

Mech 1711

Chapter 1711 Hidden Bulge

Ves had run all the way back to the front entrance of the headquarters of his company. A fair distance away, piles of broken and ruined mech parts soiled the green and idyllic gardens of the Mech Nursery's campus!

In destroying every mech that stood in the Glittering Comet's way, Ghanso Larkinson exhibited complete disregard to the value of those machines!

Each of those mechs could have contributed to Cloudy Curtain's defense! The fall of so many Avatar and Sentinel mechs weakened Cloudy Curtain's security and risked the lives of millions of citizens and billions of settled refugees!

Ves partially blamed the stubbornness of his family members. Their misplaced courage caused them to stand their ground and let themselves get shot by Ghanso like they were target dummies!

The Larkinsons had already made their point! There was no further use in allowing their mechs to get wrecked!

Of course, the Larkinsons who showed up today did not see it that way. It was all about showing their attitude against Ghanso's conduct! They hoped that by showing how firmly they stuck to their principles, they could convince this young but rash expert pilot of the family to reconsider his stance!

Sadly, their hopes were bound to get dashed as expert pilots never wavered so easily!

It was twice as bad when it came to Larkinson expert pilots! After becoming demigods, the bravery and conviction instilled in their minds turned into the pillars of their will, causing them to become more determined than any mortal Larkinson!

There was no contest between the two. The hundred Larkinsons that piloted their mechs to form a wall thought that they already possessed sufficient determination.

Ghanso wouldn't shoot every Larkinson in the way, right? Shouldn't he feel guilty with each Larkinson mech he shot?

Yet the expert pilot gritted his teeth and steeled his heart to do what he thought was necessary!

As his Glittering Comet's sensor arrays scanned the debris field, Ghanso tried to make sure that none of the wrecks posed any threat to any lives.

While he had already justified his actions in his heart and mind, he still did not wish to have any actual blood on his hands. Harming a mech was just an issue of money to him. It still fell short of wounding or killing an actual human being!

After verifying that no cockpit or life was at risk, Ghanso cast his worries aside and focused on his target.

While Ves could have retreated in his headquarters or sneaked away by resorting to stealth, he didn't think it would buy him more than a few minutes time.

The military shuttles carrying infantry already started to approach once Ghanso dismantled the wall of mechs. The vehicles already pointed a number of high-powered, directional scanners in his direction!

The energy passing through his body was so strong that Ves doubted that he could evade pursuit for long!

He did not wish to put his headquarters and the people working inside at risk. The soldiers sent to hunt him down might not be as concerned with collateral damage as Ghanso, especially since they were just mortals!

"Looks like this is the end of the line for me." Ves muttered.

"Do you wish to..?" Nitaa, who had stuck with him, brandished her rifle.

"No. Don't think about it. I explicitly order you to attack my captors unless they actually intend to kill me or something."

Ves could never resist the might of an entire state. Perhaps the story might be different if he became a Master Mech Designer, but for now his power, influence, wealth and reputation were wholly insufficient to resist lawful authority!

This was also why he never considered activating the defenses of the Mech Nursery and ordering his supporters to open fire. He would just condemn himself and his fellow Larkinsons to persecuting them by their own state!

Fortunately, it was not as if he was surrendering his life. He would just be taking a forced vacation for some time.

Despite disparaging the state, Ves still had faith in its institutions. The Mech Corps should never mistreat him or arbitrarily sentence him to death.

The Glittering Comet slowly flew towards Ves, as if anticipating a further stunt.

When nothing else happened, the expert mech reached within twenty meters of Ves and landed on the ground with a strong enough impact to whip a lot of wind in Ves' face!

"Did you run out tricks, Ves?" The mech broadcasted Ghanso's exulting voice. He didn't show any remorse for what he did! "If you weren't family, I would have squashed you like a bug for setting my own relatives against me! You are way too poisonous to be a Larkinson!"

"My Larkinson blood is just as pure as yours." Ves retorted with forced calm. He showed neither fear nor regret. "Don't worry, Venerable Ghanso. I won't run any further. Tell your goons to come here and take me away. Do not put my employees in danger."

Ves had already exhausted his limited cards. While he failed to stall Ghanso, he at least managed to raise enough of a stink in the family and the Bright Republic!

The greater the outrage, the likelier he would be freed!

There was no way General Cavendish could ever hope to succeed in his scheme after blowing up this confrontation so massively!

The Glittering Comet loomed over Ves like an unfeeling statue. Ghanso no longer bothered to talk to Ves as they both waited for the shuttles to land.

While Ves awaited his eventual capture, he decided to make some additional preparations. He turned around and beckoned to Nitaa.

"I don't want the Mech Corps to confiscate my gear. Please keep them safe."

He withdrew his toolbelt and all of the gadgets and weapons it held, from the Peaceful Resolve to the Vulcaneye multiscanner.

He also slipped his hands under his shirt and withdrew both of his shield generators, including the one wrapped by a Synthra Umbra cover.

However, Ves did not relinquish everything on his person. After a bit of thought, he removed his slender comm from his wrist but slipped them into his underwear. While the thin bracelet pressed uncomfortably against his flesh, such a small object should be completely undetectable when shielded by the Synthra Umbra material!

While Ves never intended to use his special pair of underwear in this fashion, he had to admit it came in really handy under these circumstances!

Since he still possessed some room in his pants, Ves searched the tool belt held by Nitaa.

He withdrew a small cylindrical jamming device before stuffing it in the inside of his underwear as well!

Though his pants bulged similar to how the Adonis Colossus' codpiece protruded outwards, it was still within an acceptable range!

"I should make a flatter jamming device next time." He grumbled.

Ves did not dare smuggle anything else on his person. His underwear already fit him fairly tight because he never envisioned using it as a hidden pocket!

He shook his legs and took a few steps to make sure his smuggled goods did not give themselves away in any sense. The tightness of his underpants barely affected him, which was a big relief.

Hopefully, the Mech Corps wouldn't strip search him or replace his clothes entirely.

After hesitating for a few seconds, Ves removed his overcoat as well and folded it up before passing it to Nitaa.

"Keep that secure as well. It's the most valuable piece of my outfit."

Lastly, Ves rubbed Lucky's head and whispered a few words in his ears.

"Meow."

His cat ran past Nitaa and disappeared within the depths of the LMC's headquarters.

Time was up. The shuttles had landed. As soon as their hatches opened, intimidating soldiers clad in medium and heavy combat armor emerged.

Ves held up his arms to show that he was unarmed. In the meantime, Nitaa was already stepping back to the point of entering the lobby of the headquarters. She had already holstered her rifle behind her back in order to carry all of the gear that Ves bequeathed.

Unlike Ghanso, the silent, helmeted soldiers did not speak at all. Most of them spread out and vigilantly guarded every direction.

A pair of armored soldiers approached Ves. Their insignia and markings identified them as soldiers of the 1st Volari Starhawks.

They had probably survived the fall of Sydney Superior. They strode forward with no hesitation and thoroughly searched his entire body with suit-integrated scanners.

Ves was afraid that they would pat his body as well. Once they patted his waist area, they would probably be able to feel out his smuggled goods!

Fortunately, the guards possessed way too much faith in the effectiveness of their scanners!

Ves was no average person either. The Mech Corps issued orders to take him into custody. This was not an arrest as he was not an enemy!

As a loyal citizen and war hero, none of the soldiers seemed inclined to treat him roughly!

In fact, the way the soldiers held his arms and guided him forward showed that they firmly intended to treat him as an honored guest!

They belonged to the same side, after all. Though Ves had stopped projecting his combat awards on his chest after removing his comm from his wrist, his record still reflected his illustrious accomplishments!

"Please excuse our treatment, Mr. Larkinson." An unarmored, uniformed captain greeted Ves upon entering one of the shuttles. "You have certainly given us a lot of headaches with your theatrics. Will you continue to make things difficult?"

The guards surrounding him let go of his arms, allowing Ves to sit and let his seat buckle him in place with a smile.

"I am alone now. How can I possibly stir up any trouble? I am at your mercy."

"That only makes me more concerned." The officer replied suspiciously. "You are surprisingly accommodating right now, if I may say so. I expected you to continue your resistance. You already forced our Venerable to tarnish his reputation."

"Hey, that's not my fault. If you didn't want Ghanso to disgrace himself, then your superiors shouldn't have assigned him on this mission in the first place! Whoever thought it was a great idea to dispatch a Larkinson to capture a Larkinson?"

As the shuttle rumbled and lifted off the ground, the captain crossed his arms and sighed. "We never expected you to overreact to this extent. You are reacting as if we are Ylvainan Inquisitors plotting to execute you after holding a show trial. In case you don't know, we are not as badly run as the Ylvaine Protectorate! We obey the law rather than superstition."

Ves threw a skeptical glance towards the officer. "Uh huh. If you truly know the Bright Republic as well as I do, you wouldn't be so charitable to our state."

"Do not attempt to confuse me, Devil Tongue. My loyalty won't be shaken by your deceptive words!"

The officer regarded Ves with such caution that Ves quietly gave up his attempts to shake the other man's views.

There was no use even if he succeeded in befuddling the man. This was because there were plenty more soldiers where he was heading to! Unless he was an exceptional politician and orator, he could forget about changing everyone's minds!

About fifteen minutes passed before the shuttle slowed down and thudded onto a metal deck.

The hatch opened up, allowing the soldiers and Ves to exit the vehicle and step onto the shuttle bay.

Ves inspected the interior of the combat carrier and noted that it looked much more modern and well-equipped than the combat carriers of the Flagrant Vandals.

The technicians and other crew working here did not gawk at Ves or the soldiers. Instead, they continued their duties without any interruption, which showed that they were very disciplined.

These were tough customers. None of the soldiers he had seen so far exhibited any sloppiness. Everyone was too professional!

Chapter 1712 Larkinson To Larkinson

Outside of his expectations, his captors did not drag him to some sort of interrogation chamber or pump him for any information.

His escorts merely escorted him through the corridors of the combat carrier. Ves did not blank out during this time, but carefully observed his surroundings and tried to form a mental map of the interior.

While there was an endless variety of combat carrier classes in existence, the Mech Corps still applied the same standards to all of them. Their designs possessed many similarities which was meant to aid spacers in fitting in. The combat carriers of the Flagrant Vandals did not differ so much from this vessel.

Their current route allowed Ves to guess where his escorts were taking him. While they treated him gently, they did not go too far in treating him as an honored guest.

After a few minutes, they arrived at the security department of the ship. His escorts handed him off to the security officers, who subjected him to a more powerful scanning device that surrounded his entire body.

Ves could feel the energy rays passing through his entire body! It was extremely uncomfortable! Only his waist area escaped this uncomfortable sensation!

Fortunately, the special properties of Synthra Umbra did not outright block the scans in an obvious way. It could even camouflage its properties to a limited degree to avoid

standing out too much! Synthra Umbra wouldn't be classified as a high-grade exotic if it wasn't so effective in deceiving scans!

Luckily, the security officer behind the monitor only watched out for alerts rather than inspecting the scanning data closely. If he was a bit more attentive, then Ves would surely be in trouble, but fortunately no other search took place!

Ves was a Brighter after all. Was he really going to whip out a gun from nowhere and shoot his fellow citizens?

"Please follow me to your temporary accommodations." The captain told him after the scanning had ended.

Ves quietly followed until he reached a cell in the brig.

"Wow. Can't you offer me some dignity here, captain? I used to be a head designer when I was in the Mech Corps. Major Verle of the 6th Flagrant Vandals treated me very well when I worked directly under him. He would never have the guts to treat me like a prisoner!"

The officer looked unsympathetic. He gestured to the cell, causing the armored soldiers behind Ves to gently push him inside!

An energy screen immediately emerged, blocking Ves from exiting the mostly-barren metallic cell.

"We have our orders, Mr. Larkinson. We initially planned to hold you somewhere comfortable, but your actions earlier have caused us to.. reconsider."

"Ghanso personally told you to throw me into a cell, right?"

The captain smiled sheepishly. "He harbors quite a grudge against you. We are holding him back from meeting you until he cools down."

"Well, thanks for that."

"We are not your enemy, Mr. Larkinson. We don't like this mission either."

"Venerable Ghanso did not seem so reluctant earlier. He turned my Mech Nursery into a graveyard of mechs by the time he was done!"

The captain remained unapologetic. "Our personal wants and needs are immaterial. When we take the oath and don the uniform, we cease to be individuals. Instead, we represent a great institution, one that is dedicated to protecting our state!"

"I know that. I'm a Larkinson, and I've been in your shoes. I'm just.. disappointed at being targeted by you guys."

"You have my sympathies, Mr. Larkinson, but orders are orders. I wish you an uneventful journey. You won't have to stay locked in this cell for long."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

The captain didn't reply. He nodded stiffly at Ves through the energy screen before leaving the brig, taking most of his men away.

Unfortunately, two guards remained in place. While they did not specifically stare at Ves, their presence made him feel as if he was completely exposed!

Their closed helmets made it impossible to judge whether they were paying attention to him or not. For all he knew, they were sleeping inside their combat armor.

Ves did not dare take out the gear he stuffed inside his underpants.

Even without the guards, he was very certain that his cell was stuffed with sensors that monitored his every move.

Not even the toilet section of the cell provided him with any relief!

The cell was extremely bare, offering nothing more than a bunk, a toilet and a wash bin.

Ves knew that cells like these could be configured to offer additional furniture and amenities. Sadly, his captors were too stingy to offer him comforts such as a chair, table or entertainment projector.

The guards left him with no opportunity to start a conversation either, which left him feeling bored.

As someone who always spent his time on something, remaining locked in a cell with nothing to do was already starting to grate at his nerves!

He was a man of action! He always tried to spend his time productively.

"I should be designing a mech, reading a report, questioning my subordinates or cuddling with Gloriana right now!"

No matter how much he complained about his treatment, the soldiers assigned to extract from Cloudy Curtain did not engage with him any further.

"How boring. The Vandals were much more fun than you guys."

The guards never deigned to answer him. Ves half-suspected that their combat armor filtered out his voice!

Sometimes, he really hated his Devil Tongue nickname. Why couldn't he have a proper nickname that highlighted his strengths in mech design?

An indeterminate amount of time went by as the muted sounds and vibrations of the combat carrier offered him various hints of what was taking place.

He had no other way of determining what was going on outside his cell. Only when his body started feeling queasy for a moment did he detect that the ship had entered FTL!

His hopes of getting released before the Mech Corps sorted out the situation at high command were dashed.

Perhaps Ves needed to wait until the captured fleet returned to realspace for the Mech Corps to release him from custody.

"With all of the trouble I've stirred up, there is no way General Cavendish can still have his way!"

What took place on Cloudy Curtain was the last thing the Bright Republic needed at this time! Anything that distracted from the struggle against the sandman was deeply disruptive!

What was worse was that there was no way his forced departure from Cloudy Curtain could be hidden! If the government thought they could take him away quietly, then the battle between the Larkinsons firmly ensured that many people would come to know what transpired!

This was the insurance plan that he plotted ever since he heard that Ghanso was coming to take him away. After seeing how all of his friends and allies failed to protect him at this critical moment, Ves no longer dared to place his hopes on their efforts.

He emphatically did not trust the Tovars to do what they promised. Who knew what kind of shady deals and compromises they might make with the Cavendish and Ramza Families!

Rather than placing his hopes on unreliable allies, he much preferred to rely on his own means to extricate himself from this crisis!

A series of footsteps interrupted his musings. He raised himself from his bare cot and spotted a familiar figure.

The man paused in front of the energy screen until it shut off. He strode inside and stopped in the center of the cell as if he was its master!

The strong will contained in his body was like compressed mist that was barely contained in his head! As it was, its strong presence could not be hidden as it radiated an aura that was reminiscent of the glows of LMC mechs!

"Ghanso. How lovely. Just the Larkinson I wanted to meet."

His cousin showed up in an impeccable black-and-white uniform of the 1st Volari Starhawks. His badges and insignia signified his status as an expert pilot and a mech captain of the Mech Corps.

The uniform showed off nothing else, as this was not a situation where Ghanso needed to show off his combat awards.

"So here you are." Ghanso spoke up. Different from before, he exhibited little emotion. "We would have brought you here regardless of what you did. Instead of accepting the inevitable, you launched a futile resistance and shook the foundations of our family!"

"I did not ask them to come and block your way. They came on their own accord." Ves lightly replied.

"That's a lie, Ves. You openly appealed to them to form a wall of mechs. Even if you phrased it as a request, you should have known how seriously our family members would take it! I have to admit that I even fell for your sophistry!"

Ves chuckled. "I said nothing that isn't true in some way! The reason why our aunts, uncles and cousins voluntarily piloted their mechs to block your Glittering Comet is because they agreed with what I said! The reason why you grew angry is because you don't want to accept that I'm right!"

Before he knew it, Ghanso swiftly swept forward and punched his face!

"Ah! That smarts! I'm just a mech designer, man! I'm a civilian!"

Ghanso sneered at Ves. "You're a Larkinson. You're better than this. Your physical augmentations are even more luxurious than mine!"

"That doesn't mean I'm trained for combat! I'm helpless in front of you and you know it!" Ves complained as he rubbed his bruised cheek.

"Dispense with the theatrics, Ves. I didn't come here to be entertained by a clown."

Seeing that Ghanso saw right through his act, Ves shook his head and straightened his back.

While he had left behind his overcoat, the remainder of his outfit still looked suitably formal. The dignity he carried was no less than that of Ghanso.

"That's better. I finally feel I'm facing an adult."

"That's because you're too serious, Ghanso. Lighten up. Relax. Stop beating up your fellow Larkinsons."

A surge of anger flowed from the expert pilot!

"Everything is your fault! Don't lay the blame of your actions on me! You are one of the most terrible Larkinsons that I have ever met! You don't belong in our family!"

"You don't control the family. I do. We held a vote!"

Ghanso directed a withering glare towards Ves. "A single popularity contest held at the spur of the moment does not give you the right to take over the Larkinson Family. While you are brought away, I'll be sure to sort of the mess you've made and undo all of the damage. Without your poisonous influence, I have faith that my fellow Larkinsons will return to sanity!"

"Hahaha! Keep dreaming! You crossed a line today! I exposed you and your faction for what you truly are! If the Mech Corps orders you to kill off our entire family, you would definitely jump to obey!"

Outside of his expectations, the expert pilot did not take the bait this time. Instead, Ghanso adopted a smug expression as he looked down on Ves as if he was an ant.

"Keep barking like a dog. It's all useless. Ever since you fell into our hands, you're finished. You'll no longer be around to pollute the values of our family after we reach our destination. Don't worry. You will still be safe. I am a Larkinson, after all. I would never agree to anything that harms your life."

Ghanso's ominous words inspired vigilance in Ves.

"What do the Cavendishes and Ramzas have in store for me? You sound as if you know something."

This time, it was Ghanso's turn to chuckle!

"You'll find out soon enough. Rest assured that you will be contributing to the Bright Republic in a much better way than leaving you on your own! Let me thank you in advance for your valiant service!"

With that, Ghanso turned around and left the cell.

Chapter 1713 Confinemen

Ghanso did not visit Ves again, and neither did anyone else for that matter. The crew of the combat carrier took their mission seriously and maintained a professional demeanor.

The sandmen had reached far and wide, and they could show up anywhere. While the ship was currently safe in FTL travel, who knew what they might encounter at the other end.

The carrier had to be ready to face an ambush. Venerable Ghanso needed to prepare himself for battle at any time. How could they possibly have the time to play with their prisoner?

Ves felt as if he was a piece of cargo thrown in the cargo hold of a transport. The crew were just responsible for bringing him from A to B without any superfluous steps!

He hated it. After spending a lot of time around people, this forced isolation was grating at him. He missed Gavin's dutiful reports, Raymond's advice, Nitaa's dedication, Gloriana's warmth and the energy of his design team.

It was only now that his captors deprived him from what he took for granted that Ves realized how much he depended on his friends and subordinates!

Loneliness swept through his mind and spirit, causing him to feel more and more depressed.

The bare cell didn't help any matters either. For some reason, security officers neglected to offer him any form of distraction or entertainment. They didn't even provide him with a single projector that allowed him to watch old dramas or something!

The lack of amenities forced Ves to depend on himself to pass the time.

He first attempted to develop some ideas for his next design project. Now that he completed the Deliverer design, Ves did not really have anything else on his plate.

It was difficult to figure out what mech he should design when he did not even know his future trajectory.

"I don't know where I'll stay next." He muttered.

With everything that happened today, his trust in the Bright Republic had dropped close to the bottom. While he identified himself as a Brighter, he no longer held the same amount of trust and loyalty in his home state.

Some of the words he spoke to the Larkinsons had come from the bottom of his heart. He truly meant it when he told them that they didn't owe the state anything anymore.

While he and the Larkinsons should be grateful to the Bright Republic for offering them a good environment to develop, it was difficult to go any further.

While Ves figured that the Bright Republic still offered more room for growth, the only way to do so was to grow under the tree of the Tovar Family.

"A shelter is also a cage. My family doesn't necessarily have to rely on others for protection."

Ves vastly preferred decoupling the Larkinsons from the Bright Republic and form a more independent existence. So long as his family could retain its most useful customs and traditions, it should have no problem sustaining a mercenary existence.

"That's not enough, though."

Becoming mercenaries was a step down for the Larkinsons! Most of them would certainly rebel if Ves pushed them into adopting an identity devoid of honor!

Only pirates and dark mercenaries ranked worse!

He scratched his head. "I'll have to consider this matter carefully."

Ideally, Ves wanted to make the Larkinsons work exclusively for him. The problem was that he couldn't expect every Larkinson to follow this mold. They were unlike him who did not really care about settling down somewhere else for the long term.

He needed to find some way that offered various options for his family while retaining a firm grasp on its core.

Since Ves had a lot of time on his hands, he methodically formed some ideas. Several hours went by as he explored every option he could think of. He eventually came up with a new vision for the family that entailed some radical changes!

His expression brightened as he looked forward to how he could change his family to his benefit!

Of course, plotting the future of his family only entertained him for so long. After he formed his ideas, he grew bored with pretending to be the architect of the new incarnation of his family.

He began to spend his time on something different. No matter how much his captors isolated him and deprived him with something to do, they could not prevent him from utilizing his Spirituality.

Ves turned his thoughts inwards and began to check on each active design spirit. He checked up on Qilanxo, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, Zeigra, Bravo, the Solemn Guardian and so on. He made sure to keep track of their strength, maturity, personality as well as their spiritual dividend distribution.

Most of them reached a plateau in their growth. Pure quantity no longer provided them with measurable benefits.

Fortunately, none of them appeared to be dissatisfied with their current lot. Ves believed that other spiritual entities would never be able to grow as fast and effortlessly than his design spirits!

"Your jobs are pretty cushy if you think about it! There's no reason for you to be dissatisfied with your current progress!"

The main downside to this easy growth was that none of his design spirits appeared eager to cultivate their strengths by themselves. They had grown completely dependent on the spiritual feedback provided by mech pilots!

This kind of relationship reminded Ves of the relationship between the Blessed People and the Sacred Gods they used to worship.

As a former Sacred God herself, Qilanxo had adopted her new role with a lot of gusto. Ves clearly sensed that she was applying her spiritual abilities in a much more sophisticated manner than the rest of his design spirits!

Unfortunately, Ves did not have the guts to ask Qilanxo to teach his other design spirits how

Getting in touch with each of them alleviated his loneliness, though not very much.

None of his design spirits were comparable to human company. Even Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, which was the most human design spirit in his collection, was far too pure and cerebral to provide good company.

They couldn't really help him out of his current predicament either. As design spirits, the most they could do was to influence the minds of people to a limited degree.

"It's not like I can convert the crew of this ship by exposing them to the glory of Prophet Ylvaine." He figured.

A few days went by as the combat carrier apparently traveled to a more distant star system. There were too many possible destinations to count. Space was unimaginably vast, but also filled with countless stars, many of them uninhabited due to their poor resource endowments and unattractive satellites.

Though Ves lost track of the day-night cycle, he tried his best to estimate how much time had passed.

At least he didn't have to worry about his hygiene. At irregular times, his cell would be blasted by an all-encompassing sonic blast that cleaned up his clothes and body.

This was a more convenient solution than offering him a shower, which Ves was very reluctant to take advantage of. He did not wish to expose his exceptional underwear and what he hid underneath!

"Thank goodness they went for the lazy option!"

The supply of food also came at irregular times. While Ves did not have access to a clock, his instinctive sense of time suggested that his meals arrived as little as two hours or as much as ten hours after he last had a bite!

"What is the point of this treatment?" He frowned.

From what he learned of the Vandals, these kinds of mind games were meant to disorient him and soften him up for further interrogation.

Could Ghanso have ordered the crew to mess with him as a form of revenge?

"Screw you, Ghanso!"

Fortunately, this unsettling period did not last forever.

By the time Ves felt his entire body experiencing some discomfort due to dropping out of FTL, he estimated that over three days had passed.

"I wonder how my people are doing at home. Hopefully, they haven't fallen apart in my absence."

The LMC and his other organizations should still be keeping everything together. He could also count on Gloriana to be on the lookout for anything that threatened his enterprises.

Roughly an hour or so passed before something broke the monotony of his confinement.

His ears picked up a strong and familiar stride. Ghanso Larkinson had returned. He gestured towards the guards on duty. They stepped forward and deactivated the energy screen.

"Did you finally receive orders to free me or something?" Ves asked.

"Not quite." Ghanso shook his head. "We've completely shut off contact. If you hoped for an early release, then keep dreaming. We are still following our original orders. In fact, we can only restore contact after we have transferred you out of our hands!"

Ves sneered. "Sounds like General Cavendish is very certain that his orders would be countermanded. Don't you think that your mission is improper in that case?"

"There's a reason why we are laying low. Luckily for you, Ves, you'll soon find out what we have in store."

Ghanso did not talk to him any further. He merely watched on as the guards picked him up from his cot and held him gently by the arms.

They slowly left the brig and entered the corridors. They walked passed various crew members, who did not react to Ves at all, which he found strange.

After ascending a couple of decks, they reached the starboard side of the combat carrier and halted in front of an exit hatch.

"Where are you taking me?" Ves asked with some concern.

"You'll see." Ghanso smiled coyly.

Eventually, Ves felt a minute thud from the hatch, signifying that some sort of object had formed a connection to the exit.

The hatch soon slid open, causing air from a different ship to briefly wash over their bodies!

The temperature and filtering of the air was distinctly different. Ves became more and more concerned what lay at the other end.

"Let's go, Ves." Ghanso prodded his back. "Only the two of us are allowed to proceed."

The pair of armored guards let go of his arms, allowing Ves to move on his own. Since there was nothing he could do to resist despite regaining his freedom of motion, he entered the walkway while Ghanso followed him from behind.

"Are you worried that I'm going to escape or something?" Ves frowned.

"Stop blabbering and keep walking!"

They silently crossed the distance and emerged onto an entirely different vessel.

Ves inspected the interior design and looked surprised.

"What a luxurious ship!"

The rich interior reminded him of a passenger liner in the way that it broke up the monotony by offering a lot of decoration. The warm colors, the artful projections, the tasteful plants, the gilded accents and the pleasant scent did not fit a military vessel at all! The Mech Corps would never waste so much resources on some useless luxuries!

What alarmed Ves even more was that the quality of the materials seemed unusually high! While he was not familiar with the specific formulas, he felt that even the smallest plant pot cost as much as a budget mech!

A single hatch opened up, revealing a single woman dressed in a very sophisticated business suit.

The woman walked forward with heels that clacked against the deck in a steady pattern. Once she reached the two Larkinsons, the blond woman smiled.

"Ves Larkinson. I'm very pleased to meet you. I have looked forward to our meeting for a while now!" She turned to his cousin. "Thank you, Venerable Larkinson, for bringing him to us. We will certainly repay this favor by dispatching our nearest mercenary corps to bolster your Bentheim System!"

"How many mechs?" Ghanso asked.

"Around three-hundred mechs. All second-class. All piloted by adequate mech pilots. They will assist in repelling the sandmen for the remainder of the Sand War!"

Ves grew suspicious of the woman's sophisticated accent. Her superior demeanor which did not show any hint of deference towards an expert pilot signified that her status was quite extraordinary!

After inspecting the woman some more, he realized why her attire seemed so familiar!

"You're a Fridayman!" He gasped.

"Correct!"

Ves turned to Ghanso in shock! "You traitor! It's not enough for you to shoot against your own family!"

What Ghanso did was nothing less than selling his own cousin to the Fridaymen!

Chapter 1714 Justified Transaction

Now that he ended up on another ship, Ves finally realized the horrible truth.

The plot aimed against him was a lot more complicated than he expected!

From what little Ghanso and the female Fridayman had said, Ves figured out the gist of what had taken place.

General Cavendish did not intend to bring him back to Rittersberg or New Foundation from the start!

When the depths of his actions became known, it would be very hard to keep Ves in custody!

This was especially so because the Tovars would never let their rivals mess with their allies!

Perhaps the Tovars might not care too much about a random individual, but Ves was different.

He forged a greater pact with Senator Tovar that intertwined their interests to a greater degree than usual!

If the Tovars failed to meet their obligations, then they would not only damage their credibility, but also earn the ire of Gloriana for no good reason!

It was extremely worrisome to be targeted by the darling of the Wodin Dynasty. While she was just a mech designer, she could easily pull a lot of strings to make life very difficult for the Tovar Family or the entire Bright Republic!

Therefore, the Tovars should be constantly lobbying on his behalf for his eventual release.

Someone as old as General Cavendish should surely be aware of how difficult it would be to take Ves off the board and deprive the Tovars of an exceptional ally.

Since the Cavendishes and the Ramzas couldn't find a way to keep Ves confined, why not hand him off to someone else?

It was no secret that the Bright Republic and its institutions developed some relationships with the citizens and organizations of the Friday Coalition.

The founding families should have definitely forged very close ties considering how long they had been in power!

While the Komodo War caused many states like the Bright Republic to adopt an openly neutral posture, their bonds to their greater patrons still existed!

From what Ves had guessed, General Cavendish formed a clandestine deal with some Fridaymen.

In exchange for handing over Ves to them, the Fridaymen promised to dispatch one of their powerful mercenary corps to relieve the pressure on Bentheim!

Three-hundred second-class mechs was incredibly powerful! While they weren't enough to fend off all of the sandmen that barged into the Bentheim System, they could easily fend off entire sandman fleets by themselves, thereby giving the local defenders some breathing room!

Ves underestimated General Cavendish! If the mech general's plot succeeded, then Cavendish would be able to harvest several gains while minimizing the damage he incurred by abusing his authority!

First, he could justify taking Ves away by pushing all of the blame on the Fridaymen.

If the general claimed that a powerful organization from the Friday Coalition really wanted to get their hands on Ves, how could he possibly refuse?

Second, he could rightfully justify his actions as contributing to the Bright Republic by securing the assistance of a powerful Fridayman mercenary corps!

So far, very few second-class outfits from the Friday Coalition and elsewhere deigned to fight the sandmen.

For General Cavendish to secure the aid of even one mercenary corps from a second-rate state was enough to mollify the rest of the Mech Corps!

This was because the Bright Republic truly needed all of the help it could get!

The best kind of help it could get consisted of immediate help that came in the form of mechs!

In contrast to the tangible help that a powerful outfit could provide, the benefits to keeping Ves was much more ambiguous!

Ves was just one of a thousand Journeyman hailing from the Bright Republic. He wasn't even a Senior who possessed a much greater pedigree in designing mechs!

While his small number of mech designs were all exceptional, few believed that Ves could design yet another mech that changed the overall war situation!

Most Brighters did not pin their hopes on a specific mech designer to come up with a killer mech design. This was because their success was very variable. One day, they might come up with a winning product. The next day, their product might flop!

Ves experienced both outcomes himself. His Desolate Soldier had been a smashing success while the Mech Corps produced only a couple of hundred copies of his Militant Soldier!

Rather than gambling on a low-probability event by pinning its hope on Ves, the state was much better off trading him to the Fridaymen to secure concrete benefits!

"Hehehe.. very well done!"

He couldn't help but chuckle uncontrollably when he realized how deep in trouble he was in right now!

Falling in the hands of the Fridayman was much worse than ending up as an unwilling guest of the Cavendish or Ramza Family!

At least the latter had to abide by the laws of the Bright Republic and the will of its people!

The trouble that Ves stirred up back in Cloudy Curtain was meant to exert pressure on his captors by exposing their sordid schemes to the Larkinsons and the public!

However, even if his entire family and the half of the citizens of the Bright Republic stood up in protest, what did that matter to the Fridaymen?

The Friday Coalition could effortlessly crush the Bright Republic without affecting their war against the Hexadric Hegemony!

Even Gloriana was rendered helpless as well! The Fridaymen were mortal enemies to the Hexers. It was impossible for them to come to an accord this time, especially during a decisive war!

Once Ves got over his dire realizations, he did his best to regain his composure. "Sorry for that. I couldn't help but become ABSOLUTELY CRAZY for a moment because of what you have done!"

"I am truly sorry for the unpleasanties surrounding your.. unusual transfer, Mr. Larkinson." The woman addressed him with respect. "We hope you will allow us to treat you as our guest. We have kept our eye on you ever since you released your Desolate Soldier. We hold immense respect for your accomplishments."

Ves sneered at the woman. While he usually preferred to be more diplomatic, especially towards someone who was in control over his life, he didn't give a damn at the moment!

The betrayal he just witnessed still made him mad beyond reason!

"I already cut ties with you Fridaymen! I want nothing to do with you! I have already committed myself to Gloriana!"

"You should forget about that vixen, Ves." Ghanso suggested with a smirk. "You know how Hexers are. They only acknowledge women as equals. Men like us are destined to be regarded as pets or toys! A star sector ruled by Hexers is the last thing our Bright Republic needs! You've been aligning with the wrong side all this time! What I've done is merely to correct your mistake and put you back on the right track!"

"Absurd! Don't pretend you are doing what is best for our state and myself! What if the Hexers win the war? Did you think about that, Ghanso?! You, the Larkinsons and our state will definitely face a reckoning if that happens!"

"Hahaha!" Ghanso erupted in laughter. "Unlike a weasel like you, I see no need to hedge my bets! I'm going all in on the Friday Coalition! Their values and their culture are highly compatible with our Bright Republic! It's madness to even consider adopting Hexer customs! I don't know what kind of fetish you have for mistresses, but leave the rest of us out! The men of our Larkinson Family would much prefer to keep their dignity in front of women!"

The blond woman lifted her hand. "That's enough, Venerable Ghanso. Let us not give Mr. Ves here an unpleasant farewell."

"You're right, miss." Ghanso retracted some of his smugness. He turned to Ves with a much more serious expression. "For what it's worth, you're right. I sold you to the Fridaymen. To be more exact, I participated in the action that resulted in this outcome."

"You don't sound remorseful."

"I won't apologise for what I've done. Everything I do is for the betterment of our family and the state I have made an oath to defend. The sandman race is not our greatest enemy. The Hexers that you've unilaterally sided with are much worse! The former just wants to kill us. The latter wants to destroy our identity!"

Though Ves wanted to argue back, he couldn't muster up a convincing response. He was too angry and unbalanced to think straight!

"Your intentions are good, but your means are dishonorable. Since when did the Larkinsons believe that the ends justify the means? Some actions are too reprehensible to be acceptable!"

"When my actions end up saving the lives of trillions of people and keep the Bright Republic in existence, I am more than willing to shoulder the guilt of my actions! While I acknowledge that I am wrong, I will sleep easily knowing that I have made the galaxy a better place!"

After patting Ves' shoulder in a patronizing manner, Ghanso exchanged a few words with the woman before returning back to the combat carrier!

The hatch closed after the expert pilot's departure. Presumably, the walkway was being retracted as well!

Ves turned to the woman and tried to estimate whether it would be a good idea to storm up to her and take her hostage.

He immediately crossed out this stupid idea.

Even though no guards were in sight, Ves did not delude himself into thinking he was in control.

He owned the Barracuda for many years, so he knew a bit about the security measures of such advanced vessels.

If Ves made any hostile move, the artificial gravity affecting his body might grow five times as strong, causing him to be pressed down to the deck!

A couple of turrets might emerge from the ceiling!

The surrounding bulkheads might shift until he was boxed in a makeshift compartment with no exit in sight!

Some kind of invisible, odorless paralytic gas might be pumped in the air, causing him to instantly lose his consciousness!

In short, there were at least a dozen ways for Ves to get taken out by the internal ship defenses alone!

So long as Ves did not grasp control over this unknown but very advanced vessel, he could forget about escaping!

"So.. isn't it about time you introduce yourself?"

"Please be patient, Mr. Larkinson. My lady wishes to introduce herself to you in person. For now, let us settle you in and allow you to freshen up. My lady desires to meet you at your best."

"I see."

That sounded bad for Ves. If he was forced to shower or change his clothes, he might expose his hidden goods!

The woman led the way while Ves obediently followed like he was marching to his execution. A sense of resignation suffused his body as he kept looking around.

The ship he was on was a lot larger than his Barracuda, that was for sure. The vessel might even outclass Gloriana's Stellar Chaser!

The more formidable his current captors, the more his confidence sank. He already ruled out trying to escape from this unknown ship by himself. There were way too many systems and redundancies for him to sabotage the vessel with his limited means!

After going up a few decks, Ves got a sense that they reached the most premier passenger compartments. The woman guided him into a resplendent stateroom that was much more grand than his stateroom on the Barracuda!

"This shall be your accommodation for the remainder of our journey to the Friday Coalition. We hope you have a pleasant stay aboard our ship as our honored guest. Please forgive us for disabling or restricting many of the functions here. To ensure your good behavior, we have decided to limit what you can do. You have a reputation for trouble, after all. Isn't that right, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves smiled grimly at the caution in her words. How much did these Fridaymen research his exploits? It sounded as if they were a lot more aware of what he could do than his usual enemies!

Chapter 1715 Freshening Up

After issuing some brief instructions, the woman granted Ves an hour to himself.

He was supposed to come to terms with his new situation. The Fridayman also told him to clean himself up and change his clothes to an outfit that his new hosts had already prepared for him. Apparently, his Pride of Dusk was too crude and wild to the sophisticated tastes of the 'lady' that owned this ship!

As the woman left his new quarters, Ves scratched his head while frowning at her back.

While it wasn't immediately apparent, the woman gave off the vibe of a Benny.

This was strange, since she clearly looked down on Ghanso when she talked to him. It was as if an expert pilot clearly did not matter in her eyes!

In contrast, the woman clearly treated Ves differently. Despite becoming their unwilling guest, the Fridaymen who nabbed him wanted to foster a cordial relationship with him! He felt as if he was being wooed for some reason!

After trying to figure out what the Fridaymen wanted from him, he eventually shrugged.

"Well, whatever. I certainly won't complain about my treatment. This stateroom is a thousand times better than my previous cell!"

Ves suspected that his earlier treatment aboard the combat carrier was meant to foster the gratitude he felt right now.

"What a nasty trick!" He gasped.

The worst part about this subtle move was that Ves genuinely appreciated his upgraded accommodations while he was fully aware that he had been manipulated!

Ves held much less control over his emotions than his thoughts. In fact, he doubted he possessed any ability to affect his emotions at all!

Though he tried his best to stay rational most of the time, he was far from mastering his own emotions.

His inability to find fault with his captors for providing him with a very comfortable room was grating at his mind!

He felt the urge to beat up his own head until he succeeded in sorting out his emotions!

"What am I thinking?!"

He vigorously shook his head to rid himself of his stupid thoughts. He decided to focus on something else, lest he fall back to his pointless internal turmoil.

He spent ten minutes going over the amenities of his stateroom.

The queen-sized bed placed in the center was incredibly soft and fluffy. Ves had a sense that he would immediately fall asleep if he laid down his body on its surface!

Various advanced features allowed him to change its configuration. He could raise the bed, narrow or widen its dimensions, form a concave in the center, activate some all-encompassing massage routine, make it roll over his body at certain preprogrammed times, and so on.

He had never seen a bed like this. He even recognized that everything about it, from its bed frame to the silky fabrics, consisted entirely of expensive composites that incorporated some special exotics!

Every other piece of furniture was just as extravagant! From the projector that depicted a lively vista of a bustling city from the Friday Coalition, to the solid wooden desk that appeared to have been made by wood cut from an extraordinary tree, everything about his stateroom exuded class that was fit for a prominent Fridayman!

"Gloriana would love this if there isn't such a heavy Coalition influence!"

Every piece of furniture and decoration alluded to the powerful state in one way or another.

From the flag of the starry arrow pointing upwards in front of a hopeful green background, to the symbol of the nine-headed hydra, everything around him carried the unmistakable marks of the Coalition!

The flag of the Friday Coalition represented the aspiration of the state. It signified the hope that the Coalition would be able to unite disparate stars into a single unified state with the strength to contend for more!

The nine-headed hydra symbolized the unity of the original Coalition which used to consist of nine different partners.

Over the centuries, three of the partners fell for various reasons. The surviving partners gobbled up their former territories, thereby leaving six who survived the test of time!

In the Komodo Star Sector, the fact that six partners of the Coalition still survived was kind of an ironic joke.

Of course, no one dared to repeat this joke in front of a Fridayman!

Ves hummed for a moment as he inspected some of the trinkets. "Something is missing."

His surroundings didn't show any markings that pointed to a specific partner. Had he been nabbed by the Konsu Clan. Was the Vermeer Group of dragging him back into its orbit?

"The latter makes no sense! There is no way Master Olson will want me back after cutting ties!"

He also believed that a highly principled mech designer like her would never go back on her word!

Though that did not discount the possibility that another faction within the Vermeer Group might have different ideas, but Master Olson's response would certainly be terrible once she found it! It wasn't worth it for one of her rivals within the Group to mess with one of her former Apprentices!

No. Whoever captured Ves should probably be powerful enough to endure Master Olson's protests!

While he toured his new accommodations, he also explored what he could do, which wasn't very much.

At least he had access to a projector that allowed him to access a very narrow selection of programs. The interface was extremely limited and did not give him any room for manipulation.

As he explored his options, he found out that most of the selection consisted of both entertainment and educational programs.

Naturally, all of their content was related to the Friday Coalition!

"Are these guys trying to indoctrinate me or something?" He frowned.

The way he was being treated gave him some clues of what his captors wanted to do. Obviously, they wanted to convert him to their side on a strictly voluntary basis. They restricted themselves to employing soft methods in order to preserve all of his strengths and qualities!

Ves was aware that the Fridaymen could have employed more forceful means such as coercion or outright brainwashing, but that would definitely cripple his ability to design mechs!

This meant that his captors highly prized his design capabilities, which was within his expectations.

When Ves moved over to the desk, he tried his best to find a switch or command that would activate its terminal.

Only to find out that it didn't offer him anything of the sort at all!

"So it's true. They're too scared to give me access to an actual interface!"

Who knew what kind of mischief he could do if he had access to the network of the ship!

The simplest way to minimize this trouble was to take away the terminal entirely!

"How am I supposed to do anything if I don't have a terminal?" He whined. "I can't design mechs or do anything productive if I don't have a terminal or a comm!"

He explored his stateroom once again and approached something that looked extremely anachronistic and out of place!

"Is this.. a genuine bookcase?"

He withdrew a book and tried to get used to the foreign sensation of holding something so archaic. He cracked it open to browse its contents, only to widen his eyes at the complex diagrams printed on its pages!

"This is a textbook! And an advanced one at that!"

He flipped the pages and surmised that the textbook was about energy transmission systems of high-value mechs.

More specifically, it taught its readers plenty of theory and applications on how to design the energy transmission system of an advanced second-class mech!

He abruptly chuckled and snapped the book shut before putting it back on its place.

"They sure know me well."

The lengthy bookcase held hundreds of hardcover books, each of them containing knowledge that second-class mech designers should master!

All of these physical textbooks were enough to keep him busy for a long time! He did not mind being deprived of a terminal as long as he could devour all of these books!

Ves glanced at a nearby clock and remembered his upcoming meeting. "Oh, I should really prepare for my upcoming meeting."

He headed into the bathroom and inspected the outfit that his captors had prepared for him. It was a very understated business outfit that exuded class without looking too gauche.

This was the kind of outfit that a long-established noble would want to wear. Ves could tell, because Gloriana already taught him some of this during her occasional lectures.

Naturally, the specific fashion of this outfit fully conformed with the current trend of the Friday Coalition! Ves would look no different from a Fridayman if he donned these clothes!

If Ves had a say, he would much rather stick to his current outfit. The Pride of Dusk was something that truly belonged to him. Its cut completely conformed to the fashion of the Bright Republic.

"Well, that woman didn't leave me with any leeway." He grimaced.

He decided that it was best to play along despite knowing that it was a mental trap.

The only issue was his underwear. He did not wish to expose his contraband, which he would surely do if he removed his clothes!

"You better not be spying on me! I'm a very private person!" Ves angrily raised his fist in a random direction!

He came up with an unconventional solution. He stripped all of his clothes aside from his underwear and did his best to pretend the 'bulge' was something else aside from his cylindrical jamming device!

After carefully folding his clothes, he jumped into the shower and just let the water flow down his body while he was half-naked.

"If you think you can enjoy a show, think again! No peeking!"

By using his desire for privacy as an excuse, Ves hoped that his strange decision to shower with his underpants could be excused!

He did not worry about his hidden comm and jamming devices. Both of them were waterproof and would never malfunction after being submerged in water.

Ves pretended that there was nothing wrong and nonchalantly washed his before allowing the shower cabin to dry off his body and underpants.

After that, he stepped out and slowly began to don his new outfit. He had to admit that the suit fitted his dimensions perfectly. As he looked at himself in a three-dimensional mirror projection, he had to admit he looked very sharp!

He rummaged around the bathroom and found a small beauty bot. Once he activated it, the bot automatically floated to his head and began to style his hair in a neat comb over that was much slicker than his usual messy hair style.

After applying some subtle makeup to his face, he finally felt confident enough to meet the person responsible for taking him away from his home.

"Here goes nothing." He sighed.

Once he exited the bathroom, the blond female assistant was already waiting for him inside his stateroom!

"Follow me. My lady will see you now, Mr. Larkinson."

Unlike before, they didn't traverse the length of the ship this time. They merely crossed a fairly short distance before entering a lounge compartment.

As soon as Ves stepped inside, the assistant led him up to some couches where two women awaited his arrival.

"Mr Larkinson!" A very gorgeous blond greeted him with a very gleeful smile. She wore a sophisticated red dress that accentuated her figure while not showing anything off. "Welcome aboard the Scarlet Rose! I hope you are happy with your assigned room. I personally configured it for your needs."

As Ves seated himself on the opposite couch, he awkwardly smiled back at the woman who seemed to be around his age.

"I am.. appreciative of what you have made available to me. Can you introduce yourself?"

"Why certainly! I am Aisling Curver, a Journeyman Mech Designer from the Gauge Dynasty. I am also a junior monitor assigned to observe and manage some of the Friday Coalition's affairs in the Bright Republic!"

"I.. see. You're a spy, then."

"Oh, goodness, no!" Her voice tinkling like bells. "I am strictly a monitor! I merely accepted this duty to earn some merits. I wouldn't have stumbled upon a mech designer as fantastic as you if I turned down this boring assignment!"

"And your companion..? Is she the same?"

"She's my helper. She accepted a similar duty to earn merits as well. She's been very helpful to me since she's very familiar with the lay of the land."

Ves grimly nodded. "I'm aware. Hi, Patricia."

"Hello, Ves." Patricia Schneider greeted him back in a demure tone.

Chapter 1716 Lady Aisling Curver

Ever since he realized he fell in the hands of the Fridaymen, Ves tried to guess the identity of the ultimate beneficiary.

He half-expected to meet a familiar face, and he did in the form of an old classmate.

Of all the people he expected to meet, he never thought he would meet Patricia Scheider under these circumstances!

Oh, it should be Patricia Cain by now. She recently married a random Apprentice from the Carnegie Group.

Patricia should no longer be a Brighter now. She abandoned her former state and moved up to a better one!

Yet even if she had abandoned her roots and become a Fridayman by marriage, Ves never expected that she would stoop so low and be part of his kidnapping!

Being betrayed by Ghanso was already bad enough to Ves. Getting stabbed in the back by Patricia somehow sparked an irrational fury within his heart!

The mild glare he directed towards her only encompassed a small part of his desire to take revenge!

He tried his best to temper his fury. It had already been boiling for a while, but in this precarious circumstance losing control would not help matters further!

He forcibly suppressed his desire to kill Patricia. Looking at her demure posture and her deference towards Aisling Curver, she should be just as she said, a helper.

In order to hide his temper, Ves decided to distract himself by satisfying his curiosity. He restored his composure and tried to maintain a calm smile.

"Patricia.. why are you here?"

"Everyone must contribute to the war between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony." She replied with a calm voice. "As an Apprentice under Master Null, I must also do my part. Due to my limited foundation, I decided to leverage my familiarity with the Bright Republic and applied to be part of Lady Curver's monitoring team."

"Did you target me, Patricia?"

She shook her head. "It was never my intention to aim at you specifically."

"My assistant is right." Aisling Curver spoke, obviously intending to direct his attention away from Patricia. "In fact, we never acted proactively. I intended to abide by my mission and monitor your state's resistance against the sandmen without intervening. It was just a complete coincidence that General Ulrich Cavendish approached me with an interesting proposal."

"You are supposed to be a monitor, right?" Ves frowned. "Doesn't that mean you shouldn't interfere at all in our state's affairs?"

Lady Curver grinned. "That is ordinarily true, but General Cavendish approached me as a representative of his state. The Bright Republic is really desperate, you know? I should know since I have been monitoring your state for some time. Its infrastructure is falling apart and Bentheim is starting to crack under the pressure. While we Fridayman don't particularly care about your state, it is not that difficult to lift a finger and increase its chances of survival."

The Friday Coalition didn't care about the Bright Republic. However, if the latter fell, the Coalition would have to expend some effort and time to recultivate relations with the state that succeeded it. That cost the Coalition far more than dispatching a single mercenary corps to help ease the pressure!

Ves sighed. He couldn't really fault Lady Curver for being generous enough to lend a hand to his state. It was just that the deal was too sordid! The price for her assistance was by handing him over as if he was nothing more than a commodity!

Ves hated being treated as a commodity!

"While I admit that the help you offered is very helpful to our state, I object to the means you have employed. I had no say in this! No one asked me if I wanted to fall into your hands!"

He couldn't hold his anger this time.

Fortunately, Lady Curver did not blame him for showing his resentment. She merely smiled at him as if everything was okay!

"You're upset. You have a right to be. While I am not proud of what I have done, I think it is a very great opportunity for the both of us! I have always kept my eye on you, did you know? As the illustrious designer of the Desolate Soldier, I have tracked your accomplishments very closely! If that obsessive pig Gloriana hadn't stolen you first, I would have already introduced myself to you! Luckily, General Cavendish's scheme gave me an opening!"

"You're.. a fan?"

"Oh, yes!" The blonde woman gushed. "I just love your glows and the way you manage to influence your mech pilots in a strange but gentle manner! This is exactly what I need to branch out my design philosophy and pursue a different path from my Master!"

Ves looked up at that. "Who are you, exactly?"

"Let me introduce myself to you again. My name is Aisling Curver. I'm a Journeyman Mech Designer and a direct disciple of Master Toqueman Huron! Are you familiar with my master?"

A direct disciple! This meant that Lady Curver was similar to Tristan Wesseling! She inherited the design philosophy of a genuine Master Mech Designer!

"If I recall.. Master Huron is a professor at the Clarion University of Mech Design, which is one of the premier mech design institutions of the Gauge Dynasty!"

The Gauge Dynasty was considerably more powerful than the Carnegie Group! The prestige of Clarion University surpassed the Leemar Institute of Technology by a significant margin!

"Correct! You know your Masters. Are you aware of his specialty?"

Ves hesitated for a moment. "I only memorized that he specializes in neural interconnectivity. I'm afraid I am not aware of what that means."

"That's not surprising. Neural interconnectivity is one of the more esoteric specialties. It is a rather obscure field that is technically classified as a Class VIII design philosophy, but is actually as difficult to progress as a Class IX design philosophy!"

"Why is that so?"

Lady Curver relaxed her posture. She was relieved that Ves no longer addressed what had happened but instead asked about her passion!

"Neural interconnectivity is a wondrous field! Let me explain it to you this way. When you think about a mech, do they ever fight alone?"

Ves shook his head. "They're always deployed in squads or larger units. A group of mechs working together can get a lot more things done than a single expensive mech! Of course, the quality, design, cost and mech pilot all affect their relative strengths. It is not a sure thing that a single good mech can defeat a squad of mediocre mechs, but it is possible as long as the former is outrageous enough!"

For example, Ghanso's Glittering Comet annihilated his Avatars and Sentinels without encountering any significant resistance!

While a large part of that was because he was representing the Mech Corps, his expert mech already caused his opponents to give up any hope of restraining it! The Glittering Comet was simply too powerful!

"As an experienced marketer, you should be aware that the mechs in use today are mostly employed in groups." Curver noted. "If a mech model is too expensive, then our customers won't be able to equip all of their mech pilots with a machine. If a mech model is too cheap, then our customers will face a bottleneck in manpower! The ideal mech ought to be positioned somewhere in between. This means that there is a range of cost and quality that hits the sweet spot of the market."

"I know all of this. You don't have to explain the composition of market demand to me. Budget mechs and midrange mechs are the most prominent mechs on the market."

"Okay, since you know this, let's take a midrange mech design as a starting point. How can you strengthen this product?"

"There are many ways to do so. You incorporate more powerful exotics. You licence more advanced components. You expand your knowledge base and improve your application of it. You refine your design style and implement more ingenious solutions. You partner up with another mech designer who can compensate for your weaknesses."

Lady Curver nodded again and again. "Those are all valid solutions. The problem is that it's difficult to employ them. The budget of a midrange mech only goes so far. It's not viable to replace a medium-grade exotic with a high-grade exotic. That will certainly double or triple the cost of your mech model! As for the other solutions, each of them will either break the bank or exceed your capabilities! Only the last solution you've offered is different, but let's leave that for later."

"What is the point you are trying to make, milady?"

"Call me Aisling, please. I am not your enemy here. In fact, it's the opposite! I'm your benefactor! I intend to save you from the clutches of those witches who see you as nothing more than a boy toy! You should thank me for offering you an opportunity to regain your dignity as a man!"

Ves scowled and pounded his chest with his palm. "I never asked to be saved! Let me make one thing clear. I love Gloriana!"

While his relationship with Gloriana was very problematic on many levels, Ves had truly developed an affection for her! Hexer or not, female supremacist or not, the love they shared was completely genuine!

After encountering betrayal after betrayal in the past couple of days, Ves had grown very disillusioned with people.

He had come to hate the act of betrayal and anyone who resorted to it! No matter how righteously they justified their betrayals, people like Ghanso and Patricia deserved to get their comeuppance!

It was due to being the victim of betrayal that Ves felt as if his mind had changed. He developed a new principle that stated that he should never engage in betrayal unless his victims truly deserved it! He refused to lower himself to their standards!

This was also why he adored Gloriana. She not only trusted him completely, she had also remained loyal to him throughout their relationship!

Even now, Ves was sure that Gloriana was trying her best to get him back! He could count on her to track him down and rescue him from his captors!

Of course, Lady Curver did not take well to his declaration. She frowned and flipped her lustrous blond hair.

"It seems like the Hexers have already begun to turn you into their slave. Has Ves always been so susceptible to women, Patricia?"

"I can't say. I did not pay much attention to him while we were studying at Rittersberg." His old classmate innocently replied.

Curver pressed a finger against her lips while staring at Ves in pity. "You poor, poor man. Who knows how much self-esteem you'll lose if you remain by Gloriana's side. Don't worry, Ves! You're free now! I'll do my best to restore you as a man!"

"Let's not talk about this." Ves waved his hand. "You still haven't explained what neural interconnectivity is all about."

"Oh, yes! Well, getting back to my explanation, neural interconnectivity is simply an alternative solution to the problem I've mentioned. Aside from employing those other solutions, some mech designers in the past decided to increase the performance of their mechs by relying on teamwork! As long as the mech pilots are all trained to coordinate and act in unison with each other, the strength they can bring to bear will absolutely be more than the sum of its parts!"

"This does not sound very odd to me, Aisling. All mech militaries, from my Bright Republic's Mech Corps to your Gauge Dynasty's Sundered Phalanx rely on teamwork to gain an edge over their opponents."

"Ah, but the teamwork I'm talking about goes beyond regular coordination." The woman tapped her head. "Have you ever wondered what would happen if you expand the man-machine connection to more than a single mech and mech pilot? What if you connect multiple mech pilots together? As long as they achieve a certain degree of synchronization, the coordination they can exert will make their unit fight like a single entity!"

What?!

"That.. sounds crazy!" Ves uttered in shock. "Messing with the man-machine connection is extremely dangerous! Any deviations can easily inflict permanent brain damage to the mech pilot!"

Chapter 1717 Neural Interconnectivity

Ves encountered plenty of design philosophies over his career. His recent tour throughout the star sector allowed him to come into contact with plenty of Journeymen who each developed their own ideas on how to design better mechs.

He admired the creativity of those Journeymen. The galactic mech industry was incredibly huge and countless competitors had already come up with their own solutions.

It was very difficult to develop an original design philosophy that still hadn't been explored!

Out of all of the design philosophies he learned, Master Huron's design philosophy was probably one of the most extreme ones he heard!

It sounded even crazier than Class IX design philosophies! Not only did Master Huron decide to dedicate himself in the very sensitive field of neural interfaces, he opted to explore one of its most extreme applications in the form of connecting neural interfaces together!

Lady Curver allowed Ves some time to get over his shock.

"Many mech designers like you react like this when they first learn what neural interconnectivity means. Before you attempt to lecture me, don't forget that my Master has managed to realize his design philosophy. Neural interconnectivity is a real thing, and he's not the only mech designer in the galaxy who succeeded in applying it in a safe and useful manner!"

She was right. While Ves was imagining all sorts of horror stories, a mech designer would never be able to reach Master with this specialization if he didn't find a way to apply it without excessive risk!

Ves grew curious how Master Huron managed to grapple with the risks of experimenting with neural interfaces.

"The premise is simple, though the application is much more complex." She replied. "Two peas in a pod are very similar to each other. One of the simplest ways to form a stable neural network that connections the mind of a mech pilot to the mind of another mech pilot is by finding and pairing identical twins. Since they are already identical in many ways, there isn't much incompatibility if we form a small connection between their minds."

"It can't be that simple, right? One mistake can instantly ruin both of their brains!"

"That is true. My Master and I have never dared to open the floodgates. We only open up a tiny slit so that only a limited amount of data can be transferred back and forth. The bandwidth of this connection can be expanded gradually to strengthen the coordination between the mech pilots as they get more familiar with operating in this fashion."

"Identical twins, especially naturally-born ones, should be rare. Are those the only customers your Master is catering towards?"

"That was just his starting point, Ves. As he developed his design philosophy, he focused on expanding the pool of eligible mech pilots. He developed a way to pair brother to sister, father to son, mentor and student, and so on. My Master also engaged

in a lot of research to expand the size of what we call the neural network. While this was incredibly difficult, he managed to find a way to pair an entire squad with each other. Once he achieved this breakthrough, it became easier for him to expand the neural network to encompass an entire mech company and mech battalion!"

That sounded incredibly powerful! Ves knew the importance of coordination in battle.

If a mech battalion numbering 500 mechs all fought in perfect sync with each other, Ves could easily imagine it beating twice its numbers! Even when the quality of the mechs and the skill of the mech pilots were identical between the two forces, the side with the better coordination possessed an absolute advantage!

Ves understood why neural interconnectivity was such a worthy goal to pursue despite all of the inherent risks surrounding neural interface technology. If Master Huron truly managed to develop a safe application of connecting mech pilots together, then this was absolutely a way to circumvent the conventional limitations of increasing the battle performance of mechs!

Unlike adding more expensive exotics or incorporating high technology in a mech design, the cost to set up a neural network was not that significant!

The only requirement to form a stable network was to upgrade the neural interface and some other components in the cockpit. Nothing more was necessary!

While the underlying tech was very complicated and abstruse, this was not a significant problem as long as Master Huron specialized it to the point where he could design a specialized neural interface in his sleep!

Ves couldn't help but convey genuine admiration for Master Huron's success! However, he quickly grew suspicious. If neural networks were so fantastic, why hadn't he heard of it? Why hadn't this tech become more widely known?

"There has to be a catch, right?" He asked.

Aisling dropped her smile and sighed. "Sadly, my Master hasn't been able to develop a way to solve all of the issues surrounding neural interconnectivity. The risks you've mentioned still exist. It is just that one of the main solutions my Master has come up with has mitigated them to an extent."

"What is his solution?"

"It's very simple! He only designs mechs for elite, highly-trained outfits and military units! When a mech regiment has developed a strong martial tradition and identity, all of its mech pilots share the same values, mindsets, training and fighting spirit! The greater their commonalities, the easier it becomes to unify them in a neural network!"

"There should still be a lot of differences between the individual mech pilots, right?"

"Correct. The neural networks my Master has formed for mech companies and mech battalions are only the shallowest versions of what he can provide. We don't dare to expand the bandwidth of the connections for fear of unpleasant side effects. Only smaller units such as squads made up of close companions are safe to form a greater network."

"I see. That makes sense. It sounds like your Master still has a lot to go. This field is far from mature."

"That's where you come, Ves." Aisling directed an intrigued glance at him. The hunger in her eyes was not that different from how Gloriana stared at him sometimes! "Your specialty has a lot of potential. While I'm not sure what metaphysical man-machine symbiosis really means, it is obvious that it bears close relations with my field!"

"What.. what do you want to do?"

"Why, combine our specialties together! Just imagine it! What if we add one of my specialized neural interfaces to your Desolate Soldier? We'd create a revolutionary new mech! The biggest issue concerning neural interconnectivity is that it's hard to sustain a neural network if there is too much discordancy between the mech pilots. The further their thoughts and attitudes diverge, the greater the risk of adverse effects!"

Ves realized what she was after! "You.. you want to make use of my glows to increase the synchronization between connected mech pilots!"

"Exactly! I've performed a lot of research on your customers in my free time. It is not difficult to discover that every mech pilot of your Desolate Soldier and other mechs have each come under the influence of the glows of their machines! This essentially means that when they are put in battle together, they have already started to exhibit a rudimentary form of close coordination!"

This did not sound very strange to Ves. He knew that when a bunch of his mechs were put together, their mech pilots always exhibited greater coordination! The overlapping of glows created some mysterious effects that subtly enhanced the performance of the mechs in many ways.

Ves had always wanted to explore the potential of using glows to connect different mechs and mech pilots together to achieve better results, but he didn't have the time to explore this tangent!

Nonetheless, he couldn't help but imagine what it would be for him to collaborate with Aisling.

"You're a direct disciple of Master Huron, right? Does that mean you are already set in your way?"

"I see you aren't very familiar with what it means to inherit a Master's design philosophy." She said. "It merely means that my starting point and my early progression is entirely shaped by my Master. Once I reach Journeyman, I can diverge from my Master's research direction and explore a branching direction! Perhaps one of the best ways to describe it is that I'm specializing in a possibility that my Master has once considered but rejected in favor of another possibility!"

Ves understood this explanation. It was as if he decided to choose a different direction than the path of balance to progress his design philosophy. While the path of determinism, the path of balance and the path of life ultimately led to different outcomes, they still shared the same root!

"How is your research direction different from that of your Master?"

Aisling lifted her head in pride. "I chose to develop a dream that Master Huron has never achieved! I wish to widen the application of neural interconnectivity so that every outfit and every group can form a neural network without any cumbersome prerequisites!"

That sounded incredibly difficult! Ves couldn't help but admire the audacity of her ambition!

"If your own Master hasn't managed to achieve this, then you'll certainly have a difficult road ahead of you! However, if you succeed, you can absolutely revolutionize the mech industry with this innovation!"

One of the biggest shortcomings of her field had always been its limited applications! No mech designer who specialized in neural interconnectivity ever managed to make their tech safe and accessible to the wider public! Only very close family members or highly-trained elites possessed the ability to sustain a coherent neural network!

"I've long tried to explore a way to achieve this on my own. It wasn't until I found out about your design philosophy that I've realized that my ambition is too impossible for me to achieve by myself! I have a very strong hunch that if I combine my specialty with yours, we can absolutely invent a new application of mechs that will astound the MTA and immortalize our names! As a fellow mech designer, surely you can see the potential of our collaboration!"

Ves nodded in reflex. "I can imagine how it can work in theory, but that is just a guess. I can already tell that it is absolutely not simple to form a neural network between mech pilots who aren't very similar."

"We can explore the solutions of our problems in time." Aisling stated with confidence. "I have left you some primers on neural interface technology in your quarters. You should read them first to develop a basic understanding of my specialty. After all, how can we design a mech together if you can't follow my design choices?"

"Isn't that supposed to be restricted knowledge? The MTA never provided me with the authorization to study neural interface technology."

"It's fine." Aisling brushed the matter off. "I'm only giving you a basic introduction, which isn't enough for you to design your own neural interfaces. I just want you to understand its mechanisms and some of the basic underlying theories."

Ves would have studied the textbooks regardless of whether it was allowed, but it relieved him to hear that he wouldn't get in trouble with the MTA.

Seeing that Ves already had a lot to think about, Aisling decided that she had revealed enough for today.

"You have just arrived aboard my ship. Take a break and think about your new future. You don't have to pretend to like Gloriana anymore. Unlike her, I'm not a Hexer who looks down on men like you! As a Brighter, I'm sure you'll come to appreciate our Friday Coalition as you have done in the past!"

She flicked her fingers at Patricia.

"Please escort Ves back to his quarters."

"Yes, milady."

Patricia rose from her seat and looked at Ves with expectation.

When he stood up, he silently followed after his former classmate to the exit.

Chapter 1718 Scarlet Rose

An awkward silence formed between Ves and Patricia as they walked back to his quarters. Once they reached the entrance, Patricia unlocked it and led Ves inside.

As Lady Curver's 'guest', Ves did not have the authority to enter or exit his own room at will!

Despite his excellent treatment and warm welcome by his host, Ves did not forget that he was a prisoner!

Everyone aboard this ship was his enemy, including Patricia!

When Ves became aligned with the Hexadric Hegemony, he knew that he would never be able to maintain his friendship with Patricia! Her close entanglement with the Friday Coalition meant that they belonged to opposite sides!

Though he strongly opposed the beliefs espoused by Hexers, he didn't want to upset his girlfriend by rooting for the Fridaymen.

To be honest, he recognized that he was locked in an impossible dilemma.

As a Brighter and a man, he admired the Friday Coalition.

As Gloriana's boyfriend, he had an obligation to support the Hexadric Hegemony.

Ves had never managed to resolve this contradiction! He could never bring himself to cheer on the Hexers, but neither did he dare to express any sympathy for the Fridaymen!

It would have been so much easier if Gloriana belonged to the opposite side, but Ves had to make do with what he got. His current plan to resolve this tradition was to attempt to bring Gloriana far away from her toxic state!

So long as he managed to bring her to the Red Ocean, there would be a vast intergalactic void between them and her home state!

There was no way that Gloriana would be able to perpetuate her Hexer culture further! They could make an entirely new start in an entirely new frontier!

Of course, all of this was moot if he remained in Aisling Curver's company!

While Aisling was clearly saner and more wholesome than Gloriana, she was clearly after the same thing!

Ves felt very helpless about the fact that two different mech designers desperately sought to collaborate with him. His design philosophy was simply too attractive to their respective ambitions! Both women believed that they would be able to realize their ambitions with his help!

"Patricia."

"Yes?"

The two had fallen silent after entering his luxurious 'cell'. For some reason, Patricia hadn't left immediately, giving Ves an opportunity to ask some much-needed questions.

He had a lot of questions he wanted to ask, some of which he didn't dare to voice in front of Aisling.

Though Ves resented Patricia, he believed she wouldn't lie to him or mislead him in any way.

"Who is Aisling Curver? Why is she called a lady?"

"Lady Curver rose up from the common folk of the Gauge Dynasty." Patricia calmly answered. "She immediately stood out due to her intelligence and learning ability. She managed to enter Clarion University on a scholarship and soon attracted the notice of Master Huron. He became so impressed by her that he took her in as a direct disciple. As for becoming a lady, this is because she has gained the appreciation of the Gauge Dynasty. In the Friday Coalition, she deserves equal treatment to a trueblood descendent!"

It sounded as if Aisling was similar to Oleg. Both of them started off as average citizens in their respective locales.

He knew how frightening Oleg's intelligence and other cognitive traits had reached. If Aisling was the same, then she had earned everything she achieved!

In contrast, Gloriana was born with a silver spoon. Even if her intelligence and talent in mech design started off average, through constant augmentations and intensive tutoring, his girlfriend managed to achieve an enviable height at her age!

Both Gloriana and Aisling sounded like talented Journeymen, but if Ves had to make a choice, he would definitely respect the latter more!

Ves and Patricia were grossly inferior in comparison! Though Ves had the confidence to surpass them, for now these second-class mech designers held the upper ground.

"How does she intend to treat me? Will you guys allow me to leave?"

"I'm sorry, Ves. We can't allow you to leave. Lady Curver is determined to.. have you. Unless your collaboration with her doesn't work out, she will not let you go. I'm sure you can understand why. When it comes to her design philosophy, she won't miss this opportunity to overcome her hurdles."

Ves pressed his lips into a line. "I can't imagine how Aisling can think she can convert me while I remain as her unwilling captive."

"Are you serious, Ves?" Patricia scrunched her nose. "Do you truly want to become a Hexer?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Not exactly, but..."

"Then you should not look at a gift horse in the mouth! While it's unfair for us to treat you this way, think carefully whether you are better off with Miss Gloriana or with Lady Curver!"

If Ves did not refer to his feelings, then there was no contest. He would definitely wish to side with Lady Curver!

Yet.. his heart simply didn't allow him to betray his lover! It would be one thing if he broke up with Gloriana, but until they maintained their relationship, Ves was committed to stay loyal!

This was his principle as a man, a Larkinson and a mech designer!

The thought of betraying her trust and love invoked so much revulsion in him that he simply discarded the idea entirely!

"Let's not argue about this further." Ves shook his head in disgust. "Tell me what will happen to me. How does Lady Curver plan to keep me in her company?"

Patricia didn't hide Curver's plans. "After pulling some strings, she managed to apply for an early end to her assignment. With the help of Master Huron's powerful network, she managed to obtain an early release from her duty. She has already ordered the Scarlet Rose to leave the Bright Republic and return to the Warsaw Giant System, which is where Clarion is based."

"Where is the Warsaw Giant System located?"

"In the interior of the Gauge Dynasty's territories. For a mobile supply frigate like the Scarlet Rose, it will take about two months for her to reach the Warsaw Giant System."

Ves looked a little brighter when Patricia mentioned the Scarlet Rose. Right now, he really needed to know as much as possible about the ship he resided on! His old classmate just gave him an opening to satisfy his curiosity!

"What is a mobile supply frigate?"

"It's a frigate-sized ship class that is favored by mech designers. The Scarlet Rose is built for speed and independent operation. Many mobile supply frigates are specifically configured for mech designers. She features a full-scale mech workshop and enough cargo space to hold a decent amount of materials."

"What about defenses?"

"The Scarlet Rose possesses a small mech hangar that can deploy four mechs. As a non-combat vessel, her armor isn't the best though, and she mainly relies on speed to avoid dangerous situations."

Now that he thought about it, the Scarlet Rose sounded similar to Gloriana's Stellar Chaser, but he had the feeling that the latter fell a bit short.

"Why is the Scarlet Rose so empty? I haven't encountered a lot of people ever since I stepped aboard this ship."

"Trained spacers are precious, especially in wartime. The Scarlet Rose is designed to operate with a high degree of automation. She doesn't belong to Lady Curver. The Friday Coalition merely assigned the ship to her so she can discharge her duties as a monitor. She will have to relinquish the ship to the Coalition upon her return to Warsaw Giant."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he fell in thought.

If the ship belonged to the Friday Coalition, then the quality and capabilities of the Scarlet Rose was likely superior to the Stellar Chaser!

That also meant that it would be far harder for Ves to defeat or circumvent her security systems!

While he was tempted to ask more, Ves did not wish to give himself away. He reluctantly shifted his questioning.

"What do you think of all this?" He asked.

"Pardon?"

"Do you agree with Aisling's actions? Are you committed to the Friday Coalition?"

Patricia closed her eyes for a moment instead of answering immediately.

"I.. I never intended to oppose you. I had very little choice of assignments when the Komodo War broke out. Choosing to serve alongside a monitor sounded harmless since we are strictly ordered to observe the Bright Republic without intervening. I never thought that Lady Curver would directly contradict her orders and accept General Cavendish's offer!"

"Well, she did it anyway, and it seems the Friday Coalition doesn't really mind her transgression."

"She is an honored lady and retainer of the Gauge Dynasty." Patricia sheepishly smiled.

The Gauge Dynasty was the most powerful partner of the Friday Coalition and its most important pillar during the war. It was no big deal for Lady Curver to bend some rules, especially if her actions benefited the Coalition in some way!

From a diplomatic perspective, Lady Curver merely facilitated a mutual transaction between the Friday Coalition and the Bright Republic. The only one involved who didn't agree with this transaction happened to be himself!

Compared to the interests of entire states, his own wants and needs didn't matter the slightest!

Ves scowled in disgust. He truly hated being treated as a bargaining chip!

In fact, in everyone else's eyes, Ves shouldn't act as if he was disadvantaged in this transaction! Lady Curver ostensibly wanted to 'liberate' him from Gloriana's evil Hexer's clutches and 'restore' his manhood!

How could any normal man say no to such a deal? Instead of hating Aisling, he should instead see her as his knight in shining armor!

However, Ves was still unwilling to acknowledge this in his heart!

The betrayals he suffered stung him far too deeply to allow him to appreciate Lady Curver's goodwill!

As if sensing his boiling anger, Patricia turned to leave.

"I will leave you here for now. Though our assignment ended early, we had to compensate for it with some other tasks. Lady Curver and I won't have the time to entertain you often. I suggest you pass the time by taking advantage of the books that she has provided to you. Much of the textbooks consist of exclusive Clarion teaching material."

Ves offered the departing woman a brittle smile. "Please convey my thanks to Aisling for putting some of her library at my disposal."

Once Patricia left his quarters and locked the exit, Ves loosened his collar and slumped on his bed. He swept his gaze across his room and noted some new symbols had appeared on his furniture and decorations.

Symbols and emblems related to the Gauge Dynasty and Clarion University occupied a prominent place in his stateroom.

"How swell."

Ves ignored it all and slipped into his bed as if he wanted to sleep.

"Lights, off."

All of the lights dimmed until Ves was left in the dark.

Instead of falling asleep, Ves went over his options.

There was no way he was resigned with his current situation!

He idly lowered his arm to his pants and caressed his hidden bulge.

While he didn't have an opportunity to make use of his smuggled gadgets right now, he intended to bide his time.

"Two months. I have two months."

Should he attempt an escape or play along with Lady Curver?

Once he allowed her to bring him to the Warsaw Giant System, he was sure that it would be ten times as hard to escape his captivity!

Therefore, the following two months were crucial!

He needed to make a very important decision during this limited window.

Should he follow his conscience and do what was best for himself, Lady Curver, the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition by accepting his current fate?

Or should he follow his heart and do his best to return to Gloriana and affirm his loyalty to his Hexer girlfriend?

As Ves silently grappled with his difficulties, Ves suddenly sensed a very familiar presence creeping up from beneath his bed!

He concentrated his mind towards the subtle presence.

"Lucky!"

A slight pressure formed beneath his other hand that rested on the mattress. Lucky had secretly snuck onto Ghanso's combat carrier and the Scarlet Rose without letting anyone else know!

This was because Lucky maintained a completely intangible state! With the help of his miniaturized stealth generator and his CFA-derived ECM, his cat managed to remain completely undetected!

As long as Ves had Lucky, he was confident he could subvert the Scarlet Rose's security systems within two months!

Chapter 1719 Unwilling Gues

Ves felt as if he was a bird trapped in a cage. While the Scarlet Rose offered him a lot of comfort and luxury, he had no freedom to speak of. He could only live on the ship according to the arrangement of his host.

Over the next few days, Ves met with Lady Aisling Curver during breakfast and dinner. Evidently, she had to make up for the early end of her monitoring mission by performing another assignment.

She always looked quite weary by the time they were ready to eat supper. Aisling could barely summon enough energy to speak, allowing Ves to observe her without attracting undue attention.

Aisling was beautiful, no doubt about it. She was a bit taller than Gloriana and seemed to appeal to him in a different way. If Ves had to make a comparison, then he would say that Gloriana appeared cuter while Aisling looked ravishing.

Of course, as a respected Journeymen, Aisling always dressed rather conservatively and tried to appeal to Ves through their shared passion in mech design.

Ves guessed that Aisling intended to play the long game. She aimed to wear down his resistance by constantly exposing him to her brilliance.

So long as Ves continued to be separated from Gloriana, his feelings for her would cool down. Only then would Aisling be able to capture his heart.

For now, Ves was still full of resentment. He felt indignant about the betrayals he suffered and his unwillingness to be stuck on a ship heading deep into the Friday Coalition.

Instead of aggravating his animosity, Aisling made the right decision to put some distance between them. By meeting twice a day, Ves became more and more used to her company.

Obviously, Aisling possessed a lot of confidence in her plan to win Ves over. She had the advantage of time. As long as Ves remained her 'guest', she could patiently erode his resistance!

Certainly, she could employ more coercive means to achieve faster results. Resorting to torture, injecting him with mind-altering substances or applying outright brainwashing on him would certainly convert him into becoming her loyal slave!

However, unless she could keep everything a secret, the MTA was bound to stand up for him! As a galactic citizen, he still possessed certain rights, and the MTA did not wish

to turn the galaxy into a shark tank where mech designers continually devoured other mech designers!

Ves did not worry too much that Aisling would go too far. Even if she did not fear the wrath of the MTA, she still valued his design philosophy a lot!

A design philosophy was strongly connected to the mentality of its mech designer. If the mech designer changed too abruptly, the two no longer fit as well, resulting in a drastic loss of effectiveness!

In addition, anything that forcefully interfered with the mind and personality of a mech designer inevitably affected their creativity, ingenuity, passion and other difficult-to-quantify attributes.

Creators worked best when they expressed their earnest ideas!

How could Aisling possibly ruin the treasure she obtained? Just like Gloriana, she believed that collaborating with Ves was the key to solve the most insurmountable problem of her design philosophy!

In order to achieve the dream of making neural interconnectivity available to the masses, Aisling wanted him at his very best!

For this reason, she generously allowed him to peruse a portion of her library in the form of printed books.

Ves knew the value of their contents. Many of them weren't available for purchase in the open market. This was because some of the textbooks contained a lot of advanced knowledge that incorporated some of the ingenuity of other people's design philosophies!

Other books were valuable because they were written by the Seniors and Masters who taught at Clarion University. Though their textbooks did not delve into any advanced subjects, Ves constantly sighed in admiration at their marvellous explanations.

Most of these professors were over a century old! Clarion University only employed the best of what the Gauge Dynasty had to offer, so each of these old monsters accumulated a terrible amount of teaching experience!

"Sure enough, Clarion University is a mecca of mech design!"

From the quality and subject matter of the textbooks, Ves became convinced that Clarion University ranked higher than the Leemar Institute of Technology!

A part of it was because of the differences in strengths between the partners. Another part of it was due to their different recruitment policies.

Leemar adopted a policy that reflected the openness of the Carnegie Group. As one of the most commercial and trade-minded groups, the Carnegie Group was very open about recruiting foreign talents from all over the star sector and beyond.

While the loyalty of these foreigners was questionable, as long as the Carnegie Group provided them with enough benefits, it could definitely turn these strangers into its own strength!

The hiring of Master Null was a typical case. The man was on the run for some reason and needed somewhere to hole up. Leemar opened its doors and offered enough incentives to attract this Master!

In contrast, Clarion University did not bother too much with foreigners. The school instead focused completely on cultivating domestic talents!

Because of the unified education of the Gauge Dynasty, every student accepted into Clarion University all surpassed a certain standard. Not only that, but their prior education all fell in line with Clarion's teaching methods!

From what Ves could tell, the biggest downside to this strategy was that Clarion lacked diversity. Its students, professors and alumni all formed an insular group of elitists who thought they were better mech designers than anyone else in the entire star sector!

The pride exuded by Aisling whenever she talked about her alma mater constantly rubbed him the wrong way! Ves felt like talking to an Ansel graduate, but ten times worse!

"Clarion is by far the best mech design university in our star sector!" She boasted while sipping a glass of wine. "Our Masters are the most illustrious in the Friday Coalition! Not even their counterparts from the Hexadric Hegemony can hold a candle to our great Masters!"

"Did your Masters ever compete directly against Hexer Masters?" Ves pointedly asked.

"Uhm, no. It's difficult to hold any events between our two states. However, the mechs designed by our Masters are much more popular in other star sectors than the mechs designed by those old crones!"

While that was true, Ves knew that the real reason why Hexer mech designers did poorly abroad was because their culture rubbed everyone else the wrong way. Who wanted to pilot a mech designed by a man-hating Hexer?!

It did not surprise anyone that most foreign users consisted of female mech pilots!

Even if the quality of Hexer mech surpassed the quality of Fridayman mechs, most customers would still be reluctant to buy the former!

"From a business perspective, it's better if I retain a neutral, secular identity!" Ves concluded. "If I become known as an Ylvainan or Hexer mech designer, my market expansion will constantly encounter hindrances!"

His forced separation from Cloudy Curtain and his own organization gave Ves a lot of time to reflect on past decisions.

He achieved plenty of successes and made quite a few mistakes. Perhaps the one mistake he blamed himself for the most was that he had been too blatant in showcasing the potential of his design philosophy!

By using the Sand War as an opportunity to popularize his glows, he attracted the greed of people like Lady Curver! It was his bad luck that she did not shy away from resorting to unscrupulous means to obtain his collaboration!

"What's done is done." He sighed. "When I made the decision to expose my abilities, I knew I would put a target on my back."

He did not regret his choices. He originally planned to lay low, but the threat of the Five Scrolls Compact and the opportunity to emigrate to the Red Ocean prompted him to accelerate his progression!

He was still committed to his original plan! He wanted to evade the pursuit of the envoy dispatched by the Sunken Temple by becoming a galactic pioneer!

As long as he accumulated enough MTA merits, he could have anything he wanted to start anew in a smaller galaxy that was firmly in the grip of the Big Two!

Ves refused to believe the Five Scrolls Compact could act unscrupulously in a galaxy filled with phasewater!

From what he learned so far, the Five Scrolls Compact played a considerable role in humanity's rise during the Age of Space and Age of Conquest.

In other words, the Compact shaped human civilization in the Milky Way Galaxy! How could Ves ever rest easily as long as he remained in humanity's old domain?

"The Red Ocean! I have to reach the Red Ocean!"

By centering himself around this goal, Ves remained sober and clear-minded. He refused to fall for Aisling's traps. With a firm will, he resisted her subtle indoctrination attempts and continually reminded himself that she was an enemy!

He did not bother with any pretentiousness when he expressed his dislike for her. He wasn't a spy like Calabast and did not have the confidence to hoodwink her into believing that he became smitten by her charm.

This caused her to express some frustration at his lack of reciprocation at her entreaties.

"I don't know why you keep insisting on staying under Gloriana's spell." Aisling sighed as she summoned Ves to the lounge. "Don't you realize what's in store for you if you persist in your relationship with her? Let me show you what men are like in the Hegemony."

She waved her hand, causing a projection to emerge in the center of the lounge. Ves impassively watched the footage of how female Hexers treated their male counterparts.

On a random shopping street, the women walked confidently while their spouses followed after them in a manner that hammered home their inferiority.

The women talked to them in an imperious and dismissive manner. The men had no choice but to bow their heads and acquiesce to any requests by their women!

In another clip, a female Hexer mech designer led a design project at a very well-equipped design studio.

The lead designer treated her fellow female subordinates earnestly as if they were her own students. She corrected their mistakes, taught them something new and delegated important assignments to them. Clearly, women went along well with other women!

The conduct of the lead designer changed enormously whenever she addressed women. Even when she faced male mech designers who were just as competent as their female counterparts, the lead designer still treated them as nothing more than coolies!

The third clip depicted the treatment of Hexer mech pilots in the Hex Army.

Male mech pilots were relegated to piloting cheaper, less capable mechs. Female mech pilots almost always received the privilege of piloting better mechs.

It was easy for Ves to distinguish which mechs the Hexers valued more. Unlike most other states, the Hegemony distinctly favored mechs with feminine counters. Their mechs were slimmer and more concave than the larger and less mobile mechs piloted by males.

This did not mean that males gained no opportunities at all. They could still earn merits and increase their capabilities.

However, it was impossible for males to become officers!

One of the most central myths of the Hegemony was that males were unsuited to be leaders! How could the Hexers ever allow men to gain a leadership position? Every single officer in the Hex Army consisted of women!

A lot of talented men were trapped in low positions because the female Hexers never allowed them to climb further!

No woman wanted to take orders from a man!

The men themselves had grown up enduring constant attacks on their gender! Their self-esteem was so bad that their subservience towards women was rooted in their bones!

As Ves watched clip after clip, he knew that Aisling did not serve him with doctored footage.

She had no need to resort to falsehoods when the real Hegemony already provided her with a wealth of material!

Chapter 1720 Stubborn Boy

Ves already knew how Hexers treated men in their society.

It was actually a mistake to call them man-haters.

Hexers didn't hate men. They just considered them inferior.

It was not a contradiction for female Hexers to adore male gender but simultaneously treat them as lessers.

In fact, if Hexers treated men like slaves or abused them on a daily basis, the Big Two would not tolerate their conduct!

The basic rights of humans had to be respected. Just because the Hexers only treated half of its population like dirt did not mean it could get away with such rampant abuse!

The Hexers therefore propagated an alternate vision on how human civilization should be run. They ran the Hegemony like a model that other states should adopt.

Both men and women had a place in their society. Women deserved to be in charge and occupied all of the upper level positions.

Even if female Hexers weren't good at anything, they still had the right to boss around males in the workplace!

As for the boys, they were continually treated as juveniles at best or pets at worst.

They received much fewer opportunities than women and had to work a lot harder to get anywhere.

This strangely led to the phenomena where the rare male successes became incredibly successful in their chosen vocations!

Male expert pilots were one of the rare species of boys who earned genuine respect from female Hexers!

Male high-ranking mech designers also existed in the Hegemony's vast mech community. Each of them gained some appreciation and were treated better than other boys.

Of course, just because they were better than most women in their professions did not mean they deserved equal treatment.

Every male expert pilot had to answer to a female officer! This was because Hexers regarded them as powerful brutes that had to be controlled lest they run rabid!

Boys were still boys. As long as they were given free reign, the boys would surely give in to their worst impulses!

Male Journeymen and Seniors received similar treatment. While the Hegemony did not block boys from excelling in this career, they were not allowed to design and publish mechs on their own.

Each of them had to work with a female mech designer!

The best a male mech designer could hope for was to become a spouse of a female mech designer.

Those who weren't as lucky could only serve as a minor contributor or assistant to a bossy female mech designer.

This was the reality of being born a male in Hexer society.

"Don't you see the absurdity of devoting yourself to your Hexer girlfriend?" Aisling persistently prodded him. "Open your eyes and look beyond her pretty face! Behind her is an awful state that heavily discriminates on men like you! If Hexers like Gloriana have their way, they would strip you of your dignity and tear down your pride until you become nothing more than a human-shaped puppy!"

Ves did not attempt to debate her points. In order to resist her persuasion, he took a page out of Ghanso's playbook and defaulted to his Larkinson stubbornness.

"I am committed to Gloriana. I never break my commitments. To change my mind is to betray the promises I've made to her! I will never stab her in the back!"

Aisling threw a perplexed look at him. She didn't understand how someone so brilliant in mech design could be so stupid when it came to women!

"Do you enjoy being treated this way, Ves?"

"..."

"The Friday Coalition can offer you so much more! As long as you stick with me, I can give you a new status in our state! As Master Huron's direct disciple, no one will hinder me from settling you in the Warsaw Giant System and giving you an opportunity to participate in my design projects. So long as we achieve some success in our collaborations, my Master will definitely put his full weight behind our partnership!"

"I have already cut ties with the Friday Coalition." Ves flatly remarked.

"That's not entirely correct. You merely cut ties with Master Olson and the Leemar Institute of Technology. At most, you're blacklisted by the Vermeer Group and the Carnegie Group. Our Gauge Dynasty never pays attention to what they do. We are better!"

Ves shrugged. "That sounds nice, but I have no desire to restore my relations with the Friday Coalition. Gloriana will never tolerate me if I reconcile with your state!"

Aisling grew angry and momentarily lost control!

"Gloriana Gloriana Gloriana! Everything is about Gloriana to you! Don't you realize that she has got you wrapped around her fingers? The moment she met you at Centerpoint, she ceaselessly tried to trap you in her web! The two of you were never made to be together! A proud mech designer like you deserves better!"

Obviously, this conversation went nowhere. After enduring a long tirade, Aisling finally sent him back to his quarters.

During his time in captivity, only Patricia talked to him without an agenda.

Sadly, Patricia rarely appeared in his presence.

Ves suspected that Aisling was wary that he would fall for Patricia, and thereby kept her away!

However, Ves always became more mellow and receptive after talking to Patricia. This was something he deliberately did to encourage his host to keep giving him opportunities to talk to his old classmate.

Though Ves firmly regarded Patricia as an enemy, he did not hold any personal animosity against her. She was merely performing her duty to her new state. As a citizen of the Friday Coalition, it was impossible for her to remain a bystander in the war between the Coalition and the Hegemony!

The only doubt about Patricia's assignment was what the Fridaymen were doing in the Bright Republic in the first place.

Ves faintly suspected that the Scarlet Rose was sent to the Bright Republic for another, more clandestine mission. Why did the Coalition dispatch a young and talented Journeyman to perform a seemingly-routine monitoring mission when they could have easily dispatched a diplomat or a spy?

The fact that the Coalition explicitly sent mech designers to the Bright Republic meant that their mission probably had something to do with mechs!

Of course, Ves kept all of his guesses to himself. He didn't care about their prior missions.

Instead of worrying about irrelevant issues, he would much rather work on his escape attempt!

Ever since he confirmed that Lucky followed him aboard the Scarlet Rose while remaining completely hidden and intangible, Ves believed he had the capital to turn the tables on his host!

In order to reverse his current circumstances, Ves had to stay patient and make ample preparations. Taking over a mobile supply frigate by himself was not very simple!

Even if he had the help of a team of commandos, he would still fail in his attempt to wrest control of the Scarlet Rose!

To succeed, he had to mitigate or circumvent every security measure in place. Ves therefore dispatched Lucky on a scouting mission and secretly scan each and every compartment and component.

This was extremely tedious for Lucky. To keep his presence hidden, Ves ordered his pet to resort to passive scanners only. This meant that Lucky had to crawl through every single section of the ship, all the while remaining out of sight!

Ves trusted in Lucky's ability to remain hidden. The cat had become way too good at sneaking into places where he shouldn't be in. While the Scarlet Rose was much more advanced than all of the other places he had broken in, the cat possessed too many advantages in this regard!

For now, Ves did not dare to instruct Lucky to hack the Scarlet Rose's network or tap into its quantum entanglement node to send a message to Gloriana and his people.

The moment Aisling found out that Ves possessed the capability to communicate with the outside galaxy, she would surely strip him of his privileges and throw him straight into the brig!

Though Ves wanted to take it slow, he knew that delaying his hijacking attempt would only increase the difficulty of returning home!

Taking over the Scarlet Rose was just the first step! He still had to leave the Friday Coalition, so it would be best if he escaped before the ship crossed into its borders!

That meant that his actual time limit was much less! Ves estimated that the Scarlet Rose would probably enter into Coalition space in around two weeks!

If he failed to hijack the ship until then, then he would have a lot more problems on his hands!

He needed to do everything possible to hasten his preparations. Aside from waiting for Lucky, he also resorted to other means to increase his understanding of the Scarlet Rose.

One example of this was by taking advantage of the library in his quarters.

"These books are quite good." He murmured as he leaned back on his chair while flipping page after page.

He currently studied an advanced programming textbook. While its contents were most relevant to mechs, the programming language it taught just happened to be common enough to be used in many ships as well!

Learning how to hack or subvert the programming of the Scarlet Rose was essential to taking it over! Though it was impossible for him to access her systems on his own, so long as he had Lucky, he was confident he could circumvent most of the safeguards and tap into her core systems!

This wasn't enough to guarantee a successful takeover, though. He dabbled in other textbooks as well. For example, he deepened his understanding of power reactors in order to find some way to sabotage and disable the ship's central power reactor.

As Lucky occasionally came back and covertly displayed the data he gathered, Ves ascertained what he needed to do in order to subvert the ship.

He identified three core areas which he needed to control.

First, he needed to lock down the bridge and prevent the captain and the bridge crew from controlling the vessel.

Second, he needed to secure the engineering compartment in order to grasp the crucial power reactor and FTL drive.

Ves could not afford to allow anyone to damage these two critical ship components! As long as the engineers thrashed either of them, the Scarlet Rose would become stranded in space!

Therefore, Ves not only had to take control of engineering, but also neutralize the engineers before they could do any damage!

The third area that Ves needed to control was the security compartment, which also served as the armory. While the Scarlet Rose did not employ a lot of spacers, she still possessed a crew complement of fifty people, of which fifteen of them consisted of guards and security officers!

Ves not only had to grasp the entire security compartment, but also neutralize the armed personnel before they could take up arms and launch a counterattack!

Of course, that did not mean the rest of the crew were harmless. Each of them posed a risk to his takeover attempt. With their expertise and access to the systems of the ship, they could easily cut off his access by sabotaging crucial communication lines or something.

Aside from taking over these three areas, Ves also had to disable every independent safeguard. Lucky's surveys revealed that each compartment contained an independent security system that would automatically activate as soon as something went wrong!

Ves could not afford to ignore these small and isolated security systems! He had to sabotage or tamper with each and every one of them lest they blew up when he walked through a corridor or something!

"What a headache!"

Yet the more formidable the ship, the more Ves wanted to claim her for himself! The Scarlet Rose would serve as an excellent mobile workplace for him if he was on the move! She was pretty much a miniature version of a factory ship but in a much smaller and more convenient package!