

Chapter 1011 Professor Corus Ventag

Unlike most of the Seniors he met before, Professor Ventag didn't sit behind his desk. Instead, he stood in front of a projection depicting Bentheim from orbit. It was a stunning sight and the globe offered its viewers a good glimpse of the dense amount of structures dotting the busy planet.

"Come closer, young man."

Ves slowly stepped inside, taking note of the security guards stationed inside. It seemed that every important person aboard this ship except Ves received guard protection!

Of course, that might also be because Ves wasn't very important in the eyes of Senator Tovar and the higher ups!

He quickly shook away his resentment at the perceived lack of care in order to cross the room without making a scene.

When Ves came to Professor Ventag's side, he became struck by how thin and tall the Senior appeared.

Ventag possessed a dark complexion that wasn't very prevalent in the Komodo Star Sector. He possessed an intense pair of eyes that continued to scan over Bentheim's various terrain features.

A minute passed by as Ves quietly waited for the Senior to speak. Just standing silently next to the professor already gave Ves a vague idea that this was a hard-working Senior Mech Designer with a lot more promise than Professor Velten!

This was a Senior who was still in his prime!

"Mr. Larkinson." The professor finally began. "Senator Tovar instructed me to take care of you while you are a part of the peace delegation. He seems to believe that you can benefit from my guidance while you are here. Tell me,

are you the kind of helpless mech designer who can't do anything without a Senior to hold your hand?"

Ves smiled awkwardly at the Senior. What the hell was this?!

"I did not expect Senator Tovar to solicit you on my behalf." He began. "I welcome any advice you can give me, but I am already content with my current progress."

Ventag nodded. "Short and diplomatic. Good answer. Your words contain neither arrogance or servility. You have expressed enough deference to be respectful, but not enough to suggest you are sucking up to me. Are you pleased?"

"I am pleased to receive your praise."

"Wrong answer."

Ves looked a bit stumped as Ventag stopped speaking and went back to staring the projection of the globe. What was he supposed to say? It was too unseemly for an Apprentice to argue against a Senior's judgement, yet Ventag didn't change the topic to something else and instead let his last remark linger.

He felt as if Professor Ventag was testing in some way. While Ves did not fear being quizzed on mech design topics, all of this strange talk just tied him in a knot.

Fortunately, the strange Senior eventually moved on and gestured an arm at the projection. "Hmph. Very well, let's move on. Tell me, what do you see?"

"It's a projection of Bentheim, the principal planet of the Bentheim System."

Ves answered. "As the center of trade, production and innovation of the Bright Republic, Bentheim is a vital economic motor to the state."

"Is that all you see? Is that all that Bentheim represents?"

What Ves previously said was a standard textbook answer. However, a Senior never wanted a simple answer! This prompted him to recall his previous talks with Senator Tovar and Leland. To people in their camp, Bentheim wouldn't have given them so many headaches if it was just a prosperous planet.

"Bentheim.. Bentheim is a planet in contention. It possesses an abundant amount of economic power, but it is far away from Rittersberg, which is the Republic political center of power. These differences have led to much friction, culminating in the rise of the Bentheim Liberation Movement. Their goal to liberate Bentheim from the Republic is unrealistic and downright stupid, but their grievances against the central government aren't... unfounded."

Professor Ventag threw him an intense glance that made Ves feel as if his eyes were being poked. "That is a very nuanced opinion. Senator Tovar won't be pleased with your answer, you know. To the politicians at Rittersberg, Bentheim has been treated more than fairly. Certainly, the planet gives up a lot of its revenue, but in turn it is able to shelter under the umbrella of the mighty Bright Republic! Do you see it that way as well, Mr. Larkinson?"

One could argue how much benefits the rest of the Bright Republic actually offered to Bentheim. That way usually led to people getting into heated arguments.

Ves vaguely figured that this issue seemed to be very important Professor Ventag. Otherwise, why raise this topic in the first place?

No matter what he said, he would be sure to upset at least someone. In the presence of Professor Ventag, Ves suspected that he couldn't get away with a lie or a non-answer. So he decided to bite the bullet and speak his personal opinion on the matter.

"While I've spent a portion of my youth as well as my student years on Rittersberg, my true home is Cloudy Curtain which is very close to Bentheim.

Having grown up on a quiet, rural planet right next door to the busy Bentheim, I learned that my planet is heavily depended on the commerce and consumers that Bentheim offers. While Cloudy Curtain is extremely dependent on Bentheim to sell cloud rice and other agricultural products, Bentheim is also dependent on other planets and star systems to provide them with goods and services that keeps it aloft."

Ventag's lips curled a little. He appeared to be pleased. "Go on."

"Every planet and star system is interconnected these days. As far as Bentheim concerned, it uses up an incredible amount of food to feed its dense population and demands an enormous tide of raw materials to feed its mech companies and other industries."

"Trade doesn't necessarily happen within the borders of a state. In fact, Bentheim imports and exports most of the goods that pass through the star system."

"Even so, the domestic suppliers and buyers offer Bentheim stable and favorable partners to do business with. You can't say the same about the foreign states, who can turn against us at any time to further their own goals. Aside from that, Bentheim's most powerful gift from the state is the protection of all of the forces of the Mech Corps raised in the other parts of the state to reinforce the star system's defenses!"

"Very good. That is one of the most important observations you can make." Professor Ventag nodded. "No state can stand on their own without military power. The Bright Republic is no different. Some local miscreants and agitators may be convinced that Bentheim is able to raise a sufficient amount of forces to hold back the Vesia Kingdom, but that is a considerable miscalculation. Strength is strongly correlated with territory. This has been tested over and over again throughout the wars in the past, both against other human states and against the aliens. What do you think of Ansel?"

Ventag probably didn't ask Ves on his opinion about the city.

"The AUMD is one of the most prestigious schools for mech designers." Ves answered, stating the obvious before he gave his opinion. "Regardless of its faults, it is nonetheless able to provide the Bright Republic with most of its Senior Mech Designers. As long as we have so many Seniors, we are able to stay on par against the Vesians who possess slightly more Seniors due to their larger population."

Professor Ventag sighed. "The AUMD is a necessary evil. I agree with Senator Tovar that Ansel possesses an outsized amount of influence in the mech industry. However, the way the Bright Republic has hamfistedly tried to restrict the school has either ended in failure or antagonized the Ansel alumni network into pushing back. It is not so easy to wean the Republic from their dependence to a single institution."

All of this didn't really seem relevant to Ves in his life. However, he knew that the more he grew, the more he would become involved with this particular dynamic. What he witnessed at the KNG already showed him a glimpse of the power and reach of Ansel mech designers.

"Probably the only way to keep the AUMD in check is to offer worthy competition." Ves remarked.

"That is exactly what we are trying to do. The Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation is one of several ongoing solutions by the central government to chip away at the AUMD's monopoly on high-ranked mech designers. However, we estimate that barring any major incidents, it will take centuries for the DCTI to be able to come close to matching the AUMD's prestige. What do you think of my alma mater?"

Ves twitched his lips. He couldn't very well badmouth the professor's own school, right?

"The DCTI enjoys a good reputation in the Bright Republic. It's the second school of choice for most students aspiring to be mech designers. Its track record of raising mech designers who went on to successfully advance to Senior is respectable enough to give many students hope of achieving the same one day."

Ventag shook his head. "I'm afraid it is not so simple, Mr. Larkinson. Every decent school for mech designer is able to raise some Journeymen at the very least. However, it takes an enormous amount of investment as well as other requirements to make a Journeyman advance to Senior. The AUMD is able to shoulder these requirements with their famed alumni network. Successful Seniors are willing to lend their hand to the younger generation of Ansel mech designers with guidance, financial assistance, technical help or favorable contracts."

"It's a virtuous cycle." Ves observed. "Older Seniors help out younger Journeyman, increasing the chances that the latter are able to advance to Seniors. This new generation of Seniors are subsequently encouraged by the alumni network to do the same to the generation of mech designers before them. The same thing repeats again and again."

At some point, the alumni network became so wealthy, powerful and influential that Ansel graduates take up the majority of the Bright Republic's top-end mech design talent!

"I am glad you recognize how formidable the Ansel machine has become." Ventag said. "Breaking this machine is impossible. Therefore, Rittersberg has instead decided to erode it over time. It may take centuries, but eventually the DCTI will rise to catch up to the AUMD and be able to offer an equivalent amount of help to their Journeymen to ease their advancement to Senior."

This was a very long-term scheme that didn't seem very likely to achieve their goals. Ves did not hold out his hopes that the DCTI would ever be able to beat

the AUMD at their own game. Its reputation as the second-best mech design university of the Bright Republic wasn't a badge of honor, but a mark of stain to the school. The AUMD would never allow the DCTI to wipe off that stain.

Ves found it difficult to care about this issue. He was just an Apprentice for now, and even if he advanced Journeyman he still failed to see why he should be involved. After all, he studied at a school on Rittersberg and not Bentheim, so he found it hard to care about the rivalry between the two best mech design universities.

"Senator Tovar... has expressed an intriguing possibility." Professor Ventag said and stopped studying the projection of Bentheim. He turned to Ves with his intense eyes flaring. "Personally, I find his suggestion rather premature. However, it is intriguing enough for me to consider it. What do you think about a future opportunity to teach at my school? As long as you become a Journeyman Mech Designer with some renown, you are qualified to teach some introductory classes at the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation. Does that interest you, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves gulped. This offer completely came out of the blue! While Ves always dreamt of holding a teaching job as a side activity, he wasn't very picky about the schools. Yet if Ves casually accepted this overture from Professor Ventag, then he would firmly put himself in the DCTI's camp, making him an enemy of the AUMD and its powerful Ansel alumni network!

Chapter 1012 Bargaining Chip

As Ves exited Professor Ventag's stateroom, he nervously wiped his brow. He managed to weasel his way out of the potential offer with a noncommittal answer.

Regardless, Ves received a standing invitation to come teach at the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation as long as he advanced to Journeyman and became respected among the ranks of other Journeymen.

To be honest, Ves saw a lot of appeal in accepting a teaching position at the DCTI. As the second-best school of mech design in the Republic, it still earned quite some renown. Anyone talented enough to teach at the university instantly stood out from other mech designers.

His stature in the mech industry would increase, and the market responded quite well to mechs designed by professors from renowned universities. In addition, Ves would be able to get in touch with a lot of other Journeymen and Seniors the DCTI employed.

However, the down side to teaching at the DCTI was the political implications of aligning himself to their camp. Professor Ventag made it very clear that the Tovars and perhaps the central government at Rittersberg explicitly supported the DCTI in an attempt to dethrone the Ansel University of Mech Design.

To an outsider to the conflict like Ves, the rivalry seemed way too overblown. While he understood the apprehension towards the collective power of the AUMD, it also did a lot of good for the Republic. It didn't seem to him that Ansel held any nefarious intentions to the state.

Those Ansel brats that Ves corralled for half a year at Frozen Point Research Base showed that while they possessed a greater foundation, it didn't necessarily make them great mech designers. They just graduated at a higher starting point and if they were lucky they could make use of their Ansel association to get access to easy startup funds or good employment opportunities.

"Even so, Ansel has produced so many Senior Mech Designers that they are practically in control of the Bright Republic's mech industry."

If every Ansel Senior came to a decision on something, everyone else had no choice but to obey. This even took on the form of a formal institution called the

Bentheim Mech Court which was a gathering of ten of the most renowned and prestigious Seniors in the Republic!

The fear that Rittersberg held towards Ansel was that it firmly held root in Bentheim. Every mech designer that graduated from that school considered themselves a Bentheimer as well as a citizen of the Republic.

Sometimes, the Ansel alumni balanced both loyalties without any difficulties. In extreme cases, however, the former took precedence to disastrous results.

The DCTI, as pathetic as it seemed in comparison, served as Rittersberg's main thrust towards the AUMD. Both schools had been locked into bitter rivalry ever since the central government stoked the conflict.

Right now, Ves mainly stood apart from this conflict due to his low stature within the mech industry. He was able to get away from Professor Ventag without a commitment because of that.

Still, to Ves it seemed that he was merely postponing a necessary decision. Eventually, he would advance to Journeyman and become someone successful enough to attract scrutiny from both camps.

The problem was that Ves stood opposite to Ansel from the very start. Not only did he study at Rittersberg, he also became apprenticed, if only tenuously, to a foreign Master Mech Designer. Both of these traits instantly disqualified him from entering their exclusive circle.

"Therefore, I can either stay neutral or throw my lot with the DCTI."

Staying neutral allowed him to stay above these petty conflicts. It also afforded him no extra privileges in the Bright Republic's mech industry.

From his time at the KNG, Ves knew that as mech companies became bigger and more influential, politics played a greater in keeping them aloft. Having strong allies shielded his company to an extent.

Yet was this protection enough to side with the DCTI? Ves did not follow the normal career trajectory of a mech designer from the Republic. With the help of the System, he possessed much less reliance on the help of others to advance his mech design skills.

As long as he improved, why should he knock on someone else's door and beg for help?

The strongest advantage the System gave him was that it enabled him to be self-sufficient!

Therefore, the most prudent and rational course of action for him was to stay aloof of the rivalry between the two institutions. Certainly, Ves wouldn't be the first mech designer to do so. In fact, he vaguely knew that many other mech designers with ties to the Friday Coalition did so as well.

"In fact, I've already joined a camp. The Clifford Society and Master Olson are both powerful if exceedingly distant backers."

Still, though they both wielded a lot of clout, they were very distant and the help they could provide to Ves was limited.

It might be one thing if Ves began to relocate his business to the Friday Coalition, but as long as he remained in the Bright Republic he still couldn't get away with everything. Therefore, siding with one of the two institutions would still help him pass through various difficulties.

As Ves continued to weigh the merits of associating himself with the DCTI as opposed to staying neutral, he headed towards the Felicitous Remembrance's dining room for a meal.

The dining room befitted the Remembrance's luxurious aesthetic. As Ves saw more of the ship, he got the notion that she was much more than met the eye. As Ves sat down a semi-enclosed table and ordered some plain dishes from

the projected menu, he knocked his knuckle against the surface of the ornate dining table.

"This is compressed alloy!"

Who would waste so much money constructing nearly indestructible tables? While the bulkheads and most of the structure of the Remembrance didn't make use of compressed alloys, they did make use of large amounts of very strong alloys that Ves found a bit too extravagant to justify.

Of course, it wasn't any of his business where Senator Tovar chose to spend his money.

As a couple of bots hovered by to drop the dishes, Ves began to dig in. "This is good!"

While Ves didn't mind a nutrient pack to get by for the day, it felt good to indulge once in a while. Still, Ves kept Professor Velten's warning in mind about overindulging in pleasures.

For some reason, Ves thought that Professor Ventag took an excessive amount of interest in his political concerns. His participation in the Tovar Peace Delegation and his intricate involvement with the central government and the Tovar Family put him knee-deep into politics.

"Will he even have enough time left to spend on furthering his own career?" Ves idly wondered. "Ventag didn't even discuss actual mech design topics with me. It's as if he is more of an official than a mech designer."

Certainly, Ves recognized that almost every mech designer needed to be a bit of a politician in order to navigate the higher echelons of power. Government and businesses inevitably began to intermingle considering the huge sums involved.

Yet for a mech designer to strive so much on behalf of someone else weirded Ves a little out. None of the other Seniors he met appeared to hold much regard for politics.

Halfway into his meal, someone abruptly arrived and sat at the other end of the table.

"Yo! Do you mind if I sit here?" A slightly accented voice asked. It sounded vaguely familiar to Ves. "Everyone else aboard this damned ship is too old or stuck up to keep me company! I'm surprised they let someone as young as you in their club!"

Startled, Ves looked up and saw a handsome man around his age or a little older staring back at him. His handsome countenance, his noble bearing, his masculine clothing and his wild blond hair all seemed very familiar to Ves!

"Lord Javier! What are you doing here?!" Ves asked with a startled tone!

Javier frowned for a moment. "You know me?"

"How could I not? We hunted you down with great effort and great sacrifice. Your Loquacious Raphael made a big impression against the Vandals!"

This prompted Javier to study Ves in greater detail. He took in the various awards and began to suspect something. "You were with the Vandals?"

Ves saw no harm in admitting it. "I was."

This caused the Vesian noble to color a bit. Obviously, he hadn't entirely gotten over the way the Vandals defeated him in battle and hunted him down while he tried to escape under stealth.

For the both of them to meet each other aboard the Felicitous Remembrance seemed to be quite the coincidence!

When the Flagrant Vandals finally took Lord Javier into custody, they ostensibly handed him over to the Vesian Revolutionary Front. This allowed

the VRF to execute the abusive noble for the many crimes he committed against the citizens of the Detemen System.

Yet secretly, the Vandals kept him alive and in captivity all this time in a hidden compartment deep inside the Shield of Hispania.

Ves never heard what the Vandals did with Lord Javier. He wasn't part of Major Verle's inner circle back then so did not get any opportunity to meet the noble scion in person.

For Lord Javier to avoid being executed and for him to be present here drew Ves' curiosity.

"Are you a prisoner here?" Ves asked simply.

"Nah. I'm a 'guest'." Lord Javier shrugged and slumped in his chair. "Since you know who I really am, I guess it can't hurt to tell you that I'm a bargaining chip in the upcoming negotiation."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Your father, the head of House Eneqqin, would love to have you back. Yet would the rest of your House even want you back for all you've done? Not only did you fail to defend the Detemen System against the Vandal raids, you've been missing for what, two years?"

Lord Javier grinned and waved aside those arguments. "My father is powerful enough to dismiss those faults. All the other useless dolts of House Eneqqin aren't a match for me when I'm back inside the cockpit! That alone makes it worth it for father to get me back! Anything else that's inconvenient to me can be scrubbed from the records just like any other stains. No one except the locals will remember the Detemen raid in five years time."

"How wonderfully convenient of you nobles." Ves dryly remarked.

Just as the high officials of the Bright Republics sought to bend the rules in their favor, so did the nobles of the Vesia Kingdom. The only difference was that the Vesian way was a lot more direct due to their greater authority!

"Say, I've seen you in the news." Lord Javier looked at Ves in a speculative way. "You're that combat-tested mech designer, right? From the famous Larkinson line as well. Your family has a bad reputation in my state, you know. If any of our mech pilots can prove they killed one of you bastards, they would earn a lot of merit. It's even better if we kill your expert candidates. Any commoner can instantly become a knight if they killed someone like Ghanso Larkinson!"

Ves felt really weird talking face to face with an unabashed Vesian noble. "I'm glad to hear that the Larkinsons have been thorns in the side of you Vesians."

"Ah, well, it's all fun and games in the war, am I right?" Lord Javier flippantly said. "To be honest, I quite enjoy my vacation among you guys. Spending some time away from my duties and sitting out on the war while other poor sods are fighting and dying for no reason is quite the lucky chance."

"The people who are fighting at the frontlines are doing so for a cause. I don't think you should belittle their sacrifices."

"Pff. They're merely sheep. People live and die all the time. If not in this war, then some other stupid conflict. The Reinald Republic's pirate problem has already proved that people can't sit still."

For some reason, Ves vaguely thought that Lord Javier shared a lot in common with Senator Tovar. They both treated the lives of others like currency. At least the senator had the decency to claim he worked on behalf of the state. In comparison, Lord Javier didn't hide the fact that he was a callous bastard outside a public setting.

Chapter 1013 A Rubarthan Theory

Back when the Flagrant Vandals raided the Detemen System and hunted Lord Javier down, the noble facetiously spouted words that painted him as a hero that stood up for the beleaguered citizens.

Now though, Lord Javier seemed to have aged a bit and lose some of his brashness during his time in captivity. While Ves thought that he was still very much a jerk, Javier at least seemed to be aware of his lack of power among the Brighters.

In fact, Ves somehow found it rather compelling to hear the opinions of a genuine Vesian noble. Perhaps desperate for company, Lord Javier freely divulged his opinions on matters that nobles never talked about to outsiders.

"Why have you been taken along?" Ves asked. "Is there something remarkable about you?"

"I already told you, Ves. I'm just a hostage that your pompous senator wants to use as a bargaining chip." He replied. "You might not know this, but House Eneqqin is a major force in the Imodris Duchy. My father is very powerful and influential. The only problem facing our House is that I'm the only heir that's qualified to take up his mantle. All the other Eneqqins who are eligible to become the new head of our House are all pansies who I've beaten up on a daily basis back when we grew up. Without me, House Eneqqin is doomed!"

"Even so, does the Duchess of Imodris favor House Eneqqin so much that she'll agree to a peace treaty just so that they get you back?" Ves asked with skepticism.

Javier chuckled. "It helps. My return can do quite a lot, you know. Not only will House Eneqqin's succession and continued dominance for the next half century or longer be secure, the Duchess will also have our undying loyalty for the foreseeable future. That kind of support will secure House Imodris' hold on

the duchy. Those kinds of gains help compensate for the gains that House Imodris misses out if the war is cut short earlier than scheduled."

To Javier, the Bright-Vesia Wars was nothing more than a means for the Vesian nobles to jockey for power and prestige.

The adventurous young lords and ladies gleefully led their forces into battle in order to raise their status and win the struggle for succession in their noble houses.

The older generation on the other hand put their sights on other noble houses. Those that performed well in the war received more accolades and attention while those who did badly quickly fell in status among the noble circles.

Even the dukes and duchesses that ruled at the top of their own territories couldn't avoid this generational rat race. If their mech legions didn't perform sufficiently well at the frontlines, their share of the overall distribution of resources from collective revenue sources such as the Kingdom's two port systems would be cut!

All in all, to Ves it sounded like a costly but brutally effective way to keep everyone on their toes. Through constant competition, every Vesian, no matter how high their status, needed to fight in order to preserve their privileges!

"So us Brighters are just target dummies for you Vesians to show off your prowess?" Ves cynically remarked.

"For a soft republic ruled by duplicitous families, some of you Brighters can sure put up a mean fight! I had to literally fight for my life during my battles against your Vandal mechs! But yeah, we've fought against you so often that we've pretty much got the measure of your Mech Corps. Fighting you Brighters has become so routine that hardly anything surprises us anymore, your sudden raid on the Detemen System aside."

"Don't you think the war is kind of pointless then?"

"Nah. Who else are we going to beat up if not the Bright Republic? There's too much we don't know if we pick a fight against another state! Since we've never truly fought a war against another state, we don't know whether it will go well or poorly for us. On the other hand, waging war against the Bright Republic is a much better idea because you guys are strong enough to put a worthy fight but not too strong to the point of being able to turn the tables on us!"

In other words, the Vesians were so familiar with fighting against the Bright Republic that the risks and uncertainties posed by the Bright-Vesia Wars had been reduced to the minimum! The constancy and predictability of the generational wars allowed the Vesians to unleash their war fever without any major risk of suffering any catastrophic setbacks.

It depressed Ves a bit that the Vesian nobility regarded the Bright Republic as an easy target to bully. Even knowing this didn't help anything as the Kingdom was a bit larger and more populous than the Republic. This gave them an enduring advantage in manpower, industry and more.

"What would it take to end the sequence of wars?" Ves asked morosely.

"There's nothing you can do." Javier chuckled. "Too many of us have grown used to the benefits of the war to consider any alternatives. Bullying the Republic is so fun and it's a good outlet of our stress. It helps us reveal the strong among the weak and it keeps our fighting forces trim and effective. The only way for us to stop the wars for good is if we don't get as much benefits from them or if the cost of fighting you is too much to bear."

It all came down to benefits. The Vesian nobles kept periodically declaring war against the Republic like clockwork because they gained a lot more than they

lost. The Bright Republic probably fell into a similar situation seeing that the Tovar Peace Delegation needed to move in complete secrecy.

As someone as powerful as Senator Tovar hadn't managed to gain the complete support of the Bright Republic for his initiative to negotiate a peace, that meant that certain powers and influences within the Bright Republic hungered for war as much as the Vesians did!

That seemed incredibly perverse to Ves!

Lord Javier noticed Ves' reaction to his words. He grinned even wider. "Are you mad?"

"I shouldn't be." Ves shook his head. "I just find it to be a sad state of affairs. Is it really profitable for both of our states to keep waging the same war over and over again? It's just so... senseless."

"It fits with a particular theory the higher ups of both of our states ascribe to. It's a theory that originated from the New Rubarth Empire in response to the old and stagnant Greater Terran United Confederation."

"What are you talking about?" Ves frowned.

"It's called the Societal Vitality Theory. The Rubarthans came up with it when they studied a large range of human and alien societies." Javier enthusiastically explained. "The theory states that the strength and health of a society is determined by how much they fight and how hard their people must struggle to live and prosper. In the early days of humanity's ascension into the stars during the Age of Space, we were some of the lowest species in the galaxy. Yet we somehow managed to outwit superior alien races and get the better of them. Do you know what those supposedly superior races all had in common?"

"They were weak?"

"They were strong. They benefited from greater numbers, larger military and technological superiority. Yet we beat them anyway despite our weaknesses! The main reason why we rolled over them is because they turned out to be weaker than on paper. The alien empires were stagnant and every alien leader gained their positions through taking advantage of their birthright and their political maneuvering. However, when confronted with actual war, most of them turned out to be incompetent when it came to the survival of their species!"

Ves knew the story wasn't so simple, especially in light of the recent revelations about the Five Scrolls Compact guiding humanity from the shadows. Still, Lord Javier's explanation sounded oddly sensible.

"So a state that's been peaceful for a long time is weaker than a state that's been through constant wars? What about the losses and all of the destruction that ensues whenever a war is waged?"

"That's a valid concern. It's difficult to find a war that doesn't hurt yourself more than you can get back." Lord Javier chuckled again. "That's the beauty of the Bright-Vesia Wars, though. They're so predictable and regular that both sides know the overall score. The battles might change, but the outcome will always roughly be set in stone. To the adherents of the Societal Vitality Theory, the wars are the perfect vehicle to keep our states from stagnating into a bunch of paper tigers like the Reinald Republic! The more intense the fighting, the more our invigorated our states become!"

Ves suddenly gained a realization. All his wondering about whether there was a conspiracy behind the Bright-Vesia Wars turned out to be true!

It was just that the conspiracy took on a different form than he expected. It wasn't as if a small number of powerful people from both states met together in a shady, smoke-filled room and diabolically laughed with each other as they plotted to drive their own subjects to their deaths.

Instead, both sides ascribed to this weird theory and believed they would both become stronger if they waged a war every now and then! It was an open if unspoken conspiracy that required no explicit meetings or agreements to commence!

He didn't quite know yet how to regard this perverse circumstances. It seemed extraordinarily callous to him that war was being treated as a tool to shape societies.

"In fact, the Societal Vitality Theory also caught on with the MTA and CFA." Lord Javier boldly claimed. "Do you think they like it that the various human states in the galaxy focus so much on fighting each other instead of the aliens? They probably don't, but they think it's necessary to keep the space peasants busy and on their toes. If they relax too much, not only will their star systems become too overpopulated, their birth rates will also fall below a level that is sustainable if the state ever meets a crisis."

Ves looked up at that. "That sounds contradictory. How can a stagnant state be overpopulated yet find it problematic that their birth rates fall? Isn't that a natural response to overpopulation? Can't states just terraform new stars to settle on if they need more space?"

"It doesn't quite work that way, Ves. Terraforming is an investment and not every planet or star system is valuable enough to exploit. Just take the Reinald Republic again for example. Because they're part of the Frozen Leaf Alliance, no one wants to pick a fight with them. The lack of wars not only lowered their war readiness, they are also suffering from headaches on what to do with their crowded settlements. They're greedy for money for a very good reason, you know. They need money to pay the terraforming companies to make new terrestrial planets habitable to human life. However, these new colonies are mostly a net drain to Reinald's treasury."

"I see." Ves replied. "What about the overcrowding and the lower birthrates? How does that affect the Reinald Republic?"

"The overcrowding and lack of threats makes the Reinaldians complacent. They don't birth as much offspring, they marry later in their lives and generally don't feel any urgency in living their lives. This also means they don't work hard enough to excel in their lives. They have less expert pilots and less Senior Mech Designers than a state of their size ought to have!"

"Is that true?" Ves asked.

"Oh, I'm not a numbers wizard, but all the scientists who studied the Societal Vitality Theory all said so. They say that a society's life pattern adjusts itself to the predominant circumstances. Peace begets a slow, peaceful life pattern because that is the most optimal way the people are able to live their lives. War on the other hand forces people to grow stronger, fight harder and live their lives to the best of their abilities. All the deaths also eases up the overpopulation issue and sustaining high birth rates is seen as the key to sustain a state in the even of a major crisis!"

Ves had mixed feelings about this supposed theory. Lord Javier obviously appeared to be a proponent of the Societal Vitality Theory, and Ves did have to admit that the logic sounded plausible.

It explained some of Senator Tovar's policy decisions. To a shepherd of a state, leaders like him constantly worried over how to strengthen a state and retain its dynamism. Perhaps to Senator Tovar and his ilk, a regular, generational war sounded like just the right answer to maintain the liveliness of the Bright Republic!

Chapter 1014 Rationale for Death

Ves didn't know whether he should be thankful or regretful to Lord Javier. On one hand, the Vesian noble generously filled him in on the Societal Vitality

Theory. On the other hand, it also destroyed his faith in the higher ups of both states!

He used to think that even if the original reasons for the wars no longer applied, both states still warred over legitimate reasons.

The Vesians wanted to conquer the Bentheim System so that they would be able to gain an invincible economic stranglehold on all of the commerce and trade that passed through the surrounding regions.

Bright Republic simply wanted to maintain its territorial sovereignty and defend itself against the foreign aggressor.

Those reasons still applied, but in the backdrop of the Societal Vitality Theory, they rang a little hollow now. To Ves, this diabolical theory served as a force that pushed its proponents to action rather restraint, sometimes to disastrous results!

Ves figured out the reason why Lord Javier brought up this contentious topic. "The main threat to the peace talks is this theory, right?"

"Right! I don't know how many people among the Bright Republic supports the theory, but back in the Kingdom almost every influential noble has sided with it. We admire the Rubarthan way quite a lot!"

The New Rubarth Empire used to be a part of the Greater Terran United Confederation. The latter used to be the only major human entity in the stars. That was a different time back then. The Terrans proved to be too overbearing and mired in bureaucracy to govern their sprawling territories fairly and effectively.

After the Rubarthans declared independence during a time of turmoil for the Terrans, times had changed. The Terrans partially reformed the way they governed themselves, but it was too late by then. The New Rubarth Empire

grew into such a substantial power in a short time that they pretty much rivaled the Terrans in might!

Perhaps the rapid but enduring success of the Rubarthans in their galactic rivalry against the Terrans gave the theory a lot of weight. Ves did hear that internal competition and political maneuvering there was rather brutal.

The founder families that eventually founded the Bright Republic used to be aberrant pacifists who tired from all of the infighting and warmongering at the powerful first-rate superstate!

"The constant wars between our states has pretty much enshrined the Societal Vitality Theory among our leaders." Ves speculated. "Proponents of the theory are able to take advantage of the wars to enhance their prestige and further their goals. Those who oppose it on moral or practical grounds won't benefit from the wars unless they give in, which pretty much turns them into hypocrites. I don't see any way we can forge an early peace if that's the case."

Lord Javier threw a patronizing smile at Ves. "You have to think a bit bigger than that, Ves. What is the ultimate goal of adhering to the Societal Vitality Theory? It's to strengthen the social vitality of our states! Why? To strengthen the efficiency, dynamism and military might of our states against other threats! We pursue strength because it is the only thing that keeps us safe against the threats of the galaxy."

As Ves recalled his recent talk with Senator Tovar, he started to gain an understanding of the need for peace. "Is there a greater threat on the horizon?"

"The senator didn't tell me, but I'm not stupid, you know. I'm a good observer, and from what I see the Brighters aboard this ship aren't worried about us

Vesians. Instead, they're on guard against a different threat. A greater threat, as you said."

A grave silence fell between the two. The Remembrance's elegant and luxurious dining room didn't host many diners at this time, so hardly any noise interrupted Ves' contemplation.

The implications of this theory probably led to a lot of unnecessary wars. At least, unnecessary to the average people. To the proponents of the theory, war was a great tool to invigorate a state!

"Is there any proof that it actually works?"

"Sure." Javier shrugged. "First of all, the strength and prestige the Rubarthans gained in their early years against the stagnant and corrupt Terrans is a powerful historical case. The Rubarthans trounced the Terrans in almost every aspect because the latter have become so stale that they reacted like fossils to something they adequately planned against beforehand. Over the years, the rise and success of many other states over their more peaceful rival has given the theory strong support."

"I don't think it's that simple. Sure, a war might be able to invigorate a state as you say it, but it might also just cause them to suffer far more damage than they get in return. I bet the researchers aren't so eager to study the failures. Perhaps the survivor bias plays a huge role in making those determinations."

"Hey, what do you take them for? They're smart enough to take that into account. At least I think so." Lord Javier scratched his head. "Whatever. The point is that we've not only seen this kind effect among human states, but also among the various alien empires. Before humanity came along, most of the galaxy got carved up by the same old alien races. The balance of power largely remained the same and nobody powerful felt eager enough to fight

because the super low birth rates of the Seven Apex Races makes any serious war too costly."

"Humans don't suffer from that problem." Ves remarked as he followed the logic of the Societal Vitality Theory. "Compared to those powerful alien races that depend on exotics to propagate their species, our growth rate as a species is enormous. All the setbacks we've suffered against the aliens during the Age of Stars and Age of Conquest never put us down for long. Instead, we bounced right back with our explosive birth rate."

A comparison between different human states did not yield any drastic differences. However, when Ves compared human civilization to the previously dominant alien civilizations, their traits diverged enormously.

The birth and growth rates central to the logic behind the Societal Vitality Theory formed one of the most powerful advantages of the human race! No major alien race at the time could keep up with the constant growth and expanding population of the upstart humans!

Of course, with the Five Scrolls Compact acting behind the scenes, humanity's rise could not solely be attributed to these reasons alone. Ves did not think any further in this direction because he hardly knew anything about this line of questioning.

"It's a different time now, you know?" Lord Javier said as a couple of bots started to deliver his dishes. He came to the dining room to eat, after all.

"During the Age of Stars and the first half of the Age of Conquest, we humans largely pointed our guns outwards against the aliens. We took their stars, their technology, their resources and repeated it over and over again as we gobbled up the galaxy. What a great time to be alive back then!"

For various reasons, the exponentially-accelerating conquest and expansion began to stall halfway into the Age of Conquest. The surviving alien races no

longer remained complacent against the humans that threatened to gain complete control over the galaxy. They set aside their long-standing rivalry and animosity against each other and presented a somewhat united front against the galactic threat that was humanity!

At some point, the various human states that made up human civilization found it increasingly difficult to fight against the aliens. Eager to fight but with no alien opponent in reach, they instead began to turn their weapons against each other!

"Is the Societal Vitality Theory an attempt to go back to the glory days of humanity's rise?" Ves asked.

"Kind of." Lord Javier nodded. "Well, it's more of an attempt to prevent our society from backsliding. If we all grow too fat and happy of our current accomplishments, the aliens staring hatefully at us will give us a nasty surprise. Life must constantly be a struggle if we are to stay strong. This applies to both humans and aliens. Now that we've dethroned the Seven Apex Races and chased them out of their ancestral territories, they're holding a lot of grievances against us. You can bet they aren't relaxing while they're plotting our race's demise."

Ves had difficulty seeing the relevance of looking at humanity from so far above. "All of this sounds very high-minded. We're not the masters of the human race. Is there any point for us to think that way?"

"Why not?" The noble shrugged. "At least it's essential for me to be familiar with the arguments if I want to fit in with the rest of my class. It's also useful for you as well, you know. With all the wars, skirmishes and other fights taking place throughout the galaxy, a lot of mechs are used up. What fuels the mech industry? Battle! The more battles taking place, the more mechs you can sell! Doesn't that sound like a good deal?"

This observation caused Ves to feel a bit troubled. He couldn't refute this logic. The mech industry would have been a lot less dynamic and a lot harder to participate in if battles rarely broke out. Mechs lasted about five years with intensive use and ten years with moderate use.

However, if the amount of fights in the Komodo Star Sector decreased by ninety percent, then most mechs would be able to reach their full nominal lifespan of twenty years!

On top of that, the vastly reduced fighting pressure would also prompt many forces to delay the acquisition of newer mechs. Why waste money on upgrading their mech lineup when their existing mechs already did the job? With good maintenance, a mech could conceivably last up to forty years without any marked degradation in performance!

The longer mechs survived on average, the lower the demand for new mechs. This all reflected back to the mech industry which would be forced to shrink and lower their production in response to the anemic amount of activity in the mech market.

Put simply, mech designers like Ves enjoyed good times as long as there was a lot of fighting going! While Ves was already aware of this simple truth to an extent, when looking through the lens of the Societal Vitality Theory, he became aware that it was advantageous for him to be one of its proponents!

However, his shock at these revelations hadn't faded yet for him to make up his mind about the theory. While a strong part of Ves pushed him to agree with the theory, he instinctively felt he'd become an abhorrent person if he did so. What made him any better than the likes of Lord Javier and Senator Tovar if he started to believe in their common ideology?

"Surely not everyone agrees with this radical theory, right?" Ves pushed back. "It sounds very controversial and its implications are incredible massive. There are bound to be critics to what appears to be a justification for warmongering."

Lord Javier rudely flipped his fingers while he ate. "Sure. Not everyone agrees. But they don't last very long. A lot of states that emphasized peace and other happy stuff grew weak to the point they got conquered by other states that actually invested in the strength of their military and society. Hippies and peace-loving idiots make for awful leaders because they don't understand that those who don't share in their beliefs are always stronger and not afraid to flex their power."

It sounded like a sad state of affairs, but every person who grew up in these times became used to the constant warring between the human states.

Right now, the Societal Vitality Theory sounded like a justification more than anything else. What was so bad about giving to humanity's darker impulses when all the despots and warlords could draw upon the theory to excuse all of the death and suffering they engendered?

Ves equated the Societal Vitality Theory to a rationale for death!

Chapter 1015 Differences in Opinion

For better or worse, Ves opened up his eyes to the dominant theory, or should he say ideology, that many human rulers and policymakers worshipped.

It sounded compelling. It looked as if it made sense. It had an enormous body of historical cases to back up its claims.

Yet... Ves felt very uneasy how it casually brushed aside the very destructive cost of adhering to the theory's recommendations. Any leader who wanted their states to retain their strength and war readiness and avoid sliding into peaceful indolence and hedonism would likely wanted to manufacture a war of some sorts!

At this moment, Ves could not offer any strong arguments against the Societal Vitality Theory. As much as the wars, deaths and destruction enormously consumed the human race, he also had to admit that it did a decent job keeping them strong and alert. This placed the human civilization in a much better state against external enemies such as the alien races.

However, the most pernicious cost was that much of humanity began to see themselves as enemies.

Ever since humanity turned their animosity and their weapons against themselves, the killing of humans became normalized. Although the Age of Conquest saw this norm being pushed too far, even during the Age of Mechs it became completely acceptable to kill fellow humans in the pursuit of power and wealth.

The rulers didn't care. Mainly the lower classes suffered the brunt of following this ideology. Those who ruled from the top sat in their ivory towers directing more pigs to the slaughter.

In their drive to invigorate their state and raise its vitality, they needed to keep birth rates high and give their citizens a sense of urgency in their lives. Yet to do so would also lead to overpopulation, which was an extremely expensive problem.

The galaxy was huge. It contained an uncountable amount of star systems and even more terrestrial planets in various shapes and sizes. Yet to make them suitable for human habitation took both time and investment.

All the most profitable and easiest planets already got terraformed. If states wanted to accommodate an ever-growing population, they needed to start converting less attractive planets for human habitation. As ever-poorer colonies came into being, the state bore a greater burden as it cost a lot of money to raise a colony and to grow it into a proper settlement. Sometimes,

these colonies never paid back the investment put into its development as it offered very little exports to the rest of the state!

Therefore, to solve the dilemma of high birth rates but a finite limit on population, leaders needed some way to relieve the pressure.

Therefore, war served as the most convenient pressure relief valve. Lots of people got killed. Lots of property and assets got destroyed.

Yet those who survived felt a greater need to recover what they lost and rebuild what was broken. The people became more industrious. The people worked harder. The people never took their luxuries for granted.

As long as the cost of wars remained within the boundaries of what was acceptable to the rulers, such a cycle was actually productive and beneficial to the society in question.

Adopted at a wider scale among the level of the entire human civilization, it kept the human race from suffering the same flaws that made the other alien races so weak against unexpected aggression.

At least if you believed in the Societal Vitality Theory.

While Ves did not have the qualifications to question sociologists and other stuffy academics about the validity of this theory, he nonetheless felt it possessed an innate flaw. He just couldn't quite pin it down at the moment.

Aside from that, the Societal Vitality Theory also suffered from the plutocratic consequence of high-minded policy ignoring the very human cost of their actions.

The Bright-Vesia Wars for example killed billions of people over a span of four centuries. Even more of them lost their homes, their relatives, their livelihoods and more. The Bright Republic could have allocated all of that prosperity into

bettering the lives of their citizens rather than fuel a perpetually-hungry war machine.

Yet that was also what the Societal Vitality Theory aimed to fight against. It encouraged leaders to guide their state towards investing their resources into the military. Civil infrastructure and the welfare of the people played second fiddle to maintaining strength.

Ves thought of all of this as he sat silent in the dining room, his half-eaten meal forgotten. Lord Javier meanwhile took the silence as an opportunity to gobble up his own sumptuous steak.

"Hmmm! This is good!" Javier praised. "Much better than the nutrient packs you Vandals stuffed in my mouth! You should really try some!"

To someone like Lord Javier, he inherited his stance on the Societal Vitality Theory from Count Loqer, his father. In turn, Count Loqer inherited his beliefs from his own father, and so on. Even if a parent didn't pass on those beliefs, their peers would make sure their fellow leaders were on the same page.

Ves narrowed his eyes at Lord Javier. "Why did you take the time to explain the Societal Vitality Theory to me? You're awfully charitable for a Vesian noble."

"I'm a hostage. There's no two ways about it." The noble shrugged. "Even I know that I have to set aside my old behavior and suck up to my captors. The worst Vesian nobles are those who are good at one thing but bad at adapting to changing circumstances. If there is anything my father has taught me, it is to be as adaptable as a chameleon and as slippery as an eel when you fall into trouble."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

Lord Javier smirked. "Oh, alright. You looked so confused and out of place on this ship. It's like seeing a fish flopping about on the ground next to a lake. As

a generous noble, I felt it was my duty to pick up the fish and throw it back into the lake. Even if I don't obtain any gratitude from my captors, I'll at least be able to make a good impression on the poor fish."

"What a peculiar analogy to compare me to a fish flopping about for water." Ves replied dryly. He didn't know whether he should be thankful or indignant at being treated as a charity case. "That said, although I somewhat regret learning about it, thank you for filling me in on this supposed theory. If you haven't been pulling my leg, then you've given me a lot to think about for the rest of my life."

Certainly, Ves did not believe that Lord Javier invented this theory out of the blue. It fit too much with what he saw and how humans worked these days. The theory offered a logical underpinning to the continued phenomenon of the incredibly costly Bright-Vesia Wars and the persistent infighting among other human states that many believed held human civilization back from advancing.

"Now that I've given you the lowdown on what people like Senator Tovar and myself really think when they look at subjects, you should give me something in return." Lord Javier suddenly demanded as he finished his main course.

"Pardon?"

"C'mon. You're a hotshot mech designer right? Camden Tovar isn't the kind of man to invite a loser to his peace delegation. I've met most of them already and each and everyone of them is either wealthy, influential or an authority in their fields of expertise. You don't look like you fit in any of the three categories, but your youth makes you promising."

"I'm almost thirty standard years, you know."

"Same." Javier shrugged. "Yet compared to those other bastards who are fifty to eighty years old, we're as young as babes. To an old fossil like Senator

Tovar, we might as well be fetuses who barely started crawling out of our mothers' wombs. Ah, no offense to you if you were born from an artificial womb."

"It's okay. I'm natural born."

"Good. Anyway, regardless of what Senator Tovar sees in you, he must at least see something in your mech design ability. You're good at designing mechs, right?"

"I founded the Living Mech Corporation which grew into a multibillion bright credit company in just a couple of years." Ves bragged, feeling the need to puff himself up for some reason. "I've only dabbled with variants for a year or so before immediately transitioning to selling original mech models that I've designed all by myself! Even with just two premium product lines, my company is selling hundreds of mechs per month, a large proportion of which are exported the the entire star sector!"

Lord Javier subtly shifted his attitude towards Ves in a more respectful manner. "That does sound impressive."

"On top of that, I've also become apprenticed to Master Carmin Olson of the Vermeer Group! I'm also a member of the Leemar Institute of Technology's Clifford Society."

The awe in Lord Javier's eyes increased even further, though the noble also smirked again. "I know that apprenticeships to Masters is a big deal in the mech industry. However, you don't look like a direct disciple. You wouldn't be tagging along with Senator Tovar and you would have already heard about the Societal Vitality Theory if that's the case. You're one of those nominal disciples, right? Hah! A Master can accumulate hundreds of those without a care! Apprentices like that are just cheap labor that are loyal to them because

their Master threw them a bone when they needed something to gnaw upon. Master Mech Designers aren't as generous as you think."

While Lord Javier's words resonated with him, Ves still wanted to defend Master Olson's conduct. Regardless of her lack of attention to Ves, he never really needed a lot of handholding in the first place. Allowing him to enjoy the status of being apprenticed to a Master from the Friday Coalition and being able to enter the Clifford Society as a privileged Knight instead of a servile Squire benefited him immensely.

"My connection to Master is a mutually beneficial relationship. It is not uncommon for me to pay back her generosity." Ves settled on a neutral-sounding reply. He couldn't very well badmouth his own Master. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't insinuate any insults towards a Master Mech Designer in my presence."

Every mech designer became ingrained to the hierarchy of mech designers. Those who advanced to Journeymen, Senior, Master all worked hard to reach their heights. Every fellow mech designer recognized the amount of struggle and sacrifice they paid to fulfill their dreams.

"Alright, alright, for a mech designer you sure are sensitive."

That was an odd remark to Ves. "You're poking around into matters I don't want poking."

"Whatever. My point still stands. You should open your big brains of yours and spill something good. What do you think of my old mech, the Loquacious Raphael? It's a good work, right?"

Ves recalled that insanely capable custom mech. "It's... expensive. Very capable in the right hands, as it did when you piloted it. I'm very impressed by its ability to facilitate fake resonance. It's a quality work designed by a quality mech designer."

"It sounds like there's a 'but' there."

"It's a custom mech. It's expensive. A very good mech designer spent a lot of time and effort tailoring it to your piloting style and your individual demands. How many mech pilots are able to enjoy such an extravagant privilege?"

"Do you have something against custom mechs?" Javier asked with a puzzled frown.

"Not as such. I'm actually interested in entering the market for custom mechs as well in the future. However, the majority of my customers won't be noble scions such as you who possess a budget the size of a star system's entire yearly earnings. How much of your performance back then during the Detemen Operation can be attributed to your skill as opposed to the quality of your Loquacious Raphael?"

Lord Javier narrowed his eyes at Ves in an ominous fashion. "Did you just question my skill?"

Chapter 1016 Formidable Inertia

"Don't get me wrong." Ves defended himself. "You're obviously a good mech pilot, even if you have your tutors and your rich background to thank for that. Paired with a mech that fits you like a glove, you're able to outfight an entire mech squad by yourself. However, you enjoy a great privilege that most mech pilots or even mech champions get to enjoy."

Lord Javier understood that Ves did not mean to insult him and loosened up a bit. "Some people are born of a higher station than others. But don't you think that I fought hard to get where I am? Mech pilots don't become as good as me if you don't put enough effort! I damn well deserved my custom mech! Thanks for destroying it, by the way. When the peace talks finally concludes, I'll go back and commission another custom mech, not that I think there's much hopes of it happening."

"Why do you say so?"

The Vesian noble gestured with his arm. "Because the Bright-Vesia Wars have repeated the same pattern for so many times it's practically a tradition for our two states! You don't casually interrupt a long-standing tradition. You'll piss off a lot of people for doing so! I'll bet there are plenty of people out there who want to stop Senator Tovar by any means possible."

"Are they really so short-sighted?" Ves frowned. "From what I hear, Senator Tovar has a very good reason for suggesting an interruption of the current war."

"A greater threat, yeah I heard. Senator Tovar informed me in person so that when I get in touch with my fellow nobles, I'll be able to convince them of the necessity of halting the war. Well, good luck with that. With how widely our state encourages our subjects to support the war, halting it at this point will be taken as a major betrayal! It would be like putting ourselves between a crashing starship and a planet! There is too much momentum behind the war and suggesting an abrupt end to it will mark us as cowards and traitors to our respective states!"

Both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom treated the accusations mentioned by Lord Javier very seriously. With the wars lasting four or five years on average, it was deeply taboo for anyone to advocate for peace.

Peace at this stage meant giving in to the enemy. Peace meant begging the enemy to stop the fight. Peace meant admitting that you couldn't take it anymore and wanted to throw in the towel!

In summary, supporting peace meant harming the interests of the state at the time where it needed the support of its citizens the most!

From that perspective, Lord Javier raised a very good point. Supporters of the upcoming peace talks began with an inherent disadvantage. The inertia that

took hold in both states both pushed them into continuing the same old war without any deviations!

"There will be people who question Senator Tovar's claims?"

"You underestimate how obstinate we can be when it comes to supporting the war!" Lord Javier chuckled. "Even if the senator whipped out direct footage of an impending threat headed in the direction of our states, the warmongers will still blindly stick to their beliefs that we need to fight the good fight to the fullest! Proof can be fabricated and claims can be spun from modest facts. There is no way that those predisposed to war are ever going to seriously contemplate the possibility of peace?"

"Not even if all of the Seven Apex Races invade the Komodo Star Sector in unison?"

"They'll keep shouting about fighting the Brighters or Vesians as the aliens come and shoot disintegration rays at them! If you know these people as well as I do, you'll realize that the diehards among us won't ever give in! The war is their life and their greatest obsession!"

"Is this what the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom has morphed into over the centuries?" Ves lamented. "Two conflict-driven states that are too afraid of their withdrawal symptoms as soon as their regularly-scheduled war is cut short?"

All of this sounded quite depressing to Ves. He would have thought the people in power would be wise and rational enough to set aside their interests in the war if they heard word a greater that was coming in their way. Yet according to Lord Javier, the inertia for war was so strong that it was nearly unstoppable!

"Anyway, let's not talk about the war, Ves. That's a headache for Senator Tovar. Anyway, you never did tell me something useful about mechs. Come now. Spill something."

Ves wracked his mind for something to say. "Well, there's rumors in the mech industry that the next generation will see an advancement in offense over defense. Laser weapons will particularly enjoy a significant bump in effectiveness. If you want to go with the times, you should pilot a laser rifleman mech."

"No thanks." Javier lazily grinned and leaned back on his dining seat. "I like to have my cake and eat it too. I know hero mechs get a bad rap sometimes, but it's really convenient for me to pilot a mech that's deadly both at range and up close. I don't like the way that mechs from third-rate states in the galactic rim are so overspecialized."

"That's easy for you to say, scion of House Eneqqin. Most mech pilots only enjoy so much training. They also have to make do with mechs purchased from a limited budget."

"Still, it's ridiculous that we've accepted that mechs are supposed to be good at one narrow role but godawful at everything else! Don't you think it's stupid that a big and powerful rifleman mech is deadly at range but collapses as soon as a light skirmisher runs up and stabs it with the mech equivalent of a toothpick? Isn't it ridiculous that a heavy knight can withstand an entire mech squad's worth of firepower but isn't even expected to whip out a pistol to hit them back? Why can't a mech have it both ways?!"

Ves shook his head at such talk. "It's not that simple. Do you think we mech designers intentionally specialize mechs?"

"Why not? If you sell someone a swordsman mech, they still need to cover their ranged options. That gives you the opportunity to sell them a rifleman mech."

"Despite what you think, Lord Javier, we are not perpetrating a scam. When we design a mech, we have to make many compromises. A mech can either

be good at one aspect or passable in many aspects. The only way to step out of this dichotomy is to spend an awful lot of money to design a singular mech that can do it all, but is just one machine. Would you rather have one fantastic hero mech like the Loquacious Raphael, or two full mech companies with a balanced mix of ranged and melee mechs?"

Most mech buyers favored the latter. A single mech, no matter how good, could never beat eighty average mechs unless it was an expert mech!

While Lord Javier may be a talented and highly-trained mech pilot on par with the best of the Larkinson mech pilots, he was no expert pilot!

Every mortal mech pilot possessed limits. From an economic and efficiency standpoint, mech buyers got a lot more bang for their credits if they avoided the drawbacks of diminishing returns by procuring a large number of cheaper but more efficient mechs.

However, Lord Javier seemed to have some difficulty understanding the concept of limited budgets and resources. To a noble raised in the lap of luxury, how could he accept Ves' arguments?

"Okay, let's put this into the perspective of a mech pilot instead of a mech buyer. Not every mech pilot is good at everything, right?" Ves pressed.

"Wouldn't it be a total waste to allocate a swordsman mech to an excellent marksman? A much more expensive and less effective hybrid mech or hero mech would just be an enormous waste of money because the mech pilot would only make use of its range capabilities."

This seemed to hit home with Lord Javier. The noble began to look more thoughtful. "I guess that's true. Almost no one is as good as me or worked hard to be good at both swordsmanship and marksmanship. Perhaps it does make some sense for my lessers to pilot simplistic mechs."

"Wow, Lord Javier. Maybe you should tone down the arrogance."

"Heh! If you're as good as me, why should I hide my talents?"

"As far as I know, you're not an expert pilot or even an expert candidate. I don't think you have much cause to boast if that's the case."

Ves brutally poked Lord Javier's bubble, causing him to drop his grin.

The worst part was that it was Ves who said it. While he wasn't an expert pilot, he was related to the famed Larkinson Family, who somehow managed to spawn expert pilots in each generation!

"It's really crappy that the Larkinsons aren't as powerful as the Tovars in the Bright Republic." Lord Javier jabbed back in revenge. "What did the Tovars contribute to your state? Sure, they invested money in the original colonization fleet that led to the founding of your state, but what have they done since? They took advantage of their starting point and held their grip on power ever since. The Tovars and most of the other founder families are famous for their influence in the government and in the economy. As for the military? You don't hear about heroic Tovars fighting right in the frontlines of the wars. Not like you Larkinsons. I respect that, you know."

"Thanks... I think. However, I don't think it's a good idea to disparage the Tovars aboard one of their own ships."

Lord Javier huffed. "I'm a Vesian. I'm entitled to roast the Bright Republic! And I sure do have a lot to say about your hypocritical and duplicitous state! You Brighters always oppose the way we run the Kingdom but as far as we're concerned, your rulers are a lot more despotic than ours! Don't you see that your five main founder families are resting on their laurels for centuries, leeching off the hard work and sacrifice of their citizens to live their lives in luxury? For all of their professed adhere to the Societal Vitality Theory, they always impose struggle on their subjects and never on themselves!"

"Your inverting white into black!" Ves accused. "Just because the Bright Republic isn't entire egalitarian doesn't mean the Vesia Kingdom is a ray of sunshine in our corner of the galaxy. You nobles feast like kings while you exploit your commoners. They are just one step above slaves as far as the Bright Republic is concerned!"

"Heh. That's their lot. But don't pretend our underclass is any better than ours. In your society, it's almost impossible to better their station because the founder families and most of your upper class has a stranglehold on the upper echelons of power. At least in my state, we have to fight for our benefits! Our struggle never ends! To soft Brighters like you, it probably seems as if we're obsessed with infighting. We're not fighting each other for the heck of it, but because we have to stay sharp! The Vesia Kingdom is in fact a meritocracy in the true sense of the word! Those who are talented and fight hard get to climb up the ranks of nobility while those who are useless despite their high births are quickly taken out of power!"

Ves couldn't believe the nonsense Lord Javier spewed from his mouth. What the hell? How could he make the Vesia Kingdom sound like a benevolent meritocracy while painting the Bright Republic as a state in the grip of uncrowned kings?

Shouldn't it be the other way around?

"No Brighter will ever believe your nonsense. Your narrative only makes sense to your own people."

Javier grinned even wider. "Just because a noble like me is saying it doesn't make it any less true. Admit it. The Bright Republic is a lot more rotten than the Vesia Kingdom. The sooner you recognize this truth, the sooner you'll stop getting taken advantage of by the likes of the Tovar Family. Say, you look like a decent mech designer. If the peace talks ever end well and I'll be free to go

back to the Imodris Duchy, why not come with me? I'll make sure you're treated well in the Kingdom!"

What?!

"Preposterous!" Ves slammed his fist against the sturdy table. "I'll never defect! Let alone the fact that I'm a Brighter, I'm also a Larkinson! It's in our blood to serve the Republic!"

However, his behavior only played into Lord Javier's expectations. "Spoken like a true sheep. No wonder the Larkinson Family never climbed their way up to the top. It seems you are too used to being the Republic's lapdogs to know that you deserve better."

With those damning words, Lord Javier wiped his lips with a napkin and left the dining room.

Chapter 1017 Ethos

After his lengthy conversation with Lord Javier, Ves struggled to make sense of the implications of what he heard. While talking with the Vesian noble opened his mind to the perspective of a future Vesian leader, it also sent him into confusion.

Some of the things that Lord Javier said was too preposterous! Yet the problem was that Ves couldn't quite offer a strong retort!

Shortly after he returned to his cabin, Secretary Lowe knocked on his hatch. As soon as he entered, he made the purpose of his visit clear.

"We're aware that you've met with Lord Javier of House Eneqqin."

"Is he supposed to run around freely on the ship?"

"He is never out of sight and we have assigned guards to shadow him wherever he goes."

"So what prompted this visit?"

"I've come for two reasons, Mr. Larkinson. First, Senator Tovar is aware that you've spoken extensively with Lord Javier. For the duration of the journey, he wishes for you to keep in touch with the noble. It's best if you befriend each other."

"What? Become friends with a Vesian noble? Do you know how pompous he is?" Ves frowned.

"It is exactly because he is a Vesian noble that it is worth it for you to attempt to befriend him. Remember the purpose of this journey. We are on the way to discuss the possibility of achieving an early halt in the war. In order to accomplish such a difficult task, we must charm and befriend our Vesian counterparts. Consider befriending Lord Javier as a practice run. As long as you can tolerate his presence and share something in common with him, you'll do better once the real peace talks begin."

The secretary's words rang true to Ves. He could see the logic in it. If Ves could buddy up with someone as loathsome as Lord Javier, he would probably be able to schmooze with the rest of his kind of people at the site of the peace talks.

Still, Ves felt inherently disgusted at the thought of deepening his association with Lord Javier. As a Brighter, he didn't think he was compatible with someone as unabashedly Vesian as that detestable noble scion!

Secretary Lowe picked up on Ves' struggle to accept the assignment. "You are troubled, aren't you, Mr. Larkinson? Words are words. No matter what Lord Javier says, you must stay true to your Brighter heritage."

"That's easy for you to say, but how am I supposed to deal with it? I feel like I'll go mad if I keep listening to the nonsense that Lord Javier spews on a regular basis."

"This is the other reason why I've come. Can I sit down?"

"Go ahead."

Ves sat on the seat next to the desk terminal while Secretary Lowe sat on the surface of the bed.

After making himself comfortable, the diplomatic aide began to explain. "The topics that Lord Javier brought up all have their roots with the Rubarthan way of thought. The New Rubarth Empire still exerts a marked influence on the Komodo Star Sector despite being separated by tens of thousands of light-years. If you know your history, then you know that the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are both off-shoots of the imperialistic first-rate superstate. What's the difference, then?"

"The Bright Republic adopted the republic system while the Vesia Kingdom descended into a feudal system."

"That's the simple, textbook answer that ten-year olds learn by heart in school. Think beyond the obvious. What distinguishes our two states despite our common root? Why did we diverge?"

Ves knew that Secretary Lowe tried to guide him towards an answer, but his mind was still a bit too befuddled to think straight. "I think... the founders of the Bright Republic tried to seek peace, while the founders of the Vesia Kingdom just wanted to rule over their own private kingdom."

"Good answer, Mr. Larkinson. It's close to the answer in my mind. Let me phrase it in this way. The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are both distant children descended from the New Rubarth Empire. One is a rebellious child that hates its parent state and rejects their brutal way of life. The other admires its parent state and wants to replicate that glory on their own. Does that make you understand where our two states stand?"

Sometimes, an analogy provided more clarity than a direct explanation. Equating the Bright Republic and Vesia Kingdom as children of the New

Rubarth Empire was a refreshingly clear way to describe their relationship between each other. Some of the fog that settled in his mind began to clear.

"I see." Ves said with a thoughtful expression. "So the major differences in the way our states turned out to be is due to how much we diverged from our roots? Does the New Rubarth Empire still matter out here in the galactic rim?"

Secretary Lowe gave him a patronizing smile. "Mr. Larkinson, the entire galaxy has adopted most of Rubarth's core beliefs. The Societal Vitality Theory that the New Rubarth Empire has espoused as the principal reason for their revolution and breakaway from the stagnant Terrans is in vogue among many states throughout the galaxy. There is word that even the aliens have taken note of this theory in an attempt to patch up their shortcomings."

This was a bold claim! Despite the pervasive presence of the MTA and CFA throughout much of the galaxy, Secretary Lowe boldly stated that it was actually the Rubarthan school of thought that became the most dominant ideology across the stars!

The strangest thing about this statement was that Ves felt as if it wasn't wrong!

"What about the Terrans?" He weakly asked.

"The Terrans... even they moved into the direction of the dominant beliefs that underpin New Rubarth Empire, although they do their best to deny it. They are far too proud to concede that the Rubarthans have a better point than them, but make no mistake, the Terrans have also moved in the direction of their breakaway rivals, if only hesitantly and half-heartedly. Their continued shuffling and continued unwillingness to embrace the Rubarthan beliefs has given them the reputation that they are weak and in decline. As far as the rest of the galaxy is concerned, the Rubarthan model is the best blueprint that human civilization should follow!"

All of these assertions sounded extremely bold. Yet when Ves thought about his exposure to the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire, he did have to admit that the influence of the latter first-rate superstate was much more pervasive across the Bright Republic.

Ves hardly heard anything great about the Terrans. Of course, sheer distance played a major part in why the Terrans never came up in the news, yet this did not explain why Rubarth got mentioned from time to time.

The Terrans represented the old while the Rubarthans represented the new.

The Terrans represented an outdated way of thought while the Rubarthans boldly propagated a newer, stronger way of thought.

The Terrans was past news, a relic of the past that stubbornly clung to life. The Rubarthans on the other hand constantly reached new heights and continued to advance the development of human civilization!

"I feel like we're giving the Terrans an unnecessary bad wrap. They've lost a lot of territory, I admit, but they're still on par with the Rubarthans, right?"

"That's true. The Greater Terran United Confederation is an old but stable polity. As much as the Rubarthans constantly pursue greatness, they are also great risk takers. The Terrans serve as a useful counterpart in that they are as stable as a rock and not prone to chasing after the unknown. Even so, the Rubarthans managed to convince themselves and much of human space that struggling, pushing forward and taking risks is the best way to keep humanity strong and spirited!"

"How does this tie back into the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom?"

"Come now, Mr. Larkinson. After hearing all of this, you should be able to form your own opinion. As a native of the Bright Republic, how would you describe the ethos of your home state?"

Ves furrowed his brows as he summed up his beliefs about his home state. "I would say that the Bright Republic is a state that attempts to be more enlightened to the realities of living in this dangerous galaxy. It tried its hand at peace and failed, but even so we reject the barbarity and backwardness of more despotic states."

At least, that was the ideal the Bright Republic should have pursued and what Ves always believed in. Yet his recent encounters with the upper echelons of power made him question whether the Bright Republic was all that different from the barbaric states it always looked down upon.

If the Bright Republic ate up the Societal Vitality Theory like all the other warmongering states, how could it claim to be any better?

"Well spoken, Mr. Larkinson!" Secretary Lowe appeared to take no notice of Ves' ambivalence. "While there is no way of getting around the fact that the Bright Republic has been forced to become pragmatic in their beliefs, we nonetheless hold to an ideal that we must hold ourselves higher as humans. While Senator Tovar does believe that the Societal Vitality Theory is a necessary guide to keep the Republic strong, it does not mean we have to adopt all the other traits and excesses of Rubarth. We do not adopt theories without proof that they are accurate and we do not adopt the customs that are in fashion before evaluating whether they fit with our ideals."

"As opposed to the Vesia Kingdom which has followed much closer in the footsteps of the New Rubarth Empire?" Ves asked back.

"Exactly. While the Vesia Kingdom is nowhere near as sophisticated as the New Rubarth Empire, you can see the resemblance between the two in how they both foster internal competition. In fact, the Vesians went into further extremes by relying on the Bright-Vesia Wars to test whether the heirs of their noble houses are worthy to take up the mantle of the older generation of

rulers. Tell me, Ves, do you think it's pleasant for you to live under such a regime?"

"I wouldn't like to live in such a stratified society where commoners are openly treated like dirt by the nobles." Ves replied honestly.

What he didn't say was that the Bright Republic might not be much better with founder families and a small number of plutocrats holding all the most important levers of power. They just did a better job at hiding their pervasive influence.

Ves couldn't help but grow cynical about the sordid ideologies that drove both states to behave in the way they did. Even so, he also felt as if he gained a greater understanding on how the galaxy and human space really worked.

He should be thankful for that, at least.

"The point I'm trying to make is that it is not wrong to be proud of the Bright Republic. You are a son of the Republic, and on top of that you are part of a family with a long and storied history of service to the state! While the Bright Republic may not be the utopia that everyone was hoping for, it is still a stable society where people get rewarded for their work, where mothers can feed, clothe and raise their children in peace, where servicemen get taken care of by the military, where the rule of law is taken seriously and nobody can harm anyone else with impunity and more. Is this not the kind of state that you are proud to be a citizen of, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves smiled. Those basic truths mostly rang true. While there were differences in the prosperity and development of the different planets of the Republic, there was no doubt that every citizen were largely able to live a fruitful life by pursuing their opportunities.

"A state where the common man or woman isn't treated like dirt is a state worth fighting for!" He declared.

While his conviction didn't sound very specific, Ves formed a simple enough narrative to guide him forward when he navigated the murky politics of high society in the future. That should be enough!

Chapter 1018 Common Ground

The intentions of Senator Tovar on Ves couldn't be more clear. He needed to learn to get along with Vesian nobles and officials.

That didn't necessarily mean that Ves needed to take on a Vesian coat and buy into their values and beliefs. He had to maintain hold of his Brighter identity even as he somehow made nice with the Vesian envoys and attaché.

"Easier said than done." Ves said when Secretary Lowe left his cabin after passing on his message.

Ves benefited a lot from the diplomatic aide's insight. He learned how to cope with Vesian manipulation and distortion.

Simply said, Ves was no diplomat or politician. So why should he get into a substantive debate with those who were? It would be like a farmer talking about mechs to a mech designer. No matter how much the farmer read up by himself, he could never match the sheer amount of knowledge, insight and experience of a formally trained mech designer!

So the first truth that Ves had to keep in mind was that he'd been invited to the delegation to connect with the Vesians as a mech designer!

"The key is not to focus on the differences, but on what we share in common."

Brighters and Vesians may be highly opposed to each other, but as life-long rivals they shared many similarities as well. At the very least, both sides made use of mechs to fight. Ves should be able to connect to anyone with a connection to mechs, not just fellow mech designers.

Connecting with Lord Javier served as a useful practice run. Although the captive Vesian noble on parole admitted that he had an incentive to befriend

his captors, Ves figured that he needed the handicap in order to make nice with a Vesian.

He shook his head. "It's so strange to play nice with a Vesian."

Before the war, the Vesia Kingdom had always been a faceless and dormant threat. The ravages of the previous generation's war still scarred the Bright Republic during the period he grew up. Everyone treated it as a particularly deadly war, with many more people dying than the historical trend.

Everyone made mistakes. Everyone underestimated the full scope of the war. Many people paid the price.

Growing up under such an ever-present well of depression among the adults colored Ves against the Vesians. Even if he never met a Vesian before, he already inherited the burning hatred and swelling animosity towards the citizens and combatants of their neighboring state.

It was only until the war began and Ves experienced what it was like to fight against the Vesians that he learned that all of their fears were true. The Vesian Mech Legion might be too fractured to coordinate effectively with each other on a strategic scale, their ferocious mech pilots fought just as well as the professional and highly-trained mech pilots of the Mech Corps!

As the disguised fleet under the protection of the elite 8th Spiral Shockers of the 3rd New Foundation Division made it halfway to the Reinald Republic, Ves began to meet with Lord Javier on a regular basis.

The bored and lonely noble welcomed the company, especially since the security officers aboard the Felicitous Remembrance disallowed him from accessing the galactic net.

These kinds of restrictions broke the illusion of freedom and emphasized his status as a hostage. Even if he could roam around the ship and visit almost

every public facility open to passengers, Lord Javier would always be reminded that he was a stranger among enemies.

Sometimes, his arrogance and his confident facade cracked at the strain. The arrival of Ves gave him some very much-needed relief from the absence of peers.

They gathered at one of the luxurious lounge and bar rooms of the Remembrance. Ves looked at the noble scion in confusion. "I'm not a peer. You're the son of a count and the heir to House Eneqqin. You've ruled star systems populated by billions of commoners, each of which are affected by your actions and decisions. I'm just a mech designer."

"You're kind of like the Brighter version of nobility in my eyes." Javier responded with a smile before he took a gulp of his glass of imported beer. "The Larkinson Family could be called House Larkinson and there won't be too much of a difference. The only shortcomings of your house would be that it has way too little wealth and territory for their military contributions."

"The Bright Republic doesn't work that way."

Javier grinned. "Is that so? As I've stated earlier, the Republic and the Kingdom aren't so different. Everything is just a lot less obvious in your state. It's crazy to me that you Larkinsons are content to remain as a middling family! If you Larkinsons threw your lot with the Kingdom instead of the Republic, you would have been at least as powerful as House Eneqqin!"

The Larkinson ancestor used to be a mercenary who worked for the highest bidder. He might as well have gone on to fight for the Vesians instead of the Brighters if the latter hadn't offered the most pay!

Of course, that was just idle speculation from Ves. The historical records from the time of the founding of the Bright Republic were spotty and fragmented.

Although the historians in the family did a great job at reconstructing the missing parts through the use of corroborating sources, it hadn't been entirely clear why the Larkinson Ancestor threw his lot with the Bright Republic.

A lot of employers opened up their coffers in the newly-opened Komodo Star Sector. All of them spent their savings on hiring mercenaries in order to pad their numbers and win the opportunity of a lifetime to capture more valuable territory before the borders became fixed!

Lord Javier turned out to be quite the aficionado when it came to historical battles. "Studying the past is an important aspect for a noble as well as a mech pilot. Through studying our history, we get to understand how you Brighters think, act and fight."

"That sounds surprisingly insightful, coming from you." Ves looked at Javier in mild astonishment. He took a sip of his delightfully warm coffee. As this conversation began to stray into political territory, he quickly steered the topic towards mechs. "How would you characterize the Vesian way of fighting?"

"That's a big question. Too big, in fact." Javier shrugged. "Every duchy has adopted their overall mech doctrines. I'm sure you know some of that considering you served with the Vandals as you gallivated through our space. As a subject of the Duchy of Imodris, I'm most familiar with our own mech doctrine, which heavily focuses on combined arms. We don't believe in putting ourselves into corners. Instead, we try to have a bit of everything and rely on synergy to achieve more than the sum of its parts."

"That kind of sounds like the Imodris mech doctrine spreads itself a little too thin. Won't the lack of focus prevent you from developing a strong specialty?"

"That only matters at the top level. Every mech regiment or private outfit gets to pick and choose what they like, and they know better than to grab a bit of

everything. That said, it's really annoying for me to adjust to different mech rosters each time I lead a new unit."

"There's one thing you Vesians have in common, though. You employ missile weapons a lot more frequently than the Bright Republic. Doesn't that get expensive?"

"Pah." Lord Javier sneered. "Missiles are pretty much fire-and-forget at their most basic level of use. The main reason why we employ them so frequently is because it's not as demanding to train a missileer mech pilot as opposed to a rifleman mech pilot. The latter demands actual skill in marksmanship while the former only forces you to tweak the targeting systems before you unleash the missiles."

"You guys don't train your mech pilots that well?"

Lord Javier shrugged. "It depends on which House and which noble is in charge of the mech regiment and mech legion. I know some of my peers aren't as diligent in running their units as others. I don't know. I've never been assigned to a military unit yet. I should have been in contention to lead a mech regiment, but you Vandals came and ruined my Detemen System before I could go through with my commissioning. Thanks for that, by the way."

"You're welcome."

"Sheesh. You could have at least pretended to be contrite."

Ves laughed. "Why bother when you could see through my act?"

"It's the thought that counts. Let me teach you a lesson, Ves. When you go talk to people like me, the way you act and behave in public is more important than your underlying intentions. Just now, I gave you an opportunity to make amends to me so that we would appear closer to each other, at least from a

bystander's point of view. That you didn't do so means you slighted me. The public would think that we aren't on the same page."

All of this sounded fairly different from the normal way that Brighters treated each other. The social differences between the classes weren't as wide, so they didn't have to think so much about their public conduct. It was more than sufficient enough to act as yourself, though you would also have to make sure to be polite.

As Ves interacted more and more with Lord Javier, he became more exposed to the cultural differences between their states and social classes.

Ves particularly took note of the bearing he needed to adopt as a member of a higher social class. He still clung too much to his former identity as an average citizen of the Republic. Even back when he studied mech design at Rittersberg, he didn't pay too much attention to the elitist clubs and social circles at the capital planet.

He never considered himself to be capable of reaching a high station in his life! He thought it would be a pipe dream to become the head of a multi-billion mech manufacturing company within a couple of years!

Propelled with the help of his unique advantages, his rapid ascension came so suddenly that Ves still hadn't fully adjusted his attitude in a way that befitted his new station in life.

"You already possess the confidence and the arrogance of a successful mech designer and magnate." Lord Javier eyes Ves in a critical manner. "I think the problem is that you're still too stuck in your past as an average Joe to shed your modesty."

"What's so wrong about being modest?"

"There's a difference in being modest and being understated. Just look at Senator Tovar for example. That man doesn't dress extravagantly or demand

or your obedience outright. However, the way he naturally acts already commands obedience without saying so. Sure, his status helps out a lot, but that man is a born leader no matter where he goes or who he talks to. That's classy. As for you..."

"As for me?" Ves wondered.

"You're kind of a mix between a dork and a boss. Sometimes, I get the sense that you are capable of being in charge, but you're restraining yourself for some reason. Is it because you don't see the need to keep your head high in the presence of someone like Senator Tovar or I?"

What Lord Javier said about Ves seemed very apt to him! Ves himself knew that he acted much more domineering during the times he held authority over a bunch of subordinates. From his time of taking charge of the LMC, to being the temporary head designer of the Vandals, to supervising the bunch of Ansel brats at Frozen Point Research Base, Ves had plenty of practice in exercising leadership.

Yet as soon as he met a bigshot or someone of a higher rank, he instantly adopted a servile demeanor.

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Ves, Ves, Ves." Lord Javier shook his head. "If you continue to act like that, people like Senator Tovar will keep rolling over you. If you want to get anywhere in high society, you need to learn how to stand up for yourself even if you're being approached by a CFA admiral. Don't worry. Let Uncle Javier here teach you the ropes."

Chapter 1019 Possible Threats

Ves had mixed feelings about the lesson he received from Lord Javier. It basically boiled down to keeping his spine whenever he met someone of a superior class. He not only needed to remember his confidence in himself, but

express it in a way that allowed him to gain the respect of others but not to the extent that earned their ire.

"How can you balance between the two?" He asked.

"Most of the time, the people you're meeting aren't worth the effort to placate." Lord Javier answered.

"I don't think that will cut it against someone like Senator Tovar."

"That old geezer is a special case. He and his club of geriatrics are really pissy about etiquette and stuff. They embodied the rules for so long that they're even willing to order the deaths of anyone who acts outside of their expectations."

Ves gulped. "How am I supposed to follow your advice in that case?"

"That's the fun of it all." The noble grinned. "Sometimes, you can get away with it. Earning a powerful person's respect is more than worth it. The better his impression of you, the more he'll be considerate of you. If it backfires, well, just consider it an instance where you gambled and lost. That's life."

"If that's the case, how are you still alive?"

Lord Javier patted his chest. "Because of my backing. Everyone who wants to touch me needs to consider the consequences. Even your Vandals never dared to chop off my head or put me through torture. You know why?"

"They're scared of provoking House Eneqqin and their allies."

"Exactly! Our house was at an apex within the Duchy of Imodris by the time I was still in charge of the Detemen System. I'm sure our prestige took a huge hit from my capture and the Vandal raid, but that's only a temporary setback. As soon as I get back and throw my weight around, our noble house's foundation will be rock solid again."

The situation at House Eneqqin seemed highly precarious to Ves. They depended too much on the powerful father-and-son duo to prop it up and remain in favor to the Duchess of Imodris. Now that Lord Javier failed in the defense of the Detemen System and got captured, one of the two legs of House Eneqqin got cut off!

Even if the noble house somehow managed to reattach its leg, the limb would never be able to function as smoothly as before. The rehabilitation process would be long and arduous, and Ves did not feel entirely hopeful that Lord Javier would have an easy time in power as before.

Of course, Lord Javier didn't express any doubts he would be able to regain his old height. Ves didn't know whether the noble was just pretending to be confident or if he really believed in his own optimistic delusion.

Either way, they still managed to grow somewhat closer despite their many differences. Ves got the sense that besides being deprived of company, Lord Javier also took pity on Ves.

It galled Ves a bit to receive the pity of a Vesian noble, but his self-respect took a backseat when it came to his current assignment. He needed to bear through the occasional indignities if he wanted to become adept at interacting with Vesian nobles and officials.

He figured he made good progress during their daily meetings. Lord Javier never bothered to adjust his attitude in front of Ves so he presented an accurate sample of how the typical Vesian noble would act.

While the Vesian peace delegation wouldn't consist entirely of nobles, it was still important for Ves to be able to gain their respect or acknowledgement when confronted.

As a week went by, Ves figured he was beginning to nail the kind of bearing and conduct suitable to mingle with the Vesians at the upcoming peace delegation.

By now, the fleet almost arrived at the borders of the Reinald Republic. However, this was also the most precarious time for the peace delegation.

The Reinald Republic's propensity of attracting pirates and all sorts of other shady outfits led to a certain amount of instability in the vicinity of the state.

While pirates and other criminals behaved relatively restrained within Reinald's borders, it was pretty much open season at the approaches to the pirate-friendly state.

A lot of illicit traffic flowed through the Reinald Republic's Harkensen System. The fleets and trade convoys that delivered the goods to the Harkensen System didn't teleport there from the other side of the star sector in an instant.

Just like any other starfaring vessel, their ships needed to hop from star to star. While port systems helped shorten the journey and increase security, such convenient steps didn't exist everywhere.

This gave wiley and greedy pirates the opportunity to intercept the shipments. Due to the nature of pirates, not everyone was as formidable or as well-equipped as the old Lydia's Swordmaidens.

In fact, a vast amount of pirates operated from a single converted carrier that hosted just a squad of shambling pirate mechs.

For these bottom feeders to take their ill-gotten goods to the Reinald Republic was nothing less than tempting fate! Larger pirate fleets that consisted of at least three or four carriers easily gobbled up these piddling little solitary pirate vessels.

Considering the strength of the Felicitous Remembrance's escorts, they should have been ruled out as a target. Hardly any pirate gang, no matter how strong, would be crazy enough to risk a direct confrontation against such a well-armed protection force.

The elite Spiral Shockers committed as much as five light carriers disguised as security company vessels from a generic-sounding company called Special Security Limited. While the SSL couldn't openly bring along combat carriers without drawing suspicion about their actual identities, all of their light carriers received a lot of reinforcement that made them substantially more resilient than a typical light carrier for sale in the private sector.

All of those carriers brought at least one full company of spaceborn mechs. While the Spiral Shockers couldn't bring along their expensive and well-designed signature mechs that embodied their names, they at least adopted some great mech models that sold well in the Bright Republic's mech market.

Ves found it regretful that his products wasn't among them, but then again he never designed a spaceborn mech for the LMC either.

"I should really plug that hole in the company's mech catalog. Landbound mechs aren't poor sellers, but spaceborn mechs are a major slice of the mech market that I can't afford to neglect."

The fleet didn't completely neglect landbound mechs either. On top of the Spiral Shockers, Ves also heard that another elite New Foundation mech regiment detached one of their landbound mech companies to the peace delegation as well.

Unfortunately, Ves didn't get to hear the details. He would learn of them soon enough once the fleet arrived at the Harkensen System and the members of the peace delegation shuttled down to the surface of Harkensen II.

Ves already visited Harkensen III and barely managed to make it out alive of Harkensen I. Hopefully, their upcoming visit to the Rittersberg-like administrative planet would progress more like the former than the latter. The Reinaldan Honored Ones should have gotten their act together after suffering a major calamity on their pleasure and tourism planet previously!

That reminded Ves of Miss Calabast and her affiliation to a hidden but surprisingly powerful force of instigators, terrorists and mass-murderers.

He never really got the full story about their abrupt attack, only that this mysterious force once placed a lot of untraceable mechs and mech pilots deep in hiding. They should have built up their strength and stayed hidden for a couple more years if the hunt for the Starlight Megalodon didn't come and provoked them into action early.

Ves suddenly paused. Could this mysterious force that originally aimed to destabilize or outright destroy Harkensen I be the greater threat that Senator Tovar cautioned about?

"It might also be something else entirely."

While none of the officials aboard the Remembrance ever defined the supposed threat, Ves basically narrowed it down to three possibilities.

"The first possibility is that it's another state within the Komodo Star Sector."

This was the simplest and most probable possibility. There were too many choices to consider, so Ves did not wish to narrow his vision by fixating on a couple of them. He just knew that it could be anyone of them. It could even be an entire coalition of neighboring third-rate states!

"The second possibility is a threat from outside the borders."

This could be either pirates or aliens. Ves pretty much ruled out pirates because he knew that neither the Dragon Alliance or the Ravienne Alliance

would have the gumption to cross the CFA's bottom line by boldly crossing over into civilized space. That would just provoke the CFA into sending out their war fleets to stomp out the large and easily trackable pirate fleets.

So that left the aliens, and the only alien race of note in the vicinity of the Komodo Star Sector was the sandmen!

Could it be Sigrund stirring up the pot? Ves found it rather unlikely, but he couldn't judge Sigrund according to normal logic. The hybrid alien AI was too unfathomable for a human like Ves to predict. Perhaps he took control of the sandmen race and sent them all on a suicide charge against the Komodo Star Sector in order to further some other nefarious purpose.

"The third possibility is a threat from other star sectors."

While warfare across sector borders didn't happen all that often, it was not entirely unheard of. Star sectors mainly kept to themselves because it was very troublesome for regular starships to cross over to another star sector.

Star sectors weren't determined by drawing artificial lines through empty space! They were based on the natural gravitic fluctuations and turbulence!

In common parlance, gravitic walls separated star sectors from each other, making most conventional FTL travel that relied on transitioning into higher dimensions extremely dangerous.

However, fixed channels called gravitic streams ran through the walls at various points that provided a possibility for starships to cross into other star sectors.

Not just any ship could travel through the violent and turbulent gravitic streams. Without a robust and powerful FTL drive designed for this specific purpose, a ship could forget about surviving the journey without getting splattered all over the higher dimensions.

This didn't even include other complicating factors that made travel between star sectors so perilous and unpredictable. Phenomena such as gravitic tides and gravitic tsunamis all hindered cross-star sector travel and drove up the cost of transporting passengers and goods throughout the galaxy.

This was also the biggest reason why there was such a high threshold to importing and exporting mechs over multiple star sectors. The high prices charged by transportation, insurance and security companies involved with escorting products through a gravitic stream only made the effort worth it if the mechs involved possessed high profit margins.

If it was already this difficult to ship commercial products to other star sectors, then it was just as difficult for military forces to cross over their fleets into hostile star sectors!

"It's too troublesome."

Therefore, while invasions from one star sector to another did happen every now and then, Ves didn't figure it wasn't worth the trouble in this case. The Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain Star Sectors that bordered the Komodo Star Sector both needed to unite before they would ever contemplate such a risky venture!

As Ves continued to juggle between the three possibility within his mind, an alarm suddenly sounded out.

It was a very familiar alarm to Ves. "A hostile force has arrived!"

Right now, the peace delegation's fleet had just stopped over in a well-frequented star system and just waited to cycle their FTL drives before making the next hop.

However, a major pirate fleet suddenly transitioned out of FTL close enough to pose an acute threat to the fleet!

Chapter 1020 A Nobody

As a civilian passenger ship, the Felicitous Remembrance had not been built to participate in battle. While the Tovars made sure to spruce up her defenses and add some other hidden surprises, Ves knew that she possessed no offensive power against a hostile force of spaceborn mechs.

The elite Spiral Shockers would be in charge of defending the Remembrance and the other ships of the disguised convoy. They would also be leading the battle on one of their Special Security Limited-branded light carriers.

Even so, Ves did not feel content at being left out of the fighting. How could he feel reassured when his comm connection and all of the terminals on the ship completely locked down due to the emergency? It wasn't as if he could look through a porthole and track the progress of the battle as the distances involved was too huge to be seen with the naked eye!

"I have to get into the bridge somehow." He decided to himself.

While Lord Javier would definitely be kept locked in his cabin, Ves enjoyed no such restrictions. Perhaps the security officers expected that he would have the sense to return to his cabin on his own accord.

That didn't cut it to Ves.

Thus, when the alarms continued to ring throughout the interior of the Remembrance, he ignored the warning from his comm to return to his cabin and raced towards the bridge at the upper decks.

He passed by a flurry of alert but composed ship ratings securing the ship or moving towards their assigned stations in the event of a battle.

It concerned Ves a bit that the Remembrance immediately entered a state of red alert as opposed to yellow alert.

Normally, the detection of a hostile force present within the star system always merited a yellow alert condition. This signified to the crew that battle

could break out at any time, but it was highly likely that it would take a few hours or even days before the enemy came within range to fight.

A red alert on the other hand warned that the enemy force was very close or outright within range to force a fight!

"This isn't a coincidence." Ves concluded.

This implied that the Tovar Peace Delegation's mission, route, timing or whatever else had been leaked! Someone directed a substantial pirate force to arrive just after Senator Tovar's fleet arrived in this quaint star system and began to cycle their FTL drives!

Ves didn't bother speculating on who might have leaked such precise navigation details that could cause a pirate to catch the fleet flat-footed.

"That's something for Senator Tovar and the Spiral Shockers to figure out with their smart heads."

He just wanted to be able to witness the battle and be prepared if anything went amiss. If there was anything his long experience with the Vandals had taught him, it was that anything could go wrong!

Even the famed combat prowess of the Spiral Shockers didn't reassure him that he'd be safe in this instance, especially since none of their five mech companies piloted their military mechs. In order to make their disguise convincing, they were forced to use actual commercial-grade mechs, most of which fell into the budget and midrange price range!

"Damnit. Mechs like those can't keep up with the demands of elite military mech pilots!"

It depended partially to what extent the mech regiment's mech designers modified the commercial mechs. Even so, commercial mechs of a certain price range could only tolerate so much adjustments.

As Ves finally arrived in front of the blast doors leading to the bridge, a security checkpoint staffed by a squad of formidable exoskeleton soldiers rudely stopped him in place.

A security lieutenant stomped up to Ves in his exoskeleton armor. "You're not supposed to be here, Mr. Larkinson. Even if you are an attaché from the Mech Corps, you are a passenger aboard this ship. Return to your cabin now or I'll order my men to take you there."

"Please ask Senator Tovar or Lieutenant Colonel Xelven if they have need of my services." Ves requested. "I have relevant combat experience! I've witnessed countless battles against the most vicious pirate gangs of the frontier! I can provide insights that no one else can offer!"

The lieutenant sneered at Ves. "Professor Corus Ventag has already volunteered to offer his services to the defense of our fleet. We have all the mech designer expertise we require, and the Spiral Shockers are more than capable of thrashing a bunch of pirates."

The security officers stationed assigned to the Remembrance all originated from the Spiral Shockers and hence put their complete faith on the strength of their mech pilots. Even if Ves acknowledged that they deserved their reputation, it was still rather reckless of them to dismiss a pirate threat!

Some of them were much trickier in battle than their unsophisticated appearances suggested! No ordinary pirate force would be stupid enough to attack a fleet protected by five spaceborn mech companies!

Usually, Ves would adopt a weaseling tone and try to beg the lieutenant to throw him a bone. However, he figured that such an approach wouldn't soften the obstinate Shocker officer's conviction.

What Ves needed right now was not to placate the lieutenant, but to earn his acknowledgement that he was serious business!

He straightened his back and adopted a more imperious demeanor. "While Professor Ventag is a respected Senior Mech Designer, as far as I'm aware he has not been involved in any combat actions for decades. No mech designer is omniscient. I'm not demanding entry into the bridge. I'm just stating that Senator Tovar and the officers manning the bridge might find it useful to hear some insights from a different perspective."

"My orders state that we do not allow entry of unauthorized personnel. The list of guests that are allowed to enter the bridge is very small, and your name is definitely not among them, Mr. Larkinson. Darkness Eater or not, your place in battle is not at the bridge."

No matter what arguments Ves provided, the lieutenant was like a rock against the tide of words. To a security lieutenant in charge of the vital duty to defend the bridge against any known and unknown threats that approached the blast doors, he stuck to his orders like a barnacle to a seafaring ship.

Ves realized that the Spiral Shockers adopted a much more rigid and traditional attitude towards orders. This was in line with the overall standard of the Mech Corps.

Back when he served with the Vandals, Ves could have just manipulated the Vandals or made use of his prestige to force them into complying with his demands. The Vandals not only grew familiar to Ves over the years, he also proved his capabilities many times.

Sadly, he enjoyed no such standing among the Spiral Shockers. His rich awards might have blinded any other serviceman, but the Spiral Shockers were one of the premier fighting units of the Mech Corps. The elite mech regiment enjoyed a long and storied history and the Darkness Eater medal wasn't even that special to them! They fought and won so many battles that it made Ves' experiences in the frontier seem like an average commute to work!

The pride exuded by the lieutenant and his subordinates made it clear that the Spiral Shockers looked down on Ves. They weren't even unjustified for adopting such an attitude. What help could Ves really give that Colonel Xelven and Professor Ventag hadn't already covered with their respective expertises?

After five minutes of arguing, the security lieutenant finally tired of the distraction and was about to signal some security officers to bring Ves to his cabin.

Ves quickly made his way out of the corridor to the bridge before some goons could drag him back. "Okay, I got the message. I'll be going back myself, no need to draw your guards out of their posts!"

As Ves left the upper decks, he cursed to himself. Even as he suspected that the battle already commenced, he had no idea what kind of threat the Felicitous Remembrance has her Spiral Shocker escorts faced.

It could have been a small pirate force fooled into thinking they stood a chance against the Tovar fleet. It could also be a major pirate armada with enough mechs to outnumber the Spiral Shockers five to one!

Yet without access to the local plot or any of the other ship systems that could tell him about the impending battle in space, Ves felt as if he was cast into the unknown yet again.

He decided to walk to a particular lounge room instead of a cabin on a hunch. To no surprise, Ves found Lord Javier calmly gulping down a glass of beer.

"Why am I not surprised to find you here?"

"You Brighters could hardly put me into the cockpit of a mech to help defend the ship, right?" Lord Javier smirked and gestured at an empty seat next to him. "Come sit. I could use the company."

Ves sat down but didn't order any drink except tea. The last thing he wanted to do was inebriate himself during a battle. "So. Here we are."

"Here we are." Javier nodded. "Nerve-wracking, isn't it? I felt like this all the time when I was locked aboard the Shield of Hispania while you Vandals picked fights with everyone you encountered in space."

"We didn't fight that many battles in space." Ves chuckled.

"Well, the ship entered into red alert enough times for me to get used to the feeling of knowing nothing while a battle is going outside. You'll get used to it after a few times."

"Still, it's a strange feeling, you know? I used to be one of the people in charge. I was by far the best mech designer among all of the mech designers attached to the of the Flagrant Vandals taking part in that mission. I was their head designer! Now, though, Senator Tovar or whoever else is in charge on the bridge can draw upon the knowledge of a Senior Mech Designer. In comparison, a small fry like has no value."

Lord Javier looked at Ves with a critical eye that belied his tipsy state. "You're kind of a control freak, aren't you? You like being in control. You hate it if you have no way to make your own decisions and you hate it even more if you're completely left out of the loop."

Ves reflected on himself for a bit. "I guess you're right. I think it's because I've experienced too many troubles that happened completely outside of my control. I've always been forced to ride one crashing ship after another. Even if I kind of brought this on myself for accepting Senator Tovar's invitation to be part of his peace delegation, it still frustrates me to no end."

"Why do you think people are so power hungry? News flash Ves, almost every human is a slave to their circumstances. Some don't have any ambitions and are content with their lot. Others are more like you who want to take control

over their lives. Well, the hardest thing about taking control is that you won't ever obtain it if you just sit on your butt and go with the flow. Taking control means taking charge. Taking charge means you have to assert yourself."

"I tried that with the guards blocking the way to the bridge. They stuck to their orders."

"That's the Bright Republic for you." Lord Javier said flippantly. "In the Mech Legion, any noble could have passed through that hurdle."

Ves shrugged. "It's probably better this way. Now that I think about it, it's rather inappropriate for me to attempt to barge into the Remembrance's bridge. I'm sure the Spiral Shockers and the professionals employed by Senator Tovar have the situation well in hand."

Suddenly, the Felicitous Remembrance lost power. The entire ship became engulfed in darkness and silence as the lights, the air filtration system, the temperature regulators and everything else abruptly shut down!

Even the artificial gravity stopped working, causing Lord Javier's empty mug of beer to float from his grasp in the dark!

"You were saying?"