

Chapter 961 Power of Passion

The sudden and completely illogical retreat of the Blind Men even before the battle properly begun put the entire pirate ranks into disarray!

No matter how much the pirate commanders of Kaso's Remediers and the Slick Hairs tried to admonish the Blind Men to return to the battle, their messages hadn't gotten through.

This was because Ves forcibly occupied the Blind Prophet's communication channel and kept it open using advanced CFA communications tech!

Now, it would have been salvageable if the Blind Men's second-in-command took over. Yet the Blind Prophet exerted such an overwhelming leadership position in the psuedo-cult-like organization that none of his subordinates dared to overrule his commands.

When the Blind Prophet spoke, everyone obeyed!

"This isn't part of the plan! Why are we running?!" A Blind Man mech pilot with a bit more sense asked his fellow pirates.

"You fool! The Blind Prophet will have your head if you disobey him! When he tells you to run, you better run!"

"This battle is already lost! Didn't you hear that angry mech designer?! Our mechs are scrap and only a single bump away from collapsing!"

"I think that guy is bluffing!"

"A mech designer doesn't lie about mechs, especially since ours is a ripoff of his own design! Don't you see how dangerous it is to fight against a mech designer with a mech that he can dissect to this degree!"

"Screw this! I don't want to have my mech shot out under me by a single well-placed shot!"

The Blind Men all kept running with no intention of rejoining the fight!

The confusion and the unexpected withdrawal truly put the remaining two pirate outfits aligned to the Dragon Alliance in a difficult spot. They didn't even particularly wanted to confront the famous Swordmaidens and their military allies in the first place.

Only their numbers advantage gave them sufficient courage to win, but the critical withdrawal of around sixty ranged mechs left a huge hole in both their numbers advantage and their tactical flexibility!

The lack of ranged fire support and suppression completely left the Swordmaiden melee mechs unchained! They blasted forward at great speed in their famous charges and immediately smashed a huge hole in the lines of the Remediers.

Commander Dise took the lead while piloting a spare Misty Slasher, chopping Remedier mechs left and right with her pinnacle expert candidate skills!

Even though Dise was a lot more comfortable piloting landbound mechs than spaceborn mechs, her recent ascension rapidly elevated her skills and learning ability. It was more than enough to tear apart the confused and disarrayed ranks of the pirates that thought to ambush the remnant fleet!

"Lift up your swords and hack them down to our foes! Let us teach these misguided men that the Swordmaidens are still alive!"

"Fight!"

"Chop the pirates into half!"

The Vandals mechs acted with a bit more caution, adopting their usual role of backing the Swordmaiden mechs up and preventing them from being outflanked by their foes.

Light mechs from both sides kept the Slick Hairs in check. The battle at the flanks went poorly for the pirate mechs that all donned slick hairdos, and the only reason they managed to stabilize their ranks was that the Flagrant Swordmaidens mainly aimed their weapons at the Remediers!

Both Commander Dise and Major Verle agreed on their strategy! They needed to take this golden opportunity and hammer the Remediers before they recovered their wits and regained their composure!

The brutal collision and the constant pressure against the mech pilots of the Remediers put them under enormous strain. Command and control, already rather poor among the pirates ranks, completely frayed to the point where the Remediers hardly communicated with each other effectively.

Who cared about orders when a relentless Swordmaiden mech kept chopping at their cockpits!

If the Remediers and the Slick Hairs managed to maintain their composure, then they would have given the Flagrant Swordmaidens an even fight at best. Yet the differences in morale, preparation and readiness completely put the remaining two pirate forces on the back foot with no hope of stabilizing their lines!

"The Remediers are starting to route!"

When the Remediers lost a third of their mechs through the unrelenting assaults of the Swordmaidens and the tactical supremacy of the Vandals, the remaining pirates ceased to believe they could win!

Only a few cowards flew back to their carrier ships at the start, but that trickle soon became a flood when those who remained lost faith in the battle as well!

A cascade of chaotic retreats ensued as the Remediers completely lost cohesion!

"Chase after them! Don't let them return to their carriers!" Major Verle commanded. "Prioritize the capture of the Remedier and Slick Hair pirate carriers!"

"What about the Blind Men?"

"Let them go. They're already broken."

Everyone couldn't help but throw a numb, worshipful or impressed glance at Ves.

By now, he had run out of steam, having vented his anger and frustration about being confronted by a poor imitation of his own work. He plopped back in his observer's seat and blanked out.

He completely exhausted his emotional energy with his tirade!

While he possessed sufficient awareness of what a legendary feat he accomplished by verbally intimidating a significant force of pirates to turn tail and run, he couldn't muster up the energy to care at the moment.

Nonetheless, that didn't stop everyone's appreciation of saving the lives of many precious Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots! He single-handedly determined the outcome of the battle that none of the Flagrant Swordmaidens believed they could win without crippling losses in their favor!

His acid words and burning tongue not only tilted the advantage in their favor, but practically tilted it into a completely lopsided victory!

The Flagrant Swordmaidens hardly suffered any losses in the ensuing clash and pursuit! Aside from a dozen or so mechs that got wrecked to such an extent to force their pilots to eject, The Vandals and Swordmaidens managed to retain most of their battle strength!

"Capture their carriers! As many as possible! Don't stop until we force the surrender of at least four of them! Prepare our shuttles send in the boarding parties to hasten the capture!"

Once the pirate lines collapsed, victory became assured. The matters that followed merely consisted of cleanup and securing their gains.

In the end, they managed to capture four shambling pirate carriers with relative ease. The only reason why the Vandals and Swordmaidens didn't capture the remainder was because the Remediers and the Slick Hairs still retained enough mechs to put up a desperate fight if cornered.

By leaving them a way out, the Flagrant Swordmaidens ensured their foes would continue to take the available escape route.

"Four carriers is a decent enough haul, especially considering we don't have the time to convert them for our use."

With sandman motherships about to transition at the emergence zone, the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't have much time to arrange their spoils. The salvage teams didn't bother with recovering any of the mech wrecks and instead started stripping the captured pirate carriers of their fuel and supplies with great haste!

Soon enough, the Flagrant Swordmaiden carriers transitioned back into FTL with their newly replenished stores of starship-grade fuel and containers worth of low-grade materials.

Ves didn't pay too much attention to the aftermath of the battle. His battle-turning performance earlier drained quite a lot out of him. Not only on an emotional level, but also on a spiritual level for some reason.

As he recovered quietly in the isolation of his office with just a fawning security guard standing in the corner, he tried to puzzle out why his spirituality became affected.

He eventually reasoned that he put his full passion into his speech. He inadvertently concentrated his whole mind into his spontaneous actions and channeled his fury in an even more single-minded focus than when he designed a mech!

This was the power of passion!

Whether channeling his Spirituality actually made a difference, Ves didn't know. In his judgement, as long as the Blind Prophet listened for a couple of seconds, he had already fallen into the pit!

There was no way out once the Blind Prophet heard the truth!

"Nothing hurts more than the truth." Ves nodded to himself. "There's no way the Blind Men can keep their composure once they hear how flawed their mechs really are. A mech is not like a sidearm that they can casually replace if they find fault with it! Mechs are investments that they have to rely on for years!"

Mech pilots entrusted their lives to their mechs. Their sometimes intimate relationship with their own mechs caused them to be hurt that much deeper when Ves brutally exposed their shortcomings. The fact that he mostly didn't lie at all when he listed out their many faults meant that they absolutely had no doubt that he spoke the truth!

Ves eventually received a notification from Major Verle. He finally got called to another private meeting with the big man.

"Let's see what he has to say."

He exited his office and stalked the familiar route to Verle's stateroom. As he passed by a large number of Vandal officers and ratings on duty, he received both respectful and fearful responses.

Some greeted him like a fellow Vandal buddy. Others saluted at him as if he was a Vandal officer. The rest shied away from him as if he was the devil.

No matter what, the distance between Ves and the rest of the Vandals had closed. Just like with the ground forces, Ves adequately proved himself to the men and thereby gained their acknowledgement.

Almost no one considered him an outsider anymore!

While that gave him cause to smile, he quickly dropped it once he thought of all of the Vandals who hadn't been able to make it off the surface of Aeon Corona VII. The ground forces respected him as well, but that wasn't enough for him to save them all at the hands of the Vesians.

"The only reason why my feat is so significant is because we have too few mech pilots left to put up a good fight."

This dampened his mood somewhat as he filed into Major Verle's office. This time, his ever-present security guard remained outside, giving the two senior figures some privacy.

"So." The commanding officer stared at Ves like he was an experimental specimen. "That happened."

"That happened." Ves echoed.

"Absurd as the events today have proceeded, there is no doubt that you have saved many of our lives and even ruled out the possibility of defeat. On behalf of the Vandals, thank you, Ves. You are as much a hero as the other famous Larkinson mech pilots. You are a credit to your family line."

Ves smiled deprecatingly at Verle. "It's true that I'm a Larkinson, sir, but I've been raised outside of their soldier circles. I have no desire to be compared to my fellow family members who are out fighting on the frontlines every day in their mechs."

"You give yourself too little credit. In my eyes, your impact on this battle is equivalent to what an expert pilot on our side can do. Sixty mechs! You turned away sixty mechs by yourself without paying a painful price! In the standardized evaluation criteria of the Mech Corps, your individual contribution value of this battle is through the roof! That deserves a medal and a commendation at the very least."

"Sounds good, sir." Ves shrugged. "I guess I can add that to the pile of contributions I've already earned."

The major smiled at him. "You're a real treasure, aren't you, Mr. Larkinson? From your exemplary performance and initiative you showed throughout your journey with us, and from your pivotal role in seeing the mission to success, you're due for an enormous reward. The Bright Republic isn't parsimonious when it comes to recognizing their heroes."

Ves didn't know how to feel about that. Perhaps in a normal state of mind, he would have felt jubilant about earning such recognition. Now though, he just felt tired. Tired of constantly falling into desperate straits and tired of being pushed to the brink of defeat.

He just wanted to go home.

Chapter 962 Friendly Advice

Talks about recognition from the Bright Republic still seemed far away to Ves. Right now, the Flagrant Swordmaidens hardly left the deep frontier and just survived an encounter with the Dragon Alliance's peripheral members.

If a real pirate fleet from the Dragons of the Void confronted the Flagrant Swordmaidens, then Ves had no way of replicating his feat. Such a feared and capable pirate organization would never resort to using cheap, shoddy mechs for their core mech forces!

Nonetheless, from the jubilant way Major Verle spoke to Ves, the mech officer acted as if salvation was already close at hand.

It wouldn't take too long for the remnant fleet to rendez-vous with the 'friends' of the Swordmaidens!

"By the way, the Swordmaidens are really impressed by what you've done, Mr. Larkinson. You didn't just save many of our mech pilots today. You also saved the Swordmaidens. My talks with Commander Dise are a lot more amicable now since you've earned their recognition, which conveniently extends to us. They are not an ungrateful sort, and I'm sure they'll show more sincerity with our ongoing agreement."

Ves genuinely smiled at that. "That's good to hear, sir."

"It seems you're not feeling very good at the moment."

"What I did just then took a lot out of me, sir. As a mech designer, I regard my designs as my possessions. To see such an egregious case of plagiarism in front of me just pisses me off. I take my professionalism very seriously!"

"Hmm. I see."

He probably didn't, but Ves let that pass.

After a while, Verle steered the conversation into another topic. "I feel as if you are not only tired, but disillusioned."

"How so, sir?"

"A lot of Vandals are either tired or lost. This victory has put a temporary cheer on everyone's faces, but that doesn't change the fact that we are far away from the Bright Republic and still have months to go before we are able to return to our home territory."

"I guess I'm the same as them, sir. We all wonder how long it will take to return."

"As I've said, there are plans in motion to facilitate our return. Let us talk about what that means for you. Please activate that interference device of yours."

"Alright, sir."

Ves activated his signal jammer and turned up its strength so that the entire stateroom would be blanketed with interference. The only problem was that his CFA comm was likely immune of this effect.

He conveniently didn't mention this point.

Once the disorienting effect settled in, Major Verle spoke with a bit more ease. "When you return home, you'll likely undergo a thorough debriefing and interrogation session. There are a couple of sensitive matters that are best left unmentioned, do you understand?"

"What if the interrogators insist on asking?"

"Just keep your mouth shut. The people from the Mech Corps will be indignant, but as soon as I'm able to file my report to Flashlight, you'll get pulled out in no time."

"What if Flashlights tries to push me instead?"

"They won't."

Ves raised his eyebrows? "Really, sir? They're spooks right? How can they not be curious?"

"Because I'll provide them with all the intelligence they want. As a Firestarter, my word weighs a lot more than an outsider like yours. Colonel Lowenfield and I will also pull some strings and cash in some favors to streamline your debriefing sessions. The gains from our mission and the substantial merits you've earned outweigh any other concerns. You'd be surprised what you can get away with as long as you get the job done."

"So Flashlight is much like the Vandals in this regard, sir? The ends justify the means."

"I wouldn't put it so simply." Major Verle hedged. "Flashlight is a formal military intelligence agency of the Bright Republic. There are many rules and regulations constraining their actions. It is not as if every operative is handed out a license to kill or a carte blanche to do anything they want."

"Then what's the best way to interact with Flashlight for someone like me? Can you give me some advice, sir?"

"Sure. Just consider that while Flashlight is large and influential in the Bright Republic, it also shoulders an enormous responsibility in keeping the Bright Republic on the winning side during the Bright-Vesia Wars. Internal politics is rather complex, and it's best for you to suck up to a senior official in order to secure their patronage."

Having recently dealt with such an instance on the Starlight Megalodon, Ves knew what Major Verle tried to convey.

"I suppose you're part of a faction within Flashlight as well?"

"The Firestarters form their own influence, one that leans towards taking proactive measures against the Vesians." Verle smirked. "However, I'm not sure which influence within Flashlight you'll finally be involved with. Just be prepared to pick sides early, because if you don't align yourself with any influence, you won't enjoy any protection."

"Thank you for reminding me, sir. I'll be sure to keep your warning into consideration."

Major Verle did him a huge favor by parting the veil of Flashlight's internal politics a little bit. The mech officer's words heavily implied that Ves would be substantially involved with Flashlight in the future, so learning how to stay on their good side became a high priority!

"If you're lucky, Mr. Larkinson, you will get to meet with the important official who set this mission into motion. If you're unlucky, that person will pay attention to you specifically."

"That sounds contradictory. How can I be both lucky and unlucky, sir?"

"You'll understand if you ever meet that official. Just remember that it's dangerous to associate yourself with this class of people. Try not to get entangled in the schemes that people at their height tend to hatch."

Ves nodded in understanding, curious to which high official from the Bright Republic that Major Verle actually felt apprehensive about to deserve a separate mention.

"Can I ask you something, sir? Since the Saffron Poke joined us, we regained our connection to the galactic net. Did you find out how the war is going right now?"

"The war has heated up again. The current pattern is similar to the last wars, except both the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion are accelerating their efforts. Bentheim is under enormous pressure and the Havensworth System is under a long-term blockade. Star systems are won and lost in a span of a few months, but otherwise brave mech pilots are dying in droves."

Ves could hear the cynicism in Major Verle's tone. "So this generation's war isn't much different than last time?"

"It's the same." Verle shook his head in resignation. "I've lived through the last one. While the battles are different, the outcome is the same. The Mech Legion is larger than the Mech Corps, but their individual legions and mech regiments care more about competing against each other and are never able to concentrate their efforts in any single major assault. As long as this basic deficiency holds, the war is destined to end with just a minor shift of the border between the two states."

"You make it sound as if the Vesians aren't trying very hard to overcome their mutual suspicion. Surely they aren't that stupid, right sir?"

The major nodded. "Oh, their nobles are quite devious and cunning, in fact. It is just that while they would dearly like to conquer the Bright Republic and add their territories to their own, they don't actually mind a stalemate."

"I think I already heard that conspiracy theory somewhere, sir. Something about the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom colluding with each other to fight these senseless wars in order to discipline their fighting forces and to quell the unrest within their borders."

"That is just a conspiracy theory. Take no mind of it." Verle smiled at Ves in a rather peculiar way. Obviously, it was up to Ves to interpret the major's true meaning.

The meeting wound down quickly afterwards. When Ves deactivated his signal jammer and left the office, he regained some of his good mood. He anticipated the rewards the Bright Republic might bestow him for his contributions. After all, his efforts proved pivotal in the success of this hellish mission.

While he didn't see how their efforts in the frontier influenced the war, Ves nonetheless felt a sense of accomplishment. No matter what causes the Vandals fought, bled and died for, at the very least they succeeded and furthered the plans of someone important in the Bright Republic.

"Even if it's to extend the life of some decrepit geezer." He whispered to himself.

The remnant fleet, having defeated and dispersed the only significant obstacle standing in their way, passed through a rapid succession of star systems without any further incident.

The good news didn't just extend to that. Their sandman pursuers hadn't continued following them, opting instead to park at the site of the battle and scavenge the remains of the mech wrecks and stripped-out carrier vessels.

This put a huge weight off everyone's shoulders. A week went by as the Vandals increasingly lifted up as the prospect of returning home became more probable.

Finally, after transitioning at a quiet red dwarf system, they completed their rendez-vous with a host of pirate fleets.

"Detecting seven distinct pirate fleets!" The sensor operator called out in the command center. "They are maintaining some distance between them, but they are all moving in unison!"

"So these are the dependable friends of the Swordmaidens." Major Verle remarked. "Let us hope they are hospitable to us as well."

The Vandal ships and mechs still kept their guard up, but the greeting they received from the pirates were rather tepid. Instead, they focused more on the Swordmaidens. As time went by, it became clear that the friends of the Swordmaidens truly came to assist!

"They have over fifty starships and more than a thousand spaceborn mechs!" Ves said with amazement. "The strength that we can muster is insignificant in comparison, but they aren't making any moves to take advantage!"

One unexpected but very welcome factor was that the most significant pirate gang among the agglomeration of independents actually consisted of the Omen of Misfortune!

Back at Mancroft Independent Harbor, the Omen of Misfortune got entangled into a fight against the powerful Castle Breakers. If not for the Swordmaidens coming to their aid, thereby also drawing in the Vandals in the process, the Omen of Misfortune would have certainly suffered a major defeat!

Considering the huge favor that the Vandals had extended for the Omen of Misfortune, it was somewhat reassuring for them to reciprocate in this manner. While the Vandals didn't recognize any of the other pirate gangs, the strong presence of the Omen of Misfortune lent credence to their sincerity and good faith.

"We should still remain prudent and keep a healthy separation between our forces and theirs." Major Verle reminded them all. "However, as long as everyone keeps their word, we shouldn't fear any complications."

Even so, that didn't prevent Major Verle and some of the officers to pay a visit to the Omen of Misfortune in order to express their thanks and perhaps offer some promises of payback. Ves didn't ask to accompany the delegation, as with his luck something eventful might happen due to his presence.

In any case, Ves felt leery about associating himself with a pirate gang that literally called themselves the Omen of Misfortune.

Fortunately, the Vandal officers had the situation well in hand. They returned half-a-day later with a bit more assurances.

Under the escort of so many pirate vessels and so many mechs, the remnants of the Vandals and Swordmaidens made their way back to the border of civilized with absolutely no challenge. Not even the Dragons of the Void mustered up a major fleet to go after them, though it helped that the independent pirates made a wide detour around their territory.

Perhaps only the sandmen posed a significant threat, as errant sandman fleets and motherships became attracted by such a high concentration of human vessels.

The pirates knew how to deal with that. Otherwise they wouldn't have remained standing in the frontier. Even without the aid of the Church of Haatumak, the independents successfully outmaneuvered any sandman

pursuers over the course of a month until they made it all the way back to the border of civilized space.

At that time, the huge collection of pirates transitioned into the Mancroft System, formally crossing over the border!

Ves gazed at the plot and regarded the symbols of Mancroft Station and the light CFA warship presence near the gas giant with fond eyes. They finally made it out of the frontier, and with no further shenanigans or betrayals!

"We're back!"

Practically every Vandal stood up and cheered!

Chapter 963 Misplaced Goods

Many of the pirate gangs that lent a hand to the Swordmaidens began to fly towards Mancroft Station. Since they dropped by here, they might as well do business or hang out at that hive of scum and villainy.

Ves knew that the Omen of Misfortune and the other pirates wasted a lot of time, fuel, energy and supplies just to escort eight measly vessels of the Flagrant Swordmaidens to safety. This was time that they could have spent on using their forces to more productive uses.

Yet somehow, the severely weakened Swordmaidens still enjoyed enough clout to have so many pirate forces answer their call for help!

He found that inspiring. He thought that true friendship didn't exist in the frontier, yet the conduct of independent pirate outfits such as the Swordmaidens and the Omen of Misfortune proved him wrong.

Whenever Ketis boasted about the friends of the Swordmaidens, Ves always took her stories with a grain of salt. How could treacherous and opportunistic pirates be so generous and altruistic all of a sudden?

In fact, Ves still couldn't quite explain the friendships between these independents. Their bonds transcended pure practicality and was substantially more than a relationship propped up by benefits.

As the Vandal and Swordmaiden vessels quickly stocked up on some essential fuel and supplies, the time they would travel together soon came to an end.

The Swordmaidens intended to travel to the Reinald Republic while the Vandals obviously set the Bright Republic as their destination.

While risks still existed in civilized space, both of them leaned on their backup. For the Swordmaidens, the Omen of Misfortune promised to escort them all the way to the Harkensen System in the Reinald Republic.

As for the Vandals, every serviceman aboard the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze heard with amazement that the other half of the mech regiment was present in the Mancroft System!

"That's the Wolf Mother! I recognize that huge factory ship anywhere!"

"We're saved! With Colonel Lowenfield escorting us personally, who dares to attack us?!"

This must be what Major Verle kept back from everyone. With the two remaining combat carriers of the Verle Task Force finally returning to the welcome embrace of the main element of the 6th Flagrant Vandals, their days of skulking about like rats were finally over!

As the entire Shield of Hispania erupted into a festive mood, Ketis quietly shuttled over at Ves' invitation. He met her at the shuttle bay as she stepped off the Swordmaiden shuttle.

This time, he was no longer followed by a guard. The threat level aboard the ship reduced to such an extent to make such precautions redundant.

"Have you finally made the right decision?" He gently asked.

She sighed. "I really want to stay. The Swordmaidens truly need a mech designer to keep an eye on their mechs as they rebuild. Yet... Commander Dise insists it's better to take the time to invest in myself."

"She's a smart woman and shaping up to be a great leader of the Swordmaidens." Ves nodded in acknowledgement. "She's right, you know. From a long-term perspective, the Swordmaidens are much better off if they retain a capable Journeyman Mech Designer rather than a middling Novice Mech Designer. It will just take a while for you to get there, even under my tutelage."

"It still feels as if I'm abandoning them right when they are at their lowest point." She pouted.

"I don't see it that way, Ketis. You are making a brave sacrifice by coming under my wing. You willingly chose to separate yourself from your sisters in order to work towards a better future for all of them. It won't be easy, and it won't be fast, but as long as you keep learning and improving, I'm sure you'll make it to Journeyman in time. By then, you can opt to stay with me or return to the frontier to take up Mayra's old position."

Naturally, Ves hoped that Ketis remained with him in civilized space if she proved satisfactory. He would have to find some way to bind her into a net that would keep her in his clutches, but that was a matter for the future.

For now, Ves waited for his other arrangements to happen. Once Ves confirmed her decision to go along with his plans, he took her to the CFA shuttle parked to the side.

"Where are we going, Ves?" She frowned as she boarded the shuttle and set her floating luggage containers down.

"I can't very well take you to the Mech Corps, can I? I'm still a drafted mech designer of the Mech Corps, while you are technically a citizen of the Reinald Republic according to your forged identity that Mayra prepared for you. For now, we'll have to remain separate for the duration of the Bright Republic's war against the Vesia Kingdom. I have arranged a stay for you at my company in the Bright Republic."

"So I'll be alone there?"

"Not alone. I have several trusted employees there that are holding the fort in my absence." He said as he engaged the autopilot. Even without a human pilot, the shuttle would still be able to fly. "Try not to piss them off. They're working on my behalf and so will you, so it's best to start on the same page."

The CFA shuttle departed from the shuttle bay of the Shield of Hispania and crossed the void of space for half an hour. Ketis kept asking questions about her new life on Cloudy Curtain and Ves did his best to answer.

At some point, the shuttle slowed down and appeared next to a corvette.

"What is that ship?"

"That is the Barracuda, my personal yacht!" Ves grinned.

Back when Ves first connected to the Saffron Poke's quantum entanglement node, he sent a series of encrypted messages that told Calsie and Melkor to send the Barracuda to the Mancroft System and wait for his arrival.

They got his message and sent out the corvette in time!

After Ves sent out a few codes to the Barracuda from his CFA shuttle, the cargo hold opened up. The shuttle squeezed through the open hatch and parked on the deck.

As Ves and Ketis exited the corvette, Captain Amber Silvestra saluted him.

"Sir, welcome back!"

"It's good to see you again, Captain." Ves nodded with a smile. Both of them looked older and more mature since the last time they met. "I'm on a short timetable here so we'll have to do a proper reunion another time."

"I understand, sir. Several mech patrols of the Flagrant Vandals have already started to question the Barracuda's presence so close to their ships."

Ves wasted no time. After entering a spare compartment, Ves changed out of his Squalon and CFA underlayer vacsuit and changed into his standard dark green mech designer uniform that he brought along.

A couple of bots took his Squalon and lifted it into a heavily shielded crate whose sole purpose was to block all kinds of scans and signals from penetrating its contents.

Just to be sure, Ves demanded that Ketis do the same. Because it would be inappropriate for her to wear her piratized combat armor or uniforms in civilized space, she made do with a generic outfit supplied by the Barracuda.

"I feel awfully weak in this boring getup." She complained as she pulled at her plain white clothes. "And my sword! You even forced me to give up my super-sharp CFA sword!"

"You can fabricate a new wardrobe yourself or purchase a new set of clothes at Cloudy Curtain. Just bear with it for now." He said. "Right now, our CFA gear is far too hot and eye catching for us to flaunt around. We don't actually want to draw the attention of the CFA down on us. Just talk to Melkor when the Barracuda brings you to your destination. He'll be able to set you up with some new battle gear."

"It still won't be as good as what's stored inside those crates!"

As Ketis kept sulking, Ves ignored her and turned back to the captain of the ship. "You know what to do. Bring back this stuff and make sure they're locked in the vault of the Mech Nursery. By the way, how is my company doing?"

"It's still standing." The female captain shrugged. "I don't have much of an eye for business, but it seems the LMC is holding its head above the water for now. That's a lot better than most mech manufacturers. Thousands of them have already gone bankrupt and more are gobbled up by larger companies. I hear there's plenty of rumblings at the company board at the moment."

"How many mechs is the LMC selling these days? Are the Blackbeaks and the Crystal Lords still rolling off the production lines?"

"Don't worry about that, boss. The LMC is still selling hundreds of silver label mechs. It's the bronze labels that are giving the company a hard time. Something about inflation and increased costs wiping out the profit margins. The Mech Nursery also expanded their production a lot to produce more profitable silver label mechs. I heard that the quality of the mechs went down while debt is piling up."

Ves closed his eyes but didn't linger too long. As long as the LMC held long enough until he returned, he shouldn't be so critical. At the very least, the LMC still remained standing under wartime conditions. Many other companies lacked this luxury!

"Has Calsie done a good job as interim CEO?"

"I wouldn't say she's CEO material, but she has your grandfather Benjamin's guidance and support. With his help, she has managed to remain on top of the issues, mostly. She hasn't sided with anyone if that's what you're concerned about, although some of her initiatives is rather extravagant."

Ves didn't need to know much more than that. With his grandfather keeping an eye on her, Calsie should do fine. He pushed her to take up the chair he vacated not because he expected her to grow his business, but to keep it away from the hands of those who greedily pawed at it or tried to steer it in a reckless direction.

In the worst case, Ves left behind a contingency plan to replace her should she go out of her bounds, but it appeared that wasn't necessary.

After arranging matters with Ketis and Captain Silvestra, Ves boarded a generic civilian shuttle and returned to the Shield of Hispania much-diminished in stature and possessions.

He left behind his CFA shuttle, his XV-99 Squalon and all of its integrated gadgets and gizmos, his armored toolbelt along with his CFA tools and standard-issue CFA laser sidearm, and most importantly a bunch of crates containing many bundles of vintage nutrient packs!

"Of course, I can't forget about the Archimedes Rubal either."

Ves had plans for the bioimplant, but for now he couldn't make use for it, so he sent it packing off with the rest of the goods he recovered from the Starlight Megalodon.

As Ves stepped off the civilian shuttle, which quickly flew away since it wasn't actually supposed to be here in the first place, he met up with a familiar face.

Major Verle actually went out to greet Ves in person in the shuttle bay. "I've received a report that some of our recovered gear is 'misplaced'. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Ah, no, sir." Ves coughed. "However, I did happen to see a shuttle roll off the shuttle bay deck. Terribly sloppy, sir. The shuttle technicians should be reprimanded. That fancy CFA shuttle along with all of its contents disappeared into space before we knew it, and well you know how difficult it is to locate a CFA shuttle with its passive ECM systems constantly active."

This was the excuse that Ves came up with to explain the disappearance of 'his' loot. To be honest, it was an extremely poorly-constructed excuse that wouldn't hold up to any serious scrutiny, but Major Verle already promised to make sure nobody asked any uncomfortable questions.

This was the benefit of borrowing someone else's influence!

While the rules and regulations clearly stated what was allowed, it was up to humans to enforce them. Ves learned the importance of this difference during his time with the Vandals and clearly applied his lessons in this case.

Naturally, without earning the favor of the Vandals and Major Verle specifically, Ves could forget about making use of this trick.

"Well, I hope you don't think you're done here, because you have a number of appointments on your agenda. First, we'll have to stop by at Colonel Lowenfield's flagship to hand over sensitive materials and provide a verbal report."

Ves nodded, not surprised that he'd be called up to the desk of this notable figure. Colonel Lowenfield exerted a huge influence over the Flagrant Vandals! Ves actually felt slightly apprehensive about meeting her, especially since he heard rumors that she shared a contentious relationship with Colonel Ark Larkinson at Citadel Havensworth...

She wasn't his lover or something, was she?

Chapter 964 Colonel Lowenfield

Ves, Major Verle, Captain Orfan and a bunch of other senior officers aboard the Shield of Hispania entered the shuttle and traveled over to the flagship of the mech regiment.

The large and well-armored combat carrier flew close to the Wolf Mother, and looked like a beast. Large, modern and expensive, every other combat carrier of the Flagrant Vandals seemed old and shabby.

"That's the Princely Jackal, a recent acquisition when Colonel Lowenfield turned the fortunes of the Vandals around." Major Verle noted when he spotted Ves studying the flagship's projection. "She can field sixty mechs,

thirty landbound and thirty aerial mechs, and is extremely well-suited to make landings on hostile ground."

"I would have figured the Vandals would opt to go for a spaceborn-focused combat carrier as a flagship instead, sir."

"The Vandals already have that covered. Combat carriers show their true value in closer proximity to battle."

The Princely Jackal certainly radiated a sense of class compared to the other carriers and support ships which generally looked worn and past their prime. As the shuttle touched down upon the shiny deck of the shuttle bay, a large procession of security officers greeted the new arrivals.

After the obligatory salutes and other trivial ceremonies, Captain Orfan personally stepped forward and handed over the lockbox to a security captain, who immediately placed it into an even larger and sturdier lockbox.

The Verle Task Force finally managed to hand over the mission object to the main element of the Flagrant Vandals! This marked the formal end of their perilous duty!

"We'll take good care of the contents, major." The security captain said respectfully before bringing over half of his men away to secure the mission object in the Princely Jackal's vault.

A handful of other security officers began to escort the remainder deeper into the ship. As Ves looked around, he couldn't help but find the clean, sterile interior to be a stark contrast to the older but more homely interior Shield of Hispania.

The Princely Jackal's crew members that traveled back and forth also differed substantially from the survivors that barely made it back alive from the deep frontier. There was a sense of freshness in their faces, as if they had never been pushed to the brink.

Ves found their straight backs and their mild optimism to be a very jarring sight compared to the cynical, worn-out looks of the crew of the Shield of Hispania. Every survivor of the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze was a fellow comrade in his books. Each of them shared a deep bond with each other as they lived, fought and died together many light-years away from home.

The other Vandals who served under Major Verle also became affected by the subtle changes. An unavoidable sense of alienation welled within their hearts, but they mostly kept it within themselves. No matter how long they'd been separated, the Vandals were still on their own side.

A whirlwind of questioning and debriefings ensued. Major Verle already warned Ves that many people would want to read his reports and hear him retell certain incidents in person. This wouldn't be the last time Ves retold the same stories over and over again.

Fortunately, Ves didn't undergo a hostile interrogation, as he was one of their own. After answering some mild questions and elaborating on some points they wanted clarification, he finally got shuffled to a row of seats placed just outside Colonel Lowenfield's stateroom.

The commanding officer of the Flagrant Vandals called up every participant of the mission to an individual meeting. Major Verle and Captain Orfan already had their turns. After Lieutenant Commander Soapstone exited from the hatch, Ves got called up to enter.

Compared to Major Verle's rather plain and spartan stateroom, Colonel Lowenfield added a bit more personal touches to her work environment. Fresh plants, projections of iconic sights from the Bright Republic and a display of diplomas and awards gave the impression that she was a loyal and hard-working officer of the Mech Corps.

Having heard so much about Colonel Lowenfield, he became surprised by her mild, plain appearance. Her groomed brown hair and thin stature made her seem almost invisible if not for her mech colonel insignia. She lacked the heroic bearing or the restrained aggression of someone like Major Verle who used to be a genuine mech officer who fought on the frontlines.

To Ves, Colonel Lowenfield completely filled the stereotype of a bureaucratic logistical officer who mainly stayed as far away from the frontlines as possible.

Yet she was also exactly the kind of leader the Flagrant Vandals needed the most.

Ves also reminded himself that besides her considerable administrative ability, she also wore the hat of an agent of the Firestarters!

As soon as he sat down and the hatch behind him closed up, a subtle interference field suffused the entire compartment.

"Mr. Larkinson. How very nice to meet you." She began in her mild, wispy voice. Still, Ves sensed a strong intensity hidden behind her words. "As you know, I am Colonel Lowenfield. Major Verle must have told you a lot about me, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." Ves answered in a restrained manner. "He told me you were..."

Even though he didn't lack for confidence, he felt a bit subdued when talking face-to-face with the ultimate head of the Flagrant Vandals.

"There is no need to hold back here. It is true. Major Verle and I are both representatives of the Firestarters, which in official parlance is designated as the Unconventional Action Division of the Flashlight military intelligence service. You will be familiar with their meanings in time. Outwardly, you answer to the Mech Corps, but in reality you answer to Flashlight. Every Vandal already does so from the start, whether they know it or not. Most don't. Any questions?"

Ves couldn't help but frown a bit. "Are the Flagrant Vandals nothing more than a cat's paw for the Firestarters, ma'am?"

"That is not an unfair description of this mech regiment." Lowenfield replied in a slightly formal tone. "The 6th Flagrant Vandals are not treated fairly, and perhaps you share in their indignation. However, the truth is that it is set up to be expendable from the start. A certain amount of flexibility and resourcefulness is required to survive the tasks the Flagrant Vandals are meant to fulfill. From all reports, you have proven to be abundantly capable in both aspects. It's strange."

"Strange in what aspect, ma'am?"

She smiled at Ves. "You are so very different from the straight-laced Larkinson mech pilots. Compared to Colonel Ark Larkinson who is always as straight as a rod, Major Verle has described you as the most crooked mech designer he ever had the pleasure of working with. Do you agree with that assessment?"

How the hell should Ves even respond to that remark? "It has been a trying time for all of us. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Isn't that the Vandal way?"

Colonel Lowenfield actually chuckled. "You are very different from Ark. It is a wonder the two of you are part of the same family. Ah, but I digress. Your family lineage isn't on the agenda today. Instead, I've called you here is to ask for clarification on a few points of your report and to tell you what is in store for you on our return trip to the Republic."

The colonel then proceeded to put Ves into yet another interrogation. Though she asked a lot of uncomfortable questions about certain matters that Ves really didn't want to elaborate upon such as Miss Calabast or the reason why

the Starlight Megalodon met her end so abruptly, she didn't press him too hard.

"I really can't elaborate on these points, ma'am." Ves said. He couldn't hide the fact that he deliberately left a lot of pertinent information out of his reports. "Some secrets of the CFA are best left in their hands."

"That's a decent excuse." Colonel Lowenfield gave him a mental thumbs up. "Be sure to mention that whenever the Mech Corps or Flashlight press you on those topics. There is much about the CFA that we find unfathomable, so there is a tendency for them to subconsciously cross out any further inquiries that may appear to be encroaching on their territory."

The meeting lasted for an hour but mostly progressed in an amicable manner. Despite his stiffness in front of Lowenfield, the colonel never did anything to make him feel uncomfortable.

Obviously, Colonel Lowenfield inherited Major Verle's trust and favor in him despite only meeting in person for the first time.

This also signified that the two were pretty much in cahoots and could be considered part of the same clique.

This was good. No matter what he thought about Colonel Lowenfield, at least he enjoyed her favor.

At the end of the meeting, Lowenfield finally dismissed him. "You have an appointment with Professor Velten aboard the Wolf Mother. For now, you are reassigned to serve directly under her at the factory ship. Don't keep her waiting."

After filing out of Colonel Lowenfield's stateroom, a security officer guided him all the way back to the shuttle bay whereupon he shuttled over to the massive factory ship that dwarfed anything the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan could produce.

As Ves stepped out of the shuttle, he felt as if he returned back in time to the point where he first arrived at the factory ship. Back then, he was just another Apprentice Mech Designer who performed low-level duties in the development of several internally-developed mech designs of the Vandals at the design department.

It made for an extremely stark contrast compared to the hefty responsibilities he carried as the temporary head designer of the Verle Task Force. He shouldered an immense burden as he sometimes literally ensured that the Vandals kept their mechs functional enough to fight!

"I'd hate it if I have to go back to grunt duty after all I've done." He muttered.

Ves did not need an escort to navigate to the design department, nor did he need someone to knock at the hatch leading into Professor Velten's office. After passing by a handful of vaguely familiar faces, Ves finally entered the office of the only Senior Mech Designer presiding over the mechs of the Flagrant Vandals.

This old woman who seemed to have aged even further than before carried the real burden of the mech regiment! Having shared much of her responsibilities though at a smaller and more limited scale, Ves sympathised

Even though she looked as close to death as Venerable O'Callahan, Professor Velten still possessed enough lucidity to read his expression. She threw him a sharp glance.

"I don't need your pity, Mr. Larkinson. Now, sit and let's get this over with. I'm sure you are tired with all of the inquiries you've been through, but I'm not a security officer or a mech officer. I'm a mech designer, and so are you, so we will only discuss matters concerning mechs in this office. Let us begin with the very unique expert mech the Vesians has fielded at Aeon Corona VII, the Belisarius if I recall."

Ves mostly answered questions about the Belisarius, the breakdown effect and his methods of coping with it, the Enduring Protector design that never really saw an opportunity to fulfill its purpose, his stint as a 'Senior Mech Designer' in the hierarchy of the Starlight Megalodon, and more.

He generally satisfied Professor Velten's curiosity as none of these topics touched his bottom line. Of course, he still fudged a few details here and there, and he couldn't help but puff himself up just like he used to kiss up to Virtual Commander Cosit.

Unfortunately, the professor's senility acted up several times during the inquiry. She wasn't long for this galaxy, Ves privately concluded. He found it to be a shame that the life-prolonging treatment serum that so many Vandals had sacrificed their lives for wouldn't be used to give her a new lease on life.

A Senior Mech Designer such as Professor Velten simply wasn't worth the investment.

Chapter 965 Project Managemen

Despite her age, Professor Velten showed keen interest in his descriptions of the many problems he faced and what kind of solutions he came up with. She also dug in quite deeply about all of the research projects he came in touch with at the Starlight Megalodon's Research Department.

"To think the CFA already set their sights so far three-hundred years ago." She sighed. "We are but children playing in the mud compared to the Big Two."

Overall, she seemed pleasantly surprised by his competence in taking over the position of head designer.

"Alloc should have held this position. He was ready for it. Unfortunately..."

The Journeyman Mech Designer was still missing in action even after all of this time. Professor Velten showed genuine regret about the continued

disappearance of her final protege. It took some time for her to shake off her memories and return to business.

"We have talked enough for today. Right now, you must be wondering what your next duties will be. Colonel Lowenfield has informed me that you are due for a transfer upon our return to the Bright Republic. While she hasn't told me where you are being transferred to, she raised a few points to my attention that might be relevant to your next posting."

Ves raised his back a little bit. It sounded like he wouldn't be sent back to the design department to do grunt work.

"From today, I'll instruct you and have you study proper project management. Mech designers often collaborate on major projects and since you have mostly worked alone so far, you will need to be brought up to speed on how to contribute to design projects both as a participant and as a project leader."

"Professor, while I haven't participated in too many collaborative projects, I'm not unfamiliar with them. I think I know my way around them already."

"You may think so when you think about small design projects involving four or five mech designers. However, it is a different case entirely when you talk about major design projects that involve a hundred mech designers or more. The more mech designers are involved, the higher the challenge of managing them all to make sure their talents and abilities are put to use."

Professor Velten's explanation insinuated that Ves would definitely be joining a large design team in the future. Perhaps he was even being groomed for a leadership position, though he highly doubted it because Apprentice Mech Designers generally didn't fill such big shoes.

"Leading a large number of mech designers is worse than leading mech pilots. Do you know why?" She abruptly asked.

"Uhm, the latter are soldiers who are trained to obey orders, while the former are scientists and engineers with strong beliefs, ma'am."

"Your answer is a bit simplistic, but true, in a sense. The smarter the mech designer, the more stubborn they become. This becomes a significant problem when you gather a large number of them together. There are theories, frameworks, methods and paradigms that specifically pertain to design teams involving many mech designers and component designers working together on the same projects. You will need to be up to speed with them as much as possible. We'll begin your lesson as soon as you have your rest. I'm sure you are exhausted by now."

He did talk a lot with various people. Ever since he departed from the Shield of Hispania, he answers the questions asked by professional interrogators whose job was to construct a detailed picture of how the mission progressed. He subsequently entertained Colonel Lowenfield and Professor Velten's many questions specific to their own interests.

The recombined Vandal fleet had long exited the Mancroft System and transitioned into FTL during that time!

All of this talking and trying to keep his nose clean throughout all of his answers exhausted him quite a bit on a mental level. Even if his fit and genetically optimized body could go on for longer, his mind dearly needed a reprieve.

When Ves exited the office, two familiar mech designers waited outside. Laida and a couple of other Apprentices welcomed him back to the fold.

"We heard you went on a grand adventure, Ves." Laida said.

Ves shrugged. "I'm sorry I can't tell you much about it. You know how it is with classified missions and all."

"Some of the tales about where you've been have leaked out. Is it true that you found a genuine crashed CFA battleship?!"

"I can neither confirm or deny that assertion." Ves answered robotically. "Just believe me when I tell you that it's been hell on us all."

"That's obvious." The female mech designer remarked. "Dozens of Vandal ships set off to the Reinald Republic and to the frontier by all accounts, but almost a year later the only ships that returned are two battered-looking combat carriers."

Ves really couldn't tell them much. His tiredness along with their inability to imagine living through those harrowing circumstances put some distance between him and his fellow mech designers.

He quickly separated from his curious two peers with the excuse that he had a long day and found his way towards his bunk on the Wolf Mother.

Starting from the next day, he began to study under Professor Velten. She handed over a lot of reading material that didn't really pertain to the sciences. Instead, she assigned a laundry list of textbooks pertaining to project management and leadership and the like.

As Ves started to hit the books, he already felt as if he already understood much of their contents from his previous stint as head designer. However, there was a difference between learning on the job and learning the theory behind it all.

Ves didn't find his homework to be redundant. Theory and practice complemented and reinforced each other. Even if Ves already had his experience to draw upon, it was always good to know if his methods were the best and if he could have opted for alternatives instead.

One of the reasons why Ves enthusiastically devoured the books was because all of this management theory would also be of use in his business

career. He always intended to take a firmer hand in the running of the LMC once he returned. Getting to know how to boss around his subordinates better would doubtlessly help him rein in the beast that grew in his absence.

Weeks went by as the main fleet of the Flagrant Vandals passed through unclaimed territory and the territories of small, neutral states.

During this time, Ves found it hard to reconnect to Laida and the other Apprentices. While Ves took part in a mission that saw him assisting the Flagrant Swordmaidens in fighting for their lives against hundreds of pirate and Vesian mechs, the other Apprentices mostly spent their time assisting the development of the Inheritor, Hellcat and Akkara designs.

After the Detemen Operation, the Verle Task Force abruptly set off for the mission while the main fleet calmly snuck back to the Bright Republic and held a position in the rear of the war theater.

None of the mech designers and Vandals of the main fleet saw any action during this time. Even when the war heated up at the frontlines, Colonel Lowenfield kept all of her available forces on standby.

"What happened to Pierce, Ves?" Laida asked him quietly. "As far as I knew, he was assigned to the Beggar's Bounty. Yet the Bounty isn't among the ships that returned..."

Ves closed his eyes in sadness. He hadn't spent nearly as much time with Pierce as he would have liked. "Pierce Yuvalis is missing in action. The Beggar's Bounty is one of the many ships that we have been forced to leave behind. While many Vandals who abandoned ship managed to find other berths, Pierce isn't among the people who found their way to the Shield of Hispania or the Gorgon's Gaze. I'm sorry."

Both of them grieved for their fallen friend and peer. Ves found Pierce's fate to be a truly depressing tale. The young mech designer fled the Friday Coalition

for the Bright Republic due to his lack of talent in mech design, but he always harbored an urge to improve himself to the point of being able to return to his home state with his head raised high.

Such a dream would never come to pass now that the sandman presumably sucked Pierce into a dry husk before crushing his remains entirely.

"Too many Vandals never made it back." Laida echoed in sadness.

Ves found interacting with his fellow Apprentice Mech Designers to be a bit of a chore. In matters of mech design, they still struggled with the basic questions that Ves already mastered long ago.

In his heart, only the Journeymen were his peers, but since he himself hadn't ascended to their heights yet, he couldn't just approach the other two Journeymen for a chat.

Therefore, he began to avoid spending his time with the other mech designers and instead poured his complete concentration into his studies.

Besides reading book after book from the internal database's library, Ves also listened to Professor Velten's rambling lectures as she conveyed some of her personal experiences to him. While Ves found her stories to be rather meandering and incoherent on her bad days, the leadership perspective she provided gave him a lot of insights on how to lead a team of mech designers.

"It used to be different, you know. Our profession has changed throughout the years." The Professor remarked. "I'm more than a hundred-and-fifty years old, which is half as long as the Starlight Megalodon went missing. You've already experienced how bold and innovative mech designers used to be at the early days of the Age of Mechs. When I came into my prime, the mech industry no longer played so fast and loose with the rules, but there isn't as much structure as there is now."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing, professor?" He asked.

"I can only say that the mech industry has grown more sophisticated. Structure is needed to cope with the increased amount of variables that affect our work. However, sometimes I reminisce about the good old days, where all you need to design a good mech is to gather a bunch of fellow mech designers together and lock them into a single room for a time."

Besides these interesting remarks, Ves also got to hear about her burdens as a Senior Mech Designer.

"A Senior Mech Designer is lifted up to a pedestal in the Bright Republic. You might think that we are at the top of our game and the envy of the younger generation of our state, but nothing could be further from the truth. The more capabilities you possess, the more responsibilities that you are expected to fulfill. Personally, I've made the mistake of taking these responsibilities too seriously. I spent too much time on pointless endeavors."

"What kind of endeavors?"

"Too many of them!" The professor cackled. "Where do I begin? How about collaborating with the Bright Republic's state-sponsored design teams in designing unicorn mechs that eat up billions of credits but are only fielded once or twice. Or how about becoming a tenured professor only to end up eating away precious years of my lifespan teaching stupid little brats who have no business entering this profession how to hold the right end of wrench?"

Obviously, Professor Velten held too much regrets in her life. Her fatalistic behavior implied that she knew the end of her life was near.

Right now, this dying woman who lost her final protege to the war against the Vesians treated Ves as a vehicle to leave behind some of her legacy.

It made Ves fear old age even more. He would hate to end up growing old and senile with all hopes of extending his lifespan cut off!

"Mark my words, Mr. Larkinson. If you ever advance to Journeyman or Senior and propel yourself to success, don't let yourself be distracted by the fawning of others! Nothing is more important to a mech designer than their own pursuits and initiatives!"

This was probably the most important lesson that Professor Velten tried to convey to Ves. A mech designer's time was limited, and time should be spent on improving themselves instead of fulfilling the petty desires of others.

While Ves didn't think he would ever fall into such a pit, he nodded seriously at her warning. "I will be sure to remember your advice, professor."

Chapter 966 New Foundation V

The Flagrant Vandals made their way back to the Bright Republic without any incident by following the main commercial space routes between the frontier and the Bright Republic.

Many ships plied this route, and the Bentheim System formed an indispensable link in one of the main trade routes from the frontier to the coreward side of the Komodo Star Sector.

All of this traffic meant that the Flagrant Vandals constantly passed through well-trafficked and well-guarded star systems, precluding the chance of any attacks from pirates or Vesians.

While plenty of risks still existed, the Vandals already planned for their return trip. Nothing dangerous of note ever sprung in their faces during their long way back to the Bright Republic.

Ves breathed a little easier once the Flagrant Vandals actually passed through the borders. Now that he finally returned home, he didn't have to worry as much about being jumped by unknown forces trying to steal the lockbox they retrieved from the Starlight Megalodon.

Instead of heading to the Bentheim System or the Tarry System, the Vandal fleet instead traversed to the New Foundation System, the second-most important star system of the Rittersberg region!

While the capital of the Bright Republic formed the nexus of the Rittersberg region, the New Foundation attracted almost as much attention due to the sole fact that it housed the headquarters of the Mech Corps!

As a star system occupied by the military, several mech divisions constantly stood by or patrolled the system and its occupied planets. Countless fixed defenses, minefields and orbital defense platforms constantly defended the headquarters and all the other important military infrastructure of the Bright Republic's main military branch!

"Is this your first time to the New Foundation System?" Laida asked.

"Yes."

"Huh. I figured a Larkinson like you would have been familiar here."

"I'm not the average Larkinson."

Many Larkinsons passed through the New Foundation System at some point or another. It hosted the bases of many elite mech regiments on its various fortified planets.

If Ves ever bothered to look the information up, then he'd probably be able to learn that over a dozen Larkinsons were stationed in this military star system right now!

Of course, Ves couldn't casually lift his comm and call them up. Right now, the war still raged on and many active duty service members possessed a comm just like his which completely restricted any outside communications.

"I miss my CFA comm."

Compared to the magical capabilities of that highly-advanced device, the replacement comm he received from the Wolf Mother's armory was like a toy to him. Each military-issue comm was a toy, actually, but Ves once again went back to square one by receiving the most basic one that didn't do more than take notes and answer calls from officers.

His exasperation regarding his current comm aside, Ves did look forward to his visit to the New Foundation System. As the ships of the Flagrant Vandals took up orbit over one of New Foundation V's moons, Ves and a large number of Vandals transferred into shuttles that brought them all the way down to the surface!

New Foundation V not only housed the headquarters of the Mech Corps, but also housed many other institutions falling under their umbrella. The soldiers picking up the Vandal officers never told them where they were being transferred, but from what little Ves could observe, his shuttle flew all the way to the surface and entered a guarded tunnel that led deep underground.

The lack of windows, projections and other sights made it difficult for Ves to be sure. The only information he had to go on was the slight noise, vibrations and air pressure carried over to the interior.

After this lengthy trip, the shuttle finally touched down upon a landing pad in a vast underground parking hall which housed numerous shuttles and even transports. The hustle and bustle of all of this traffic showed that this place saw significant traffic.

It was only after Ves observed the emblems affixed to the walls of the massive hall that he learned where they landed.

"This is the Bureau of Sector Affairs!"

"Correct." Major Verle said as he stepped out next to him. "Sector Affairs is responsible for any deployments, commands and other matters of the Mech

Corps outside the borders of the Bright Republic. In short, that means that most military expeditions outside our borders falls under their purview. We will have to account for our actions during the mission today, but remember your instructions. Your back is already covered, so feel free not to answer any questions that you don't want to answer."

Ves and the other Vandals saw little of the neat and brightly-lit interior of the Bureau of Sector Affairs. Instead, armed security personnel led them all through a familiar parade of debriefings and interrogation.

Having gone through this particular rodeo many times, Ves answered the questions that he didn't mind answering and kept his mouth shut on matters that he would rather not voice.

Of course, that didn't earn him any favors from BuSecA, as the bureau was sometimes called in shorthand. Still, the attempts at applying pressure on Ves mostly fell flat because they both knew the interrogators were toothless.

After several days of mostly pointless questioning and an endless amount of repeating himself, the people of BuSecA finally gave up on Ves and kicked him to a waiting area which housed various servicemen visiting the Bureau for some reason or another.

After spending a few more days in limbo with the rest of the Vandals that survived the inquiries, Ves and the rest of the Vandals were finally summoned again, this time to attend a closed award ceremony!

Major Verle clapped his back. "This is a good sign. It means all the bureaucratic boxes are ticked and all of the questioning is over. The most important point is that we fulfilled our mission and successfully handed over the lockbox to BuSecA, who will make sure its contents will be transferred over to Rittersberg where it will be immediately put to use."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Some lucky geezer will probably see a new lease in life, then. Is that right, sir?"

"Maybe." He smirked. "Now, chin up, Mr. Larkinson. Even though it's a shame that our award ceremony will take place in an empty hall due to the classified nature of our mission, it is still supreme honor to participate in it. If you look around, you are the only non-mech officer of the Vandals to take part!"

This was true. While Chief Engineer Avanaeon and Chief Technician Haine made plenty of contributions to the mission, they would only receive a smaller award along with the rest of the Vandals of the Verle Task Force.

The main stars of the show appeared to be Major Verle and Captain Orfan, with Ves coming along as a guest star. A handful of other mech officer and mech pilots that displayed individual valor in battle came along as well, but the former three stole the spotlight.

Their escorts brought them to the upper levels of the headquarters of Bureau of Sector Affairs, whereupon they went through several intensive security checks before being led inside a grand auditorium hall.

The cold beige interior and the formal banners and symbols representing the Bright Republic, the Mech Corps, the Bureau of Sector Affairs and many other institutions gave the place a sense of military grandeur.

Giant statues of mech pilots and officials holding torches lined the rectangular hall. In between, a vast amount of empty space that could have offered room for thousands of attending people made it clear that this award ceremony would happen completely out of the public eye.

Neither Ves, Major Verle, Captain Orfan or the rest would be able to show their faces to the entire state in a massed broadcast.

He found that to be a shame, because a public award ceremony would certainly boost his business prospects. How could he make people know he distinguished himself in the war if hardly anyone heard of his awards?!

After a long and desolate walk surrounded by giant statues of past heroes of the Bright Republic, they finally reached the raised stage where the Vandals all took up their assigned places.

A number of military officers and officials stood close. Behind the backdrop of the giant banners representing the Bright Republic and the Mech Corps, the award ceremony started in near-complete silence.

A major general that Ves recognized as the head of the Bureau of Sector Affairs stepped forward!

"Today, we are gathered here to recognize the collective and individual valor of the 6th Flagrant Vandals." Major General Reginald Clesse began.

The award ceremony followed through a few rituals, but the oppressive nature of the vast and empty auditorium made everyone present a little uncomfortable, as if the Bright Republic was too massive to care about their individual efforts.

The old, grey-haired and strong-bodied head of BuSecA treated the occasion in a solemn manner, doing his best to banish away the eerie nature of the empty hall.

Once they went through the rituals and the introductions, a soldier holding an antigrav pad that levitated a large number of medals and ribbons stepped forward. Major General Clesse stepped to Major Verle and began to bestow the awards to the Vandals present.

"Mech Major Quinlist Verle, for your commendable leadership and..."

"Mech Captain Rosa Orfan, for your individual bravery and going above and beyond the call of duty..."

Both mech officers received high awards. While Ves didn't pay attention to all of them, he did note that Captain Orfan received the Darkness Eater, which was the second-highest distinction that the Mech Corps bestowed to its servicemen!

After General Clesse finished gushing over Captain Orfan, not just because she was the principal Vandal responsible for securing the mission object but also because she was an expert candidate. It never hurt to suck up to a future expert pilot, even for the head of the Bureau of Sector Affairs!

The general finally walked up to Ves after that. The soldier bearing the medals in the air activated a command that sent over three of them in front of Clesse.

"Ves Larkinson, mech designer attached to the 6th Flagrant Vandals. When I heard that a mech designer is eligible to receive these rewards, I first thought it was a mistake. Mech designers aren't eligible to receive some of the awards of the Mech Corps, and the ones they are almost never find their way in their hands. Do you know why?"

"It's because mech designers are non-combatants, sir." Ves replied as neutrally as possible. It wouldn't do to say anything too sloppy in front of this important figure!

General Clesse chuckled. "It is because mech designers are generally known for their cowardice. Hardly a day passes by for another mech designer to be accused of severe dereliction of duty. However, brave mech designers, while rare, do exist. When I saw that you are a Larkinson, everything is explained."

This was one time where the Larkinson name saved Ves a lot of trouble. He didn't speak up to deny he wasn't like the other Larkinsons this time.

"Aside from the awards that are bestowed to the entirety of the Flagrant Vandals, Mr. Larkinson, you are entitled to receive three as recognition of your individual merit."

The general grabbed the medals and ribbons from the air and placed them on the chest of his dark green uniform, whereupon they automatically fixed into place.

He first received the Darkness Eater, the second-highest award which only Captain Orfan received as well! Just carrying the Darkness Eater was a massive recognition of individual merit, and even if Ves was forbidden from ever sharing the reason why he earned it, just showing it off would be a massive boost to his reputation in the domestic market!

The second award he received was the Torchbearer, which signified that Ves directly took action that saved a lot of lives! He received this award specifically for the initiative he showed in saving and assisting the remnant of the ground forces aboard the Starlight Megalodon, and also for his legendary feat of defeating the Blind Men pirate gang with words alone!

Personally, Ves thought that the Darkness Eater already covered for the latter feats, but he didn't say no to receiving more medals!

"The final award is one that is specifically reserved for mech designers that have performed a supreme service to the Bright Republic."

Ves' eyes shone when he received the Golden Mech. This was one of the most coveted awards to mech designers in the service of the Mech Corps!

Chapter 967 Founding Families

Overall, Ves was in line to receive six significant awards. Aside from the three he received from General Clesse in person today, he also received three more, either immediately or later.

The War Saint was an award to every active participant of the Bright-Vesia Wars. Even though a huge number of Brighters received them every generation, receiving them at all was a great mark on their record.

The Mech Corps additionally bestowed Ves the Frontier Service Medal just like the rest of the Verle Task Force. This signified that he served on behalf of the Mech Corps while deployed to the perilous frontier.

The third significant award he received was the Mech Corps Commendation awarded to every member of the 6th Flagrant Vandals. This was a unit award that gave supreme honor to the mech regiment as a whole, but every Vandal that served during the time of the commendation's given reason for bestowal received the right to wear this ribbon.

All of these awards and honors bestowed to Ves and the surviving Vandals seemed impressive at first glance. Yet some couldn't help but feel they served as an inadequate band-aid to the dangers and predilections they all suffered during their arduous mission.

Many Vandals never lived to make it home. Only two ships out of dozens made it back. The most galling fact was that many of those who died at the hands of the pirates, Vesians or sandmen never found out what they fought for all the way out in the frontier. Why did the Bright Republic send them all the way out to an isolated star system deep in the frontier?

What was so important enough that the sacrifice of hundreds of mech pilots and thousands of support personnel made the people awarding the medals to the handful of survivors so pleased?

Oh, Major General Clesse had the decency to recognize their sacrifices and appear solemn. Yet some of those bureaucratic official types standing at the side seemed inordinately pleased for what should have been a serious occasion.

This was because after General Clesse finished going over the Vandal survivors, he began to posthumously award the confirmed dead and missing-but-very-presumably-dead.

This put Ves and the Vandals into a somber mood.

People like Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman all contributed enormously to the ground expedition, but aside from the honors bestowed to them, their existence no longer mattered to the Republic.

The classified nature of this award ceremony basically meant their family members would never find out where and why they died. They would forever hear that their deceased relatives died as heroes, but that would be the extent of what they were allowed to know!

Perhaps Ves should follow up on the family members of those he'd been close with at the Vandals. Not now, of course, but after the war.

As Ves looked at his fellow comrades, he saw that he wasn't the only one who thought that way.

After the end of the award ceremony, one of the civilian officials gathered Ves, Major Verle and Captain Orfan to the side. "Our patron, the primary benefactor of your mission, cordially invites you to attend a private banquet with him on this planet in three days time. We have already arranged your schedule to accommodate this appointment."

Major Verle's lips twitched. Though the official's invitation was worded as a request, it really left no option for refusal. "Mr. Cordwraith, we would be delighted to accept your patron's invitation."

"Good." The slick-haired middle-aged man replied perfunctory. "The Bureau of Sector Affairs will prepare all matters on your end."

After that, Cordwraith rejoined his fellow officials and left through the side door.

As everyone returned to the guest area of BuSecA's headquarters, Ves asked a question. "Who is Mr. Cordwraith? Who is he working for? And is that person..."

"Mr. Cordwraith is the executive assistant of Senator for Life Camden Tovar of the Bright Senate. As for Mr. Tovar, I doubt you require a history lesson on the Tovars."

The mention of Camden Tovar came with such a shock to Ves that he temporarily stuttered in his steps.

Tovar!

In the chaotic founding of the Bright Republic at the opening of the Komodo Star Sector shortly after the start of the Age of Mechs, a few leaders came to prominence.

During this time where all sorts of exiles, misfits and hopeful colonists flocked to the Komodo Star Sector to carve out a place of their own, one colonization fleet from the New Rubarth Empire set forth with hope.

They hoped to live a life away from the stifled, stratified and war-obsessed Rubarthans. Several somewhat well-to-do Rubarthan families pooled their resources together to fund the colonization fleet and set forth to the edge of the galaxy as fast as possible.

In total, seventeen families funded the colonization fleet and owned shares in it with the hope of founding a prosperous new state. If not for the clash between their idealism and the rampant fighting in the Komodo Star Sector, they would have occupied a much better territory than the stars the Bright Republic occupied today!

In truth, their colonization fleet suffered a humiliating defeat at the center of the sector where the fighting was most heated. After being kicked out of the area where the Friday Coalition now made its home, the much-diminished colonists dejectedly founded their homes elsewhere, immediately butting heads with the founders of the Vesia Kingdom who carved out those stars for themselves!

"Seventeen families funded the colonization fleet, but only five exist today." Ves recalled. "As one of the five remaining surviving founder families, the Tovar Family is one of the most influential family lines in the government!"

The Larkinson Ancestor may have fought on behalf of the newly-founded Republic as well, but he was merely an extremely talented mercenary. The founder families consisted of the true behemoths of the Bright Republic and still shaped much of its policies to this day.

Much of the public cynically considered the founder families to be noble houses in all but name. Ves tended to agree with their sentiment, but at least they pretended to be the first among equals rather than outright superior as with the case of the nobility in the Vesia Kingdom.

Founding a colony required an immense amount of funding to gather all of the manpower and assets required to set up a colonization fleet and all of the supplies necessary to accelerate the development of settlements.

Those who funded it often demanded a say in the running of the colony and a share in its profits. The states that emerged from these colonies often retained a vestige of their previous ownership. Some leaders or descendants of leaders held onto power outright by adopting a feudal system of some sorts.

Most of the duchies of the Vesia Kingdom actually shared such origins. The Royal House that nominally reigned over the state contributed the most.

In the Bright Republic, their emphasis on a more enlightened and forward-thinking society prompted the founding families to avoid going to such extremes.

However, some critics claimed that the founding families never relinquished the throne. They merely stepped back in the shadows to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves.

Ves knew that many ministers and other government officials shared the same five last names in the hundred years since the founding of the Republic. Their names also popped up from time to time in military or business-related news.

"Camden Tovar is one of the heads of the Tovar Family, right?" Captain Orfan asked with a little bit of confusion.

"Correct." Verle nodded. "Camdon Tovar is the oldest surviving son of Amtusa Tovar, one of the Bright Founders of our great state."

"How old is Mr. Camden?"

"Over two-hundred-and-eighty years old I think. It's really surprising how much longer he's managed to live. Hardly anyone from the Republic has become this old."

Orfan sneered. "I see. He's really getting on in years."

Ves nodded as well. No wonder Camden Tovar was so desperate for another round of life-prolonging treatment. That man was an institution of the Republic by himself! Not only was he directly descended from one of the legendary Bright Founders, he also held the office of Bright President for four terms of five years each.

Nowadays, he retired to become a lifelong senator in the Bright Senate, still very much involved in the highest level of policymaking.

From what Ves learned from the news and from the idle gossip of the Larkinsons, Camden Tovar was a diplomatic powerhouse. His distinguished age, background and stature allowed him to forge friendships with powerful individuals of the other states in the Komodo Star Sector and to maintain them for centuries or longer!

At the highest levels of power and influence, age mattered a lot. It was proof that someone made sufficient achievements to be able to prolong their lifespan. Someone who was five-hundred years old was definitely an immensely powerful and wealthy individual, and such a person wouldn't easily associate himself with hundred-year old upstarts.

Even though average people considered a hundred-year old person and a five-hundred year old person to be the same, in truth in their circles there was a vast gulf in status between the two!

Therefore, the extension of the lifespan of someone like Camden Tovar, who worked tirelessly to maintain the Republic's relationships with other states, not only benefited the senator, but also the Republic as a whole!

With Senator Camden Tovar being able to continue and even advance his friendships with other powerful influences, the Flagrant Vandals substantially changed the course of history of the entire Republic!

Ves softened up his stance regarding the meaning of the mission. Major Verle noticed his change of expression and nodded in confirmation of his silent conclusion.

Of the three, only Captain Orfan still hadn't thought that far yet. To her, the high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum or whatever was just a goodie that allowed this decrepit old Tovar fellow to cling to life a hundred years longer or more.

The three retreated to one of their guest rooms in the upper levels of the BuSecA building to talk more freely among themselves. Ves had a feeling these guest rooms were ordinarily reserved for dignitaries, as their size and splendor surpassed the average five-star hotel room.

Major Verle looked at Captain Orfan, who pretty much almost immediately went for the minibar to pour herself a strong drink, and shook his head. He instead drew Ves to a set of luxurious couches set before a panoramic one-way window that looked out of the high rise district of one of New Foundation V's main cities.

"Now that you know who our benefactor is, what do you feel?"

"I feel... conflicted." Ves responded.

"How so, Ves?"

"I can see how our mission benefits the bigger picture. Tovar is a bigshot in the Republic and he's also one of the most important diplomatic figures of the state. With him around for at least a hundred more years, we won't have to worry about any of the other nearby states ganging up on us. Our sacrifices have not been in vain."

"Yet you do not seem entirely pleased."

"No, sir." Ves sighed and glanced at Orfan who was already knocking back her third shot from the guest room's expensive liquor. "I feel I understand what Captain Orfan is going through right now as well. It's rather galling to think that the deaths of tens of thousands of Vandal servicemen is a cheap price to pay to extend a new lease on life for a single individual. Sure, we've definitely contributed to the Republic, but only vaguely in a long-term sense. Our main accomplishment is actually doing Mr. Tovar a massive favor that I'm not quite sure he even deserves."

"You best keep those thoughts to yourself, Ves." Major Verle clapped his back. "We are all servants of the Republic in one way or another. Also, the benefit we've brought to Mr. Tovar doesn't just benefit Mr. Tovar himself or the entire state, but also the Tovar Family as well. It makes a really huge difference if their patriarch gets to live four-hundred years or more. None of the other founding families has anyone close to that. The Tovar Family will definitely sprint ahead of the other four founding families as a consequence."

Ves knew that Major Verle implied more than what he mentioned. "In other words, we directly boosted the fortunes of the Tovar Family, disrupting the balance of powers between the founding families. The other four families won't be very pleased with what we've done."

"For better or worse, you and I and all the other Vandals have nudged towards the camp of the Tovar Family." Verle stated with a hint of helplessness. "For most of us, that's not good news."

Chapter 968 Camden Tovar

The three most honored Vandals remained in the guest area for three, boring days. The immense wealth and luxury on display in this section of BuSecA's headquarters formed an immensely stark contrast against the bare, utilitarian interior of the Shield of Hispania.

Some of them simply couldn't get used to decadence and pampering on offer. Many other citizens and foreign officials resided in the guest area as well. Some gathered in the bars and lounges in the common section to socialize.

Ves attempted to pass the time by lounging at a courtyard balcony, but the medals and ribbons pinned to his chest immediately attracted a lot of stares.

Due to the regulations of the Mech Corps, Ves was obligated to wear his dress uniform in this context. His dress uniform was a slightly more impressive version of his standard dark green mech designer uniform.

Normally, that wouldn't have drew much attention from the other guests. Even a couple of ribbons didn't seem so special.

Yet the regulations stated that three big awards he earned needed to be in full display.

The Darkness Eater and the Torchbearer medals drew immediate attention from the citizens of the Bright Republic. They all recognized the medals and knew how rare it was to be awarded with them. The main reason why they stared so long at Ves was because he earned those awards as a mech designer!

How could a noncombatant win two of some of the most coveted decorations of the Mech Corps?! It didn't make any sense! Mech designers generally never fought on the battlefield, but both the Darkness Eater and the Torchbearer could only be earned by earning supreme merit in battle circumstances!

In the history of the Bright Republic, the military awarded most of those two awards to mech pilots. Sometimes, members of the auxiliary regiments such as infantrymen or tank operators received these honors as well.

Yet a mech designer? Absurd!

It was like some field surgeon suddenly went berserk, picked up a machine gun and stormed into an enemy Vesian base and wiped out all of the hostiles by himself!

The addition of the Golden Mech proved to be the clincher. The addition of the Golden Mech reinforced the fact that Ves was a mech designer and contributed enormously to the state with his expertise.

Yet to someone like Ves who already carried the Darkness Eater and the Torchbearer, the addition of a supreme award that was almost never seen

because of how rare they popped up reinforced the fact that he was a genuine mech designer and not some supersoldier in disguise!

The Golden Mech was an award designed by mech designers of the Republic to be bestowed under extremely stringent conditions relevant in their field of expertise. This was also the reason why the Golden Mech looked so ostentatious and thereby attract so much attention.

When these curious people walked up to Ves and asked how he earned those medals, Ves of course couldn't reveal any classified information.

"I'm not allowed to say." He responded, and that usually ended their questions in that direction.

Yet the lack of information continued to fuel their curiosity regarding him. When they asked who he was, Ves couldn't very well refuse.

"I'm Ves Larkinson, a mech designer in the service of the Mech Corps."

The people he talked to would instantly light up in recognition and say something like, "Ah, a Larkinson!" or "No wonder, you're a Larkinson!" or "As expected of a Larkinson!"

Ves didn't know whether to laugh or cry that they could instantly accept that he earned these attention-grabbing awards because of his family name. Nonetheless, a lot of people continued to push onto him for one reason or another, causing him to flee back to his guest room.

"They're just like the rabid clones back at that lab!"

Despite that unpleasantness, Ves knew that earning these noteworthy medals would definitely benefit him in his later business ventures. He was pretty sure that he was the only mech designer of the Bright Republic to hold all three of these awards at once!

"This will play well with the veteran demographic of the mech market." He predicted.

Although it would be crass to show off these medals everywhere he went, their mere mention in his record already raised his profile head and shoulders above his fellow competitors.

The Bright Republic was a state suffused with war, and those who distinguished themselves in the Bright-Vesia Wars always received bright prospects after the war. After all, it wouldn't do for the state to belittle or stigmatize their war heroes. All of them served as examples for future generations, and many citizens in fact did look up to them as heroes or idols.

Ves could already think of several ways to take advantage of his honors to enhance the performance of his businesses. It wasn't every day you could purchase a mech designed by someone who simultaneously held the Darkness Eater, the Torchbearer and the Golden Mech!

"If I manage to advance to Journeyman Mech Designer quickly enough, then that would be perfect!"

The one regret he held was that while his awards attracted a lot of attention from fellow Brighters, many foreigners weren't familiar with them. Certainly, there was still some appeal to buying a mech designed by a war veteran and war hero, but they would rather pay attention to the specs rather than the personal story of the person who designed the mech.

Therefore, Ves reminded himself that he shouldn't go in over his head. While the Bright Republic would always form the main market of his business, the LMC's reach already extended to much of the Komodo Star Sector.

As his company continued to grow, the proportion of foreign sales would grow larger while its home market would continue to diminish in importance. The Bright Republic's market was only so large, after all.

Ves mostly spent his time hanging out with Major Verle and Captain Orfan, reminiscing about the Vandals and talking a bit about the future. While Major Verle definitely intended to stick with the Vandals both as a mech officer and an agent of the Firestarters, Captain Orfan seemed much more disillusioned about the mech regiment she fought for all this time.

"I thought the Flagrant Vandals are scrappy fighters who depend on themselves and who don't take crap from anyone." She stated in one of her drunken rants. "Yet despite being neglected by the Mech Corps, we can't help but come running once they want something from us! This is complete and utter nonsense!"

To someone like her who held a lot of affection for the Vandals despite their many flaws, Captain Orfan couldn't get her mind around the purpose of the mission. She didn't know their true role as a hidden hand of the Firestarters, and even if she did she'd probably give them the middle finger.

After spending their time in an overly comfortable limbo, the time of the private banquet finally arrived. A number of bots entered their guest rooms and meticulously cleaned and brushed up their appearances. They needed to look as neat and impeccable as possible in the presence of Senator Tovar!

The three gathered back together in their neatly-pressed dress uniforms with all of their medals, ribbons, badges and insignia on prominent display.

The Darkness Eaters pinned on Ves and Captain Orfan's uniforms were the biggest attention grabbers. Major Verle had to make do with the Plasma Spark, which was merely the third-highest award of the Mech Corps.

Fortunately, they'd been spared from parading through the common section of the guest area by entering a nearby restricted elevator. They went all the way upwards until they arrived at second-highest floor!

A grand restaurant and dining room made up this floor, and was usually used to host various parties with foreign dignitaries. Such an extravagant occasion wasn't on the agenda today, and the three guests went through a quiet side entrance before entering a smaller but still very opulent private dining hall.

Aside from a row of attendants that did their best to stand against the wall and make their presence unobtrusive, the tall and luxurious dining hall hosted nobody else except for two notable figures.

One of them was Mr. Cordwraith, who fawned at the old and extremely distinguished gentleman slowly rising to his feet to greet the guests.

"Come." His rich and deep voice boomed, somehow encompassing the entire hall in a voice trained for public speaking since the moment he was born. "Let me greet my saviors in person."

The three crossed the distance until they arrived a few steps away from the simple but exquisitely-dressed senator who smiled at them. "Mech Major Quinlist Verle. Mech Captain Rosa Orfan. Mr. Ves Larkinson. It is an honor to meet you all. Let me start by expressing my profound gratitude at your heroic efforts to secure a new lease of life for me so that I can serve the Republic for a significant time longer. The entire Bright Republic owes the 6th Flagrant Vandals a monumental debt."

"We serve at the pleasure of the Republic, Senator Tovar." Major Verle shook hands with the senator. "The Flagrant Vandals always stand ready to do our part for the Mech Corps and the state."

"Good man." Senator Tovar nodded before turning to the next guest. "Captain Orfan, I hear you have undergone a peculiar transformation during your mission. Some of our researchers have expressed a lot of interest in the phenomenon. I hope you won't mind the monitoring team that will accompany

you with the Vandals from now on. I will assure you that you will be adequately compensated for your cooperation."

Captain Orfan gave the senator a strained smile. "No problem, senator. I'm a loyal mech officer of the Mech Corps."

If Senator Tovar picked up on her sarcastic undertone, he didn't show it. Instead, he shook her hands with a surprisingly firm grip for someone so old and finally turned to the final guest.

"Mr. Larkinson. May I call you Ves? I have met so many Larkinsons throughout the years that it is easier on my mind if I call you by your first names."

The senator was a man who was already old by the time his grandfather Benjamin was still in diapers! Ves twitched back a polite smile. "I don't mind. You may call me whatever you wish, senator."

As they shook hands, Ves experienced the senator's powerful grip in person. Senator Tovar exhibited a lot of strength and vitality in that single handshake!

Compared to his past appearances in the news, Senator Tovar obviously appeared a lot more livelier now! His frame seemed more powerful, some black started to color in his grey hair and his skin shed its worn and leathery appearance.

The effects of life-prolonging treatments came into effect remarkably quickly!

When they finished their greeting, they sat down at a firm square table. The human attendants started to bring in various dishes that Ves recognized as regional and planetary specialties from various parts of the Bright Republic.

The senator carried the conversation over the table while they ate. Between the empty platitudes, the powerful man frequently thanked them for their services.

It didn't surprise Ves to see Senator Tovar so open with his gratitude. Anyone would if they heard they could literally live a century longer. That was a lot of extra years that they could use to experience the galaxy, see their descendants grow and leave behind an unforgettable legacy.

The senator also gave out hints on other matters.

"The 6th Flagrant Vandals have outdone themselves during this war. While many other mech regiments are content with doing the same thing over and over, only you dared to plunge all the way through the territory of the Vesia Kingdom and deal them a blow that they would never forget."

"We have only taken the first step to bloodying the nose of the Vesians." Major Verle modestly replied. "The mech regiments fighting at the frontlines are the real heroes for halting the invaders from ravaging our stars."

Senator Tovar gently shook his head. "Even so, the Flagrant Vandals has not shied away from going to even further extremes. The mission that has brought you all the way to the frontier is one that is hard to fulfill by even the most elite mech regiments, but the Vandals have proven themselves to be uniquely suited to fulfill it. Given your successful track record during this war, I think the Mech Corps needs to consider their stance regarding the allocation of resources to their mech regiments."

Chapter 969 Gratitude

The senator basically insinuated that on his say so, he could get the Mech Corps to stop treating the Flagrant Vandals like an abandoned child.

Such an offer sounded like a heaven-sent gift to the Vandals! As they lost a substantial amount of forces, they needed lots of funding to replenish their ships, mechs and manpowers.

Yet Major Verle did not respond in the way Ves expected. "The 6th Flagrant Vandals answers to the 3rd Tarry Division of the Southern Mech Army. Any

decisions regarding the allocation of resources and funding is best left to the chain of command."

"I can facilitate the decision making of the relevant offices." The senator continued, emphasizing his clout. "While I am not in any way directly involved with the military, a single reminder is enough to make them reconsider their past decisions."

"We appreciate your intentions, but the budget of the Mech Corps is already fixed. Much more deserving mech regiments who have arduously fought in the frontlines of the war are already in line to obtain their share of the funding. It is best not to disrupt the current allocation of resources in order to avoid affecting the progression of the war to our detriment."

The senator pursed his lips but nodded. "You make a good point, major. The Mech Corps has already made their own arrangements."

Even though the Vandals could truly benefit from the additional funding that Tovar could arrange for them, Major Verle resolutely rejected the generous offer.

Not only did he warn Ves not to get entangled with a powerful influence such as Senator Tovar and the Tovar Family, but he also followed his own advice despite the attractive enticement!

Of course, Major Verle didn't reject Senator Tovar's initiative due to his integrity. He merely wanted to keep the Vandals from being associated with the Tovar Family.

While doing so might give the Vandals a lot of help, it would also earn them a lot of new enemies! Anyone who despised the Tovars or competed with them for power and influence would start to play tricks on the hapless mech regiment.

The Vandals weren't ready to deal with those kinds of games. Not by a longshot.

Certainly, Senator Tovar got the hint and stopped hinting about giving the Vandals a boost.

Nonetheless, the old man couldn't help but insist on 'expressing his gratitude' throughout the private banquet.

Sometimes, he didn't leave any room for rejection.

"Major Verle, meeting you in person has reinforced my good impression of you. The Mech Corps needs steady officers like you that can keep the bigger picture in mind. I will be sure to put in a good word to your superiors."

"My thanks, senator, but I am already pleased with the recognition that I've received already." Verle replied, trying to keep the vexation out of his voice.

"Captain Orfan, I see you are not entirely comfortable in this formal setting. No, don't apologise. Expert candidates come in all shapes and sizes. I can see that you are a mech pilot who is born for battle. That's great, as there are many mech regiments that urgently need a future expert pilot to champion their forces. Just say the word, and the most elite mech regiments will open their doors for you. For now, the Flagrant Vandals are no longer capable of supporting a mech pilot of your quality."

"The Vandals are family to me, sir." Orfan replied, likewise keeping her anger restrained. Ves figured she was hugely insulted by the senator's casual disregard for her mech regiment. "I intend to stick with them and help them rebuild their forces."

"Anyone can rebuild a battered mech regiment." Senator Tovar shook his head. "Ordinarily, I would agree with you, but this is a time of war. Talent such as you are best utilized in the frontlines holding back the Vesians. As a loyal citizen of the Republic, I'm sure you wish to do your part in the war, correct? I

will ask around to see which elite mech regiment best fits your battle style and see if they have room for another exemplary mech pilot."

The casual way in which Senator Tovar rolled over them in his insistence on expressing his gratitude really opened up Ves' eyes. To a man at the top of the Bright Republic's power structure, nothing was impossible!

Even if the senator's authority didn't stretch that far in the military, his soft power in the form of his clout, reputation, and family influence could make many things happen! In the face of his power and stature, other decision makers would find it difficult to accede to his requests!

"As for you, Ves, you do your family proud. Even if you have not been given the opportunity to join your many brothers and sisters in fighting against the Vesians directly, your current career choice is no less impressive."

"Thank you, sir." Ves responded politely.

"I see you are wearing your awards with pride. There was a considerable amount of controversy regarding their bestowal to you. While no one doubts your contribution to the mission and the Bright Republic, to award a mech designer with not one, but two distinguished medals that relate to merit earned in combat actions is unprecedented. I hope you do not mind that I leaned on the handful of generals responsible for this decision on your behalf, although I do admit your Larkinson name helped smooth matters over."

Ves twitched another smile. At least he now knew that he didn't receive these extravagant awards easily. It seemed that Senator Tovar already did him a huge 'favor', likely irritating some generals in the process!

"Thank you, sir, but I am merely a mech designer temporarily in the service of the Mech Corps. Unlike my relatives, I do not envision a career in the military."

"Ah, your record stated that you started your own business and did quite well in a short amount of time. The Living Mech Corporation, yes? What a curious moniker for a mech manufacturing company."

"The name reflects our aspiration to sell mechs that come to life in the hands of our customers, sir." Ves replied, automatically going through his marketing spiel. "We aren't selling a product. We are selling enduring partners to mech pilots who have a need for dependable mechs of impeccable quality."

"What an interesting and thoughtful philosophy." Tovar chuckled at Ves. "That is a very sophisticated standpoint to take regarding machines built for war. Is it not the purpose of mechs to be expended in battle?"

"Respectfully, sir, I believe there is a difference between treating a mech as a commodity and treating a mech as an investment. Mech pilots with the former mindset may be content with cheaper products built to serve a specific purpose and nothing more, but there are also mech pilots who expect something more out of their machines. This is where the LMC comes in. Our mechs are premium products that are built to last. It is my hope that like living persons, my mechs will one day be able to grow stronger over time rather than grow weaker like every other mech in the market today."

The senator's eyes lit up in enthusiasm. "How bold! How daring! What a marvelous ideal! I absolutely agree with you! These days, the high volume of sales of mechs has encouraged a pattern of reckless use among mech pilots. Too often they change their mechs as if they change their coats. It is inordinately wasteful and while many of your colleagues and competitors are glad with the extra sales, it nonetheless lowers the efficiency of our forces."

For some reason, Ves and the senator both got pulled into a philosophical discussion on the use of mechs. While Ves could never match the depth and wisdom of Senator Tovar, his unique thoughts regarding this topic was like a breath of fresh air to the old lawmaker.

"At first, I presumed a Larkinson such as you who has managed to thrive under very arduous circumstances would be a consummate soldier or a battle fanatic like your relatives. Now, I have learned that your family is capable of spawning more than talented and dedicated mech pilots. How they managed to raise an insightful and successful mech designer such as you is a mystery for the ages."

"I have good parents." Ves replied simply. He was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable at the praises the senator piled up on him. While he felt flattered by the attention, he always kept Major Verle's warning in mind. "The Bright Republic has raised many talented mech designers. I am but one among many."

"Ah, but you do yourself a disservice to speak so lightly of your accomplishments. It is unfortunate to hear that the Mech Corps will not be able to enjoy your services for long. I can see you are easily able to thrive no matter if you work in the military or in the private sector. I read that your company sells two very notable mech models. They are obviously worth more attention if they are designed by a mech designer of your talents."

Damn, did Tovar intend to invest in his company or something?!

"My company is barely out of its startup phase. We are still very inadequate in many ways, and I have been absent from the company for about two years now due to my obligations to the Mech Corps. I would hate to embarrass you with our meager mech catalog. Right now, it would benefit my company more if we can keep growing organically without any undue haste or pressure. I believe it is too easy to disrupt a young company by taking too many risks."

Senator Tovar appeared to be weighing his words. "Hm, that is a very mature perspective for someone so young as you. I commend your patience, but I do not entirely agree. A company cannot do without risks. The Bright Republic's

mech market is very competitive, and for every ten company that holds back, there is always one that doesn't hesitate to gamble."

"Many of those companies who gamble fail and go bankrupt."

"Only the inept!" Tovar emphasized. "Mech manufacturers founded by listless and incompetent mech designers deserve everything they get when they inevitably flounder. You are very different from the useless rabble of mech designers, Ves. Your exploits during the mission alone amply proves that you have the survival instincts that are necessary to thrive on and off the battlefield."

"Even so, the mech industry is very complex. It is too precarious for me to gamble on the success of my company, especially when it is dealing in assets worth billions of credits and is responsible for employing thousands of people."

"I have no doubt you will find a way should you choose to chart a bolder course." Camden Tovar shook his head. "Trust me, the Republic places very high expectations on young mech designers such as you who have distinguished themselves during war. Why do you think we draft so many mech designers every generation? It is not only to supplement our mech forces with desperately-needed technical expertise. Instead, the primary reason is to separate the wheat from the chaff!"

"The Republic... wants to know which mech designers are worth investing in by tracking our performance during the war, sir?" He asked.

At some level, Ves already suspected as much, but to hear this from the mouth of a former bright president of the Republic himself was very abrupt!

Tovar threw a friendly smile at Ves. "If we leave our mech designers be, their numbers will balloon and our economy will be dragged down by stubborn cockroaches who somehow manage to cling to their marginal existences. It is much better to pack them off to the war to see whether they have what it takes

to survive! Only those who are brave and smart enough to survive the rigors of war are deserving of our support."

"That is... remarkably efficient of the Republic." He commented a bit flatly.

"I admit, our policy regarding mech designers sounds rather harsh, but it is only through hardship that we can raise strong mech pilots and strong mech designers. It is no coincidence that many mech designers are placed far closer to the battlefield than they ought to! Without some way of reducing their numbers, our economy would be flooded again with a deluge of useless mech designers after the war. The Mech Corps actually has to meet a secret quota in this regard, which is a policy I helped pioneer. We are really doing you mech designers favor by allowing the capable among you a chance to distinguish yourselves, of which you are the best exemplar in this generation."

"I am honored that you feel so, sir."

What the hell?! Ves wanted this banquet to end as soon as possible!

Chapter 970 Chess Pieces

"You did well in handling Senator Tovar's advances." Major Verle praised Ves after the end of that uncomfortable private banquet. "

Ves shrugged as they returned to one of the guest rooms where they all plopped down on the sofas. "Well, the senator may be a great figure of the Republic, but his opinions are... high-minded."

Captain Orfan snorted as she immediately returned to the bar and poured herself another strong drink. "That old geezer is more than high-minded! He practically treats us all like chess pieces! I get that he's feeling great now that he gets to live a century longer, but I can't help but feel if it would be better if someone younger would take his place instead."

"Camden Tovar is a born leader." Major Verle explained to the two. "As the son of Bright Founder Amtuso Tovar, he has watched his father lead the

Bright Republic since young, and once he came into adulthood he has exercised leadership ever since. Senator Tovar considers himself a father of the state, and he believes it is his station in life to steer the fates of billions of citizens with each of his decisions."

Ves noted the implicit point that Verle tried to make. "In other words, his decisions make sense when taking the larger picture into account, but he doesn't have eyes for the little people in between who get hurt by his policies. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

"Hmph." Orfan sneered. "The only 'needs of the few' he cares about are his own. He doesn't care about anyone else but his own interests."

"That's obvious considering he claimed earlier about deliberately pushing the Mech Corps into driving mech designers to their deaths! I mean, what the hell?! Major, did you know about this secret policy?!"

Verle shook his head and sighed. "Not as such. We all suspected, though. Several standing regulations regarding the deployment of mech designers doesn't make much sense except when seen in this light. It certainly is a polarizing way to sharpen the mech designers of the Republic."

"Yes, but this is far too extreme!" Ves exclaimed. "Why not let the market do the work! It's already doing a good job to force the incompetent mech designers into other careers. There's no need to set such an insane policy to push them onto the battlefield until enough of them have died!"

"I agree with you, Ves, but that's not how Senator Tovar sees it up from his ivory tower. I can see his perspective on the matter. We are one step away from the frontier and we are also at the very end of the galactic supply chains. Senator Tovar doesn't want the Bright Republic to breed complacent mech designers who are extremely well-suited in one particular circumstance. He wants hardier mech designers who are adaptable and deal well with pressure."

To that end, he doesn't mind sacrificing half of you if it means the remaining half are hardened from their experiences from the war."

Ves frowned deeply. It explained the certain amount of bias the state bestowed to mech designers returning from the war. "I don't know if it works as well as the senator has envisioned it. I know that a lot of mech designers return broken and traumatized."

"Then that's even better! The mech designers who have somehow managed to survive but become useless will naturally drop out of the mech business, leaving more room for those the state regards as gems to thrive. You have to see it in this way, Ves. The Bright Republic doesn't want tens of thousands of mediocre mech designers who are fragile, weak-minded flowers that can't cope at all against various crises. They would rather have ten good mech designers that have proven themselves that they can cope with various extremes."

"The market already does that to an extent."

"Senator Tovar obviously doesn't think it does a good enough job. People like him believe that anyone, not just mech designers, are able to reach their full potential when subjected to the ravages of war." Verle replied. "The more important point is that Tovar appears to be one of the principal supporters of this policy. This means that he will be looking out for mech designers who validate his beliefs. Did you think he was praising you a bit too excessively during the banquet? That's because you exemplify his political narrative! As a brave and resourceful mech designer who saved many servicemen at many occasions, Senator Tovar wishes to parade you around in front of the naysayers of his policy in order to vindicate his standpoint!"

A spark lit up in Ves' mind. "So that's why Senator Tovar pushed for all of those extravagant awards. As a mech designer, it's already rather outlandish for me to receive the Darkness Eater. The Golden Mech is even more difficult

to obtain. From what I know, only Senior Mech Designers who have designed war-winning mechs are eligible, and only one or two are awarded at most in each generation."

This likely signified that the secret policy regarding mech designers delivered mixed results. The opposition to it must be substantial. If the senator didn't wish to be humiliated by having one of his pet policy decisions reversed by his political opponents, then he needed to prop up someone like Ves who he could spin as a 'successful' outcome!

"Therefore, that's why I don't want you to get involved with him. Senator Tovar favors you because you're a useful pawn to him. However, you know what they say about pawns."

"Pawns get sacrificed as soon as it's convenient for the chess players. The senator is already used to doing so from his high position."

"Exactly." Verle nodded. "The senator isn't interested in you as a person. He's only interested in the political gains he can make if he has you under his thumb. Fortunately, you did a decent job in rejecting his advances in a tactful manner, so he doesn't have many avenues in pulling you into his camp. Nonetheless, it doesn't change the fact that you are a great example of the kind of mech designer that the senator wishes to breed. We can't rule out that he will arrange some circumstances behind the scenes to give you a boost in your career."

"Thereby giving his political opponents a reason to drag me down." Ves realized.

Even though he felt that it wasn't unjust to award him those prestigious medals, there was no doubt that this was also an attempt by Camden Tovar to manufacture a heroic mech designer!

"You've learned. Good. You desperately need to get your political acumen up to speed now that you've attracted the attention of Senator Tovar. I don't know enough about the other founder families to guess their stances, but it's known that the Tovar Family are in bitter opposition against the Ramzi Family. Their rivalry isn't necessarily based on politics or philosophy. They just hate each other's guts."

"Great." Ves said mildly. "Hopefully I don't catch their attention."

Now that the benefactor of the mission expressed his gratitude to the principal people responsible for extending a new lease on his life, the stay at the headquarters of the Bureau of Sector Affairs came to an end.

They only enjoyed a single night of sleep before they transferred out. Major Verle and Captain Orfan received orders to head to the Tarry region where the Flagrant Vandals currently recuperated well behind the frontlines.

As for Ves, he finally received transfer orders taking him to a confidential location somewhere in the Robach System in the Green Nebula region.

The Green Nebula region was situated somewhere in the middle of the Bright Republic, between the Rittersberg region to the left and the Bentheim region to the right in most standard two-dimensional maps.

That basically meant that nothing really important went on in the Green Nebula region, as the other two regions overshadowed it. Still, Ves knew better than to underestimate this region's importance.

Before they left, Ves met with Verle and Orfan one last time to say farewell. After bidding off Captain Orfan, Verle took Ves aside so she wouldn't be able to overhear them. "Make sure to cherish the opportunity given to you. Colonel Lowenfield and I called in some favors, but after yesterday I think we shouldn't have bothered, because Senator Tovar has likely pulled some strings."

"Will this be the last time we see each other, sir?"

"Probably." Verle nodded. "Flashlight is very large and expansive. You should read up on its history and familiarize yourself with its customs if you can. Remember my previous advice. Try to make some friends there and make sure you get on the good side of at least one of your superiors."

"You keep hammering on that point, yet you also warn me not to get involved with the Tovars."

"Flashlight is a military intelligence agency." Verle stated. "Do you realize what a difference that makes? It means that compared to the Republic's foreign and domestic intelligence agencies, we are allowed to get away with more. We don't want to piss off the other states, and we have to respect the rights of our own citizens, so our spies can't go too far. It's different when the intelligence activities directly change the course of the war."

Ves understood his message. "So Flashlight is allowed to go to further extremes than the other agencies, is that what you're saying? I guess I've already internalized this lesson with my time with the Vandals."

"Good man. When you're at Flashlight, I won't be around to give you these kinds of pointers, so make sure you get close to someone who's willing to take you under their wing. This can literally save your life."

"Is it that dangerous at Flashlight?"

"To paraphrase Senator Tovar, only for the inept." Major Verle smiled in a mocking fashion. "Flashlight is a large organization that employs many kinds of people, the most significant of whom are either sharks or wolves in sheep's clothing. You're not a careerist, so you won't have any say in the agency, but that also means the people there generally won't bother with you too much, as you'll be out in a few years anyway."

After some more sage advice, Ves finally said goodbye and followed a guide to a shuttle in the underground parking hall.

The shuttle took him back up to orbit to transfer him to a military supply ship carrying supplies and personnel to the Green Nebula region.

The ship only offered basic facilities to its passengers, most of which consisted of mech pilots and various support personnel.

Now that he was out of the headquarters of BuSecA, Ves could finally pack off his dress uniform along with his gaudy medals in exchange for a more sober work uniform without any ribbons or shiny pieces of metal.

He didn't attract too much attention when he mingled with the other servicemen this time, and that was exactly how he liked it in this setting.

Of course, he received the usual disdain reserved for drafted mech designers, but that quickly faded as Ves displayed some of the habits and mannerisms of someone who went through hell and back.

Soldiers possessed the remarkable ability to recognize the similarities in each other. At some point, Ves gained enough qualifications to enter into their circle.

It helped that his Larkinson background already made him familiar with their traits. The only difference now was that understood their perspective because he personally lived through some of what they experienced.

Meanwhile, the military supply ship accompanied a convoy headed for the Green Nebula region. Weeks went by as the slow vessels transitioned from system to system along the way. Some ships separated from the convoy as they reached their destination while many others still had more hops to go.

Almost two weeks went by until the convoy finally arrived at the Robach System. The military supply ship separated from the convoy and flew to a military space station orbiting Robach III, the only habitable planet in the system. From there, a secret shuttle covertly slipped him and a handful of

other passengers out to a secret base dug deep inside Robach VI, a cold and uninhabitable planet.