joke in the Kingdom? "Will the royal family be able to represent the entire state?"

"Good question." Cordwraith smirked. "I understand your skepticism, but we all have to start somewhere. Despite what the common people believe, the Vesian royals aren't toothless. We believe that they are capable enough to sway some of the powerful duchies on their side."

This sounded like a contentious matter. If the royals wanted to negotiate an early end to the war, they needed to offer something attractive enough to the nobles to get them to agree with the early peace.

If the Vesians didn't receive enough concessions, then an early peace would be too hard to swallow for them. They'd rather continue the fight if that was the case! Vesian nobles were so disunited that the only way to get them on the same page was to offer them rich rewards!

On the other hand, if the Bright Republic bled too much to obtain this peace, Senator Tovar and all the other advocates of peace would lose all of their support and credibility! The Bright Republic did not spend countless lives over the centuries to defend against Vesian aggression only to succumb and concede a large amount of territory to the scum!

All in all, Ves currently saw no hope that these talks would ever be able to succeed, yet what did he know? Mr. Cordwraith and Senator Tovar probably knew a lot of secrets and other information that might have led them to believe this deal had a chance to actually go through.

Someone as small as Ves wouldn't be privileged to know that sort of information. No, his job was merely to look impressive and pretty at the sides while the real adults held their discussions.

Still, this might be an interesting and unique experience for him. Unfortunately, it also came with some risks according to Colonel Xelven.

"Make no mistake, Mr. Larkinson. Part of the reason for the confidentiality is because various influences and factions in both states deeply wish to keep fighting. They are not above playing tricks if that is what it takes to end Senator Tovar's initiative. While I'm not able to estimate the danger level, this will not be a problem-free assignment, do you understand?"

Ves nodded. "I understand, sir."

It seemed like he wouldn't be getting the cushy rear assignment he hoped for. Still, to be part of a bold initiative to end the war sooner than everyone else expected was a noble cause. Even if Senator Tovar of all people tried to accomplish it, that did not set aside his own desire to end the senseless bloodshed.

"While we do not expect too much from you, we do not intend for you to remain idle while we are holding the talks." Mr. Cordwraith said. "An important aspect about any negotiation of this nature is to charm our counterparts and attempt to reach a common understanding. Someone with a colorful background as yours will attract quite some attention."

This made Ves feel a little nervous. "I'm supposed to woo the Vesian delegation?"

"Not so strongly, but we do hope you can hit it off with a Vesian or two. By befriending some the Vesians, we might be able to employ you as a backchannel to conduct some secret talks, or we might be able to add some clauses to the peace treaty that contains some cooperative aspects."

Ves didn't quite understand how that worked. "Is that really possible?"

"The best deals are made when both sides hit it off. It's easier to agree to terms with friends rather than enemies. By doing your part in befriending the Vesians, the odds of success grow slightly more optimistic. Even then, the probability that our talks end well enough to agree to the terms of a peace treaty is only fifty percent at most."

In other words, nobody knew if what they attempted would ever bear fruit.

"Is that all my role extends to?" Ves frowned. He hardly knew how to approach such a strange demand.

"For now, we do not expect anything else from you, Mr. Larkinson." Colonel Xelven shrugged apologetically. "The upcoming talks are highly controversial

and if anyone gets wind of it, the chance they might attack is very real. We cannot afford to bring along too many critical individuals to the peace talks, but neither can we bring along a hollow delegation. The Vesians might suspect our sincerity. It is already enough of a risk for us to invite a crucially important Senior Mech Designer. Sending you in place of a second Senior will not do our delegation too much of a disservice."

Because Ves earned a lot of prestigious awards. This was what Ves amounted to. A poor replacement for a second Senior Mech Designer.

If the peace talks ever went awry, the Bright Republic would incur a lot of losses if Senator Tovar died. If a Senior Mech Designer died as well, the pain would be almost unbearable. If they lost another Senior on top of that, then the criticism that resulted from this botched attempt to end the war would result in a huge backlash!

Therefore, those who supported the initiative wanted to hedge their bets and send out as few core people as possible without presenting a weak front to the Vesians.

Even though Ves became famous recently, his fall would not impact the Republic substantially. Compared to the pain of losing a Senior, the loss of a single Apprentice hardly mattered.

Both Cordwraith and Xelven made it clear to Ves that he should leverage his fame and his accomplishments to go on some sort of charm offensive. All of this would take place in an informal setting outside of the formal peace talks.

While Ves still held a lot of questions, this wasn't the time to ask them. According to what he heard, this delegation had been set up on short notice, but everyone needed to move quickly. The longer they lingered here, the higher the chance the hostile factions might find out about the initiative!

Colonel Xelven motioned his hand in dismissal. "A fleet has already been prepared for departure. You'll be brought to another star system and be transferred to a disguised civilian trade convoy where you will get to meet the other members of the delegation."

Eventually, Ves walked out of the office in a daze. Preston Lowe got called up next and he enthusiastically entered the office for his own meeting with Mr. Cordwraith and Colonel Xelven.

"This is a bit abrupt."

The guards that previously accompanied him already disappeared. They wouldn't be a part of this mission.

After fiddling with his comm, he followed the route to his next berth. Eventually, he entered a nondescript convoy vessel which carried supplies to a far-flung star system near the borders of the state.

As the ship joined a convoy that went on its way, Ves enjoyed an uneventful time. Two weeks passed by as Ves remained in isolation in order to reveal as little of his presence as possible.

At the end of the route, they emerged at a sparsely populated star system where a handful of ships and mechs awaited their arrival.

Ves transferred to a modestly-sized passenger ship called the Felicitous Remembrance. While outwardly the Remembrance resembled a run-of-the-mill vessel for long transits across states, he recognized many expensive alloys that invisibly strengthened her structural integrity.

While the Remembrance would never be able to match the resilience of a combat carrier, she came respectably close! It would be no problem for this supposed civilian vessel to survive a few direct hits!

Signs of understated luxury also suggested that a lot of money had been invested in the Remembrance. From handmade sculptures to fresh exotic flowers, the luxury aboard this vessel seemed designed to cater to a sophisticated taste.

After undergoing a brief introduction, he met up with Mr. Cordwraith right outside the biggest stateroom of the Remembrance.

"Senator Tovar wishes to see you in person." The executive assistant told him as he eyed Ves' current service dress uniform. "I see you are already wearing your new ribbons. Good. You can go in now."

Ves entered a luxuriously furnished stateroom that took up way too much space than necessary to accommodate a single passenger. He ignored the astonishing sights and instead walked up to the statesman, who appeared to be engrossed in studying a star map of the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

Dozens of star systems at the border blinked red, signifying their takeover by the Vesians. The Bright Republic still held their ground somewhat, but the red thrust aiming straight towards Bentheim appeared incredibly alarming!

Ves realized that it was highly inappropriate for him to study this map. This was because it conveyed the current state of the war as well as high-level status updates of each ongoing battle taking pace at this very moment!

"Ahem." He awkwardly coughed, trying to get the vigorous old man's attention. "You called, senator?"

The senator still studied the map without acknowledging his presence.

Ves considered whether he should come closer, but the security guards standing unobtrusively at the sides began to twitch when he took a step.

He halted. "Senator?"

Nothing. Apparently, Ves needed to wait until Camden Tovar finished whatever he was doing right now. It reminded Ves of his intensive design moods where he put his full concentration on designing the best mech that could match his vision.

Was Senator Tovar doing something similar right now? Did he construct a vision of the future, and was he attempting to design a framework for the peace talks that could make his vision come true?

It sounded ridiculous, but right now Ves thought the analogy to be remarkably apt.

The stakes were incredibly high for the upcoming peace talks. The person responsible for bringing this initiative into motion shouldered a huge burden.

Yet just like a motivated mech designer, Senator Tovar believed he could engineer a solution even if no one else believed it was possible!

Ves admired that courage! Seeing how the senator put his full mind and effort to this upcoming task gave him hope that the peace talks might actually stand a decent chance of success!

Chapter 1008 Strange Meeting

"Ah, Ves Larkinson. You've arrived." Senator Tovar abruptly said as he turned his gaze away from the detailed star map. The projection instantly winked out at a single gesture of his hand. "I must say, you have proven to be a pleasant surprise to me. I never expected you to be able to set off the KNG Affair as it has become known. Perhaps I misjudged a bit. You seem to be a better fit for Flashlight than I realized."

"Ah, you know about my association with Flashlight, sir?" Ves widened his eyes.

Tovar smirked at him. "I know many things. As far as Flashlight goes, their goals partially align with mine. The ripple effects of the KNG Affair serves as a

shot across the bow to the rent seekers and profiteers within the Republic that they should serve the state more sincerely."

Ves suddenly realized that Flashlight might be more intricately connected to Camden Tovar than he initially thought. Could he be in charge? That didn't seem likely. The other founder families would never let a single rival take charge of the powerful and largely unchecked military intelligence agency.

Even if Senator Tovar might not call the shots at Flashlights, his informal ties to the infamous agency alone gave him a sufficient amount of influence and access!

All the rules about keeping Flashlight confidential didn't apply to the powerful senator! Compared to the nobles of the Vesia Kingdom, Senator Tovar possessed influence comparable to a duke that ruled over an entire territory in an almost autonomous fashion!

The Tovar Family was pretty much a noble house in all but name, one that held a lot of the levers of powers within the Republic.

Ves saw an opportunity there. Since he was already meeting face-to-face with one of the most powerful politicians of the Republic, why not take advantage of that and express some of his opinions? Since Senator Tovar looked at him favorably, he didn't see the harm in trying.

"The KNG Affair is just the tip of the iceberg, sir." Ves stated boldly. "What happened at the KNG is probably happening in many other mech companies as well. I understand the military depends on their production capacity to supply them with mechs, but not every company is as diligent in safeguarding their military production."

Senator Tovar raised an eyebrow at him, as if he was amused at Ves' transparent lobbying attempt. "A panel has already been convened to

entertain suggestions on how to improve the current processes to prevent a repeat."

"I've heard about that, sir, but most of the people who joined the panel are business owners and high-ranking mech officers. I'm not questioning their competence, but they are similar to Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis who let something happen right underneath their noses for several years!"

"What are you suggesting then, Ves?"

"It's strange that the previous liaison mech designers assigned to oversee the KNG's military production hadn't spotted a clue. They've grown far too comfortable with their jobs."

Senator Tovar frowned. "I have little say over how the Mech Corps assign and instruct their liaison mech designers."

In other words, certain powerful people wanted the position of liaison to continue to be used to place well-connected mech designers far away from the frontlines. By allowing them to supervise the military production of a company based in Bentheim, they could spend most of their time visiting coffee shops during the day and partying at various nightclubs during the night.

Since Tovar implied that he wouldn't be able to change this corrupt mechanism, Ves took a step back and provided an alternative suggestion. "Oh I'm sure that most liaison mech designers are already.. busy. Considering the large amount of responsibilities that liaisons need to fulfill, why not provide them with an aide or two? Involving more people ensures that all of the work that needs to be done will be addressed in a timely fashion."

"I don't think adding more mech designers will solve the problem."

"Then don't assign mech designers to the liaisons. Instead, why not draw upon professionals with plenty of technical expertise? They don't need to be

chief technicians. Any mech technician with an abundant amount of experience working in large mech workshops or manufacturing complexes will do, sir."

The senator took his words seriously. "That is a remarkably insightful suggestion. I can see the merit in this proposal, even if the Mech Corps will abhor having to make new procedures to implement it. I'll take it up with a member of the panel later."

"Thank you, sir. I'm just doing my part for the Republic."

"Hahaha!" Tovar laughed. "This is the kind of drive I like to see! You are a credit to your family. You Larkinsons have always remained loyal to the Republic, and although it is a pity that your predecessors have never entered the political arena, perhaps you might be the first to step inside the ring."

Ves smiled nervously at that. "I appreciate your compliments, sir, but I am firmly committed to running business."

"Prudent choice. Well, you can't have everything." Tovar shook his head. "Let us move on to business. Has my assistant brought you up to speed?"

"Yes. He informed me that you are appointed by the government to head a delegation to meet with the Vesians to negotiate a possible end to the war."

"You are correct, but not entirely." Tovar said. "While I do carry official sanction, only a small portion of the government is aware of my mission. We cannot allow the skeptics, naysayers and warmongers to find out about this attempt because they will do their best to stop us from succeeding."

"Pardon me for my skepticism, but can it actually be done, sir?"

Senator Tovar crossed his arms. "You won't be so skeptical once you obtain the full picture. Both the Republic and the Kingdom has better things to do than to let the current war run its course. It's incredibly destructive and it will

take far too long for us to regain our strength. Even if I can convince my Vesian counterpart of the necessity to end the war, too many institutions are opposed to a premature peace. It is the role of our delegation to find common ground with the Vesians."

"What is my role in this? I've heard from Mr. Cordwraith that my presence would be helpful somehow, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to fit in this kind of setting."

"The diplomats and I will take care of the formal diplomacy. The attachés we are bringing along will sometimes be called to lend their expertise to us, but they are also charged with bonding with the Vesian attachés. Due to your peculiar status, you are very well suited for the latter duty."

Ves wanted to sigh. "I'll do my best, but could you give me some advice? I don't have a good picture of what I'm supposed to be doing. It would help me a lot to hear what you expect from me, sir."

Although Senator Tovar looked a little bit irritated, he nonetheless took the time to answer.

"You are expected to interact with the members of the Vesian delegation on a regular basis. Most of them will consist of Vesians aligned to the royal family, so they are not as clannish as the Vesians who have pledged their loyalty to the dukes. Try and see if you can't befriend their mech designers. We will also welcome any other friendships. The more, the merrier. Once you build up a rapport with the Vesians, report back to us and we'll make use of your personal ties to suggest some collaborative projects."

"I see, sir."

Ves did not look very hopeful that any sort of collaboration could take place between the two bitterly hostile states. In fact, he heard quite enough. He just

wanted to get out of the same compartment as this old fossil and get this entire mission over with as soon as possible.

As for making friends with Vesians? He'll see.

Unfortunately, the old man did not dismiss him just yet. "Let us take a seat."

They both moved over to his desk. As the senator took a seat behind the desk, he began to sink his chair and lose himself in the sensation.

"Ah. I have never felt so comfortable in my long life. I really have to thank you again for helping me rejuvenate my life and regain some of my physical prime."

"I was merely doing my duty, sir."

"Tell me, what do you think of the current state of the Bright Republic's mech industry?"

Oh boy. Ves had a lot of opinions about that, but he wasn't sure it would be wise to voice them all to Senator Tovar. Besides, why did the old man bring this up?

"I think the Bright Republic has a strong market." Ves said. "Our mech designers are sensible and while many of us fail in our businesses, those who succeed are able to compete against some of the best commercial mech models for sale in the entire star sector."

Tovar nodded in agreement. "Business is a battlefield. It is no less bloody than the actual fighting at the frontlines. We are not in the habit of raising flowers in a greenhouse. I am sure that an entrepreneur such as you experienced difficulties in trying to compete against all the high-quality foreign mechs for sale in our domestic market, but it is only through opening the gates that we are able to develop strong mechs."

"The proportion of mech sales that originate from domestic producers is a bit low, in my opinion." Ves said carefully. "Even the companies headed by our Senior Mech Designers do not always enjoy great success in competing against the mainstream mech models peddled by the enormous trans-galactic enterprises."

"That is a valid criticism, but a little hardship does them a lot of good. We can't make our Seniors feel too comfortable. They already enjoy a lot of renown in the Republic. Do you know that many of them have graduated from Ansel?"

"The Ansel University of Mech Design is the best institution to study mech design in the Republic." Ves stated.

"Yet a talented mech designer like you emerged from the Rittersberg University of Technology." Tovar suddenly poked, striding into dangerous territory for Ves. "Strange, that. Your academic records doesn't suggest that you possess the ability that you have shown shortly after your graduation. Yet inexplicably you've managed to rise like a rocket, to the point of gaining the acknowledgement of a young Master Mech Designer of the Friday Coalition."

Ves knew that the early parts of his career always served as a huge anomaly to anyone reading his record. He couldn't provide a good explanation for his rapid improvement. It wasn't as if he could mention the System as the reason for his sudden rise!

"Rittersberg may not enjoy the best reputation, but the professors there are all proper mech designers who have instilled the right mindset and values to their students. I'm eminently grateful for them to have shaped my perspective on mech design in a sober fashion. As for my later achievements, the financial difficulties my father's absence imposed upon me has forced me to work hard and study harder than I have ever done so before."

That was pretty much a nonsense answer, and Ves figured Senator Tovar wouldn't be fooled at all by his words.

The senator indeed gave him a sharp glance, but didn't go into it further. "Very strange, yes, but the success you've achieved in your business career has paved the way for your subsequent achievements in your service to the Republic! I am very grateful for that. Mech designers like you prove that Ansel does not hold a monopoly on producing the best mech designers of the Republic."

"Any school can produce a talented mech designer." Ves stated. "I think that most lack opportunities after they graduate. The mech industry are all too willing to invest in the business ventures of Ansel graduates even if they are average while they completely neglect graduates from my own alma mater despite their excellent academic results."

Even an aberrantly competent mech designer like Patricia moved to the Friday Coalition for some reason.

"Your words have merit. Ansel is too powerful. Worse, this school is intricately tied to Bentheim."

The senator shook his head. "Alas, breaking a school where most of our Senior Mech Designers have come from is an impossible dream. This is also the greater problem with mech designers, you see. Too many of our influential mech designers are rooted in Bentheim. You're a rare exception to the rule. Not only did you study at Rittersberg, your extended family is also based there. And while your mech company is highly involved with Bentheim, you've cleverly set the foundation of your company a star system away."

Ves figured that Senator Tovar was attempting to drive at something by these remarks. "You think too highly of me, sir. I was just making the best business choices at the time."

Tovar smiled speculatively at Ves.

Chapter 1009 Clou

Ves exited Senator Tovar's magnificent stateroom in confusion. The conversation took a strange direction at the end, and he couldn't quite figure out the old man's intentions.

He did figure out one thing, though. The senator's interest in him had increased, and Ves did not know whether that was good or bad. As much as he benefited from having a powerful backer within the government, he had no illusion that the senator truly valued him more than a useful tool.

As a mech designer, Ves worked with various tools. "A good tool is hard to find, but I won't cry if it breaks. I'll just get a replacement."

He witnessed various instances of leaders sacrificing others for their own purposes. From Calabast using up the lives of her operatives to Senator Tovar treating the 6th Flagrant Vandals as a gambling stake to win the jackpot of his life, powerful people did not shy away from sacrificing the lives of their subordinates to get what they wanted.

Even so, the people working under them did not get a raw deal. They remained in service for a reason. Often, they received rich rewards and their families would get taken care of. Loyal service to a powerful individual or organization allowed someone to elevate their own station and build up a path towards a better future.

Having witnessed what really went on among the various rivalling government institutions such as Flashlight and the Ministry of Economic Development, Ves began to think it was unavoidable for him to remain uninvolved in politics.

For now, Ves managed to obtain Flashlight's recognition and backing. Yet Flashlight possessed a substantial if ambiguous connection to Senator Tovar. This basically meant that Ves might have inadvertently joined the camp of the

Tovar Family without even realizing it before he actually met with the old man again!

"Damn!"

This might have been one reason why Senator Tovar diverted some of his valuable time to meet with Ves in person. The senator thought he was welcoming someone who aligned with the Tovar Family!

Ves shook his head. "Well, it's not as if the senator is skimpy on his rewards."

He patted his chest where two extra ribbons joined his previous collection. It was almost inconceivable for a mech designer to earn these awards. Carrying them certainly impressed the citizens of the Bright Republic, yet would the Vesian delegation feel the same?

He still didn't even receive a clear picture on how he was supposed to act during the peace talks. Obviously, he wouldn't be allowed inside the confidential conference room where Senator Tovar and his equivalent from the royal house conducted their high-stakes horse trading.

Instead, Tovar told him to hang around outside and try to befriend the other Vesians in the same position as him. Apparently, bringing along interesting fellows like Ves to meet with other interesting fellows from the other party happened all the time in these kinds of gatherings.

Shortly after the arrival of Ves and some other key personnel, the Tovar Peace Delegation finally set off to a surprising destination. When Ves asked a crew member where they would be heading, he received a surprising answer.

"The Reinald Republic agreed to host the peace talks. They've set aside a place for the talks at Harksenen II."

Ves blinked. "The Harkensen System? Isn't it extremely busy?"

"The brass seem to think that they can hide themselves the best if they're in a crowd. All kinds of shady types visit the Harkensen System on a daily basis, so our disguised fleet won't catch any attention."

Hearing that they would be visiting the Harkensen System again made Ves feel as if he was revisiting the past. He did not enjoy the best time there, and the chaos on Harkensen I severely damaged the star system's standing as a safe destination to relax and partake in the underground markets.

Even so, the Tovar Peace Delegation would not be cutting straight through hostile territory in order to reach the Reinald Republic. Instead, the fleet would take a very wide detour around the Vesia Kingdom and reach the Reinald Republic from the other side.

The fleet centered around the Felicitous Remembrance intended to expedite their travel by travelling through various port systems. This allowed the fleet to traverse a much greater distance with much greater time savings.

Even so, the extent of their detour still meant that the fleet would only be able to reach the Reinald Republic in one-and-a-half months. That didn't sound very bad as they would mostly be safe by sticking to the major shipping lines, but it left Ves with very little to do except to get to know the crew a bit better.

Due to the high degree of confidentiality surrounding the peace talks, almost no one except Senator Tovar and some other key personnel retained access to the galactic net. Everyone else got their access cut off, leaving them isolated from the greater galaxy!

Fortunately, Ves hadn't been stranded on the Felicitous Remembrance without guidance. Preston Lowe found him again as he whiled away his time in his luxurious cabin aboard the passenger ship.

"Secretary Lowe, is it?"

"Ah, you remember me, Mr. Larkinson." The diplomatic aide bowed. "I've been assigned to meet the needs of our various attachés, which includes you. I understand that someone as young as you might be lacking some direction right now. If you have any questions, now would be the time to ask."

Ves truly wanted to obtain some answers to his questions.

"Alright. Who are the people in charge of conducting the negotiations?"

"Senator Camden Tovar is the principal representative of our government." Preston smoothly replied. "However, aside from setting overall policy, the senator will likely leave most of the daily talks to Lieutenant Colonel Xelven from the Bureau of Sector Affairs."

Ves frowned at that. "Why a military officer?"

"Forging a peace between the Republic and the Kingdom requires the cessation of military conflict. The thorniest issues and the biggest headaches we expect to encounter all relate to the contradictions that have developed during the war. Therefore, since the bulk of the peace talks will involve military concessions, it is best if we can rely on Colonel Xelven to stay on top of these topics."

"Having a member of the armed forces lead the talks will also placate all the servicemen back home when the peace treaty is finally revealed." Ves guessed.

"True. Even if we managed to survive the arduous talks and sign a successful agreement with our Vesian counterparts, it is still a tall order to convince the rest of the Bright Republic of its necessity. It is essential for us to get the military on our side. Therefore, Senator Tovar has given Colonel Xelven wide discretion on the direction of the talks."

That sounded like a very major concession at first, but Ves figured that the Bureau of Sector Affairs might possess some connections to the Tovar

Family. After all, for Senator Tovar to trust Colonel Xelven to this extent would be unthinkable unless the military officer threw his lot with the Tovars.

Everyone aboard the ship possessed some connections to the Tovar Family, Ves belatedly realized. There wouldn't be any independents accompanying the peace delegation to the Harkensen System.

"How many attachés has Senator Tovar brought along?" He asked.

"Around thirty, all told."

"Thirty!"

"Do you think that's much? That's fairly small considering the monumental nature of the peace talks." Secretary Lowe shook his head. "All the prior formal peace talks between the Republic and the Kingdom involved hundreds of attachés at a time. Each of them lent their expertise to to hammer out the specific details of some of the terms of the peace treaty."

According to Lowe, Senator Tovar invited various experts from almost every part of Brighter society to take part. The various attachés consisted of an eclectic mix of military officers, government officials, academics, bankers, industrialists and so on. Each of them held some weight in their circles.

In fact, Ves stood out as an attaché because he wasn't at least fifty years old and familiar in the upper echelons of power in the Republic!

"You're kind of the odd man out, Mr. Larkinson." Secretary Lowe warned him.

"While your recent achievements garnered you a lot of respect from the republic, the people that have joined this delegation are all great men and women who have accomplished much more in their lives. As a junior, you must pay great attention to your conduct. Be respectful and be mindful of your place."

"I get it." Ves smiled sardonically. "I'm just a little fish in a pond of big fish. I should keep my head down lest I get eaten."

"I am glad to see you recognize the overall situation. In truth, I believe much of the Vesian delegation will also consist of senior military officers, government officials and business magnates. As a younger member of our delegation, you will have a hard time mixing in with them. Let us hope they have also brought a number of young people along."

Ves did not think himself any lesser than any of the other business owners that accepted Senator Tovar's invitation. Due to his younger age and shorter career, he hadn't managed to transform his business success into clout.

Without clout, he held no influence among the upper society of the Republic. Not even his Larkinson name allowed him access to this exclusive circle.

Something like clout could only be accumulated over time. It took more than a successful business and a notable reputation to impress the old hands who had been running the various core aspects of the Bright Republic for decades if not longer.

"What can you tell me about the other mech designer of the delegation?"

"Ah. You must be talking about Professor Corus Ventag. As a mech designer, you must have heard of him, right?"

He did. Ves memorized the identities of almost every Senior Mech Designer based in the Bright Republic. This wasn't very hard as most of them either led their own mech companies or became tenured professors at various universities and institutions.

Even most of the Senior Mech Designers who partnered up with the Mech Corps or Flashlight also held publicly-known positions.

Ves tried to recall what he knew of Professor Ventag. One detail immediately stood out. "He teaches at Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation, right?"

"The DCTI is the professor's alma mater as well. He is one of the few Senior Mech Designers of the Republic who isn't related to the Ansel University of Mech Design."

This must be the main reason why Senator Tovar associated with Professor Ventag. With the senator and Flashlight's seeming preoccupation against the AUMD, Professor Ventag offered him a powerful connection to the mech industry that wasn't involved with Ansel's incestuous alumni network.

He also recalled another major fact. "Professor Ventag is also the founder and CEO of NORA Consolidated!"

NORA Consolidated was a big name in the Bright Republic's mech industry. While it wasn't the largest mech company, it could absolutely rank among the top due to the incredible diversity of their products.

Professor Ventag's specialty was rather vague in that he focused his efforts on revolutionizing damage control in mechs. This did not restrict him in the type of mechs he designed, so NORA Consolidated offered a very expansive mech catalog which sold almost every type of mechs aside from heavy mechs!

In fact, Professor Ventag gained something of a reputation for being an all-rounder within the mech industry. He didn't design any flashy or extreme mechs. Instead, he designed simple, functional and efficient mechs that did their jobs in the most expedient fashion possible.

NORA Consolidated became known as the biggest players in the midrange mech market. They gained a reputation for great quality control and offering reasonable prices for very reliable mechs.

While the lack of flashiness and extremes prevented the company to stand out in the market, it nonetheless managed to gain a large amount of loyal followers who came to trust the company's brand.

Ves respected Professor Ventag for achieving this much! Best of all, unlike Professor Velten, Professor Ventag was merely around eighty years old, which meant he had plenty of years ahead of him before he needed to retire!

Chapter 1010 Senior Woes

Obtaining the first round of life-prolonging treatment may be out of reach for the average people, but a Senior Mech Designer was never hurting for money.

Seniors normally spent an inordinate amount of time, money and resources to progress their research. At this stage in their careers, many Seniors valued their research over their companies. However, it took an extremely long time for them to obtain any breakthroughs.

Most never managed to achieve any breakthroughs in their lifetimes.

Therefore, they diverted some of their efforts into earning huge amounts of money to be able to afford the first round of life-prolonging treatment from the MTA.

While expensive, a Senior possessed enough earning power to pay for the treatment within their lifetimes. Such expensive treatments were normally out of reach to Journeymen.

Of course, this situation only applied to third-rate states. In a second-rate state like the Friday Coalition, certain wealthy Journeymen or those who possessed powerful backers got to extend their life by a century without sacrificing too much.

This essential difference in earning power strengthened the mech industry of the Friday Coalition because these Journeymen gained an additional century

of lifespan to advance to Senior. This in effect gave second-rate states a much higher proportion of Seniors, so much so that the rate of Masters emerging from the crowd subsequently increased as well!

However, if there was one flaw about Seniors who advanced late, it was that they usually held very little promise. Seniors based in the Republic who advanced through their own hard work under less-than-ideal circumstances were not inferior than the Seniors based in the second-rate states!

Seniors wished above all else to realize their design philosophy and turn the impossible into reality. In pursuit of their advancement to Master, the longer they lived, the greater the chance they accomplished their greatest desire.

Yet to obtain the second round of life-prolonging treatment required them to pay an exponentially greater amount of compensation. In general, no Senior based in a third-rate state would be able to afford the opportunity to live up to three-hundred years!

Even the Seniors of the Friday Coalition encountered many difficulties in trying to pay for such a luxurious privilege. In truth, Ves didn't fully know what the MTA demanded in exchange for the third round of treatment, but he heard that they didn't solely ask for a huge bag of money.

"Anyone who wants to obtain the subsequent rounds of life-prolonging treatment has to meet some other conditions."

Everyone figured that the actual supply of life-prolonging treatment was very limited. If the MTA didn't put up more barriers to halt the influx of requests, they wouldn't have enough to extend the lives of their own key personnel!

In short, no matter where a Senior based himself, he would easily be able to scrounge up the money to extend his lifespan to up to two-hundred years.

The only two Seniors from the Bright Republic that Ves interacted with was Professor Velten at the Flagrant Vandals and Professor Enoch at Frozen

Point Research Base. Both of them differed remarkably as the former had reached a very advanced age.

In fact, Professor Velten was outright senile, and had already resigned most of her former duties. Ves found her life trajectory to be fairly tragic, yet he also knew that most Seniors led similar trajectories in their life.

He hadn't forgotten her final warning to him back at the Wolf Mother.

"A Senior already enjoys a great status in the Bright Republic and elsewhere in the galaxy. They are flooded with opportunities. Yet compared to advancing to Master, most of those offers are nothing but distractions."

Without advancing to Master, a Senior would always reach the end of their lives filled with regret!

Those who advanced to Master relatively fast like Master Olson were truly fortunate! Even those who advanced well into their second century of life also thanked their luck. Far too many Seniors never found the opportunity to advance and turned into footnotes in the mech industry.

A lot of local mech designers memorized the names of every Master Mech Designers based in the Komodo Star Sector. Yet they never bothered memorizing the names of every Senior except the ones from their own state.

In any case, Professor Ventag that Senator Tovar somehow roped into the peace delegation possessed some hope of advancing to Master.

"Even so, most Seniors who are based in third-rate states never advance to Master." He frowned.

Masters emerged only rarely. Even the Friday Coalition didn't have enough to go around. It simply came down to lacking enough money to fund their expensive research endeavors.

This was why at some point, some Seniors who still possessed a decent hope of advancing to Master within their lifetimes moved to the Friday Coalition.

Ves didn't know the exact figures, but the Bright Republic and many other third-rate states actually lost over half of their Seniors this way!

The only problem was that the Seniors who all decided to make the move never received a warm welcome in such a tough and unfamiliar environment. Their status as outsiders always distinguished themselves from the native Seniors.

In practice, the Seniors that decided to move to a more prosperous state hadn't led to a greater increase in the chance of advancing to Master at all!

People came up with various reasons to explain why. The general consensus was that all the distractions and difficulties surrounding the relocation burdened the foreign Seniors so much that they failed to enter their best state when performing their research.

"That's probably not the full story, but it's definitely one of the main factors."
Ves silently judged.

Therefore, plenty of Seniors still remained with their current states even if they seem limited. It wasn't as if they sold their mechs to a single state at this stage. Many companies such as the Kadar-Neyvis Group and NORA Consolidated sold mechs across states and even star sectors!

As long as the reach of their products extended to more and more markets, the amount of money flowing in grew respectfully large. This gave Professor Ventag enough money to fuel his ongoing research.

The Seniors who relocated to the Friday Coalition often faced very steep competition from the large amount of Seniors who already carved out their places in the state's prosperous mech market. Native Seniors possessed a much stronger foundation into some of the more advanced tech that catered

specifically to a second-rate state's development level. This gave native mech designers an edge and foreign mech designers an inherent disadvantage.

In short, Any Senior entering the market of the Friday Coalition for the first time needed to build their company back from the ground up. This usually took a very long time as the competition was too intense! By the time their companies reached a certain scale, they might already be nearing two-hundred years old and with very little time left to work towards their advancement!

In the end, the fate of a mech designer strongly correlated to their origins.

Those born and raised in third-rate states inevitably hit a ceiling that was nearly impossible for them to break.

Those born in second-rate states inherently received more privileges and opportunities, so it was no surprise that they possessed the ability to pump out Masters every now and then.

"It's unfair, but nothing in the galaxy is truly fair." Ves concluded. "The disadvantaged just have to work a little harder to achieve their dreams."

None of this dynamic concerned Ves too much because the System formed a very powerful tool in overcoming the various hurdles in his career if they stymied him. Just because he didn't want to become dependent on the System didn't mean he purposefully turned away from it whenever it offered him a way to save years of his life spent on fruitless work.

However, understanding the situation facing Seniors helped him understand Professor Ventag's position. While the Felicitous Remembrance blocked all outside access to the galactic net, Ves still received permission to access her internal database, which stored huge tranches of data.

Ves managed to read up on the Senior. NORA Consolidated truly cooperated a lot of the government and military. Professor Ventag received a reputation for being particularly cozy with some government institutions.

While the market didn't care about that, the mech industry and in particular the other Senior Mech Designers faintly opposed him for that reason.

After all, unlike most of the other Seniors who originated from the AUMD, Professor Ventag came from the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation.

Widely considered as the second-best mech university of the Bright Republic, the DCTI always stood in Ansel's shadow. If not for the fact that some of its graduates occasionally managed to advance to Senior, it would have been completely obscured by many of the other run-of-the-mill institutions of the Bright Republic.

Even so, a lot of mech designers who didn't think they'd be able to get accepted by the AUMD all applied to study at the DCTI in droves.

He laughed a bit. "I was one of them in fact."

Back when he didn't obtain the System, he had never excelled in his studies. He certainly hadn't become good enough for the likes of Ansel or the DCTI. He had no choice but to attend the Rittersberg University of Technology.

"Even then, I think the Larkinsons gave me a hand in getting accepted there. It's not that easy to get into the RUT either."

While the universities on Rittersberg never managed to produce any particularly talented mech designers, many of them went on to work in the military or the public sector. A lot of officials and policymakers that regulated the mech market had actually graduated from the RUT or other schools located in the capital.

This also happened to give the Ansel alumni a lot to complain about. They detested the bureaucrats from Rittersberg and disparaged them as failed mech designers who went on to pursue a middling career in the government.

Ves shrugged. He could have been one of those petty bureaucrats as well if his mech business failed and he wasn't able to accumulate new knowledge quickly enough.

As he continued to perform research on Professor Ventag, Secretary Lowe rang the bell outside his cabin.

"Mr. Larkinson?"

"What is, secretary?"

"Professor Corus Ventag has extended an invitation to visit him at his stateroom aboard the ship."

Ves looked up from his terminal. "He did?"

"If you wish to accept his invitation, please go on your way as soon as convenient."

"I'll be right outside!"

He half-expected Professor Ventag to ignore Ves. Outside of his wartime accomplishments, Ves shouldn't have attracted the Senior's attention. As a lowly Apprentice, Ves wasn't worth befriending. Ventag would be completely justified if he decided to ignore the only other mech designer in the peace delegation!

Even so, Ves smiled at the summons. Every Senior Mech Designer he met enriched his understanding of their class even further. From the senile Professor Velten to the obsessive Skull Architect, talking to each of them gave Ves valuable insights of the higher echelons of the mech design profession.

He quickly sorted out his uniform and appearance and stepped outside his cabin, where Secretary Lowe swiftly guided him to the Senior Mech Designer's stateroom.

"Professor Ventag is an honored guest of Senator Tovar. I don't think you need the reminder, but please be respectful when you meet with him. The Tovar Family also has ties to NORA Consolidated."

Ves nodded. "I understand. I won't do anything that annoys the professor."

After a brief walk, they emerged in front of a hatch guarded by four security guards from the elite mech regiment that took responsibility for protecting the peace delegation.

After a fairly thorough security check where Ves had to temporarily relinquish his comm, he entered through the hatch where he entered a slightly smaller and less luxurious compartment than Senator Tovar's stateroom.

"Ah, Ves Larkinson. Please come inside. I have been expecting you." A deep and intense voice called out from within.