

Chapter 14: First Pick

"I'm really sorry for how all of this has happened." James apologised awkwardly as he followed Milly into the backroom. It was a cluttered and confined space, with stacks of machinery parts and gaming rig side-panels. James hadn't really been aware of how hands-on Milly had been with the repairs of the DV8 equipment. She weaved around the room like a veteran, not disturbing anything along her path. As she got to her workbench, she started stacking some parts before sliding them away to make space for herself. A moment later, she leapt up and sat on the edge of the workbench before giving James a weary smile. "There's a chair somewhere under all that junk if you fancy a treasure hunt."

In the past, James would likely have remained standing for fear of damaging any of the parts, but he was different now. "Nox is likely going to be replacing all your rigs, so you'll probably be back here repairing a lot less." James guessed as he started placing the various parts of machinery on the floor beside the chair. "I'm also sponsored by Nexus Rigs, and have a pretty okay relationship with one of their engineers. So, even if you have issues, we can just ask her."

Milly just nodded her head slowly, giving James a humouring look. "And what exactly is it you'd have me doing with all this time you're freeing up for me?" Her voice was a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. If James guessed by her face, curiosity was winning. He finally took his seat and gave her what he hoped was a winning smile. "I'd like you to work with me on building up an eSports team. One that can compete in the leagues, without having graduated from any of the gaming universities."

All suspicion vanished as Milly's face lit up with excitement. "What's your angle? Are you looking to become a sponsor? Are you going to be a scout? Is this a hobby? Tell me!" She leaned forward almost precariously as she asked a stream of questions. James could only laugh at her enthusiasm and tried to answer them. He started with the one that he thought was the riskiest. "I want to create an E-Classifier team." Milly didn't so much as bat an eyelid at the revelation, and instead continued to grin at him. With his resolve now steeled, James continued. "I am going to be buying properties out in the slums with the money that I'm getting from the Nox sponsorship. She's going to be mentoring me and helping me accelerate my business, Travesty Holdings. Rather than being just a landlord like Nox, I wanted to use my success to create a platform for E-Classifiers. Give them the opportunity to show the world how great they are! Would I be a scout? No, I don't even know most of their names... other than the stupid nicknames that Darius gave them over the years. Sponsor? Yes, and no. I haven't brought it up with them, but I'd like to give the Paragons the opportunity to sponsor the players. That way, I'll know they're getting a fair deal and it's not going to take all of my limited funds. It'll also create a bit of competition between them and give the Paragons a better understanding of how those with nothing to live for."

James gestured vaguely, realising he didn't have it all figured out at all. He half expected Milly would laugh at him, or tell him he was absolutely crazy to be risking so much on a half-baked plan. Yet, rather than judging him, Milly was just looking at him curiously. It took her a few moments to formulate her thoughts, but it was worth it in the end. "I'm relieved to

see that you're still the same person. I thought you'd change once you were pulled out of poverty and feared that you were done with us now that you've hit the major leagues. I couldn't believe it when these suits arrived. I thought it was some sort of punishment or something. Were you angry with me? Was I a terrible friend to you? Did you resent me?" Milly raised her fingers as she went through all her fears and doubts, a smile still on her face as she did so. The hurt that she had been bottling up was finally being released, but it wasn't angrily. James didn't dare interrupt her, as he just listened intently to her feelings. Milly eventually stopped her list and gave James a relieved smile. "I'm happy you didn't turn your back on the slums. I know Billy will feel the same way. E-Classers need more help than others, but showing the world what they can do is an incredible goal. Now that you're a C-Classifier, people will soon forget that you were in E-Class and the narrative will still depict you as an underdog. Even though you're probably the most powerful player in Abidden right now."

Before James could say anything to the contrary, Milly raised her hand to show that she wasn't done yet. "I can help you from an operational standpoint, but not financially. I have no idea what DV8 is going to look like after this audit is complete. I'm still terrified that they're going to shut me down and that I'll be powerless to prevent it. I have a roster of E-Classers that do jobs for me, and they've all had to share their recordings of fights so I can vet them. I have records of their social gaming licences, both blacklisted and suspended. We can definitely find a team of skilled players, but getting them through all the legal hoops, securing sponsors for them, and making sure that everything complies with the gaming leagues... that's going to be a definite hurdle for us to overcome."

James nodded, happy to hear that Milly was including herself in his plan. He wanted to put her fears at ease, but Milly was the type that wanted cold hard facts rather than promises or feelings. So with that in mind, he started listing their resources. "Elvira Corbeau is my legal representative for Abidden, and she got my gaming licence reinstated. Nox Holdings has a legal guy that helped me with the citizenship stuff, so we at least have two people there that have done the exact thing we'll need in the future. Kell Daystar is a public relations machine, and if I was to ask him for help, I'm sure he'd assist. I think the Legendary Quest has put my name on the radar for many people, so maybe there will be some goodwill that we can get from them? We'll take literally all the charity we can get if it means we're able to create this platform."

Milly tilted her head to one side. "But to what end? What do you want them to achieve? If an E-Classifier team ends up progressing to D-Class, then what? Start again? What is the goal?" Her question was direct, and James wasn't sure if he knew the answer until his voice answered for him. "Eradicate E-Class. If we can't do that, then at least take away the perception that they're a drain on society... and that with real help, they can contribute meaningfully. We were just unlucky, or we were fucked over, or we were victims of predatory corporations... but with a second chance, we could show our value. We'll stop being seen as the dirt on their shoes, and we'll be able to stand beside them."

With a shake of her head, Milly leaned back and gave James an exasperated sigh. "I run a cafe, and you play VR games. Regardless of how popular you are right now, you won't be able to topple societal law. You might give people hope, and you might make it easier on a few people... but you won't be able to make any effective change. So, I'll ask again. What is

it you want to achieve? Within the realm of actual possibility. What can we do to bring you closer to that lofty goal of yours?" Her question was painful to hear, but was delivered with sincerity. James slumped back in his chair with a laugh, wondering if he was going crazy. Was the rush of excitement and relevance going to his head? He had been mulling over his goals and ideas, but they eventually took on a life of themselves... evolving to become a grand goal of changing the world, one step at a time. He took himself back to his original goal, dialling everything back to the thought that sparked everything for him. He looked at Milly with a wild smile on his face, hoping she'd share his enthusiasm. "I want an E-Class team to win the District One Invitational."

Milly clapped her hands and pointed at James with both of her hands. "Now, that! I can fucking get on board with!" Without so much as another word, Milly hopped down from her workbench and started tapping at her interface. Deft movements of her fingers resulted in a virtual page being flicked across to her workbench. The piles of machinery that she had previously navigated around were flung to one side as she eagerly cleared the surface area. James got to his feet and craned his neck to see what was being projected, but multiple parts of the image were obscured by the rig scraps. Milly finally cleared it and presented the image to James. It was a league table filled with multiple logos of different eSports teams. Milly flicked through them at such a rapid pace, James wasn't sure how she read any of it. Her mumbling eventually became clear as she finally found what she was looking for. "District One Invitational won't happen for another few months, so there is a lot of work to do before then. We need to get a team seeded, and to do that, it means either graduating top of your class... joining a team that has already been seeded..." Milly listed all the options as though they were common knowledge. "Outside teams and private teams need to have a track record to be eligible to apply. So it's not going to be a case of paying someone off and getting a ticket. We'll need to go through the Rookie leagues, and that is going to pit us against a lot of tough opponents with state-of-the-art machinery. They'll have eSports professionals coaching them, but they'll be really early in their career and unlikely to have good team chemistry." Milly trailed off as she was speaking more to herself now than to James. There were so many things for them to consider that it was almost paralyzing. James hoped he could draw her back before she reasoned it was impossible.

"Milly, what is the first step we need to consider? Before anything else?" As the question landed, Milly blinked twice as though she had just been woken out of a trance. She glanced at James and then back at the table in front of her. "We need to select a team first. Experienced players with compatible skills that can work in a team formation. Support, offensive, defensive... fuck, how are you going to find someone that will work in a support role? It's the slums, everyone is out for themselves! When you factor in-"

"Milly!" James said loudly, but in as gentle a tone as he could muster. She caught herself before falling down another hole of overthinking and speculation. Nodding her head, she once again dialled everything back and got herself on track. "Okay, you'll need a good team composition. We can go through my records to see if we can find people that match up. We'll keep your name out of it for the moment, and we'll just say that there's a backer. If they're not convinced, then we'll name drop. It'll make it easier for us to manage expectations and we'll frame this as a long-term job for them. We can use my rigs here to start, get them working together in a team against you... maybe six versus one? Recreate your own District One Invitational debut!" Milly laughed humorlessly as she thought about it. The gears in her

head were turning as she considered their plan, building it up from a basic concept. "They'll need nutrition packs, warm clothing and a place to stay. You'll need to make sure your housing is suitable for them and ready to go. We'll need to get their base fitness up so they can spend more time in the rigs, and we'll need to get them checked by a doctor... because the league has strict medical guidelines these days. We probably have you to thank for that." This time her smile was genuine and James couldn't help but laugh. Milly turned to look at James with yet another curious expression. "Was there anybody that ever impressed you in the slums? Good fighters?"

James exhaled loudly. "Fuck, where do I start? There are so many people that destroyed me at the beginning." He thought through a few of the usual suspects that made him avoid certain fights. Darius had many favourites before James came along, and it wasn't always clear who the favourite was in any given fight. Sometimes Darius had encouraged James to bet all his money in a tournament with another favourite competing. It was a sick game that ensured Darius always won. Shaking his head, James thought back to those arcade games with disgust when suddenly a person popped into his head.

Without so much as another word, James started combing through his stored recordings. His new interface glided through the files with ease, making him love the purchase all the more. It took a few seconds to find the one he was looking for, which he quickly sent to Milly's workbench. She quickly consented to the file transfer, which resulted in a clip playing almost instantly. Milly looked at the fighter weaving through the branches of a tree with a rifle in her hand. Through the image, she could see James smiling broadly. "This is Sniper-Girl. She's my first pick!"