

### Chapter 971 Frozen Poin

The shuttle went through a couple of detours before slipping through a hidden tunnel built inside a frigid mountain range on Robach VI. Powerful sensor arrays built into the tunnel subjected the entire shuttle to extremely powerful scans. Ves could feel their power and knew that if they scanned him for a minute or two more, they'd be liable to cook everyone's flesh!

Every passenger let out a relieved breath once the scans finished. Apparently, they found nothing suspicious, because the shuttle continued to fly through the tunnel until it ended in yet another expansive underground parking hall.

A man in uniform greeted their arrival. "Welcome to Frozen Point Research Base. This isn't the coldest base in the Republic, but we'll make sure you'll have a frosty stay."

As the passengers followed the man, Ves looked around the parking hall and saw that most of the people employed in this base consisted of various people in uniform.

They went through a very thorough security checkpoint where scanners and frisky guards both ensured that none of the new arrivals carried anything they shouldn't. Once that was over with, they headed to administration where they registered their arrival and received special comms that served as their all-in-one access key.

"Don't lose them while you are in this base." Their guide told them. "There are hidden turrets and other security measures integrated in each room and corridor that won't hesitate to turn against you should you fail to be recognized as an individual authorized to be in a particular area."

Everyone nodded in acknowledgement. Even though Frozen Point seemed like a plain and rather dull underground base, it was obviously a site of some importance considering all of the safeguards in place.

After Ves completed his induction, his comm guided him to a section of the base called the Mech Design Department. This boring name didn't really describe its role all that much, so Ves was curious what mech designers actually did at Frozen Point.

He entered the department and met a receptionist who flicked him over to an office of a Senior Mech Designer.

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson, I have been expecting you." An older man greeted him as he looked up from his terminal. "Please sit."

Ves sat down on a chair on the other side of the desk and tried to look attentive. It appeared that this mech designer would be his immediate boss for the foreseeable future.

"I am Professor Bolsa Enoch, a Senior Mech Designer as I'm sure you already know. Here at Frozen Point, we perform various clandestine research and analysis on mechs under the umbrella of Flashlight's Mech Research Division. While your record hasn't stated much about your previous deployment, I understand that you've distinguished yourself in the frontier of all places."

"I don't think I'm allowed to say anything about that, sir."

"I understand. Here at Flashlight, we don't ask questions that we aren't allowed to know the answers to. Many of us have been involved in matters best left in the dark. What is more relevant to me is that you appear to have some friends in high places. While Frozen Point isn't the most well-funded or critical research bases of the mech Research Division, it is a very desirable place for young mech designers like you. Care to take a guess?"

Ves thought for a moment. "Frozen Point is well behind the frontlines and has likely never come under threat during its existence. Any mech designer drafted to the war will probably like it here because their life won't be at risk."

"Correct, although they are rather misguided." Professor Enoch shook his head. "Your transfer to this base has surprised us all at the Mech Design Department. Your record may have left out what you have done prior to your arrival, but the awards you've received... it has baffled us. Receiving the Golden Mech is especially contentious among us Seniors."

Ves suddenly frowned as he realized the negative implications of receiving such a coveted award. "Are the other Seniors... dissatisfied with my awards?"

"Officially, the Bright Republic and the Mech Corps has the right to recognize the contributions of its loyal citizens." Enoch stated perfunctory. "It is not in our purview to question the decisions of the brass. I am sure whatever distinctions you've made has made you worthy enough to receive such recognition. It is only..."

"I'm just an Apprentice Mech Designer." Ves replied with a sigh. "I don't know if a Golden Mech has ever been awarded to a junior of my rank."

"Indeed. Even if you are deserving, many of my colleagues can't help but wonder if what they have done in the service of Flashlight and the Republic can measure up to your 'contributions'. You are lucky that I am beyond such vanities. That is also why someone very interested in you has made sure that you are assigned under my watch."

It could be the influence of Colonel Lowenfield and Major Verle. Probably not. Someone that high placed would have only listened to someone like Senator Tovar.

"I am ready to work wherever I'm assigned to, professor." Ves stated.

From what little interaction they had so far, Ves got the sense that Enoch wouldn't be inclined to be so friendly and accomodating to an Apprentice like him without the intervention of someone above.

Enoch sniffed at his response. "That's nice to hear. In any case, your assignment here at Frozen Point will be to assist the Mech Analysis Work Group in our core purpose, which is to analyze and process the vast amount of scattered footage and sensor readings of Vesian mechs in order to pick out their strengths and weaknesses. I've been informed that this is not an unfamiliar task to you, is that correct?"

Ves tried to suppress a smirk. He was so good at it that in one instance he managed to scare away an entire pirate gang by exposing all of the shortcomings of their mechs!

"I have a decent amount of experience in this area, and I think I am quite capable of analyzing most standard mechs."

"Hm, you sound honest enough." The professor nodded in satisfaction. "You pass. Compared to my other subordinates, I'm pleased by your modesty. I feel easier to appoint you as a supervisor of the Second Analysis Team. A Journeyman who used to hold that position has been transferred to a more promising position, so you'll have to fill in some very big shoes, do you understand?"

It wouldn't be the first time Ves took up a position ordinarily held by a Journeyman. "I am confident that I can fulfill your expectations."

Professor Enoch looked a little skeptical at his boast. "We'll see. The Second Analysis Team can be a bit of a handful. I hope you won't come to me for any complaints. As the recipient of the Golden Mech, many of us have placed high expectations on you. Do not disappoint us."

After receiving a bit more instructions on what his new job actually entailed, the Professor transferred a lot of documents to his comm and ordered him to read them all before he started his new job.

"One more thing, Mr. Larkinson."

"Yes, professor?"

"Be sure to wear the right uniform while on the job. We have already supplied your quarters with the right outfits."

After that, Ves left the office and followed the guide on his comm to another section of the base which housed all the accommodation.

Ves entered the quarters assigned to him. The small and basic-looking room did not offer too much space, reminding him of the cabins back on the Shield of Hispania. He checked the closet and read up on the relevant regulations and saw that he needed to wear his so-called 'service dress uniform' during his stay in the base.

If Ves had been assigned to serve aboard a ship, then he could still keep wearing his unobtrusive work uniform. Yet now that he was formally transferred to Frozen Point, Ves needed to wear the service dress version of his uniform.

Overall, the uniform of mech designers didn't really differ all that much besides their cut and some embellishments. The only point where Ves had issue with was that he was obligated to wear his awards, though fortunately just in ribbon form so he could leave out the shiny metal. Apparently, the Mech Corps did give way to some practicality, unlike the Mech Legion which encouraged their servicemen to show off their bling.

"Damn, I'm going to catch a lot of attention again regardless." He cursed.

Mech designers generally didn't earn that much awards, especially ones related to combat.

After resigning himself to his fate, he spent the rest of the night going over the documents regarding his new duties before turning in for the night.

The next day, Professor Enoch brought him to the workplace of the Second Analysis Team.

An expansive bank of terminals and projections of various Vesian mechs dominated the expansive room. Around forty mech designers of various ages but mostly on the younger end worked behind the terminals.

Each of them halted and stood up at Professor Enoch's entry.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your new supervisor. Ves Larkinson is a distinguished Apprentice Mech Designer who has received special attention from the higher ups. Please afford him the respect that he is owed. That is all. I will let Mr. Larkinson take over from here."

As Professor Enoch left him to the wolves, Ves suppressed his irritation at the professor's overly short introduction. Obviously, the Senior wanted Ves to prove himself to his new subordinates and added some difficulties by mentioning that Ves got to this position only because someone pulled some strings behind the scenes.

The mech designers all waited for Professor Enoch to leave the work room before relaxing their guard.

"Are you really just an Apprentice?" A young man questioned.

"I am."

"Wait a minute! Look at his chest! That... That's the Darkness Eater!"

"Hell, he's wearing the Torchbearer as well!"

"That's not all! He's also carrying the Golden Mech!"

That caused the entire room of mech designers to grow from shocked to numb. All the other ribbons that Ves wore on his chest didn't catch as much attention as the three biggest ones, something which none of the mech designers would ever be able to touch in their lives!

The sight of those awards sparked a wave of disbelief. "This is absurd! There's no way a mech designer like him earned those medals for real!"

"He cheated! He cheated!"

"How many generals did he seduce to obtain those decorations?!"

Seemingly spontaneously, the prevailing theory among the mech designers of the Second Analysis Team was that Ves somehow had an affair with half the generals of the Mech Corps in order to obtain the three big awards.

This entire show exasperated Ves because he knew exactly what kind of mech designers he was dealing with right now. Their young age, their soft demeanor and sense of entitlement in their voices told him that they were the lucky ones who had been drafted by the Mech Corps but assigned to rear-guard duty.

These were the people with enough talent, wealth or connections to be spared from the ravages of war. No wonder Professor Enoch mentioned that Frozen Point Research Base was a highly desirable place to work at for mech designers. There was hardly any risk of danger here!

From the looks of it, the mech designers here were used to a looser and more tolerant work regime. It wouldn't have been much of a problem if a genuine Journeyman Mech Designer took charge of these high-ranking Apprentice Mech Designers, but the problem was that Ves was technically one of their peers!

Fortunately, Ves didn't entirely come unprepared. Along with his prior leadership experience, he also brushed up on some management theories under the direction of Professor Velten.

Ves started to take on the bearing of a leader and threw them all a sharp glance. Some of the mech designers couldn't help but falter in their disrespectful banter.

"If that is all, please follow me to the virtual workshop. Let us get acquainted with each other."

His voice cut through their irreverent banter. Even though he hadn't raised his voice all that much, it contained a magnetic quality that attracted their attention no matter how much they initially dismissed him. Ves expected his orders to be obeyed!

### Chapter 972 Second Analysis Team

The first step Ves needed to take in his new role as supervisor was to obtain everyone's acknowledgement.

While there were several ways he could earn the respect and obedience of his subordinates, Ves liked to be a little more direct. Why pussyfoot around when he could prove his ability to the other mech designers in the fastest and most efficient way possible?

Just like how he once took over the position of head designer at the Flagrant Vandals, this time Ves intended to prove he was the most qualified mech designer to become their supervisor by defeating them in a mass design duel!

"Many of you are probably skeptical of my qualifications. That's a fair question to ask." Ves began as they all filed into the virtual workshop.

This was an area where mech designers could experiment with designing virtual mechs or analyzing reconstructed models at a lifelike scale.

"Since we don't know each other, let us introduce ourselves and get to know each other better here. Let's start with names. As you all know, I am Ves Larkinson. I graduated from the Rittersberg University of Technology and I am currently apprenticed to Master Carmin Olson from the Friday Coalition."

His introduction did not elicit the reaction that Ves was hoping for. While a number of mech designers out of the forty gathered here looked impressed

that he possessed a connection to a Master Mech Designer, two-thirds of them reacted differently.

First, they showed disdain at the mention of his alma mater. Admittedly, the Rittersberg University of Technology didn't particularly excel in bringing up notable mech designers.

However, many of them reacted quite negatively when he mentioned his apprenticeship.

Ves already had a creeping suspicion why most of the mech designers here felt that way.

"Please introduce yourselves to me. Let's start from left to right."

The leftmost mech designer proudly stepped forward. "Reginald Van Buren, Apprentice mech Designer, Ansel University of Mech Design. I am also the founder and former CEO of VBO Mechs."

The other thirty-nine mech designers stepped forward and announced themselves in turn. An overwhelming number of them graduated from the Ansel University of Mech Design on Bentheim, to the point where many of them were former classmates of each other!

Many of them proudly showed off some of their accomplishments. Some of them were mentored by notable Seniors of the Republic, while others founded successful mech manufacturing companies, often with the help of their rich and powerful families or backers.

Each of them were already used to success with the help of their advantages. Ves predicted that in time, many of them would grow up and mature to become the backbone of the Bright Republic's mech industry.

"Ansel, huh?" Ves muttered.

This institute had a tendency to shape their mech designers into loyal patriots of the Republic. This was generally a good thing because those mech designers wouldn't be tempted to run off for greener pastures at the Friday Coalition or elsewhere.

Unfortunately, they also tended to look down on graduates from the other universities of the Bright Republic. On top of that, they exhibited a deep suspicion against mech designers associated with foreign institutes or mech designers, of which the Friday Coalition wasn't excluded!

Therefore, Ves already saw that he had an uphill battle in store to gain the acknowledgement of his subordinates. He narrowed his eyes as he recognized he needed to act even harsher than he originally intended.

To stuck-up, entitled, elitist mech designers like these, only with a sufficient amount of shock would he be able to beat their prejudices out of their systems!

"Alright, I can see you are all doubting my qualifications to lead the Second Analysis Team. Very well. Today, I'll give you the opportunity to prove your point. Let's compete on designs. I'll give each of you as well as myself eight hours to design a mech according to a randomized set of parameters. At the end of the time limit, we'll pit all of our designs in simulated combat against each other. If my design loses against any of yours, I'll acknowledge that I'm not qualified. Is that okay?"

A couple of mech designers looked suspicious, but many of the Ansel graduates expressed supreme confidence in their ability. There was no way this upstart transfer could upstage all forty of them, right?

Ves smirked like a shark. These little brats had no idea who they were messing with. Spending all of their time in this isolated bubble in the Robach

System may have kept them safe from any threats to their lives, but it also prevented from acquiring some essential survival skills!

"Let us begin. I'll set the randomizer up so that we'll be on a completely even playing field for this massed design duel."

For the rest of the day, the members of the Second Analysis Team continued to hole up in the virtual workshop. The time extended way beyond eight hours as Ves wanted to hammer the differences between him and the rest!

At the end of the extended session, all forty mech designers slumped their way out of the virtual workshop, looking utterly exhausted and defeated.

"I'm finally out! Thank heavens!"

"What a monster!"

"How is this freak not a Journeyman yet?!"

Ves walked out afterwards with a smile and a jaunt in his step. Just like with the Vandal mech designers, he showcased his superior knowledge and design ability in the fairest method possible by pitting them in combat against each other.

The only difference this time was that Ves competed against somewhat competent mech designers this time. All of them possessed sufficient chops to compete directly in the mech market.

Nonetheless, unlike Ves, even if they were close to becoming Journeyman, they still possessed some gaps in several critical areas.

Even after his design won handedly in all forty simulated duels against the other designs, Ves kept the defeated mech designers back. Many of them still looked unconvinced, so Ves needed to chip away at their confidence a bit more.

How better to do so than to pick apart the weaknesses of their hasty and sloppy designs? This was the main job of Professor Enoch's Mech Analysis Research Group, so he began to prove his qualifications to be their supervisor by brutally criticizing all of the faults and shortcomings of their designs.

No one even had a chance to defend their designs in front of his verbal onslaught.

Only then did he release his subordinates from the virtual workshop, because only now did he truly defeat their rebellious spirits.

"Tomorrow, let's get to work." He announced, causing many of them to groan or dread the next day.

Over the next couple of days, Ves began to ease into his role as supervisor. His main job consisted of herding all forty mech designers in analyzing the deluge of data of Vesian mechs sent from the frontlines.

The main challenge in this job was that there were truly hundreds, if not thousands of different mech models to go through. An additional complication was that many of their designs were updated over time or came in new and slightly different variants, thereby necessitating another evaluation to figure out what changed.

The amount of work never ended, and mech designers needed to work all day in order to have a chance at reducing the stockpile.

Still, Ves started to question the effectiveness of the method adopted by the Mech Analysis Research Group. Wouldn't Professor Enoch alone be able to pick out all of the weaknesses by himself? Ves knocked on the door of his office and sat down to ask this very question.

"It's too much." Professor Enoch replied simply. "Since you have done a decent job at acclimatizing to your new responsibilities, you must have surely found out that we are receiving data from hundreds of different Vesian mechs

every day. If I do all the work all day, I won't just go crazy, I'll also grow tired and weary to the point where I misjudge the data at hand. Therefore, we are leaving much of the simpler and more obvious observations to groups of Apprentices. Only after they are done with their analyses will I check up on their work and add any details they have left out."

"Ah, so you are only responsible for analyzing and noting down the details that the other Apprentices has missed." Ves concluded.

"Correct, and it should be a responsibility for you as well. We aren't employing you just to manage the Second Analysis Team. You also need to start noting down your observations and analyses before you pass on the files to my desk, do you understand?"

Ves nodded. "I understand. The more traits we manage to pick out, the less work is left to you."

Therefore, to keep Professor Enoch happy, Ves needed to make sure that he and everyone else in the Second Analysis Team caught as many details as possible.

Days passed into weeks, and weeks passed into months. The initial tension between Ves and his subordinates started to smooth out, although a palpable distance still existed. The relation between Ansel alumni and non-Ansel mech designers would always stay frosty regardless how much Ves had proved himself.

Nonetheless, under his strict reign, none of the Apprentices dared to pull off any tricks. Those who tried received a fierce verbal beating from Ves.

As routine settled in, Ves found the work to be rather tedious if anything. Analyzing hundreds and thousands of unique iterations of mechs fielded by the Vesians quickly got old. There were too many of them, and while most of

them were excellent designs, he had already seen more than enough to last a lifetime.

Professor Enoch became more and more pleased by his performance. The Second Analysis Team caught more details, saving the professor a significant amount of time and effort, allowing him to spend his time more fruitfully on another project at Frozen Point. Naturally, the professor's other activities were classified and Ves had no business poking around there.

Having stayed in the base for a couple of months, Ves realized that a lot more went on at Frozen Point than just keeping a couple of important brats busy by having them stare at mechs all day.

Ves knew that his current assignment was already vitally important. Mech designers in the field didn't always have the time or ability to analyze all the different kinds of mechs the Vesians fielded next. Just like the Mech Corps, the Mech Legion constantly iterated on their designs, evolving them or adapting them to different circumstances after every battle.

"Our work makes a huge difference, even if we never get to see the effects in person." Professor Enoch mentioned one day during their daily morning briefings. "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. A thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular mech model will wipe away the doubt in the minds of our mech pilots. Studies have shown that we can increase the odds of winning by as much as ten percent!"

Even so, Ves started to miss the exciting days with the Vandals. Somehow, everything he did there felt much more meaningful than holing up in this secret research base far away from the action.

None of the mech designers never felt any effects from the war at Frozen Point.

What little Ves knew about how the war progressed came in the form of gossip and scattered clues from all of the data they received. He learned how to read the raw data they received to build a vague picture of the war.

Perhaps one day, a certain mech model fielded by a certain Vesian mech regiment showed up at the border. Perhaps a few weeks later that same mech model showed up much deeper into the Republic's territory, almost encroaching upon Bentheim. Perhaps a month after that a slightly updated version of that mech model appeared again closer to the border again.

Many of such designs see-sawed back and forth. Star Systems were constantly fought over, and many of them exchanged hands several times as defenders and attackers switched places.

To Ves, it seemed the war wasn't going anywhere for both sides. The Vesians couldn't manage to break through to Bentheim, but the Brighters failed to dislodge the invaders from their territory.

If it was anything like the past, the two sides would eventually exhaust themselves against each other and broker a peace at some point. Ves wondered if this time would be any different.

The only point of concern was that this time, the Vesians managed to penetrate dangerously close to Bentheim. Vesian mech regiments already sporadically raided the Bentheim System, disrupting some of the trade that went through the critical port system.

Would the Vesians be able to break through in earnest this time?

One day, Professor Enoch finally called him up for an office for a special meeting. Evidently, Ves showcased enough ability and leadership to be entrusted with greater responsibilities.

## Chapter 973 Railroad

Ves sat in front of Professor Enoch at his office. Just like the professor and any other mech designer, he wore his service dress uniform. The only difference was that the ribbons he showed off caught a lot of attention to those who knew how to read them, which was actually pretty much everyone assigned to Frozen Point!

"Mr. Larkinson, you've been with us for half a year, have you not? I hope that your comfortable and placid stay at Frozen Point hasn't distorted your perception of Flashlight. Analyzing and interpreting data is one of our mildest activities and only scratches the surface of our mandate. I hope you realize that your job for the last few months was a trial to see if you have what it takes to work for Flashlight. Even if you dropped the ball and failed to deliver the work that is expected from the Second Analysis Team, every report still has to go through my office, allowing me to catch anything you've missed."

He understood the Senior Mech Designer's underlying message. Having worked in Frozen Point Research base for months, he began to get a feel for the subtlety underlying the words of those who embodied Flashlight's secretive nature.

"So all this time, sir, I've been in some sort of trial period to see if I have what it takes to work for Flashlight?"

The professor smiled at Ves. "Indeed. The nature of your transfer is rather unconventional, to say the least. Many of us here at Flashlight questioned whether certain authorities stretched the rules too much when they issued your awards. Some of us wanted to wait and see if you have the ability to be one of us, while others investigated your background and recent exploits."

"And that took months?"

"We aren't in a hurry. At least we thought so. The investigation of my colleagues are still in progress, but events prompted by the latest actions of

our enemies have overtaken us. You have followed the progress of the war, right? It has become clear to us that the Vesians are preparing a direct push for the Bentheim system at all costs this time. This has alarmed our entire military apparatus! At this critical time, Flashlight needs all hands on deck."

This sounded quite serious, as Professor Enoch was not prone to exaggeration.

"Therefore, there is a different assignment in store for me now?" Ves asked.

"Indeed. While we would rather use our more dedicated agents for the missions that needs to be done on Bentheim, this critical planet is so large and complex that we find ourselves shorthanded. This is why we are reaching out for alternatives, and your name has come up for one of our missions. You see, your Larkinson lineage and your awards has shown that you are not averse to danger. Have you not complained to me that you feel unfulfilled with your current duties? This is your chance to escape the drudgery of herding a bunch of brats!"

When Ves expressed his dissatisfaction, he hoped that Professor Enoch would transfer him to a design team or allow him to assist in research.

He did not intend to volunteer for a dangerous mission in the field as the professor hinted what was on the table right now!

If Ves knew that his complaints led to this result, then he would have kept his head down! After spending the bulk of his time in the war on the Aeon Corona Mission, he was more than tired of dangerous missions!

"The last months have allowed us to confirm that you haven't been promoted above your station. As the bearer of the Darkness Eater, Torchbearer and Golden Mech, it is an enormous waste for Flashlight to keep you behind enemy lines. No, a Larkinson such as you must crave for action! Well, I have

good news for you, for there is a perilous but important priority mission that has a need for a mech designer that isn't averse to

Ves returned a brittle smile. "Oh, I do not wish to be presumptuous. I am not a trained intelligence operative. I barely know how to hit a target with a pistol! I am sure that Flashlight has better, more trustworthy and more reliable mech designers for the job."

"Ah, but that is the thing? We mech designers aren't known for our courage and daring. Our constant need for study and practice has left us with very little time to improve our survival abilities. You appear to be an exception to the rule, no doubt helped by your Larkinson roots!"

"I believe you are overstating my upbringing. Even if I share the same last name as the other Larkinsons, as a norm I have never underwent any of the focusing combat training that my mech pilots cousins have undergone."

This was one of the times where his Larkinson background bit him back in butt! Every Brighter seemed to have the misconception that anyone who bore the last name of Larkinson was trained to fight from birth! Ves enjoyed no such thing, and the only combat training he went through was the basic mandatory training courses he went through when he attended the Rittersberg University of Technology.

The professor practically ran over his objections. "Ah, you do not have to be so modest, Mr. Larkinson. The job that Flashlight needs fulfilling is a very special one. It requires a very good mech designer of Journeyman caliber to undergo significant risks. To send one of our precious Journeymen into danger is far too risky and the higher ups would never allow it. You, however, closely approximates the ability of one yet you are still an Apprentice."

In other words, Flashlight needed someone good but also someone expendable if anything went wrong. Even though Ves considered himself to

be a single step away from advancing to Journeyman, the truth of the matter was that he was still regarded as an Apprentice!

The Bright Republic was already home to so many Apprentice Mech Designers that they didn't really care if thousands of them died. Senator Tovar's opinions made that painfully clear.

In contrast, the difficulty of advancing meant that the number of Journeymen that emerged never satisfied the Republic. Journeymen enjoyed special consideration by the state because each of them was a potential money maker for the economy. The most successful among them designed attractive mechs that sold well throughout the star sector or beyond.

Seeing that all of his attempts to fend off the request fell on flat ears, Ves sighed. "Can you at least explain what this mission entails, sir?"

"Not without receiving your commitment to participate in this mission." The professor shook his head. He reached down from his desk and placed a secure data pad before Ves. "The mission we have in mind for you is fairly sensitive, so we first need to bring you aboard before we can reveal the details to you. Please sign the documents in the pad."

Ves gazed at the secure data pad as if it was a venomous snake poised to bite his hand. He was practically being railroaded in participating in this special mission!

"I believe Flashlight would be better served if someone with the right training and qualifications undergoes their missions rather than an amateur like me. To be honest, much of my earlier accomplishments are highly overstated. The only reason why I got these awards in the first place is because it served the political interests of someone powerful."

Professor Enoch paused and tapped his finger against his desk. The small smirk on his face showed that he wasn't unaware of what Ves was doing right now.

"The Bright Republic is a meritocracy. We have to be. The Vesians, for all of their barbarity, are remarkably effective in motivating their commoners by dangling the hopes of obtaining peerage. As your awards have already shown, the Mech Corps can be generous to their heroes. Flashlight is no less reserved when it comes to rewarding success."

That caught Ves' attention. "What kind of... remuneration is in consideration if I make a good effort?"

"There are a number of benefits should you choose to engage with Flashlight in earnest. As only agents of a certain status within the organization are able to participate in this mission, we will upgrade your status from a conscripted mech designer attached to Flashlight into an external collaborator of our esteemed organization."

"Does that mean I'll formally join Flashlight?"

"Not exactly." The professor shook his head. "The difference between a collaborator and a member of Flashlight is that the latter are direct members while the former are merely people who cooperate with some of our initiatives. The benefit is that we will not expect you to dedicate your entire life to the service, but in turn you won't be able to climb in the service. It's a shame we didn't get to you earlier."

"If I'm upgraded to an external collaborator for Flashlight, what benefits am I entitled to receive?"

"Certain individuals in Flashlight has impressed upon us to take over the role over supervising your mech company from the Ministry of Economic Development. You have to know that this particular ministry is very greedy

about the companies under their benevolent rule. We need to pay a substantial price to pry one of their companies from their grip. Therefore, I'm sorry to say that this particular favor hasn't been fulfilled. If you suddenly become an external collaborator, then the situation is entirely different."

Ves understood. If Ves maintained an ongoing relationship with Flashlight, then it would make sense for his company to come under their supervision. This would allow them to leverage his company to further their interests.

While Ves wasn't pleased at all to have any government entities interfering with his business, he slowly learned over time that all major businesses became subject to government control in some sense. This was the standard in the Bright Republic and much of the Komodo Star Sector.

Therefore, rather than surrendering his company to the bloated Ministry of Economic Development, Ves would rather accept some constraints from Flashlight which was much less inclined to exercise any overt control due to their covert nature.

It would defeat the point of maintaining a veil of secrecy if the LMC became a known front for Flashlight!

"Are there any other rewards for becoming a collaborator? What's in store for me if I perform the mission to Flashlight's satisfaction?"

"We have not fixed any concrete rewards as of yet, but success will firmly validate your perceived value to the service. On top of that, a good performance will also settle the doubts of skeptics and stifle the criticism of naysayers. Winning over the support of the bulk of the service is vital if you wish to cooperate fruitfully with Flashlight as an external collaborator."

All of the claims made by Professor Enoch sounded a bit too vague to Ves' liking. Yet he knew the importance of getting on the good side of Flashlight.

Major Verle did warn him several times that he needed to find a backer in the intelligence agency in order to maintain a firm footing in their company.

Equivocating or refusing this mission would not only displease Professor Enoch and those that favored him, but would also strengthen the voices of his critics within the service!

The picture Professor Enoch painted for Ves all encouraged him to accept this dangerous venture. Though he knew that he'd be able to earn a lot of kudos from Flashlight if he did so, he had no idea of how much danger he'd be subjected to if he said yes!

Ves grumbled inwardly that he really should have been more appreciative of his boring and tedious job as supervisor of the Second Analysis Team. Riding herd on a bunch of entitled mech designers in a quiet place like Frozen Point sounded a lot better than participating in some murky mission in a chaotic place like Bentheim!

#### **Chapter 974 Collaborator**

After thorough consideration, Ves eventually signed the documents. Some of them dealt with disclaimers about how Ves would be on his own if his relationship with Flashlight became exposed. They also bound him under some very strict terms of secrecy.

All of these obligations sounded par for the course for an intelligence agency, so Ves did not feel too uncomfortable with signing them in his name. From now on, Ves became a part of the Flashlight family, albeit only as a distant cousin instead of a son from the main line.

"Excellent!" Professor Enoch said as he put away the data pad. "I'll make sure those documents are processed as quickly as possible. While we don't expect a collaborator like you to act as a spy for us, it would do you good if you could read some manuals on how to keep your connection to us a secret. You can

read them later from your comm. Right now, let us move on to the mission that is in store for a mech designer of your talents."

The man retrieved another data pad and unlocked its encryption before passing it on to Ves.

"Let me give you some background. As a mech designer who founded your company close to Bentheim, I'm sure you are familiar with the complexities of the port system. A small but significant proportion of trade in the Komodo Star Sector flows through the Bentheim System. The main inhabited planet that is simply referred to as Bentheim is additionally home to high density industry. Both of these endowments has led to Bentheim becoming a huge source of revenue for the state."

As Ves began to read the introductory documents, he began to get an inkling of what went on. "Not everyone on Bentheim is pleased that their hard work is used to subsidize the poorer regions of the Bright Republic."

"Indeed. Simpletons." Enoch threw out a contemptuous smile. "Many Bentheimers share this sentiment, but they have always been fairly manageable. The true problem lies with those with harder convictions. The separatists of the Bentheim Liberation Movement has been a thorn in our side for centuries. While rooting out the vermin in our state is ordinarily the responsibility of Spotlight, the Republic's domestic intelligence agency, they do not have the best track record."

"The Bentheim Liberation Movement has never been stamped out. Each time one of their hideouts get destroyed, another one pops up right after." Ves remarked.

"Very much so. While we here at Flashlight are inclined to let Spotlight handle this headache, the imminent Vesian invasion attempt on Bentheim has brought this issue under our mandate. That is because we have obtained

evidence that the separatists are prepared to act in coordination with the Vesians!"

Ves did not show much surprise at this revelation. After all, hadn't the Vandals banded together with the Vesian Revolutionary Front to facilitate their raid on the Detemen System? It could only be said that the Vesians chose well in adopting the same methods!

"The separatists has to now that they are inviting a tiger to deal with the wolf." He said, expressing his own opinion. "Even if the BLM succeeds in dislodging the Bright Republic from Bentheim, the Vesians will probably be worse."

"Well, logic hasn't always been their strong suit." Professor Enoch huffed. "If they are actually clever, then they would have never embarked on this impossible crusade to fight for an independent Bentheim state. In any case, one of the reasons why the BLM is always able to bounce back with a new crop of rebel-owned mechs is because a small number of domestic companies secretly support them by supplying a considerable amount of funding, supplies and war materiel to their cells!"

While Ves already knew that something like this must be happening, Professor Enoch made it sound as if the scale was a lot larger than he thought!

"Why would these mech companies do such a thing? Most mech designers aren't stupid. They should know that throwing off the Bright Republic won't favor them. Once the Vesians come and take over, they'll displace all of the old companies with Brighter roots for newer companies that are unquestionably loyal to the various powers within the Vesia Kingdom."

"As I said earlier, logic is never the BLM's strong suit, and the same goes for the backers who enable them. With regards to the mech companies, some mech designers are native Bentheimers who are naive and misguided enough

to be sympathetic to the cause. Other mech designers are loyal Brighters, but are being incentivized, blackmailed or coerced by the BLM to provide material aid."

The BLM mostly consisted of locals. It was no surprise to Ves that they became very adept at manipulating the mech companies that operated on Bentheim to their advantage.

As Ves read the mission briefing, he understood that his primary job would be to investigate a major mech manufacturer that came to prominence quite recently.

"You suspect this Kadar-Neyvis Group of collaborating with the separatists? Why don't you just send in the Planetary Guard to raid their offices and take their mech designers into custody?"

Professor Enoch's smile grew a little stringent. "That is because the KNG is not to be trifled with despite its relatively short existence. One of their founders is... politically connected."

"Ah." Ves gained some understanding of the sensitive nature of this mission. "Spotlight probably doesn't want to touch the KNG at all, is that right? So they shoved the responsibility of dealing with this potentially dirty laundry to Flashlight instead."

"The KNG came about as a merger between two mech companies founded by two Journeymen. Mrs. Estella Kadar originates from Rittersberg and provides the political connections from the capital to further the company's interests. Mr. Antoine Neyvis is a local Bentheimer from a well-off family and provides the local connections to allow their company thrive on Bentheim. Both of them are alumni of the AUMD and are also married with children."

The union of two Journeyman Mech Designers and their companies sounded like a match made in heaven! It was no wonder that the KNG rose quickly ever since their founders married and their companies merged.

In addition, as graduates of the powerful Ansel University of Mech Design, they were also a part of the school's very cohesive and interconnected alumni network.

All in all, their connections meant that no one wanted to touch them if they could help it! Likely, one of the reasons Ves came into consideration for this mission was that he never attended Ansel in his life.

"Okay, I get it. Somewhat. You've obtained scattered proof that the KNG is involved with the BLM, but you don't have confirmation." Ves summed up. "Therefore, they need to be investigated but not in a way that makes it obvious that the Republic has cause to suspect their loyalty. It states here that the KNG is currently producing a lot of mechs and replacement parts for several Bentheim mech regiments. So they have the support of several Bentheim mech regiments as well!"

What a nightmare to the authorities! With both political, local and military connections, the KNG covered their backs extremely thoroughly!

"While Flashlight is not afraid of exposing any misdeeds at any company no matter how well-connected they are, that does not mean it is wise to barge into their facilities without solid proof. Not only would that unnecessarily draw the ire of their backers, but it would also destabilize Bentheim if it became known that a powerful company like the KNG was in cahoots with the BLM."

"So the important aspect about the mission is that everything has to be done quietly?"

"Indeed." The professor nodded. "Flashlight prefers to operate with tact and discretion. The more our activities are exposed, the harder it is for us to get

anything done. We would like to handle this matter without drawing anyone's attention."

"So how does Flashlight intends to slip me into the KNG to investigate their factories for any signs of misdeeds? Do I need to put on a disguise and pretend to be someone else?"

"Not as such. You are not trained as a spy, so it would be very unwise to employ you in that fashion. No, you will go in with your own identity. The KNG excels at designing and producing both spaceborn mechs and frontline mechs, so much so that they have several standing contracts with a couple of Bentheim mech regiments. Due to the KNG's association with the Mech Corps, it is not unusual for the military to send a liaison to supervise the production of their military mechs."

Ves nodded. Mech regiments all possessed some form of mech production capabilities in their bases. The Flagrant Vandals for example invested a considerable amount of funding and resources into acquiring the Wolf Mother, a gigantic factory ship which was capable of fabricating mechs and other heavy machinery on the move.

However, the military was the military. They didn't particularly excel at mass producing mechs. Domestic companies could do the same job cheaper, faster and at a much greater scale.

In the spirit of specialization, many mech regiments and mech divisions tended to source their mechs from trusted companies. With the KNG's abundant amount of connections, they must have been a great company to entrust with the production of mechs for the military.

That such a company actually maintained dealings with both the Mech Corps and the Bentheim Liberation Movement was exceedingly alarming!

He read through the mission briefing on the data pad and finally came to the section which described the nature of his role. "I see that Flashlight is putting my exploits to good use."

"Indeed. Even if your exact accomplishments are classified, there is no doubt that you have excelled in your duties." The professor said with a touch of mocking. "It wouldn't be out of place for the Mech Corps to take you away from the frontlines and reward you with a cushy job in Bentheim. Your skill in mech design along with the distinctions you've earned both allow us to convince the married pair of Journeymen that you are a legitimate liaison mech designer assigned to the KNG."

"Even so, won't Kadar or Neyvis or anyone else at the company be a bit suspicious about me poking around at their production facilities?"

"The Mech Corps already assigned a liaison at the KNG. That mech designer is already transferring out, so you will merely be filling in someone else's shoes. Besides, that previous liaison happened to be fellow Ansel alumnus, so he was rather overly chummy with the pair."

It sounded stupid for a graduate of the AUMD to supervise the activities of other graduates of that school. Ves had no doubt that someone pulled some strings to arrange such a circumstance.

"Even so, I haven't studied at Ansel so the pair is bound to be vigilant against me, right?"

The professor laughed. "Hahaha! Ah, but that's the beauty of it! We predict they won't put up their guard in your presence at all! First, you are a Larkinson and a war hero who has earned three very distinguished medals. The Golden Mech alone will make them more inclined to build a relationship with you regardless of your lack of connections to Ansel."

Ves understood that. It would be very impolitic for Kadar and Neyvis to disparage the holder of all those awards. The brats at the Second Analysis Team didn't know any better but the two middle-aged Journeymen knew better.

"Secondly, you are as good as a Journeyman but you are still officially an Apprentice. Kadar and Neyvis will still look down on you for that and won't suspect that you are knowledgeable and perceptive enough to pick up minute irregularities that would have tripped a Journeyman."

He agreed with that as well. Ves was very confident of his abilities, and his extensive experience in his own company and with the Vandals made him quite adept at navigating various workshops and production facilities.

"Third, you've spent half a year supervising numerous younger Ansel alumni. Your daily interactions with them haven't gone unnoticed, and while I am aware you do not have the best relationship with them, you have become familiar with their shared traits and identity. The familiarity that you have acquired with interacting with Ansel alumni will serve you well in keeping on the good side of Kadar and Neyvis."

All of these points sounded compelling. While Ves did not feel very enthusiastic about being sent alone into a possibly murky den by himself and with very little assistance.

It made him feel as if he volunteered to become a rat.

#### Chapter 975 Preparing a Role

"I have a question." Ves said. "My job is to leverage the identity of a liaison mech designer of the Mech Corps to investigate the Kadar-Neyvis Group for any subversive activities. Where exactly does the danger come from? Why does Flashlight frame this mission in a way that implies the potential for extreme danger to any mech designer that investigates the company?"

Professor Enoch closed his eyes for a moment. "Good question. This isn't stated in your mission briefing, but we are aware that the Bentheim Liberation Movement has a habit of placing their own men in the mech companies that have caught their interest. If the KNG is secretly collaborating with the separatists, then you will be sure that the both of them will be extremely hostile against those that nose around too much."

"I see."

"In the worst case, the BLM has not only planted their combatants in the KNG's production facilities, but also rigged them up to blow in the event of exposure."

"However, if everything goes well, it won't come down to that, right?"

"Correct. We are merely talking about the worse case scenario. If you do your job well and avoid attracting the attention of the pair or any possible BLM spies, it is sufficient for you to return to your handler once you have gathered sufficient hard proof of any suspect activities."

Sounded simple. Probably wasn't. Oh well. Ves had already signed on to this mission, so it was far too late to turn around.

"I have another question. I'm supposed to investigate for any signs the KNG is collaborating with the BLM, but that's not all, right? It states here that if I found definite proof of such a connection, I'm also responsible for following up on who at the KNG is responsible."

"Indeed." Enoch said and gestured with his hand. "There are many possible explanations why the KNG might possibly be involved with the BLM. It could be a disgruntled manager turning to the BLM out of a perceived grievance. It could be a chief technician that always sympathised with the separatists who is the main insider responsible."

"It could also be someone from the top that is the main driver to the KNG's activities, someone like Antoine Neyvis who is a native from Bentheim." Ves bluntly pointed out the most painful possibility.

"Even so, there are various levels of involvement with the BLM. The extent of KNG's collaboration might merely be a minor incident where they smuggle some parts fabricated off the books in exchange for cash. It could also be a more thorough cooperation where the KNG supplies the BLM with entire mechs. The reason for doing so may rest on a voluntary or involuntary basis. If someone like Mr. Neyvis is in fact involved with the matter, it is important to find out whether he is a genuine sympathiser or an unwilling collaborator who has been blackmailed into working with the BLM."

All of this sounded like a murky swamp, and Ves was about to dive head-first into the dirty water.

"While I'm confident I can ascertain whether there are any irregularities at the KNG's production facilities, I'm less confident about investigating the people responsible. I know mechs and I'm very familiar with their production environment, but if you expect me to be some kind of charmer like in all the spy dramas, then I'm afraid you barked up the wrong tree."

Professor Enoch smiled at Ves in a way that disregarded what he just said. "Don't worry, Mr. Larkinson. A handler and support team will be backing you up during the mission. If you encounter any difficulties during your investigation, just tell your handler. While liaisons are usually sent in alone, know that you are not alone in your endeavors. The entirety of Flashlight is backing you up."

"The documents I signed earlier stated that only holds as long as my true relationship with Flashlight remains a secret. If my connection with you ever comes to light, it will be as if I never existed in your eyes!"

"That's how the game is played, Mr. Larkinson. You shouldn't get in bed with Flashlight if you can't keep a secret. My advice? Don't let yourself be exposed! If Kadar or Neyvis ever has cause to suspect your identity, you should admit to being an agent of the Mech Corps. At no point are you ever allowed to reveal that you have been sent by Flashlight, is that clear?"

"Understood, professor." Ves replied in a resigned tone.

After his agreement and initial briefing, Ves quietly put down his responsibilities as the supervisor of the Second Analysis Team without saying farewell to his subordinates.

Even if he found the job to be very tedious, he would miss the safety it afforded him. While being sent to Bentheim wasn't equivalent to being sent to the frontlines, Flashlight possessed a high degree of confidence that the Vesians would be coming!

With the Vesians breaking through from the outside and the Bentheim Liberation Movement wreaking havoc from the inside, it would be like the chaos and anarchy at Detemen IV all over again!

After a few days of hasty instruction and preparation, Ves boarded a shuttle that brought him out of Frozen Point. The shuttle left Robach VI and spent a fair amount of time to slip him back to the military space station on Robach III whereupon Ves 'returned to the system', as it were.

It was as if the Mech Corps never let go of Ves in the first place.

Wearing his unremarkable work uniform devoid of any glaring ribbons and medals, he quietly boarded a generic-looking military supply ship that joined a convoy that cut its way through the Green Nebula region with Bentheim as the end destination.

A large amount of military convoys made their way to Bentheim every day, so this one didn't attract any attention at all. To those who investigated his

movements, it would simply appear that Ves spent some in a hidden base of the Mech Corps before popping back into public to take up his new duties as a military liaison to the Kadar-Neyvis Group.

However, there was something different about the ship that Ves was on right now. While she was a legitimate supply ship, Flashlight actually fudged her internal structure in order to sneak in a hidden compartment.

It was there that Ves met the intelligence officer responsible for supervising his infiltration attempt.

A young but impeccably-groomed man stood up from his terminal and approached Ves for a brief handshake. "I am Leland Toll. I'll be your case officer for this mission. I'm aware of your identity and some of your capabilities, and I know that you aren't familiar with our tradecraft. That's okay. It's my responsibility to worry about the spy matters so you don't have to. For now, you are primarily needed for your competence in mech design."

"Is Leland Toll even your real name?"

The man smiled at Ves in a familiar mocking fashion. "Names are merely labels. While it is wise of you to doubt every scrap of information you get your hands on, that is not what is asked of you for this mission. If you want to grow close to Mrs. Kadar and Mr. Neyvis, you will have to restrain your suspicious impulses."

That was easier said than done, Ves inwardly muttered. "So what's in store for me here?"

"During the remainder of our journey to Bentheim, you'll visit this secret compartment every day for a couple of hours in order to prepare you for your role. You will assume your role immediately upon arrival at Bentheim."

"That's not a lot of time."

"As I've said, Ves, we don't want you to be a spy." Leland repeated. "We want to convince everyone that you are just a mech designer, and what better way to sell this story by presenting a version of you that's the truth? Even so, you will need to be brought up to speed with some of the tools and protocols that we'll be using on your mission. In addition, I want you to read through and memorize the names and pertinent facts on not only the two mech designers presiding over the KNG, but every other mech designer, manager, chief technician and so on. Any of them may be the principal culprit that has subverted the KNG."

Ves nodded in understanding. While Flashlight hoped that the collusion within the Kadar-Neyvis Group only extended to a middle manager type, Ves had a suspicion that the rot extended a lot higher than that.

While he did not possess any solid proof that told him so, his own experience as the founder and CEO of the LMC told him that mech designers cared a lot about their production facilities. While not every mech designer deigned to fabricate a mech by hand like Ves regularly did, they were nonetheless control freaks when it came to running a smooth fabrication operation!

Kadar and Neyvis both appeared to be very competent mech designers. No one incompetent ever advanced to Journeymen. This led Ves to believe that they wouldn't be so sloppy and neglectful when it came to supervising the production aspect of their company.

In the next week or so, the military convoy slowly meandered its way through the Green Nebula region. This time, the convoy didn't take the long way but made a fairly direct passage to the Bentheim System.

Evidently, this critical port system urgently required a lot of supplies.

During this time, Ves got up to speed on various aspects that Leland wanted to instill in him, though time was far too short to teach him everything.

He familiarized with the names, faces and backgrounds of the key personnel within the KNG.

He received some instructions on how to use the small spy gadgets that Flashlight sometimes employed.

He learned some methods and protocol that seemed trivial but was at least easy for Ves to pick up.

"A badly trained spy is worse than an untrained spy like you." Leland remarked. "Right now, you are still pure in this regard so you have that authentic quality that makes it hard for others to pick up your connection to Flashlight. If we attempted to instill you with some of our actual methods, you simply don't have the training and experience to hide the signs."

While Ves understood this logic, he still felt as if he was being dumped right in the middle of potentially hostile terrain with barely any precautions!

"Will I at least be entitled to carry a weapon to defend myself?"

Leland nodded and pulled out a drawer holding a fairly boring-looking holstered pistol. "Even a liaison mech designer of the Mech Corps carries a sidearm as a rule. We've prepared a modified high-performance laser pistol for you that is disguised as a stand-issue model of the Mech Corps. It can help you in a pinch, but don't mistake it for a fully-fledged assault weapon."

"Can I get anything else? A shield generator perhaps?"

That caused the intelligence officer to chuckle. "I wish. We aren't that flush for funding. Your role as a liaison for the Mech Corps is intended to reinforce the impression that you are exempted from any hazardous duties closer to the war theater. When you are on Bentheim, you should show the appropriate amount of apprehension towards the uncertainties about the war in the news, but no more. Above all else, Bentheim is friendly territory, and your behavior should reflect that belief."

Ves was indeed somewhat familiar with Bentheim. That reminded him of something. "Am I allowed to make use of my own connections on Bentheim while I'm there?"

"Officially, a mech designer in the service of the Mech Corps is strictly expected to dedicate themselves to their primary responsibilities. Even if you have friends on Bentheim or own a company that has a presence there, you shouldn't mix official duties with private interests."

The way Leland said those words seemed to invite an opening. "I think there's a caveat there."

"Very perceptive of you. In practice, many mech designers in the same position are regularly found to be... lax regarding this regulation. Your supposed 'cushy' job at Bentheim also affords you more allowances than normal. How you choose to conduct yourself in light of this is up to you. Just remember that you need to sell your role to the KNG."

#### Chapter 976 Old Friend

As Leland brought him up to speed on various matters related to the KNG, the military convoy emerged in the Bentheim System faster than he thought. After undergoing a thorough security inspection that nevertheless completely missed the secret compartment where Leland hid, the supply ship finally reached a military space station.

Ves sat debarked from the ship with a hovering luggage coffer while wearing his service uniform. As a liaison officer, he was tasked with the duty of representing the interests of the Mech Corps at the Kadar-Neyvis Group.

He did not come as part of a fighting unit like before with the Vandals. Therefore, he constantly needed to dress as a representative befitting the dignity of the Mech Corps, which meant he wore his service uniform with his awards in ribbon form.

In this case, he wore them on his chest in the form of a ribbon rack.

Now that wasn't anything unusual. Many liaisons mech designers carried something of the sort. Careerists especially tended to accumulate a fair amount of campaign, service and training awards.

Ves even figured that many of them were actually invented by mech designers for the sole purpose of padding a military mech designer's chest! This not only allowed them to stand out from the conscripts, but also made them look less pathetic when standing next to mech pilots.

Of course, in the case of Ves, his three top awards looked very out of place to a mech designer like him. As soon as he stepped aboard the public area of the military space station, those that glanced at him couldn't help but rub their eyes or question their judgement.

"Darkness Eater? Torchbearer? On a mech designer of all people?!"

"That's the Golden Mech! How can that be?! He's too young! And there's been no word of an award ceremony!"

He knew he would elicit this kind of reaction, though he found the servicemen in transit to be a bit more expressive in their astonishment than he expected. Still, this time Ves aimed to achieve this kind of reaction.

The more astonishment he received, the more attention he drew!

The more attention he drew, the higher his public profile!

Ves smirked at the thought of how he would spend his time as a liaison on Bentheim. "Private interests shouldn't interfere with public duty, but who's there to stop me this time?"

Ordinarily, a liaison mech designer stationed on Bentheim enjoyed very loose supervision. As long as the military mechs came out from the manufacturing

complexes alright, the higher ups didn't tend to care too much how they spent their time.

"The entire purpose of the job of liaison mech designer is to pull mech designers from the frontlines so that they can spend their time in comfort and leisure far away from the action."

Just like the mech designers assigned to the analysis teams at Frozen Point, many mech designers with promise or connections aimed for these low-risk positions.

Each of them would be able to ride out the war in almost complete safety while still being able to claim they served in the war!

Ves shook his head at the thought that he worked hard to be just like them once.

While the role he adopted ostensibly spared him from the ravages of war, who truly knew how safe it was at Bentheim these days? In addition, he needed to snoop around the production facilities of the KNG. If the large mech manufacturer possessed no ties with the Bentheim Liberation Movement, then nothing would happen.

The dangerous moments came if they did, for Ves doubted that the BLM would allow any nosy mech designers like him to find out anything amiss.

In the end, he was merely acting out a role, which was a short distance away from embodying it. The only thing on his mind right now was how he could leverage this temporary role to his own advantage.

Since he wasn't really answering to anyone except Leland this time, he figured he could get away with a lot more than the average liaison on official duty.

To that end, his first goal was to raise his public profile and become a recognized figure in the public sphere. Right now, there was no better way to do so than appearing in public! The noteworthiness of his three top awards would do the rest!

Already, the visitors of the space station started to consult their comms. They began to ask around about any news regarding his exploits or looked up his record to confirm what they saw!

If they did look him up, they would see a very condensed record with very few details.

Yet that was enough! The combination of his Larkinson name, his top awards and his association with the 6th Flagrant Vandals should be enough to send tongues wagging!

As he calmly waited for the next shuttle ride to the surface, a couple of drafted mech designers on leave summed up the courage to approach him. "Sir? Could you tell us how you earned your Golden Mech? I thought only Senior Mech Designers won this medal!"

Ves smiled at them. They happened to be cute female mech designers. "I am not at liberty to say. You know how it goes. Classified and all."

"Oh, how exciting!" They giggled. His answer raised his mystique and sparked their interest even further. "Can you please tell us anything? How was the frontier? Why did the Mech Corps send you all the way out there?"

"I'm sorry, but to say anything about it would violate my obligations to keep everything a secret. My ride is just coming up. Good day, ladies."

A short interaction like that would be enough to spread more gossip around. While Ves was tempted to invent some stories about his travails in the frontier, it wouldn't do to skirt his vows of secrecy.

The shuttle ride brought him down to one of the many military bases on the surface of Bentheim. From there, he reported to his nominal superior, some bureaucratic officer who was actually a plant from Flashlight.

The meeting went short as the only purpose of Ves' arrival was to formally receive his new orders and get all of his administration in order.

After that, the Mech Corps let him off his leash. He smiled as he exited the interior of base and stepped out to a shuttle parking zone. He boarded a small armored shuttle and instead of heading to the KNG, he instead requested the shuttle pilot to bring him to the offices of Bollinger's Mechs!

"Pardon me? The shuttle pilot turned around his head and asked. "Mr. Larkinson, according to your itinerary you should be heading to the headquarters of the Kadar-Neyvis Group! Nowhere in the schedule does it state that you have to head to Bollinger's Mechs!"

Ves waved aside the pilot's concern. "Don't ask too many questions. I'm a busy mech designer. Not everything is put into the schedule, don't you know that? Bring me to Bollinger's Mech in downtown Dorum and better make it quick!"

His demeanor and imperious tone brook no refusal. Even if the shuttle pilot still had questions, he didn't dare to voice them, especially when word of Ves' prestigious decorations already spread through the military gossip network!

The armored shuttle smoothly lifted off the landing pad and flew to downtown Dorum, the capital of Bentheim and the most densely-populated city on the planet.

As he looked out of the view ports, Ves noted a bit fewer air traffic than before. Much fewer aircars flew around these days, but military shuttles and aerial mechs began to impose a heavier presence on the surface, depressing the freewheeling commerce that previously defined the planet.

"If Bentheim already looks depressing from here, who knows how awful the actual economic outlook has become." He muttered to himself.

After a quiet transit, the shuttle landed in the landing pad reserved for visitors to the nearby offices. The shuttle would keep waiting here for his next appointment, so Ves did not have to instruct anything to the pilot as he stepped out and faced the familiar facade of Marcella's downtown office.

Marcella owned several properties. The one at the outskirts of Dorum was where she stored and delivered her products to customers dropping by in person. The property here formed the front office where she received her customers and did most of her sales work.

As far as he knew, Marcella was a savvy mech broker who operated multiple lines of businesses. Besides Bollinger's Mechs which was a brokerage that mainly sold individual and small batches of mechs directly to customers, she also maintained a parent company called Bollinger Mech Trade. It mainly dealt with establishing export contracts and selling larger batches of mechs to bigger clients, though their high value made such transactions very infrequent.

Technically, Bollinger Mech Trade possessed a five percent stake in the Living Mech Corporation. However, Marcella Bollinger was the founder and owner of Bollinger Mech Trade, so in effect the legal distinction between person and company was meaningless.

Even though Ves hadn't come with an invitation, the receptionist took one glance at Ves and recognized his face. "Mr. Larkinson! What brings you here? Are you here on behalf of the LMC or the Mech Corps?"

He couldn't fault her confusion as he came in his mech designer uniform.

"Let's say I'm her for a personal visit. The military has nothing to do with my visit this time."

"Very well. I'll call ahead and tell Marcella to expect you. You already have a standing invitation to meet with her whenever she's in her office!"

He entered an elevator which brought him to the top office where Bollinger didn't appear to have changed much since the last time he talked to her. Life as an injured, retired veteran mech pilot softened her up a little, though her stocky physique and artificial limbs still conveyed her military roots.

As for Ves, he hadn't grown taller or bigger. He even looked a little smoother as his previous gene optimization treatments elevated his physical appearance closer to the human ideal.

Nonetheless, the ensemble of his bearing, his service uniform and the decorations plastered on it completely transformed him in Marcella's perspective.

"Ves! You grew up!" She remarked with astonishment and rose up from her seat. "I've heard word about a mech designer bearing combat awards but I thought it was a hoax!"

"They're very much real." He smiled back as he walked close to shake her hand with a confident grip. "It's good to see you again after all this time, old friend."

She snorted. "I'm not that old yet even if I've lived through the last war."

The handshake completed the change in impression in her mind. Ves was no longer a young, inexperienced mech designer who barely ventured out of the Bentheim region anymore.

Now, even though only a couple of years went by, he already carried the demeanor of a veteran and someone who experienced what the wider galaxy had to offer.

"So, not to pry or anything, but are you even allowed to visit me? A man in uniform like you doesn't look like you're on leave."

"It's okay. As long as I don't take too long, I don't think anyone will mind." Ves dismissed her concerns. If there was anything he learned in his time with the Vandals, it was that he could get away with a lot more than he ought to as long as he had the prestige to back it up. "Let's talk about my business. Please brief me how the LMC is doing right nowadays."

"Do you want the short version or the long version?"

"Short."

"Well, the short version is that the Bright Republic's economy is in a depression. Prices of everything have risen, particularly that of raw materials. The needs of the military take precedence over the needs of the private market, so most mech manufacturers have seen their profit margins dwindle."

"I've also heard about debt piling up at the LMC. What is going on with that?"

Marcella smiled sardonically at Ves. "It's the new shareholder that directly and indirectly have taken over the board. The TNC Holding Group now owns 21 percent of the LMC's shares, but their actual influence is much greater. It's a front for the Ministry of Economic Development."

"Damn. So it happened already." Ves sighed.

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Chapter 977

"WHAT?!" Ves erupted . "The Ministry of Economic Development bestowed 21 percent of the LMC's shares to the TNC Holding Group in exchange for permits and approval!?"

"Those permits aren't worthless . " Marcella told him . "In fact, every large mech manufacturer with ambitions to sell a large volume of mechs per year

needs to have the consent of the Bright Republic . Any company that doesn't play along will be stymied by the various government institutions that issue those permits and approvals . "

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"The LMC scaled up much faster than I anticipated . I always intended to inform you, but you were already off before I knew it . No matter . Even if you were still around, you'd surrender to the inevitable . Besides, it's not as if they paid for your shares for nothing . That girl Calsie you put up as your representative managed to negotiate a sum of around 13 billion credits in exchange for 21 percent of your shares to the LMC . For now, that money is stored in a trust fund in your name . "

Ves blew his top off . "What kind of biased evaluation is that?! The LMC may not have been around for long, but a fifth of my company is worth a lot more than 13 billion credits in my judgement!"

"The auditors in the employ of the Ministry of Economic Development don't think so . Are you questioning their judgement?" She sent him a deprecating smile .

Properly speaking, MinEcDev should have hired impartial auditors to determine the worth of the shares of the LMC . Yet according to Marcella, the ministry set its own rules so whatever it did was absolutely legal!

It was utter nonsense of course!

Using their own people to inspect the finances of the LMC in order to determine how much they should pay for its shares was like a kid pointing to a toy and saying that it's worth nothing so that he could get to play with it for free!

"What a scummy ministry . " Ves muttered . "If they're already like this at the start, I am dreading what I'll hear next . "

They moved on to the current share structure of the LMC . Marcella summoned up a flat projection that listed the current shareholders of the LMC to this date .

VES LARKINSON: 49 percent .

LARKINSON ESTATE: 25 percent .

TNC HOLDING GROUP: 21 percent .

BOLLINGER MECH TRADE: 5 percent .

Overall, the front for the Ministry of Economic Development wrangled just enough shares out of his hands to lose absolute control over his company .

He didn't think that was a coincidence .

"Why leave me with 49 percent?"

"If the ministry takes any more, you'd be less invested in your own company .

" The mech broker explained . "Who won't say you'll neglect the LMC and start up a new company instead? The purpose of the MinEcDev isn't to drive you away, but to bind you and your company to the state . Every company that has gained some influence in the economy is a tool to enhance the power and prosperity of the Republic . They don't want this tool to fall into other people's hands . "

Marcella briefly explained the rationale behind this policy of taking a substantial minority stake in major companies . Not only did the Bright Republic wanted to keep the company in their clutches and prevent them from transferring their headquarters to another state, they also wanted to rein in the absolute control of the founders of the company .

"The Bright Republic isn't the exception here . " She said . "Many states have adopted similar industrial policies at the higher level . The states don't care about startups and small businesses within their borders . However, it is

critically irresponsible to let their larger companies do what they want . Companies pursue their own interests and the interests of their CEOs and shareholders . Sometimes, those interests conflict with the interests of the state . "

Ves understood the logic of the inherent solution adopted by the states . Even if he didn't entirely agree with them in his position as a business leader, he could see why the states did not wish to be at the mercy of the whims of the companies within their borders .

"You can't fight against the Republic on this point, Ves . " Marcella warned him . "Many have tried and failed . Free market economies are out of vogue these days . "

They moved on to the role of the TNC Holding Group . Even though only a portion of the members of the board directly represented their interests, the other members actually deferred to the TNC and in extension the Ministry of Economic Development!

As someone who took liberties with power himself, Ves knew that the Ministry of Economic Development was throwing their weight around, making it difficult for others to refuse their demands .

According to Marcella, MinEcDev wielded a substantial amount of power in shaping the Republic's economy! Anyone who didn't play ball with them would find their business environment constrained while the conditions of their competitors eased up . In that fashion, MinEcDev's policy of holding only a minor say in matters within the company effectively morphed into a voice that couldn't be ignored .

Ves glowered at the description of the infamous ministry . While he heard some things about their overbearingness in the mech industry, he didn't think

they took so many liberties and that his company would fall within their clutches so soon after he founded his company .

"It's actually remarkable how fast they moved to acquire a stake in your company . " Marcella half-complimented him . "That means they are paying special attention to you . MinEcDev sees promise in your career prospects and remain hopeful about the LMC's growth trajectory . To that end, they pushed aggressively to expand the Mech Nursery's production capacity . "

"And thereby piling mountains of debt on the LMC's balance sheet . "

"That as well . " Marcella smiled sardonically at him . "MinEcDev is making a gamble that sales of the LMC's silver label mechs will continue to grow in volume and popularity over time . "

"From what it sounds like, they've gambled and lost . "

"Not entirely . The operation is still profitable, just less so than usual . The main problem is that MinEcDev never expected the ongoing war to impact Bentheim so directly . With the Vesians encroaching on the Bentheim region, many trade routes are cut off and the supply of raw materials has decreased . Along with the economic depression, it costs significantly more to produce the same mechs . "

"Have prices of mechs risen as well? A lot of mech companies ought to have gone out of business by now . "

"Only the small players . The bigger, more established mech manufacturers with strong financial muscle can easily bear the temporary difficulties . They're led by far-sighted CEOs and mech designers who have accumulated an abundant war chest during the good times . Not only have they snapped up some of the more attractive failing businesses, they're also outright selling mechs at no profit in order to maintain and expand their market share!"

Ves really had to hand it to the bigger players . They certainly knew how to exploit this crisis, especially when they predicted years or even decades ago .

The conduct of the larger and more established mech companies meant that it was completely unviable for the smaller players who struggled with rising production costs to jack up the prices of their own products .

"The bigger fish are increasing the pressure on the smaller fish . " He remarked in an exasperated tone . "Are they deliberately trying to drive the smaller mech companies out of business?"

"Yup . And before you ask, the Ministry of Economic Development not only condones their behavior, but actively encourages it . In their perspective, any mech company that succumbs to a little difficulty like this does not deserve to stay in business . "

"Well, there's a problem there . Companies that fall into the middle like mine are small enough to be affected by the market actions of the bigger players, but also large enough for them to obtain a minority stake! Isn't there an inherent contradiction there? Shouldn't they lend a hand to the LMC or something to tide it over?"

Marcella shrugged . "MinEcDev is so large and possesses a minority stake in thousands of companies across multiple industries . Just because they are invested in the LMC doesn't mean it cares for the company to the point it will stop it from failing . Companies fail all the time . The officials at the ministry aren't inclined to subsidize failure . However, that doesn't stop them from profiting off the successes of the companies in their sphere of influence . "

It all sounded delightfully opportunistic on the part of the ministry . Ves couldn't help but laugh a bit helplessly at their shrewdness . If companies under their supervision went bust, then all they lost was other people's tax

money . Yet if some of them went on to enjoy an explosively growth, then they stood to rake in a lot of money that falls directly under their control!

"The way you paint the ministry makes it sound as if it's a giant patronage center . " Ves remarked .

"Oh, the Bright Republic is fairly moderate in that regard . " She idly dismissed his concerns . "There are states where the equivalent government institutions have a much lighter touch, but there are even more states where the government is much more involved with their own companies . However, you have to remember that the most precious asset of a mech company are their leading mech designers . MinEcDev may want to push you around, but they don't dare to drive you away . "

Even if he'd be enormously disadvantaged for doing so, as a last resort Ves could always pack his bags and emigrate to another state .

He'd have to start over again, though, and compete in a completely unfamiliar market environment that usually favored their domestic producers over foreigners .

Even if his second company grew successful again, he'd still have to deal with the same government interference all over again, putting him back to square one .

"Alright, alright, I get it . It's not a good idea to fight against the Ministry of Economic Development at this point . " He concluded . "Let's move on, then . So the company's in debt and profit margins are slumping . How are our mech sales, by the way?"

"There's at least some good news there, Ves . While the bronze label mechs aren't being made anymore because there's no profit to be gained, sales of the silver label mechs are actually stable and have steadily grown over time

as more mech pilots begin to appreciate them . The LMC sells two very good products, and word of mouth has continued to grow . "

Marcella handed over a data pad that described the overall sales patterns for his two main mech models .

The Blackbeak offensive knight mech model earned a reputation for being hardy, dependable and mobile enough among the mercenary community .

The Crystal Lord on the other hand became a small hit among well-off mech pilots specialized in rifleman mechs .

Due to the war, sales of both models in the domestic market rose steadily . Even though the mercenary corps and other outfits operating in the Bright Republic didn't fight at the frontlines, they were still tasked with protecting mines and production facilities not important or strategic enough to warrant attention from the Mech Corps .

These mercenary corps therefore experienced sporadic fighting against the Mech Legion or some of the more daring Vesian mercenary corps contracted to raid Brighter properties .

Both the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord models acquitted themselves well in actual combat . The mostly positive combat footage spread around in the galactic net continued to raise people's interest, though their premium price tags scared most potential buyers away .

The overall decrease in quality that Marcella briefly touched upon also started to discourage some buyers . Mechs produced later exhibited a notable difference in quality compared to the LMC's earlier products .

The toadies from the TNC Holding Group constantly pushed to expand the LMC's production volume and speed at the detriment of quality .

"Overall, the situation of the LMC could be worse . " Marcella said in a lackadaisical manner, as if Ves was making too big of a deal out of the ministry's shenanigans . "The key takeaway here is that the LMC has managed to stay above water under the economic malaise . Although the government has tasked the company with allocating several production lines towards the producing military supplies at cost prices, at least you have a company to return to after the war . Many mech designers don't enjoy that particular luxury . "

In other words, Ves should count his luck . The problem was that he didn't feel so fortunate .

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Chapter 978

His meeting with Marcella stretched out longer than Ves anticipated .

As Marcella was in control of five percent of the shares of the LMC and had a representative on the board, she was fully up to speed with its circumstances .

Ves listened and commented to her descriptions but overall he saw little need to issue new instructions .

"With Calsie, your grandfather and me in control of the majority of the shares, we have enough power to resist the worst excesses of the Ministry of Economic Development . None of us want the company to falter . "

"That's good to hear . How is Calsie doing as interim CEO by the way? I've heard that she's been holding the fort to an extent . "

"It's difficult to say . " Marcella replied . "She has her own ideas on company policy . However, she's done an honest job adhering to your interests where it matters . The only problem is that everyone considers her a pushover, so she

isn't able to wield as much authority as you . She clearly doesn't have the chops to be the leader of a multibillion credit mech company . "

"The former is more important than the latter to me . Besides, as long as everyone else is doing an adequate job, the CEO doesn't really need to be an expert . If I put a more experienced executive at the helm, I risk inviting someone else's agent . I can't afford to take the risk of letting another influence gain an inroad into my own company . " He said .

"That's really paranoid of you, you know . Why not let someone from the Larkinson Estate take charge instead?"

"The Larkinsons look out for the Larkinsons . "

"You're a Larkinson as well . "

"I am my own man . "

That said a lot about Ves . Marcella declined to comment on that any further, as this was something personal between Ves and the Larkinsons .

Overall, even if it took a lot more time than anticipated, Ves learned enough about the company to reassure him somewhat of its continued existence even in his absence .

Marcella pressed the back of her hand against her forehead in a dramatic fashion . "I've worked very hard to keep the LMC's mech sales going, you know! The Bright Republic's mech market can only buy up so many expensive silver label mechs a month . I've constantly had to search for foreign partners in foreign states to export the rest of our mechs to . Word of mouth travels slower outside the Republic, and your mechs face much stiffer competition there . Still, I've managed to close enough deals to offload the bulk of the LMC's direct production to foreign states . "

"I appreciate your effort, but don't think I'm aware of the real reason why you're doing so!" Ves chuckled . "You don't want your five percent stake in the LMC to become worthless . When the LMC prospers, so do you . It's in your best interest to help my company grow . "

For now, Ves laid aside the fortunes of the LMC to the side . While he was tempted to take the reins again, his official duties made it highly improper to do so . In addition, with the Ministry of Economic Development continuing to exert their influence on the company, it wasn't as if anything Ves tried to do would stick .

He recognized that the only way to rid the LMC of this scummy ministry's influence was to replace it with a better government institution .

His current mission on behalf of Flashlight might pave the way for that if he performed up to their satisfaction . Ves should get a move on to performing his actual duties as opposed to spending time in Marcella's office .

That didn't mean he had no way of influencing the fortunes of the LMC while he was working for Flashlight, though . A devious light entered his eyes .

"Right now, I've been pulled from my previous assignment . " He explained . "The Mech Corps has seen fit to turn me into a liaison mech designer for the Kadar-Neyvis Group . "

Marcella looked impressed . "From the medals you've earned, there's no doubt you've earned a break . As for the KNG, that's a rising star among the local mech companies! They're substantially more developed than the LMC and they're continuing to rise under the leadership of their two Journeyman mech designers . I think it's a really good opportunity for you to learn the tricks of the trade from them if you're assigned to babysit the production of their military mechs . "

"I intend to do more than that . " Ves smiled . "The important thing here is that I'll be showing up in public in my current appearance from time to time . Tell me, how will the public respond when they see me like this?"

He tapped his ribbon rack for emphasis . There was no way Marcella missed the message .

"Darkness Eater, Torchbearer, Golden Mech, War Saint, Frontier Service Medal, Mech Corps Commendation... you sure know how to stand out, Ves . I can see the news portals and the discussion forums on the galactic net going wild for a time . " She snorted with amusement .

Ves smirked . "Let's capitalize on that . While I'm not allowed to shill for my company while I'm in the service, just showing up in public from time to time will be sufficient to arouse everyone's interests . I want you and the LMC to take advantage of all of that attention and help my company sell more mechs!"

Her eyes gleamed . "What a great idea! Although I don't expect the interest in your possible exploits to last, the LMC will surely be able to leverage your reputation to increase their sales in the domestic market! It will even have a ripple effect on your foreign sales, though not as directly . "

Both of them began to scheme how they could turn his dashing appearances into a short and long-term marketing advantage . The initial boost in interest would be the biggest, but as long as Ves didn't tarnish his reputation, his company would definitely continue to stand out against the competition by the mere fact that it was founded and led by a war hero!

Marcella showed some misgivings, however . "I don't disagree with you Ves, but don't think you are capitalizing on your elevated status a bit too blatantly? Earning those distinctions is a personal honor . I don't think the Mech Corps intended to give them to you just so you can profiteer off the good

associations those medals carry . All the other honorable bearers of the Darkness Eater will resent you for being so shameless . "

"Every businessman has to learn how to be shameless . " Ves casually dismissed her concerns . "I'm no different than the winning athletes of the Rimward Games showing up in commercials to shill for various products . "

"I don't think the Mech Corps will appreciate some of their prestigious awards being devolved into devices for commercial gain . "

"Then they shouldn't have awarded them to a business owner like me in the first place . "

"I think I understand now why the Mech Corps almost never awards their more prestigious medals to mech designers . "

Nevertheless, the marketing push concocted by Ves and Marcella benefited her substantially, so she did not object too strongly . In the face of naked commercial interest, personal honor no longer became a concern .

After shaking their hands to conclude this new arrangement, Ves asked one more thing before he bid her goodbye .

"By the way, you seem to be a little familiar with the KNG . Can you tell me more about the company I'm about to liase with on behalf of the Mech Corps?"

"Sure . " As an insider in the Bentheim mech industry, she knew almost all of the larger players . "The KNG has a rich mech catalog in both spaceborn mechs and frontline mechs . Kadar specializes in designing spaceborn mechs while Neyvis excels in designing frontline mechs . The KNG therefore has a strong presence in the lower end of the mech market . They have a strong cross-border presence as well, but they still derive most of their sales from the domestic market . "

The KNG differed from the LMC in that their pair of Journeyman Mech Designers were good enough to compete directly against the mainstream mech models in some of the major market segments . While the mainstream mech models always won out slightly in terms of price to performance ratio, mechs designed by locals were a bit more suitable for use in practical terms .

Marcella showed him some of their publicly disclosed figures . "This is where the KNG's mechs excel at . Their mechs are easier on the pocket books compared to the well-engineered mainstream mech models that are lot more finicky to maintain and troublesome to repair . "

This was the predominant business model among mech manufacturing companies with the chops to compete directly against the popular mech models . While they still couldn't beat the sheer design talent and insane level of optimization in the hands of the big trans-galactic enterprises, their products nevertheless didn't entirely fit the local circumstances .

The disparity between a mech designed by an Apprentice and a mainstream mech model was quite big . The gap in performance when everything else was equal made it so that Apprentices couldn't charge the same price for their inferior products .

A Journeyman on the other hand possessed the ability to design a mech where the performance gap narrowed to a small enough margin that many customers could be persuaded to purchase local products instead . Of course, it took savvy marketing, a trusted brand and good performance in the field to be able to snatch up a significant amount of market share in multiple segments .

"It sounds as if the KNG are doing well for themselves . "

"Not exactly . " Marcella shook her head . "Their foundation is strong, but the adverse business climate that has swept over Bentheim affected the KNG much more severely than your LMC . Do you know why?"

It took a moment for Ves to recognize the crucial difference . "The LMC is a lot smaller, but my company mainly sells premium mechs with high profit margins! Even if production costs have risen lately, my company can still absorb the pain by giving up some of the profit . The KNG on the other hand has much less room for maneuver . "

"Exactly . I mentioned earlier that the KNG mainly services the lower end of the mech market . Their annual production volume is a lot larger than that of the LMC, but the profits of each mech sale is no more than one to three million credits for their cheaper offerings . A twenty percent increase in the cost of production can easily wipe out those razor-thin profit margins . "

"How has the KNG responded?"

"They're aiming to maintain their market share and market presence by selling their mechs at a loss . Keeping their manufacturing complexes operating at full capacity also allows them to retain their favorable bulk contracts with material suppliers as well as retain their large body of trained and loyal fabricators and mech technicians . All told, they are losing up to a million credits for each mech sold!"

Ves nonetheless widened his eyes . "Are they even allowed to do that, Marcella?! How can they even sustain such a loss-making venture!"

"Well, there's rumors that someone in Rittersberg is very friendly towards the KNG . The Ministry of Economic Development has a good relationship with Mrs . Kadar from what I've been told . MinEcDev has even offered to help the KNG absorb their losses with subsidies and interest-free loans . "

Ves wanted to vomit when he heard that . The disparity in treatment towards the LMC and the KNG couldn't be more stark!

"Also, Mr . Neyvis has the backing of his family which owns a long-standing company in Bentheim, so the KNG is not at risk of running out of funds anytime soon . The calculus of the company is to ride out the war and make everything back when they capitalize on the decreased competition and recovering market prospects . "

Even so, there was no way the Kadar-Neyvis Group could get away with this much without the advantages bestowed by their connections!

Ves always believed that government and business shouldn't mix, but evidently the KNG found a way to make that work!

Still, this entire situation sounded a bit too fishy . Selling mechs at a loss would definitely be a huge burden to the KNG regardless of all the help they received . Such a desperate circumstance may make them vulnerable to certain solicitations, perhaps even from the BLM . . .

## Chapter 979

The armored shuttle finally touched down on the landing pad next to the headquarters of one of Bentheim's large mech manufacturers . The Kadar-Neyvis Group may not be the most established mech company on the planet, but everyone considered it to be on the rise .

This was mainly due to the rare fact that the KNG was led by two married Journeyman Mech Designers . While marriage between mech designers wasn't all that uncommon, it took a rare set of conditions to make two Journeyman, already not that numerous, fall in love and set the conditions to maintain a harmonious personal, business and design relationship .

That Mrs . Kadar and Mr . Nevis made their union work without a hitch made for a very encouraging sign for their business prospects .

The headquarters of KNG was located in downtown Dorum like many other notable mech companies . While companies fought hard to open and maintain an office building in the center of the city, a company as renowned like the KNG shouldn't have any problems setting up shop in the most coveted areas of the capital city .

The KNG even managed to place their headquarters at Mech Designer Row, a narrow but highly coveted city district with land prices that went through the roof! Mech Designer Row's prime position close to several important government institutions, convention centers, mass transit, cultural attractions, shops and more made it into an extremely attractive piece of real estate .

For example, the Old Commercial District next door hosted one of Bosworth's big mech show room . Ves remembered that he visited Bosworth's a long time ago to witness a mastercrafted copy of the Caesar Augustus design .

"It would be nice if my products entered Bosworth's product listing one day . "

The big mech wholesaler, distributor and seller built up an expansive commercial network throughout the third-rate states of the Komodo Star Sector .

A company like Bosworth's likely didn't put a relatively small player like the LMC in their eyes . Even the KNG still had ways to go before they became worthy of the big mech wholesaler's attention .

"Still, the KNG is a pretty big deal already in the Bright Republic . "

They took up a position in the mech market which Ves aimed to elevate the LMC to as well one day .

The LMC only offered two main product lines, a knight mech model and a laser rifleman mech model . Both of them were landbound designs priced in the premium segment, making them fairly niche products with relatively little competition but also little mass appeal .

The KNG pursued a much bolder product strategy . They designed dozens of mechs falling into a much wider range of mech types and roles . They didn't spread themselves too thin and aimed to achieve a stable market position in the market for budget spaceborn mechs and and very cheap frontline mechs .

From Marcella's analysis of the KNG's current business strategy, their Spaceborn Mech Division headed by Estella Kadar turned a small but steady stream of profits .

On the other hand, their Frontline Mech Division headed by Antoine Neyvis was much more susceptible to economic boom-and-bust cycles . When times were good, frontline mechs sold by the thousands every day . When times became slightly worse, a glut of supply and a shortage of demand meant that they became extremely unprofitable .

Right now, the KNG fell into a time where they became forced to sell their frontline mechs at a loss in order to maintain their perceived market position .

If they stopped selling mechs entirely, then they signalled to the market that the fundamentals of their company was weak . Mech buyers didn't like to purchase mechs from losers because who knew if the company would collapse one day, depriving the buyers of various support services such as repairs, the supply of replacement parts and upgrades .

Even if Marcella knew more about the KNG than the public had on hand, she wasn't an insider of the company . She couldn't accurately guess how long the company could keep up its loss-making ventures .

"Every healthy company saves for a rainy day, but it's a question whether the KNG's reserves are enough . "

A man in his thirties in a formal business suit greeted Ves shortly after he stepped off the military shuttle . "Mr . Larkinson, pleased to meet you . I am Jeffrey Arlet, a relationship manager of the Public Relations Department of the

Kadar-Neyvis Group . I'll be accompanying you around our great company during your visits at our headquarters, manufacturing complexes and other facilities . "

Ves shook hands with the man and surprised him with a strong grip . "Please take care of me, Mr . Arlet . "

"Please call me Jeff, is that okay?"

"Sure . You can call me Ves . Right now, pretend my uniform doesn't exist . "

Naturally, no one could ever stop staring at his uniform . Jeff kept glancing at his decorations as if he wanted to confirm the rumors about Ves that already swirled around the galactic net .

In fact, much of those rumors gained a lot of momentum all of a sudden when Marcella tasked her company to proliferate them! Soon almost everyone would hear of the new mech designer hero that made the rounds in Bentheim!

The pair walked out of the shuttle parking zone and into the tall main structure that housed the main corporate office of the KNG . The structure radiated a sense of class and prestige . The interior's sterile, white and transparent interior but with a lively touch of plants and trees made Ves feel as if he entered an artificial paradise .

The relations manager began to introduce the company to Ves as they walked to a central elevator .

"The Kadar-Neyvis Group emerged after the merger of the Kadar Group and Neyvis Mechs . As such, we have spent years fusing all of our aspects together to form a new and stronger company that is ready to grow to the top!"

Ves looked very impressed at that claim . "That's a high ambition . There's a lot of competition at the top . "

"All of us within the company are confident that Mrs . Kadar and Mr . Neyvis will be able to turn their vision into reality . " Jeff boasted confidently . "We believe our mechs are sufficiently distinct and valuable enough that we are able to capture the hearts of many customers in the Bright Republic and beyond its borders!"

The two entered an elevator upon which Jeff sent an authorization from his comm to bring them straight to the top .

"What are the core values of the KNG?"

"With regards to our products, we aim to combine affordability with excellent after-sales support . Our mechs are priced competitively and they are often bundled with a range of support services where we provide long-term insurance, repairs and replacements to our loyal customers . Over the years, we have drawn a considerable amount of fixed customers who have fallen in love with our robust mech ecosystem and continue to purchase new mechs from us at favorable rates . "

Ves understood the KNG's business strategy from here . "It's a very far-sighted strategy to sell mechs at close to bottom prices but recover some profit with your after-sales services . I imagine it takes a huge upfront financial commitment to wait that long until you are finally able to earn a profit on an old mech sale . "

"The financial health of our company is extremely robust . " Jeff immediately emphasized with a bright smile . "With two very capable and experienced Journeyman Mech Designers as our lead designers, all of our products are competitive against the competing offerings on the market . Our market shares in several market segments is very significant . Customers are attracted by our competitively priced mechs and they know that they can rely on us to service their needs!"

Yeah right, Ves thought . If he hadn't heard Marcella's own take on the company, then he would have been fooled by Jeff's overly rosy descriptions . As a representative from the Public Relations Department, it was his job to impress the various stakeholders of the KNG . Obviously, such a person would never badmouth his own employer on a voluntary basis .

The elevator rose up fairly slowly, all considered . However, the transparent shaft gave Ves a very complete glimpse of some of the hallways and offices where various employees diligently worked for the company .

"As you can see, we employ a large amount of talented people . Many of them are old hands from the Kadar Group or Neyvis Mechs . We pride ourselves on the good treatment of our employees, no matter if they are top managers or lowly clerks . From the lowest mech technicians to the members of our esteemed design teams, the Kadar-Neyvis Group is a closely-knit community of like-minded people who are united in our desire to propel our company to the top!"

"Uh huh . " Ves nodded a bit lamely . This Jeff was laying it a little thick .

"What kind of people does the KNG employ? Are they mainly Bentheimers?"

"We are a local Bentheim mech manufacturer, so it is a given that we draw most of our talents locally . Nevertheless, we pride ourselves on our diversity and we are always open for talent from other regions of the Republic . A substantial portion of our management comes from Rittersberg . "

It sounded like a contradiction to Ves . How could a company simultaneously be proud of their diversity while tacitly admitting they mostly employed people from Bentheim and Rittersberg?

While he didn't know exactly who came from where, it would be a really bad idea if the upper management consists of graduates from Rittersberg while most of the lower jobs were taken up by local Bentheimers .

"Ah, we are here . Please follow me . " Jeff said as the elevator finally reached the top . "Our founders can't wait to greet you in person!"

They walked through an impressive looking entrance hall that simultaneously served as a showcase of KNG's bestsellers . Various scale models of their most popular mech designs stood on both sides of the hall .

Ves recognized the care and attention put into manually fabricating and assembling each of these smaller mechs . Obviously, both Kadar and Neyvis felt the need to work on them personally .

This amount of care shown in their products lifted his opinion of the two Journeymen a little .

Once they entered through the tall double doors, they entered a very wide office space where the two famed mech designers stood in the middle .

"Welcome, Mr . Larkinson, to the Kadar-Neyvis Group!" A matronly woman greeted him with a bright smile . "Please come closer and let me see you!"

Both of them greeted each other politely and exchanged handshakes . Mrs . Kadar emanated a matronly vibe only seen among happy mothers .

"Leife! Aislin! Come here and meet our guest!"

Two rambunctious children playing in a playpen set aside in the office chamber scampered over to their mother while holding their plushy mech toys .

"This is Aislin, my lovely daughter . "

"Hiiiiii . " The four-year old greeted shyly .

"And this is Leife, her older brother . "

"Mommy, is he a soldier or a mech designer?" He asked in a young voice as the six-year old admired his uniform and his ribbons .

"Oh, he's both . In fact, I dare say he's the bravest mech designer in the Mech Corps!"

Ves chuckled politely . "There are many brave mech designers in the Mech Corps . Your parents served in the previous war as well if I recall . "

"Oh, we were a bit too young back then . " Mr . Neyvis replied modestly . "We hadn't even graduated yet when we were drafted by the Mech Corps in the final years of our study . I can't say we served with distinction, but we did our duty to the Republic . "

What Neyvis didn't mention was that as promising students of the Ansel University of Mech Design, they almost certainly received cushy rear position jobs . This allowed them to claim they 'did their time' in the previous war while barely spending a year in actual service .

Of course, it would be very impolite for Ves to bring that up . Instead, he smiled at the children, for they were really cute . "What lovely mechs you hold! What models are they based on?"

"Uh-huh!" Leife proudly extended the plushy version of a spaceborn mech .  
"This is my mommy's latest model! The Kadar-Neyvis Group Havikon Executor AXA-2000! It's fast and its got lasers and pew pew pew!"

Ves felt as if he was watching a younger version of himself . He used to play with miniatures of plushies of mechs as well when he was their age .

Mrs . Kadar laughed in an indulgent manner . "The Havikon Executor is a new product that is popular with security companies . They are economic but capable enough to be employed in guarding space stations and other fixed facilities in space . "

"Ahem . " Mr . Neyvis coughed . "We can introduce our other products to Ves at a later date . Do you mind if I call you that?"

"I don't mind, Antoine . " Ves said, agreeing to the looser customs . One of his goals here was to lower the guard of his hosts, and going by a first-name basis helped allow him to get closer . "So what is on the agenda today?"

### Chapter 980 Wholesome Family

Estella and Antoine brought their children and Ves to a shuttle landing pad at the top of the headquarters where they traveled to an exclusive restaurant called the Lyrical Kitchen in the Entertainment District.

Unobtrusive security guards accompanied each member of the happy family, while another shuttle with heavier armed guards followed them from the rear.

Meanwhile, Ves made do with Jeff, who looked like he couldn't even take a single punch.

The trip didn't last that long as the Entertainment District was very close to Mech Designer Row. As the shuttle landed on a parking zone which hosted many expensive shuttles and aircars, the processing walked a short distance before arriving at the famed Bentheim restaurant.

"I hope you don't mind inviting you to dine at the Lyrical Kitchen." Antoine said. "While there are many fine establishments in Dorum, the Lyrical Kitchen is a treat to our children."

"I understand." Ves nodded. "I admit this is my first time at the Lyrical Kitchen. I've heard they're famed for their musicians."

"You are in for a treat, my dear!" Estella smiled brightly at him as she ushered her children through the door.

It turned out that the happy family were regular customers and had a standing invitation to dine at this establishment, so the attendants quickly ushered them to a semi-closed corner in the fancy, multi-level restaurant.

As a projection of a menu along with food items emerged in front of all of them, Ves became a bit lost at the various exotic food options.

He enjoyed a solidly middle-class upbringing at Cloudy Curtain, and even his extensive stays on Rittersberg were never marked with excessive luxury and spending. Therefore, he never truly got exposed to the greater luxuries in life. He hardly knew the difference between all of the expensive food options on offer.

To Ves, the only item he recognized was cloud rice grown from his very own home planet! As for the rest, he saw no difference between them and the contents of a nutrient pack!

In fact, Ves much preferred the simplicity of a nutrient pack over some of the weirder options on the menu!

Fortunately, Estella noticed his hesitation and tactfully helped him out of his fix. "Is this your first time here? Let me recommend you some dishes for a start. The Lyrical Kitchen is known for their excellent meat dishes prepared in the local style of Bentheim cuisine. Half of their meat is sourced from wild exobeasts imported from the frontier!"

"My dear, Ves here wears the Frontier Service Medal."

"Ah, I forgot! How exciting!" Estella exclaimed while she quickly selected some dishes for him. "Did you eat a lot of exobeast meat on your deployment to the frontier?"

Ves smiled as recalled the time he had a bite of god species meat. "The taste of some of the exobeasts that you can find in the frontier is indescribable. I will never forget the first time I tasted the cooked flesh of a very formidable exobeast."

"What exobeast did you taste? Is it possible for the local restaurants to import their meat someday?"

"Unlikely." Ves shook his head. "Some bounties of the frontier are destined to remain out of our reach. It's too hard to bring back all of the treasures the Faris Star Region has to offer."

Right now, Aeon Corona VII must be in an extremely chaotic spot. He hadn't heard any mention about the Aeon Corona System in the news, but he was sure that Sigrund already made himself scarce while the CFA sent a war fleet to figure out what happened there or something.

As the appetizers arrived on hovering plates, a band of musicians arrived at a stage in their corner. Leife and Aislin both cheered in their raised seats and requested them to play a tune.

"One of the specialties of the Lyrical Kitchen is that they employ talented musicians who can improve a song for every occasion." Antoine explained to Ves. "They boast that their musicians never play the same song twice."

Ves knew that it took a lot of practice and coordination between the musicians to accomplish something like that. He half-suspected them to be carrying a brain implant that connected their minds together.

Still, the musicians played well and they easily managed to impress the two young children.

Seeing Estella and Antoine looking at their each other and their children with loving eyes made Ves feel inadequate. Compared to his lonesome self, the two Journeymen already found each other and developed a wholesome relationship that looked too perfect to be true.

"What is on your mind, Ves?" Antoine asked as he spotted Ves' melancholic eyes.

"I'm very impressed with your family. Your children are very lucky to have you as their parents."

"You are still young. You have lots of time to find the perfect girl." Estella smiled. "As a woman, I can state that a mech designer of your talents and accomplishments won't have any trouble searching for a suitable partner. I can introduce you to the daughters of some of our friends if you'd like."

"No thanks, Estella. Right now, my duty to the Mech Corps comes before my private matters. As you said, I still have plenty of time yet to find a partner."

At this phase in his life, Ves still aimed to spend all of his time on furthering his career and his company. Finding a girlfriend and planning for marriage seemed too far ahead for him right now.

As the main courses started to arrive, Ves began to chat about casual topics with the two other mech designers. Their children mainly clapped and asked for more songs from the musicians while Jeff and the guard stood quietly at the sides.

None of them discussed any serious business as of yet. Presumably, Estella and Antoine preferred to keep Ves away from poking his nose in their business. No one liked their guests to go through their dirty laundry, after all. Ves would do the same if another mech designer came to inspect his business.

Before he arrived at Bentheim, Ves already discussed the role he should adopt with Leland. The intelligence officer wanted Ves to present himself in a distinct manner that was different from his real self.

The whole point of sending in Ves instead of someone else from Flashlight was because they quickly needed to ascertain if the KNG truly collaborated with the separatists or not. Not only did Ves have to conduct his investigation quickly, he also needed to do so quietly without attracting any suspicion at all.

To that end, Leland wanted to craft a disarming version of Ves for him to adopt.

The key was to reinforce certain biases in those that Ves interacted. Instead of presenting himself as a very competent Apprentice Mech Designer, Ves instead pretended to be a more average mech designer.

During his talks with the leaders of the KNG, the topics strayed to his exploits from time to time. While Ves faithfully kept his mouth shut about the classified aspects of his mission, he did mention some tidbits expressly spoken to downplay his actual accomplishments.

"To be frank, the honors bestowed to me by the Mech Corps makes me feel ashamed." Ves 'admitted' to the married couple. "A powerful official from Rittersberg advocated for my case to the generals of the Mech Corps and magnified my modest accomplishments to serve certain political needs. The Bright Republic needed a war hero to keep everyone's spirits high. In truth, it's mostly propaganda."

"Even so, what you are doing is doubtlessly noble." Estella said with an understanding smile. "I'm from Rittersberg, so I understand the calculus behind their decisions. I can easily see why they would prop you up as a war hero. It's easier to settle on you as you're a Larkinson."

The three of them shared seemingly understanding gazes. Ves figured he accomplished the message he tried to convey.

In their minds, Ves must have been some average drafted mech designer that made a mild accomplishment during a mission. One of the political masters back at Rittersbers liked what he saw, so he exaggerated Ves' accomplishments and forced the Mech Corps to cough up some of their prestigious medals to manufacture a war hero to inspire the Republic.

Hopefully, Estella and Antoine bought this story. One of the strongest aspects about this story was that it was based on a very real truth. If Estella used her connections with Rittersberg to investigate the claims, she would find out that

Senator Tovar himself pushed strongly to convince the generals to award medals like the Darkness Eater and the Golden Mech to Ves.

All of it actually happened!

The more the KNG regarded Ves as a political appointee, the less they thought of his actual ability and thereby lower his guard around him. This was just the first step.

Still, Even if he wanted to pretend to be a bumbling mech designer who earned his medals through political intervention rather than earning supreme merit, he still needed to make a show of being earnest in performing his latest responsibilities.

"I'm thankful for inviting me to this establishment, but the Mech Corps won't be pleased if I spend my time outside your company all day." Ves said, turning a little more serious. "I intend to discharge my duties to the best of my abilities while I'm assigned as your company's liaison."

"Of course, Ves." Antoine nodded while showing an understanding if slightly patronizing expression. "We wouldn't want to displease your superiors. We have scheduled an extensive tour of the company for you over the next few days. We plan to show you around our headquarters, our design center, our manufacturing complexes, our testing and distribution complex and our service complex to start with. While we own several other properties elsewhere, it wouldn't be convenient to visit them as they are located in other star systems."

"That's a lot of complexes." Ves commented.

"Our company is very large. Our sales volume is very large so we require a large number of facilities to sustain our activities. I don't think you'll be able to visit them all in a single day so we spread out your visits over a number of days if that's alright."

"That's okay. For now, a quick visit to each of your company's facilities is enough to get me started. My job is mainly to supervise the production of military mechs and supplies so it isn't necessary for me to pay attention to every aspect of your company. I'm fine with a short tour as a start."

Flashlight mainly wanted Ves to poke around the KNG's manufacturing complexes and the testing and distribution complex. If the BLM did infiltrate the KNG, then they would be sure to focus their efforts at the production and distribution sites. Where else would they be able to smuggle away mechs and supplies under everyone's noses?

Even so, Ves did not refuse the opportunity to learn how a larger and more developed mech manufacturer such as the KNG ran its various operations.

He knew that Estella and Antoine attempted to charm him with this upcoming tour. They hoped to build up a favorable relationship with Ves by showing him around and teaching him a bit on how to run a mech company.

Technically, they were competitors, so it took some consideration on the part of the married couple to give Ves a good glimpse on how they ran their company.

Besides, as Journeymen, they didn't feel very threatened by an 'average' Apprentice such as Ves. Perhaps they would even be generous enough to give Ves some pointers on designing mechs!

Ves tried to stifle a laugh as he perceived that Estella and Antoine bought his act. While Ves wasn't a great actor by any means, he didn't act completely outside the norm.

It was a wonder what a few lies and misdirections could do to shape a completely different image from the truth.