

Mech 1741

Chapter 1741 Careful Communication

In the following days, Ves raced to take direct control over the most essential systems.

He focused mostly on navigation, engineering, security and communications. As long as he overcame the defenses of these systems and cleaned up all of the hidden traps, Ves became more confident about his chances of escape.

Even though he took over the Scarlet Rose, Ves still treated as if it was a terrible exobeast who could break out of her shackles as soon as he let down his guard!

As his Grand Dynamo rapidly replenished his spiritual energy reserves, Ves regained more and more of his emotions.

This was not necessarily a good thing. Regaining his emotions meant his frustrations about his new ship began to drag down his mood.

Compared to mechs, ships were incredibly troublesome to work with! Ves personally experienced why shipwrights always worked in teams!

"Starships are too big and complex to be grasped by a single person!"

While it was common for mech designers to work together on a mech design, if Ves really wanted to, he could design and build a mech by himself!

His most recent solo project, the Devil Tiger, served as one of his proudest accomplishments!

When a mech came into existence, it only took a single mech pilot to exert its potential.

In his years of working with mechs, Ves always took these customs for granted.

Now that he started to chew a starship that was bigger than the Barracuda, Ves fully experienced the uphill struggle of mastering a starship by himself!

While it was theoretically possible for a single person to design, build and crew a starship by himself, in practice the amount of labor and expertise required was too much to bear for any single individual!

"I am no Atlas holding up the heavens." Ves helplessly admitted.

The more he dove into the Scarlet Rose, the more he understood the unfathomable depths of ship design.

As a mech designer, Ves only possessed some technical understanding of ship systems and ship components.

The Scarlet Rose possessed over a hundred core systems, with countless lesser ones regulating every minor function!

This was too much for Ves to bear alone!

If he wasn't in a low period, then he would have felt a lot more repelled by his current activities!

Fortunately, Ves took advantage of his rational state. No matter how much he disliked his current work, as long as his dislike was suppressed, he could still persevere and slog through the swamp!

All of this work eventually paid off. Not only did he gain more control over the most essential core systems, he also gained a deeper understanding of the Scarlet Rose.

Her capabilities continued to impress him. She was a bona-fide second-class frigate whose acceleration, FTL cycling time, sensors and fabrication capabilities presented an attractive package to mech designers like Ves!

Although her armor and cargo capacity weren't great, these downsides hardly bothered Ves too much.

What Ves currently valued the most was her elusiveness. Her ability to outrun most pursuers along with her quick FTL cycling time and decent FTL range meant that most powerful pursuers wouldn't be able to keep up with her pace.

This gave Ves the confidence of outrunning the hunters of the Friday Coalition!

Of course, Ves still dreaded them. He only had to make one wrong move to fall into their hands!

While the light carriers and combat carriers of the Coalition wouldn't be able to keep up, it was a different story for smaller and more agile ship classes!

Even another corvette or mobile supply frigate would be able to catch up to the Scarlet Rose!

Normally, Ves did not have any reason to fear these smaller ships. A mobile supply frigate only carried a handful of mechs while a corvette only deployed a single mech at most.

Yet Ves did not forget that his new ship was running entirely on automation right now! The absence of a human crew meant that the Scarlet Rose performed worse than usual!

Not only was the Scarlet Rose unable to outrun comparable ships, she also possessed little ability to resist attackers!

Though his ship currently carried four second-class mechs, without any mech pilots on hand, how could he ever enjoy their protection?

Even if the Coalition didn't send any mechs, Ves would still be hard pressed to hold on to his Scarlet Rose!

Ves still didn't trust her internal defense systems. He feared that any boarding party that managed to step foot on his ship could only be resisted by relying solely on himself and Lucky!

"I can't allow any enemy to board my ship!"

Though Ves and Lucky succeeded in killing the former crew of the ship, that was only by virtue of launching a surprise attack.

Against a large, prepared and determined group of commandos, Ves did not rate his chances highly!

All of these pressing concerns continued to weigh on his mind. While his temporary rational state prevented him from sinking in despair, he still felt a little pessimistic when he estimated his odds.

In the end, he was just a single person! Away from his friends and subordinates, he could only rely on Lucky to assist his efforts!

Ves already realized how unlikely it was to escape Coalition pursuit if this remained true.

He recognized that he needed help! A lot of help!

For this reason, Ves tried to gain control over the external communication systems before the ship reached her next stop.

He shut off and isolated most communication methods and focused completely on the controller attached to the quantum entanglement node.

He knew that the entire controller was very suspect. The reason why he locked down the quantum entanglement node right at the start was because the ship would continue to feed back information to the Friday Coalition if left alone!

While Ves deeply wanted to contact Gloriana and his organization for help, he didn't dare to do so before he replaced the controller.

It took some time to fabricate a rudimentary control module that was completely standalone.

Ves did not want the rest of the Scarlet Rose to connect with this replacement control module. Who knew what kind of hidden programming would spring into action and covertly transmit some information back to the Coalition Reserve Corps!

The best way to prevent this from happening was by tearing down the bridge!

Of course, Ves didn't know whether the quantum entanglement node itself was connected to the Friday Coalition.

Technically, it should have been under the sole purview of the Comm Consortium, but what if the Friday Coalition gained the right to tap into its transmissions?

The device originally belonged to the Coalition, after all.

This was why he did not dare to be too open in his upcoming communication attempts. He had to act as if the Coalition was listening in on his transmissions.

He smiled. "Thankfully, I've already taken this into account."

As a paranoid bastard, Ves had already made some preparations beforehand. The moment he finished installing the replacement control module on the quantum entanglement node, he connected to the galactic net for the first time since Ghanso took him away!

The control module currently served as a bridge that connected to his comm through a solid wire.

Ves wasn't stupid enough to add wireless capabilities to his control module. Only a fixed connection ensured adequate security!

After checking that nothing was amiss, he first attempted to call Gloriana through an encryption method that Ves had already prepared beforehand.

Gloriana instantly accepted the call!

"Ves!" Her projection appeared in front him, causing his muted heart to stir! "I missed you! How are you? My sources tell me that something has happened to the Scarlet Rose! Are you still a prisoner?"

"Woah, there! Calm down, Gloriana. Let me start at the beginning."

In his current state, Ves did not wish to waste his time. He quickly explained his experiences on the Scarlet Rose. The moment he finished explaining his successful hijacking attempt, his girlfriend gazed at him in admiration!

"I never expected you to be so daring to take over a ship by yourself! How did you manage to do it? I don't see any way for you to kill the entire crew!"

"Ah, I have my ways." Ves modestly said.

"From what little intelligence we've gathered, the Coalition seemed to have the impression that we dispatched one of our special forces teams to liberate the Scarlet Rose!"

"Regardless of what happened, I succeeded in taking control over the ship." Ves moved on, neither confirming or denying her guess.

If the eavesdroppers managed to crack the encryption, they would still be guessing whether a commando team truly captured the ship!

Gloriana understood the gravity of the situation. "I really regret not being able to help you, Ves. I promise to make it up to you! While there aren't many Hexer assets in this region of space, I can still convince them to come to your assistance! I can also convince your Avatars to rendez-vous with you!"

"I'll transmit my position, route and plans through the agreed-upon method. You should know what I'm talking about."

She nodded. "I'll be keeping my eye out."

"I'll also transmit the schematics and the current configuration of the Scarlet Rose. I've done my best to subvert control over some of her core systems, but I'm not confident whether I've missed something."

"I already looked up on the Scarlet Rose." She said. "She's a fairly modern ship, and I'm not sure whether the Hegemony has grasped her design. We can only offer limited assistance on this front."

"Well, do the best you can. Even some advice is useful. You Hexers must surely be familiar with the tricks the Fridaymen employ."

"I'll see what I can do. Your friend C should be able to offer what you need, I think. She's been trying just as hard as me to get you back!"

Ves narrowed his eyes. "I could have used C's help earlier."

Gloriana's projection scowled. "You're not the only one who's disappointed in her! While she promised to make it up for her absence, don't put your hopes in her! She doesn't love you like I do! Only I can save my boy!"

"Uhm.."

"Don't worry, Ves! You just do your best and evade the Fridaymen! As soon as I obtain your data, I'll pass them on to the Hegemony to figure out the best way to circumvent their pursuers!"

"How much effort are they investing in recapturing this ship?"

The Coalition doesn't have many assets in place to hunt you down. However, the states in this region are all aligned with our enemies! We have already seen signs that these states have dispatched a lot of outfits and forces to intercept the Scarlet Rose! Don't trust anyone you encounter!"

He already anticipated this possibility. If the Fridaymen managed to work together with Ghanso and General Cavendish, then they should surely be able to leverage the help of states closer to Coalition space!

After discussing his precarious situation, Ves wanted to know what had happened to the organizations he left behind.

"Has the LMC imploded?"

She smiled. "Don't worry, Ves. Your company and your other organizations are still holding up. The people you put in charge are still firmly in control. Right now, they're busy executing one of your contingency plans. While they aren't able to move as many assets as they want to, the authorities haven't posed any hindrance. They can't afford to antagonize us after this scandal blew up in their faces!"

He became relieved at hearing this. He feared the Bright Republic decided to commit to the Friday Coalition and make the LMC and the Larkinson Family miserable.

"What about.. the Deliverer?"

"Our new model is performing as we expected." She smiled brilliantly. "The Deliverers has succeeded in making an impact in the Ylvaine Protectorate! There are already talks about assisting other states, but the negotiations aren't always smooth. You can't imagine how remorseful the Bright Republic is right now! The Ylvainans are driving a very hard bargain against your state right now!"

Ves had mixed feelings about this. If the Deliverers showed their value earlier, the Bright Republic would have never screwed him over!

Chapter 1742 Slalom

After hearing about how much leverage the Ylvaine Protectorate gained after they managed to master the use of his Deliverers, Ves felt a bit proud.

He even considered whether he should make use of his influence on the state to dictate their decisions.

If Ves wasn't so rational, then he would have followed his angry impulses and told the Ylvainans to bleed his former state dry!

A darker part of him even wanted to take a step further and withhold assistance entirely!

However, Ves quickly ruled out these impulsive decisions.

From a logical point of view, the fall of the Bright Republic would expose the flanks of the Ylvaine Protectorate and Vesia Kingdom against the sandmen.

There was no way the Ylvainans and Vesians would be able to stretch their overstretched defense forces any further!

Since its own safety was at stake, the Ylvainans would never break relations with the Brighters entirely! They still depended on each other to protect each other's flanks!

Aside from that, Ves maintained a principle that he should not be too picky about his customers and how they utilized them. The moment the mechs ended up in the hands of his customers, he no longer possessed any say in their use.

If the Ylvainans wanted to use his mechs to help the people who stabbed his back, then Ves shouldn't interfere.

This was what a mech designer ought to do! They only provided the tools. It was up to the recipients to use them for their desired ends!

Of course, the situation was a little special right now. It was not that easy to remain hands-off when the Deliverer had the potential to wipe out most sandman fleets before they inflicted any substantial damage!

He managed to move on, though. This was not the time to indulge in improper influencing, especially when the lives of trillions of Brighters and Ylvainans were at stake!

The three leading dynasties were the rightful rulers of the Ylvaine Dynasty. Ves did not possess the mandate, experience or training to be a qualified leader of an entire state!

After reminding himself of this, Ves loosened his shoulders.

"Let's end this call before the Fridaymen find out anymore. Each communication attempt is risky, so we shouldn't talk too often."

Though Gloriana looked regretful, she reluctantly accepted his argument.

Tears began to well in her eyes as she gazed at her boyfriend.

Ves clearly wasn't in a good state right now since he was still relying on a floating chair to move around!

"Don't give up, Ves! I'll do everything I can to bring you to safety! Once you're in the clear, we should have a good talk about our future!"

That sounded rather ominous to Ves. He immediately suspected that Gloriana wanted to encourage him to move to Hegemony space in order to avoid Coalition pursuit!

Ves quickly ended the comm call before he said something he might regret! In his rational state, who knew what kind of insane decision he might make!

He felt as if he was in Axelar's shoes right now! His sane self was a lot more suspect than his ordinary self!

Because it wasn't him! Only when he regained his emotions would he trust his own judgement!

Right now, he acted as if his judgement was impaired.

"It's like I'm drunk right now! I can't assume I'll make the right decisions!"

Perhaps someone like Patricia would disagree, but Ves had always been someone who stuck to his choices even if his logic disagreed.

One benefit about his recent changes was that he gained the opportunity to make a comparison between his rational self and emotional self.

With the help of Patricia's explanations, Ves gained a much greater awareness of himself.

It was as if he was on the outside looking in on how he acted.

While his judgement wasn't always good, he longed to return to normal.

This was because Ves never doubted his decisions! Whenever he made a choice, he usually committed to them with unflinching conviction!

His decision to commit to Gloriana despite the dubiousness of the relationship was a typical example.

As long as he was happy, who cared about whether he made the wrong decision?!

This certainty was missing in him right now, which troubled him quite a bit. He continually doubted some of his decisions.

If he wasn't used to sticking to his choices, then he would have changed his mind already!

"My mental state is not very good right." He concluded. "I should distract myself."

Before he did anything else, he first prepared the data package for Gloriana.

Ves did not assume he could hide his encrypted data package from the Coalition. To assume otherwise was to insult their intelligence capabilities.

However, there were ways to frustrate them. It just took a bit of time to set up the preparations.

Ves spent a few hours in programming a software program that performed some very simple tasks.

First, it received some data input. This input could be as little as a single document or an entire data chip worth of files!

Once it received the input, the program encrypted it with a randomized encryption method.

This consumed most of his attention because he configured the software with a lot of encryption methods. Each of them relied on a lot of randomized elements that made them very hard to crack by relying on quantum rotation and all kinds of other techniques!

No matter the method, Ves believed it would definitely take some time and computing power to decrypt the data!

Once his software program finished encrypting the data, it uploaded its output on a random address on the galactic net.

Each time it uploaded something on the galactic net, it uploaded the encrypted file on another address!

While the principle of his software program sounded trivially simple, the annoying part about it was the sheer volume of encrypted output it disgorged onto the galactic net!

In the first minute since he activated it, it started to upload more random encrypted files at a million different addresses!

Each of these files were encrypted in different ways! No single method solved all of them easily!

Even if the Friday Coalition managed to decrypt the files, most of them only contained gibberish data!

The vast majority of files his program uploaded on the galactic net consisted of decoys!

Ves intended to run this spamming program for an entire day. After uploading an uncountable amount of files on the galactic net, he believed the Friday Coalition would definitely be frustrating themselves if they attempted to crack each and every one of them in the hopes of gaining any useful data!

Out of all of those decoys, only a hundred files contained the data that Ves wanted to convey to Gloriana. Ves had split up his package in a hundred parts as another precaution.

Only Crindon knew the right addresses and decryption methods of those files. As a Kinner, Crindon was absolutely loyal, so Ves did not worry about any leaks on his end!

Of course, while this method was very consuming, Ves did not rule out the possibility that the Friday Coalition found a way to recover the sensitive data.

"Well, it's not like I can do anything better." He shrugged.

If he relied on the Scarlet Rose's communication system, he could employ much more sophisticated solutions.

It was too bad that he didn't trust it at all. The reason why he wasted valuable time in programming an encryption solution was because he could only trust what he made himself!

After making sure that his software program and his control module worked as expected, he left them alone and returned to the bridge.

He became a little tense as his floater chair entered the bridge.

The ship was just about to reach her second stop. Ves wasn't sure whether it was as lifeless as the first stop.

It took less than two weeks for the Scarlet Rose to travel from the Bright Republic to the border of the Friday Coalition.

However, this was the most direct route. The ship travelled along a popular shipping route. Many ships frequented this route, which was very bad news to a fugitive like Ves!

While most of this traffic consisted of neutrals, as long as one mercenary corps or escort force decided to do the Friday Coalition a favor, Ves would definitely be in trouble!

Therefore, he had no choice but to take an inefficient, circuitous route to safety.

His current route resembled a slalom that meandered its way to the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Not only did he have to make a lot of detours, he also had to travel to the most lifeless star systems imaginable!

Most of these consisted of red dwarf systems. Their weak mass and energy made it very hard for FTL drives to reach these destinations.

This wasn't a problem when the jump was short, but as long as the distance lengthened, it was too risky for ships to travel to them! As long as they missed the mark, it was a complete mystery where they ultimately stopped!

All of these measures doubled or tripled his return time. He might have to wander the stars for more than a month before the Scarlet Rose reached her destination!

This wasn't the first time he traveled in this fashion. The Flagrant Vandals successfully used these methods to avoid getting cornered by the Vesians as they boldly cut through their space!

Ves did not forget that one of the reasons the Vandals succeeded was because they had the help of the Vesian Revolution Front.

If Ves wanted to replicate the feat of the Vandals, he needed some intelligence assistance as well.

He had no choice but to rely on Gloriana and Calabast to provide him with this valuable information.

Even with all of these advantages, he was not very optimistic about his chances. The Friday Coalition's influence in this region of space was simply too heavy!

All of this was proven right as soon as the Scarlet Rose finally emerged out of FTL.

Despite ending up in another empty star system that didn't even contain a single manned space station, the Scarlet Rose still detected the presence of fifteen ships in the system!

Three of them even appeared within several light-minutes of his emergence point!

If the variance of the Scarlet Rose's FTL emergence hadn't nudged the ship away, the Scarlet Rose might have ended up in the middle of their triangular formation!

A few minutes after entering the star system, Ves received a transmission from one of the unknown ships.

[VES LARKINSON. ON BEHALF OF THE COALITION RESERVE CORPS, WE ORDER YOU TO CEASE YOUR FLIGHT AND SURRENDER THE SCARLET ROSE.]

"How friendly." Ves snorted.

He didn't panic.

Ves immediately commanded his ship to engage her thrusters and run as far away from the closest ships as possible.

Immediately, her powerful propulsion systems accelerated the Scarlet Rose away from the nearest ship.

At the same time, he activated the scanners and allocated a lot of energy into scanning the properties of the three pursuing ships.

The results quickly came in. It turned out that the three vessels belonged to a third-class mercenary corps that had doubtlessly been hired to squat at one of the likely emergence zones the Scarlet Rose might end up next.

The three ships were all light carriers. Due to their low relative velocity, none of the carriers enjoyed a head start on the Scarlet Rose.

More importantly, the pursuing ships consisted entirely of bog-standard third-class light carriers!

Compared to a second-class mobile supply frigate, their acceleration was too inferior! The mercenary corps would never be able to catch up to the Scarlet Rose before she transitioned back into FTL!

Ves put down his worries. Though the light carriers appeared to be distressingly close, in truth the distance would only grow larger instead of smaller!

"There's no reason for me to worry about them! At this distance, not even laser weapons can hit my ship!"

While Ves put down his concerns, he was still displeased.

This was just the start. Ves bet that he would definitely encounter this situation several more times!

Chapter 1743 Three Republics

After exchanging encrypted messages with Gloriana, Ves received a bunch of useful information.

First, he received an analysis of the Dyer Broslev Class. The Scarlet Rose just happened to be an upgraded version of the Dyer Broslev Class, so the information he received was very useful in increasing his understanding of his new ship.

The Hexers not only analyzed the Dyer Broslev Class in detail, but also documented all of the traps, safeguards and backup measures slipped into the various systems of the ship.

Though Ves managed to disarm many of them, he still missed a couple of hidden dangers, especially the ones embedded in the minor systems.

A sour expression faintly marred his face.

"Starships are way too complex."

If Ves was working with a mech, then he would have grasped it to a much greater degree! Even if it wasn't possible for him to master 100 of the ship, then he would have at least managed to understand 50 or 60 percent of its mechanisms!

In comparison, Ves felt he had only gained a selective understanding of the ship. He barely grasped 10 to 20 percent of the Scarlet Rose, but actually understood less than 5 percent of her workings!

The only reason why Ves managed to gain control of the mobile supply frigate was because no one else was left to contest his coup.

As long as the captain or a senior officer of the ship remained alive, they could have instantly taken back control over the core command systems!

The information provided by the Hexers specifically pointed out this well-hidden security risk. Though it only posed a threat when someone accessed the bridge, Ves still poured all of his efforts into closing this backdoor!

Aside from this useful information, Gloriana also passed on a modified route for him to navigate back to safety.

When Ves inspected the route, he found out that it actually consisted of several branches. If one destination wasn't safe for any reason, he could opt to travel to another star system instead.

Ves had to admit that this plan was very comprehensive. He wouldn't end up without direction when circumstances forced him to diverge from his primary route!

He could definitely tell that Calabast was responsible for forming this plan. Aside from suggesting various routes, the plan also highlighted opportunities to upgrade the ship or shake off pursuit.

Unfortunately, the plan did not mention anything about enlisting additional help along the way.

The Scarlet Rose was an empty castle without a competent crew. She was also defenseless as there weren't any ships and mechs to protect her against any possible threats!

Ves sorely missed the Avatars of Myth and the Battle Criers at this time! As long as he enjoyed their protection, he had much more confidence in sneaking back to safety!

Fortunately, the one saving grace was the Scarlet Rose's exceptional mobility.

As long as Ves disregarded the longevity of her propulsion system, his ship could easily outrun nearly any pursuers!

The fast cycling time of her FTL drive made it difficult for carriers and lower-quality vessels to keep up with her flight!

The original crew of the Scarlet Rose deserved a lot of credit for keeping the ship in excellent shape. Her FTL drive and her propulsion system were both in tip-top shape.

Though it was risky to overburden them, Ves didn't have to worry about wearing them out in a short amount of time.

Ships were built to endure, especially the more expensive ones like the Scarlet Rose. In ordinary cases, she should easily be able to maintain optimum performance for 50 years!

Overburdening the ship in any way would shorten this optimum state. The deterioration became even worse when there weren't any engineers on hand to mitigate the damage and perform immediate maintenance and repairs!

However, Ves didn't care about this at the moment. Though he already considered the ship as his possession, he clearly knew his priorities!

He should secure his own life and freedom first before chasing after other goals!

"If it's necessary to abandon the Scarlet Rose, I'll do it! I won't be able to cling to her anyway if my enemies manage to corner the ship!"

The plan already took these eventualities into account. Some of the star systems on his route were lightly populated.

The sparse settlements didn't attract a lot of traffic, thereby giving Ves plenty of opportunities to slip in and blend in the towns and cities.

As long as he waited for rescue or obtained passage on another ship, Ves could definitely resume his escape!

Of course, Ves did not wish to resort to this contingency plan. He was not a spy and did not feel confident in his ability to hijack another ship, especially when his opponents blockaded the planet!

According to his current plan, the Scarlet Rose had to pass through three different states in order to reach the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Right now, he resided in the Ordent Republic, a weak third-rate state that bordered the Friday Coalition.

Due to its small size and strong dependence on the Friday Coalition, the state did not possess a strong military heritage. The private sector outfits weren't very powerful either. None of them fought in any intensive battles or wars. Most of the fighting in this star system consisted of ritualized duels and restricted battles.

However, the annoying part about Ordent was that it maintained close ties with the Gauge Dynasty and Konsu Clan. The intelligence provided by Gloriana warned him that the Ordenters wouldn't hesitate to move in large numbers to hunt him down!

Once he passed through the Ordent Republic, Ves would cross into the Great Zona Republic.

Though its name sounded impressive, it wasn't actually stronger than the Bright Republic.

Different from Ordent, Zona experienced numerous wars, all of which ended in victory!

The reason why it adopted its current name was because the smaller Zona Republic managed to annex various neighboring states!

Though each of these states were small and weak, for Zona to become the ultimate victor of this territorial struggle spoke volumes about its military might!

In recent times, Zona abandoned its aggressive posture. While its militarists wanted to continue its string of victories, the internal stability of the state dropped significantly as it failed to digest its earlier conquests!

The Zonars were good at winning territories, but that didn't mean that they were good at keeping them! Their arrogant, tyrannical rule over their conquered territories evoked a lot of dissatisfaction, providing fertile ground to many hostile rebel groups!

Ves already knew how hard it was to fight against rebels. The Bentheim Liberation Movement and the Vesia Revolutionary Front managed to last for centuries despite enduring continuous persecution!

While it was almost impossible for these rebel groups to topple an entire state, they nonetheless turned into persistent dogs that continued to gnaw at the legs of the Great Zona Republic!

None of these rebel organizations should possess any special affection for the Friday Coalition.

Yet that did not mean that the enemy of his enemy was a friend!

The Scarlet Rose was an extremely valuable second-class ship! Any rebel group that managed to get their hands on her would be able to expand their spaceborn operations or sell her for a huge windfall!

The rebels couldn't be trusted! At best, Ves could take advantage of the pressure they exerted on the Zonars to slip between the cracks!

After crossing the Great Zona Republic, Ves would enter the Crecia Republic.

Bordering both the Star Faith Collective and the Ylvaine Protectorate, the Crecia Republic strongly resisted these religious influences by adopting a strong secular tradition.

This reminded him a lot of the Bright Republic.

Different from his home state, Crecia was a lot more centralized. The president held most of the power as there weren't any founding families or other legacy influences to divide power among themselves.

As a result, Crecia boasted very strong stability, which was bad news to Ves. The more chaotic the state, the easier it was to slip through its territories. A stable state like Crecia meant that it could easily muster up a lot of assets to cut off his escape routes!

"Well, whatever. I'll deal with this problem when I get to it." He shrugged. "I can only solve my problems step by step."

In total, Ves needed to cross through the territories of three republics, making him feel as if he was embarking on another odyssey!

The odds were against them. Ves was all alone with no one else but Lucky to keep him company.

He couldn't obtain any further help along the way. None of the mercenary corps and other possible sources of help could be trusted. They were much more liable to capture the Scarlet Rose and offer her back to the Friday Coalition in order to obtain rich rewards!

Ves grimaced. "The states in this region are all aligned with their big neighbor."

A second-rate state ordinarily didn't bother with taking over the poorer territories of third-rate states. That did not mean a more powerful state could ignore the riffraff entirely!

The former undeniably expanded their tentacles to the latter in order to prevent its enemies from doing the same!

As long as all of the third-rate states in the vicinity came under the influence of the Coalition, the Hexers wouldn't be able to infiltrate them and use them as a springboard to mess with their rivals!

The Ylvaine Protectorate happened to avoid getting swept up in the Coalition's influence due to several reasons.

First, throughout its history, the Protectorate isolated itself from the outside galaxy. It rejected any outside influences and continued to bury its head in the sand regardless of what went on outside its borders!

Second, the partners of the Coalition all consisted of secular powers. None of them possessed much enthusiasm in building ties with a religious culture they regarded as superstition.

Third, the Friday Coalition already built up influences in many other third-rate states. It was not a big deal to leave behind some gaps.

Even if the Hexadric Hegemony tentatively built some relationships with the Ylvaine Protectorate, the isolated state would never pose a threat to the Coalition's territorial supremacy!

This neglect gave Ves an opportunity to evade pursuit. As long as he crossed the border into the Ylvaine Protectorate, all of his other pursuers should think twice!

Perhaps in ordinary times, there was no reason to respect Ylvaine Protectorate's sovereignty.

However, the Komodo War made everything more sensitive!

Most states didn't actually want to forge a life-and-death bond with the Friday Coalition! If they betted on the wrong horse, the Hexers would surely make them pay for their hasty judgement!

Another complicating factor was the dazzling role played by the Deliverers.

While Ves didn't have the time to keep up with the news, what little he read suggested that the so-called Eye of Ylvaine became the latest sensation of the Sand War!

The Deliverers all performed well when piloted by Ylvainans. However, they seemed to perform the best in the hands of the Hunters of Ylvaine!

It was as if the Great Prophet started to concentrate his blessings on these chosen elites!

With the Ylvaine Protectorate expressing willingness to dispatch their Hunters of Ylvaine to foreign states, the Ylvainans gained a lot of appreciation!

If at this time some states conspired to attack the Ylvaine Protectorate, what would happen to its military assistance?

"Since I'm the designer of the Deliverer, other people should better harbor some scruples in pursuing me!" He reasoned.

Only the most committed lackeys of the Coalitions should pursue him wholeheartedly. As for others, his entanglement with the Ylvaine Protectorate and Hexadric Hegemony should definitely deter them from trying too hard in pissing him off!

"In these troubled times, it's best to stay neutral and let the big boys fight it out!"

After making this realization, Ves regained some hope. While his actual deterrence wasn't that great, as long as he leaned on his backers, he might be able to worm his way out of trouble!

Chapter 1744 Empty Quarters

"Calabast. I haven't seen you for a while."

Her projection looked around to observe the ruined bridge. Though the cleaning bots had done their best to clean up the bodies and debris, the melted surfaces and the torn holes still told a vivid story.

"I'll keep this short, Ves." She said. "It took a lot of effort to establish this encrypted channel, and it is only effective for a couple of minutes."

Ves frowned. "How?"

"It's complicated. Suffice to say, you need a way to obtain an inside connection to the Comm Consortium."

Comm Consortium! Even with his muted emotions, Ves couldn't help but feel shocked!

This was an organization that governed every quantum communication node! It oversaw pretty much the entire galactic communication network with its vast web of instantaneous communication channels!

How Calabast managed to make an arrangement with someone inside the Comm Consortium was a mystery.

"Why go through this trouble?"

"To explain myself, and to transmit some helpful data to you. As we speak, I'm transferring some software that you can install in the Scarlet Rose's operating system. You will need this to close some of the more difficult backdoors and loopholes. I've also included some helpful programs that will help you in masking the identity of the Scarlet Rose and falsify her transponders. It won't fool determined bounty hunters, but it will help you in attracting less attention from incidental bystanders."

That sounded very welcome to Ves. His disappointment towards her subsided a little, but it wasn't enough!

"Can I get some actual help?" He pushed. "I could use some actual crew to run this ship! I could also use some escorts to bring me to safety."

"We're working on that, Ves. Gloriana and I have been exploring our options, but we can't give you anything concrete. You'll have to fend for yourself for the time being."

Her vague reply did not satisfy Ves at all. He grimaced even further.

"Why didn't you warn me about General Cavendish's plot?"

"I've already said that my intelligence network hasn't penetrated the state level." Calabast answered in an exasperated tone. "I admit that I've underestimated the conspiracy some of these state actors have hatched. I've already adjusted my organization to detect these plots faster, but don't expect too much from us. My operation can never match the effort of a state."

"What were you even doing during this time?"

"I was preparing an opportunity for you, Ves. Didn't you want to break into a second-rate mech market? Among other actions, I've approached various entities and managed to obtain a positive response from a group that is interested in your mechs."

"Let me guess. They're Hexers, right?"

She grinned. "Naturally. Did you think I would offer you to design a mech for the Fridaymen?"

Though Ves absolutely refused to do any favors for the Friday Coalition after everything that Aisling Curver had done, that didn't mean he was open to designing mechs for the Hexadric Hegemony!

"I didn't ask for this, Calabast."

"I know you had plans to offer your services to the second-rate states from Vicious Mountain, but you don't have a foundation there. It's better to start closer home. Gloriana fully supports our initiative."

"Didn't you forget that I'm a man? How could I ever break into the Hegemony's mech market? All designs have to be vetted by the Hexers!"

"This is why you need the cooperation of Gloriana. As long as she takes responsibility for your work, most Hexers won't pay too much attention that a boy is the actual lead designer. The downside is that you won't earn as much credit as you deserve."

Ves hadn't even considered designing a Hexer mech at this point. However, due to the need to earn Constance Wodin's approval, he really needed this opportunity, so he did not reject Calabast's assistance.

"Can you give me more details?"

She shook her head. "It will only distract you from your current priorities. Let's wait until you are safe before considering your future options."

After discussing a few more important matters, Calabast ended the encrypted call.

Ves fell silent as he leaned his back against the captain's chair he replaced. The old one got wrecked when he bombarded the prior captain of the ship with an excess of energy damage.

Though Ves agreed that it was too premature to think about designing a mech for the Hexers, he couldn't help but question what exactly Calabast arranged for him and Gloriana.

The Hegemony's mech market was not as free and unbridled as most other economies. The Hexers deferred to their matriarchs to decide whether a mech design was a good addition to the market.

While this vastly reduced the amount of products for sale in the Hegemony, the quality of them tended to be very high!

Of course, one of the downsides of this was that Novices and Apprentices barely had room to breathe in their domestic mech industry. While the Hexers implemented various policies to avoid starving them to death, it was undeniable that the Friday Coalition offered much more fertile ground to the younger generation of mech designers.

Ves knew that Gloriana managed to beat the odds by specializing in a very small niche. There was always demand for custom mechs. Even if she didn't manage to attract any customers, she could always gain more experience by designing mechs for the Wodin Dynasty!

While Gloriana already developed a presence in the Hegemony's mech industry, she didn't actually possess that much commercial experience.

Ves expected that it would take some years for him to offer his products to the Hexers. Right now, he still had much to learn before he came close to reaching an adequate degree of familiarity with second-class mechs.

"What kind of mech do I even want to design?" He asked.

This question had been plaguing him for a while. Ever since he completed the Deliverer, he no longer saw any need to intervene in the Sand War again.

Outside of this destructive conflict, the states in the region shouldn't be eager to fight on a massive scale. Wars and skirmishes would certainly diminish as the survivors poured most of their energy into rebuilding what they lost and taking over the territories scoured by the sandmen.

This was why Ves already considered stepping up to a second-class mech market. All of the low-level friction that took place in the third-rate states did not interest him at all, especially after he experienced the Sand War.

Taking part in the Komodo War sounded much more interesting, though this conflict was fought at a much higher level than Ves was used to! Without a compelling and technically-sound mech design, he would never be able to break into the market!

Right now, Ves still needed to supplement his knowledge and hurry up in gaining all of the competences necessary to design a second-class mech!

"And not just an ordinary second-class mech, but a premium one!"

That reminded him that Aisling and Patricia's quarters were ripe for the picking. Since both of them were at the mech workshop by the time that Ves launched his hijacking attempt, the women shouldn't have gotten any opportunity to retrieve their personal possessions!

While Ves wasn't interested in their personal effects, he hoped they left something useful behind, such as a full copy of their library!

The printed books in his stateroom only encompassed a shallow layer of the knowledge that Clarion University had to offer! As long as Ves got his hands on Aisling's restricted knowledge, Ves would definitely be able to grasp second-class mech design faster!

He first processed the information and software sent by Calabast. It took one day to install the new software, become familiar with its functions, and increase his control over the Scarlet Rose.

Only after he finished these necessary chores did he choose to investigate former quarters of his least favorite Fridaymen mech designers.

In case of any traps, Ves decided to take some precautions before entering.

"Meow meow!"

"Hey, I haven't complained at all about the fact that you're treating millions or billions worth of cols of exotics as your food! The least you can do is to scout ahead and dig out any secret stashes!"

"Meow."

Though Lucky looked a bit grumpy, Ves thought it was best to pull Lucky away from the material stores. He still needed at least some supplies to perform critical repairs when needed!

Aside from this precaution, he also donned a suit of combat armor he managed to retrieve from one of Lucky's unfortunate victims.

Many of the guards that met an unfortunate end at his claws had died from internal wounds. That left their combat armor intact. As long as he hacked its systems and adjusted their biometric locks, the combat armor he salvaged fully recognized him as its native user!

The main issue with his protection was that it consisted of medium combat armor. This was larger and bulkier than Ves was used to. Along with the fact that second-class combat armor came with many complex functions, he was unable to adapt to it in a short amount of time!

This was why he made for a very strange sight right now. A large, armored form coated with the colors and emblems of the Coalition Reserve Corps approached the entrance to Patricia's quarters.

Lucky playfully swished in the air as he followed after his owner.

Once they reached the hatch, Ves used his authority over the ship to override the personal lock.

Though the hatch slid open, he did not step in. Instead, he turned his armored head to Lucky, who quickly got the hint.

"Meow."

Lucky flew inside and began to sniff and scan every corner of the roomy compartment.

"Meow!"

Only after Lucky finished his pass did Ves step inside.

The layout of Patricia's stateroom was identical to his own. The furnishings were just as luxurious, and all of the furniture aside from his bookcase were exactly the same.

There were some very noticeable differences, though. For one, Patricia's desk came with a standard terminal.

Another difference was that the furnishings only featured the symbols and markings of the CRC and the Friday Coalition. This was probably how his quarters should have originally looked like before Aisling rearranged the interior to indoctrinate him into defecting to the Gauge Dynasty.

Once Ves got over the differences, he slowly began to inspect Patricia's abandoned possessions.

To his disappointment, his former classmate did not bring much. Her wardrobe carried most of her personal effects.

He picked up a bra with his armored hand and stared at it listlessly.

What use did he have for this useless article for clothing?

He threw aside the bra and began to scour through the neatly-folded clothes for any hidden treasures.

No luck.

Lucky already inspected the wardrobe beforehand, but Ves hadn't given up hope.

"Did she even bring anything useful?" He frowned.

He searched elsewhere, but only found trivial objects such as a collection of shoes and some exclusive designer perfume that was worth hundreds of thousands of cols.

Ves sniffed the fragrance but didn't experience much stimulation due to his low period.

"Useless."

He threw the bottle of perfume away, which bounced against the deck before rolling to a stop.

No matter how much he searched, he failed to find anything useful!

He faintly hoped to encounter a spare shield generator or an important cache of intelligence!

Yet after two hours of searching, Ves encountered nothing worth valuing!

Not even the files she stored in her desk terminal contained anything of use!

"She's really careful." He sighed.

He didn't think she anticipated that he would take over the ship. This was probably an ingrained habit she developed to minimize any possible leaks.

The way she arranged her quarters conformed closely to her claim that she was trying to advance as a rational mech designer.

As someone who purposefully suppressed her emotions, she had no need to bring much stuff!

Chapter 1745 Competitive Mechs

Searching Patricia's quarters turned out to be a fruitless venture.

She brought nothing useful to Ves. What personal effects she left behind largely consisted of clothes and cosmetics.

Of course, she didn't need to bring anything else. She was just supposed to be serving alongside a monitor on behalf of the Coalition Reserve Corps.

This was a fairly boring duty that demanded little of her. Aside from providing Aisling with her insights on the Bright Republic, Patricia did not need to do anything else.

The only meaningful gain he secured was getting a better insight on Patricia.

For some reason, Ves believed that there was a good chance that he would encounter her again in the future.

Though they both came from the same state, they somehow ended up on opposite sides.

While she was just an Apprentice for the time being, the confidence she exuded when she stated that she was steadily working towards Journeyman impressed him a lot!

"She'll definitely be worth watching once she advances to Journeyman!"

He left her abandoned quarters in disappointment. Getting an impression of her personality was not worth wasting two hours of his limited time.

"Hopefully, Aisling left something better behind!"

He followed the same routine on Lady Aisling's quarters.

Unlike the rooms assigned to Ves and Patricia, Aisling clearly enjoyed better digs!

Her stateroom was twice as large as his own, and much of the space was taken up by larger furniture and wasteful decorations.

Unlike Patricia, Aisling clearly brought more stuff!

Her wardrobe alone contained four times as much clothes! She even brought along more shoes!

Of course, just because her quarters were filled with her personal effects didn't mean that Ves could make use of them. In truth, many of her possessions consisted of trinkets such as miniatures of her previous mech designs.

While there was some value to studying her handmade miniatures, there was little value in doing so during his current predicament.

He could study her work later when he had the luxury to return to mech design!

Unfortunately, as Ves searched her quarters further, he only found more objects that either satisfied her vanity or were related to her profession.

It took half an hour before he encountered his first useful find.

"What's this, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

While Ves had been going through Aisling's effects, Lucky had been phasing through the deck and bulkheads in an attempt to uncover hidden pockets.

Ves half expected to find nothing. There was no reason for Aisling to bring anything too sensitive or valuable for her assignment. Just like Patricia, she shouldn't be bringing anything superfluous to her duties.

Instead, Lucky managed to dig out a strange vial containing some sort of glowing blue fluid.

Ves had no clue what he was holding. Yet he intuitively sensed that it was very valuable.

"Is there something else in the stash where you found this vial?"

"Meow."

"Nothing at all? Not even a data chip or something?"

"Meow!"

Without any documents or other objects, Ves did not know the value of this vial.

He could make some guesses, though. The contents of the vial reminded him a lot of a gene boost elixir.

The ones he was familiar with acted as primers that increased a person's tolerance towards genetic modification.

Ves obtained an entry-level boost from Master Olson. He gained a follow-up boost after undergoing an operation at the Starlight Megalodon.

The value between these boosts differed substantially.

While an entry-level boost was already valuable, a second phase priming agent could be worth as much as the Scarlet Rose!

Though his vision grew hot for a moment, his rationality quickly reasserted itself.

How could Aisling be so careless as to bring along a second phase priming agent to this mission?

She should never be carrying something so valuable without more protection!

"Unless.. It's not for her. Perhaps it might have been prepared for an upcoming trade!"

Ves recalled that Aisling ended her monitoring assignment early. In exchange, the CRC passed some other assignments to her in order to make up for her premature return.

"Is this a part of her makeup assignments?"

He couldn't really tell. There was something special about the vial that prompted Aisling to store it away in a hidden stash in her quarters.

Whether it was a gene boost elixir or some other valuable substance, Ves couldn't immediately make use of it, let alone identify it right away.

"Maybe her terminal contains some information."

He left aside the unmarked vial and sat down behind her desk. With Lucky's assistance, he managed to gain entry into her files.

"Well, well, well, it's not as empty as I thought!"

Unlike Patricia who maintained a very light footprint, Aisling clearly didn't possess the same concerns. She dumped all sorts of files and documents in the storage space of her personal terminal.

While her files were locked behind numerous passwords and encryptions, Lucky easily solved them all, revealing all of their contents to Ves without any further hindrance!

He combed over Aisling's haphazard file structure. Many of the files were related to her former and current design projects.

He not only encountered Aisling's design schematics, but also her notes, logs and explanations!

The former only provided him with some reference value. The former combined with the latter allowed him to imitate her mech design!

While Ves didn't feel any desire to engage in such a shameless action, he could still gain a deeper insight into her specialty!

"Wait a second.. these design schematics are very familiar!"

Four of the folders contained the full design documentation of the mechs stored in the mech hangar!

Each of those dormant mechs were actually her own work! She designed and built all four mechs to serve as her honor guard of some sorts.

If Ves hadn't sabotaged their neural interfaces, then he would have definitely failed in his hijacking attempt!

As it was, without any mech pilots, the mechs basically turned into metal statues. There was no way that Ves could take advantage of their strength.

Nonetheless, that did not mean that Ves discounted them entirely. At the very least, if he didn't have anything else to do, he might as well study Aisling's work in order to deepen his understanding of second-class mechs!

If he combined personal inspections of the mechs with studying Aisling's design files, Ves would definitely be able to grasp the essence of their designs!

This was considerably valuable to Ves as he didn't really have many opportunities to inspect a second-class mech up close!

Out of curiosity, Ves delved into the documentation related to her specialty. He immediately encountered pages of pages filled with calculations, projections and incomprehensible jargon.

Ves only possessed a shallow understanding of neural interface technology! His scattered learning on this subject only encompassed the tip of the iceberg!

If Ves wanted to gain a technical understanding of neural interconnectivity, then Ves had to develop an actual foundation in this field!

"Did she leave any useful learning material behind?" He wondered.

He immediately stopped exploring her design files and turned his attention to her other folders.

Ves encountered various irrelevant documents related to Clarion University and Master Huron. They encompassed subjects such as offering to tutor some important students and becoming a consultant to the Sundered Phalanx.

According to the correspondence logs, Aisling refused the offer to join a clandestine mech design team related to the Gauge Dynasty's mech military.

Ordinary individuals would never be given the opportunity to say no, but Aisling was different!

As a direct disciple to a Master, she enjoyed a more privileged status in society!

Ves idly browsed her correspondence further

While she didn't deliberately obfuscate her information, she still exhibited some care in avoiding anything too sensitive.

The most he gained out of reading the messages she sent to her friends, colleagues and her Master was that she was a very wanted partner for collaboration, especially when it came to mechs designed for small scale military units and mech athlete teams of all things!

The former made a lot of sense. Neural networks worked best when they tied a small number of mech pilots together who shared a lot in common.

Outside of close relatives, the only people who qualified were those who underwent the exact same rigorous training that shaped their attitudes and personality traits in the same direction!

Ves did not expect Aisling to be involved in the design of mechs proposed for group sport competitions!

"The mech games circuit of the Friday Coalition is much more popular than the scene in the Bright Republic!"

The mechs, mech pilots and diversity of competition formats were on an entirely different level! A lot of money passed around in this industry due to the sheer number of fans they attracted!

Not only the Fridaymen, but many other fans from the Bright Republic and other third-rate states watched the matches!

Ves personally didn't waste any time in watching them since second-class mechs were too far away from him. He regretted this decision now as he would have gained a much better feel for these types of mechs if he witnessed thousands of battles.

He turned his attention back to the correspondence. It turned out that neural interconnectivity was a high risk, high reward addition to group sports mechs.

Competitive teams who wanted to gain an edge in teamwork were all interested in leveraging the power of neural networks!

Though neural networks increased the chance of incurring brain injuries and other neural problems, to mech athletes who wanted to win at all costs, even a 5 percent increase in effective performance was worth the risks!

Reading through all of this correspondence not only enlightened him to the demand for neural interconnectivity, but also expanded his horizons of the mech games circuit.

He couldn't help but consider what it would be like to follow Aisling's footsteps and design some mechs for a professional mech athlete team.

Depending on the league and team tiers, mech designers stood to gain a lot of money!

As mechs served as one of the main victory factors, their designs were very crucial!

In the team correspondence, Aisling received offers that rewarded her with 2 to 5 percent shares of a mech athlete team's seasonal profit! As long as her mechs continued to be used, the coins would keep rolling in her bank accounts!

However, to a mech designer like Aisling, she had little interest in the monetary remuneration.

What interested her more was exposing her work to an incredibly huge audience base!

Though the offers she received only came from teams competing in the lesser leagues, this was still a very great opportunity to build up a reputation and expose her work to many future customers!

Unfortunately, the offers vastly reduced when the Komodo War erupted. Most mech games leagues suspended their matches while the rest reduced their scope.

It couldn't be helped! In the long-awaited war against their hated rivals, the Fridaymen couldn't afford to indulge in too much entertainment!

"What a shame."

Ves developed a slight yearning to participate in group competitions.

What would it be like to introduce mechs with powerful glows to the mech arenas?

The crowd would definitely go wild when they experienced the glows in person!

He became more and more interested in this idea. It was a very good idea for him to gain a reputation in a new and unfamiliar market!

Sadly, the Komodo War ruled out any attempts to gain exposure through this method. If not for this massive conflict, Ves would gain the confidence to elevate a smaller team to prominence!

"Oh well." He shrugged. "Maybe I can find some opportunities elsewhere."

After a bit of thinking, he found that Gloriana and him were very well suited to design a suite of mechs tailored to a competitive team!

"This idea has a lot of promise! I should get back to it when I have the chance!"

For now, he needed to resume his inspection of Aisling's personal files.

Chapter 1746 Mysterious Eye

For the first time since the outbreak of the Sand War, hope began to spread.

It originated from a surprising source.

Across numerous battlefields in the Protectorate, the Kronon defense fleets deployed as usual.

The sandman race continued its mindless assaults on human territories long after the sandman emperor perished.

They showed no signs of stopping! Many analysts already became resigned to the fact that the sandmen would continue to engage in their suicidal attacks until not a single living grain of sand was left!

The only variable was how many humans they killed while their race collided against the might of human civilization!

Without the assistance of the Big Two or the two dominant second-rate states, the Ylvainans, Brighters, Vesians, Reinaldans and many other people had to depend on themselves to save their lives!

After many months of fighting and countless human deaths, salvation finally graced the fatigued combatants.

It came in the form that no one expected, even the Ylvainans themselves!

The Deliverers, especially in the hands of the Eye of Ylvaine, turned battles around whenever they were deployed!

Each time these mechs made an appearance on the battlefield, their distinctive profiles with their huge gauss rifles lifted every Kronon mech pilot's morale as much as the glows of the Holy Soldiers!

"Ylvaine is with us!"

"The eye of judgement will punish the wicked!"

Despite the many mysteries surrounding the mechanisms of the Deliverer model, the Ylvainans weren't inclined to remain skeptical.

Experiencing the fantastic glows of the Deliverers was enough to make any Ylvainan into a rapturous believer in the mechs!

Each time these mechs engaged the sandmen, every other mech pilot and starfighter pilot tried to see how bright their luminescent third eyes shined into space.

The brighter the shine, the greater the mech pilot's devotion to the Ylvainan Faith!

The brighter the shine, the more responsive the Deliverer's blessings acted on the mech pilot's aim!

Of all the mech pilots, the Hunters of Ylvaine often achieved the best results!

Their intense devotion, which was constantly being reinforced by their exposure to the Deliverer's sacred glows, turned them into vessels of the Great Prophet's will!

Prophet Ylvaine had not forsaken his flock! He lived, and lent his assistance to the descendants of his original believers!

Tears welled in the eyes of both the Hunters of Ylvaine and the Kronon mech pilots that were willing to sacrifice their lives to shield these precious mechs.

Their faith had been rewarded! The legacy they preserved was real!

In one major star system, several mech regiments resisted a large sandman fleet that consisted of up to twenty sandman admirals!

Millions of drones buzzed around three humongous monoliths.

The monoliths each fired heavy laser beams at distant starships, pressuring the Ylvainans into concluding the battle quickly.

Without their motherships, the mechs had nowhere else to go! The Ylvainans couldn't afford to lose their ships, especially when the losses far outpaced their replenishment rate!

However, the starfighter screen that protected the vital Holy Soldiers and other vulnerable mechs were dropping like flies!

Just like the Brighters, the Ylvainans introduced a second generation of starfighter models that featured much more substantial armor.

Yet against the collective might of more than a million drones, these starfighters became flooded with light lasers!

The Eye of Ylvaine did not sit still for long. Three of the Deliverer mechs deployed right at once. They split up in order to encompass three sections of the approaching sandman fleet, determined to strip it down as fast as possible!

"The Hunters of Ylvaine are here!"

"Keep fighting! Don't let the sandmen threaten the Deliverer mechs!"

As soon as the Deliverer mechs arrived in position, they prepared their gauss rifles but held their fire.

The Hunters of Ylvaine had to bide their time.

No matter how many starfighters fell, no matter how desperately their pilots screamed for help, the Hunters of Ylvaine needed to commune with the Great Prophet in order to receive his blessing.

All three Hunters of Ylvaine closed their eyes and immersed themselves in their mechs.

Through trial and error, the Hunters of Ylvaine formed a ritual of some sorts that hastened the onset of the blessing.

The more they immersed in the mech, the greater the blessing!

The more they prayed to Prophet Ylvaine, the faster he responded their earnest pleas!

"Oh prophet, please bless us with your sight and save the lives of your devoted followers!"

"I pledge my life to you! I beg you, expose the wicked sandman admirals and help us exact judgement for their crimes!"

Whenever they arrived on the battlefield, each Hunter of Ylvaine prayed in their mechs as if they were kneeling before an altar.

Though this exposed the mechs to enemy fire, their distance from the sandman fleet made it extremely unlikely that they would get fired upon.

Even if the sandman did attempt to destroy the distant targets, the attending mechs would never allow the Deliverers to be profaned!

A squad of space knights escorted each Deliverer and surrounded it from each cardinal direction.

No enemy was allowed to interrupt this sacred ritual!

With the cover of these valiant space knights, the third eyes of all three Deliverer mechs shone brighter and brighter!

Though they had already shone as soon as they came online, the moment the Hunters of Ylvaine finished their prayers, the glows of their Deliverers connected to their minds at a degree that could scarcely be measured!

In fact, many mech designers tried to figure out which variable caused the third eyes increased or decreased their luminosity.

No one managed to find an answer as of yet! The input that controlled the intensity of their shining crystal orbs seemed to be connected to nothing!

This application went beyond established science. Only a deep understanding of Ves Larkinson's design philosophy would allow other mech designers to replicate this mysterious feat.

Many have tried, but none have succeeded!

The copycats who faked the shining third eyes were easily exposed as counterfeits!

This was because these mechs were devoid of glows or only contained traces of one. The third eyes glowed according to concrete input such as pilot immersion or the quality of the man-machine connection, which was not exactly what an authentic Deliverer conveyed!

What the brightness of the third eyes actually represented was the alignment between the mech pilot and the mech!

Only by resonating with the design spirit of the Deliverer would the mech pilot be able to make the third eye shine a light in the dark!

Right now, the three Deliverer mechs shone like torches in the night, repelling the darkness that threatened to engulf the vulnerable Ylvainans!

"DEATH!"

All three Deliverer mechs fired in unison in very specific directions. Each Hunter of Ylvaine observed the outcome of their shots with unnatural intensity!

As soon as the hyperaccelerated projectiles slammed against three random sandman drones, every mech pilot and starfighter pilot briefly paused.

Just seconds later, a third of the humongous sandman swarm suddenly lost coordination!

Hundreds of thousands of deadly sandman drones seemed to lost their signals and began to drift apart, having received no instructions to turn around and keep up with the swarm!

A collective roar erupted from the throats of the rapturous Kronon mech pilots and Ylvainan starfighter pilots!

"YLVAINE IS WITH US!"

The miracle wasn't over yet! Shortly after their gauss rifles chambered another round, they barked out yet again!

Three more random sandman drones shattered apart after suffering devastating kinetic impacts!

Hundreds of thousands of surrounding sandman drones all lost cohesion! They no longer fired their lasers and simply drifted off as if their souls had left their bodies!

"YLVAINE! YLVAINE! YLVAINE!"

The Deliverers unleashed a couple more volleys, hitting a sandman admiral almost every time!

Though one of the Deliverers happened to miss his target due to extreme distance, the Hunter of Ylvaine quickly made up for it by succeeding upon his second try!

The swarm had ceased to become a threat!

By slaying less than a dozen specific sandman drones, the three Deliverers achieved a result that required at least several mech regiments to succeed!

Just three long-ranged mechs managed to defeat a sandman swarm encompassing millions of drones, each of which were capable of outputting lasers that could overwhelm an entire defensive fleet and scour entire planets of life!

If that wasn't a miracle, then what even qualified as a miracle?!

The foreign observers monitoring this miraculously lopsided result all witnessed this miracle in the flesh.

They had turned numb at seeing miracle after miracle taking place before their eyes.

Most of the foreign observers were secularists who came from supposedly enlightened states.

To see the ignorant and superstitious Ylvainans succeed where everyone else had failed put a very sour taste in their mouths.

Had human science failed them?! Why couldn't the Brighters and Vesians, both of which experienced numerous wars, develop a solution as effective as the Deliverers?

Why had Ves Larkinson, a Brighter and a member of a prominent military family, developed the Deliverers for the Ylvainans instead of his own people?

Too many inexplicable questions surrounded the Deliverers. Many foreigners desperately wanted to unlock the secrets of their design, but none managed to make any breakthroughs!

The only person who could offer a satisfactory explanation happened to be the victim of a strange conspiracy!

A lot of criticism had been directed at the Bright Republic, the Cavendish Family, the Ramza Family and even the Friday Coalition! If not for this extremely ill-timed plot, the other states might have been able to persuade the Bright Martyr in sharing some of his secrets!

Even if Ves Larkinson stayed mum, then at least they could have persuaded him to design their own variants of the Deliverer!

As it was, the Ylvaine Protectorate's willingness to lend the Eye of Ylvaine to the other states offered them an alternate solution!

With such powerful mechs defending their vulnerable star systems, the foreign states would certainly be able to lessen the pressure!

Without the swarms, the mechs and starfighters perished much less quickly!

This was because the monoliths that remained behind were more suited to attack larger targets than small craft!

Without the protection of the swarm, these monoliths inevitably turned into punching bags destined to die by a thousand cuts!

Negotiations, which initially proceeded slowly, gained rapid momentum as the demand for the Hunters of Ylvaine increased!

The Ylvaine Protectorate made a large number of deals with foreign states. Alongside alliances, trade deals, generous payments and the right to proselytize their faith in the foreign states, the Ylvainans rapidly gained influence in the local region!

As long as the Protectorate lived up to its end of the deal, its post-war circumstances would definitely herald a golden age for the Ylvainan people!

As the Ylvaine Protectorate finally signed an agreement with the Bright Republic, the first Deliverers soon arrived at Bentheim.

Hard-pressed by the sandmen, the port system became a graveyard of many starfighter pilots and mech pilots!

The great industrial machine of Bentheim could no longer keep up with the attrition suffered by the Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps!

Even the irregular forces started to bleed valuable mechs and mech pilots! Outfits such as Ricklin's Rollers and the Blood Claws became less and less hopeful about their ability to defend Bentheim.

Only a rare number of notable Brighters lifted up the flag.

"Don't give up!" Vincent Ricklin shouted as his scorched and worn-out Adonis Colossus withstood numerous laser attacks as his mech boldly flew to the front. "Bentheim must never fall! Our brothers and sisters are counting on us! For Bentheim!"

"For Bentheim!"

After living through scores of battles, Vincent Ricklin was no longer the bumbling fool of before.

While his earlier performances were more comedic than heroic, the sheer defensive prowess of his Adonis Colossus always made sure he lived to fight another day!

Though his Sandbreaker rifle often missed and his missile salvos never achieved any critical results, his familiar presence always dispelled some of the darkness threatening to collapse everyone's morale!

Yet sheer charisma alone was not enough to reserve the losses suffered by the defenders of Bentheim!

Under these circumstances, three Kronon mech pilots and their Deliverers finally transferred from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim.

Chapter 1747 Light of the Prophe

Lieutenant Dominic Kronon and his two subordinates received a kingly reception upon their arrival to the war-stricken star system.

They came not as individuals, but representatives of their people and state. They wore their best dress uniforms as they attended a grand banquet in the presence of ministers, generals and other dignified officials.

As mere soldiers, they should have received the least attention out of the people present, but the circumstances were anything but unusual!

The Kronon mech pilots had already joined the Hunters of Ylvaine by virtue of their skill and record.

Not only that, but Dominic, Edward and Jazel all became one of the foremost representatives of the Eye of Ylvaine.

Not only did they test pilot the prototypes of the Deliverers, they also piloted the only three gold label Deliverers in existence!

Technically, the precious mechs still belonged to the LMC. However, Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson graciously lent the mechs to the Eye of Ylvaine as long as they were used to defend the Bright Republic.

With these great mechs about to show their magic, every Brighter in the Bentheim System anticipated a miracle!

Some of them even began to show some desire to convert to the Ylvainan Faith!

In their darkest moments, all of the enlightened ideals of the Bright Republic failed to give them solace!

Only the light of the Ylvainan Faith gave them warmth!

The second-class mercenary corps that recently lent their assistance at Bentheim failed to stir the people's hearts.

Not only did the Fridaymen mercenaries look down on the Brighters, they could only cover one direction at most!

Their role was extremely marginal in relation to the overall war theater. Even though they always smashed every sandman fleet that they met, the powerful mercenaries refused to split up and dilute their battle strength!

All of the goodwill that the Brighters held towards the Fridaymen mercenaries quickly evaporated. Though they still appreciated the help, their arrogant and dismissive attitudes did not win any hearts!

The three Kronons became the focus of many expectations.

To their credit, the three veteran Kronons endured the attention with stoic professionalism. They parroted the formal pleasantries that had been drilled in their heads and constantly smiled politely in public.

No matter how much they resented the Brighters for harming the Bright Martyr, they had to follow the arrangements of their superiors!

At this time, the Ylvaine Protectorate wanted to develop friendly relations with the Bright Republic!

"The Brighters really don't deserve to be saved." Jezebel Kronon whispered as they sat down at the seats of honor. "If I had my way, I would have stepped aside until they finally cough up the Bright Martyr."

"It's useless." Lieutenant Dominic admonished her. "Mr. Larkinson is long gone from the Bright Republic according to our sources. As much as we want to save him, we have an obligation to our people. The Protectorate needs us to play our roles."

Edward Klessner put his hand on Jezebel's shoulder. "The Great Prophet is watching over all of his believers. The Bright Martyr is no exception. Believe in Mr. Larkinson. He shall return. I am sure of it. His journey has not come to an end!"

The Kronons had little choice but to cling to faith.

As the dishes started arriving, several officials awkwardly approached the Hunters of Ylvaine, but failed to engage them in conversation.

They had too little in common. Though the Kronon mech pilots were decent in speaking prepared remarks, they possessed no diplomatic training to speak of. Their expressions of faith completely fell flat and their lingering animosity towards the Bright Republic made any attempts to forge a friendship a fruitless endeavor.

Fortunately, at least some higher ups anticipated such an outcome.

Ordinarily, soldiers understood other soldiers the best.

However, any officers of the Mech Corps received cold shoulders from the stoic Hunters of Ylvaine.

None of the three could forget how Venerable Ghanso Larkinson shot down over a hundred mechs while taking refuge behind his position in the Mech Corps!

Even though Ghanso was only one mech pilot among many, the entire service had been tarnished in the eyes of the Kronon Dynasty!

As far as they were concerned, the entire Mech Corps carried the sin of betraying the Bright Martyr!

It was already a miracle in itself that Jezebel Kronon resisted the urge to punch the mech captain who tried to engage her in conversation!

"Calm down, sergeant." Dominic softly rebuked her. "You are visibly losing control. Don't disgrace our dynasty!"

"I'm sorry, sir."

The hosts eventually changed gears seeing that all of their previous entreaties failed.

It became clear that these Kronons harbored an intense grudge towards the Mech Corps!

This was bad news, as the Bright Republic depended heavily on the willingness and sincerity of these three Kronon mech pilots to relieve the pressure at Bentheim!

This was why instead of sending more officials, the hosts instead dispatched someone that was bound to evoke more sympathy.

"Hello."

The three Kronons looked up from their discussion and encountered a captain of the Bentheim Planetary Guard!

"You are..?" Jezebel frowned.

"Captain Melinda Larkinson of the local Planetary Guard. I'm pleased to meet you."

A Larkinson! The Kronons instantly dropped their disdain. Out of all of the Brighters they met, only the Larkinsons impressed them! The valor and dedication shown by many Larkinsons when they attempted to stand in the way of Ghanso made an unforgettable impression in their minds!

If not for the severe diplomatic consequences for attacking a foreign expert pilot, the three Kronons wouldn't have stood aside that day!

Even if there was no chance that three standard mechs could beat the Glittering Comet, the Kronons still wanted to put their faith to the test!

The fact that their superiors forbid them from involving themselves in this event haunted them to this day!

For this reason, the three Kronons regarded Melinda with much more fondness than any other Brighter.

Of course, they weren't exactly sure whether Melinda stood on the side of Ghanso or Ves' side of the family.

"What is your relation to the Bright Martyr?"

"I'm his elder cousin and friend. I frequently spent time with him in the past and I continued to stay in touch with him as he began his mech design career."

"I see. You're a friend of ours if you're a friend of the Bright Martyr." Lieutenant Dominic nodded to her in approval. "Come take a seat."

Melinda sat down and carefully engaged in conversation with the Ylvainans.

"Just for full disclosure, it wasn't my idea to attend this reception and approach you in this way. I would have wanted to meet you in more informal circumstances, but duty demands otherwise."

"You Larkinsons are so dedicated to your duties." Jezebel sneered.

"Aren't you Kronons the same? I believe Ves had a word to say about your rigid dedication to your mission. What I often find lacking from Ves is that he's too obsessed with his work and career to remember what our lives are really all about. Our work shouldn't define our lives. Our friends and family define our lives."

All three Kronons looked at her with incomprehension.

"Well said, but.. our mission must always come first. Our Protectorate wouldn't have lasted so long against the sandmen if not for our valiant dedication. We are the Protectors of the Flock. It is our duty to fight for our people!"

Melinda smiled ruefully at them. "You don't seem to understand my point."

"We do." Dominic replied. "We just choose to give up the many pleasures and delights that life can bring. Every Kronon born in the dynasty or adopted into it is willing to sacrifice everything for the betterment of our people! This is what our faith compels us! Don't think we are giving up everything for nothing. We will definitely be rewarded in the afterlife!"

All three Kronons shared looks of conviction with each other. No matter how devout they were in their faith, every member of the Kronon Dynasty had been instilled with the values of their lineage.

The Kronon Dynasty sacrificed an enormous amount of members in escorting the fugitive believers to the edge of human space! Through the selfless sacrifice of their predecessors, the Ylvainan Faith finally managed to take root in the territories that encompassed their current state!

Their zealotry and unflinching devotion threw Melinda off balance.

She had the sense she was talking to a member of the conservative faction of the Larkinson Family!

"That sounds.. nice." She eventually remarked. "In any case, you'll soon be deployed to different fleets in order to assist them in resisting the tide of sandmen. Are you willing to lend a hand to our people?"

"We are professionals." Dominic declared. "We follow the instructions of our superiors. As long as Ylvaine wills it, we shall defend you Brighters as if you are part of our flock!"

"What if.. there is a conflict between the two? What if your superiors and 'Ylvaine' disagrees?"

Jezebel grinned. "The Great Prophet's will is absolute! As our greatest leader and founder of our faith, his orders take precedence!"

"He's dead, though!" Melinda blurted out. "How can you possibly take orders from someone in the grave?"

"The Great Prophet isn't dead." Edward responded. "He's alive. We know because his heart beats with ours each time. If you are a devout Ylvainan believer, you will know this as well once you step in the cockpit of a Holy Soldier or Deliverer mech. Aren't you one of the Bright Martyr's friends? You must have piloted one of his mechs, then."

"I participated in the Battle for Bentheim from the beginning by piloting a Desolate Soldier into battle."

"Then you must surely know that your mech is alive! Every mech made by the Bright Martyr is alive!"

"The Living Mech Corporation isn't called this way for nothing." Melinda agreed. "I've always felt that there is more to the glows of the Desolate Soldiers. I imagine it's the same for your Ylvainan mechs. However, I find it hard to accept that this is the same as your prophet coming back from the dead to help your people tide over this crisis!"

"This is what we believe." Jezebel spoke with conviction. "The Bright Martyr is the true blessed of our Great Prophet! Your cousin's unique talent with mechs is the vehicle in which Prophet Ylvaine has bestowed his light onto us once again! We are eminently grateful to Mr. Larkinson for saving us and reigniting our people's faith!"

Melinda couldn't help but remain skeptical. If this prophet of theirs was so great, then why did he need to communicate with his followers through the medium of a mech? Why couldn't the prophet pass on his revelations to his followers directly? Weren't gods supposed to be able to bless their believers directly?

However, it wouldn't be very polite nor diplomatic to express her Brighter skepticism.

She still remembered her mission. She needed to forge a friendly relationship with these weird and zealous Kronons.

Dominic asked his own question to Melinda.

"It is no secret that many Larkinsons have applied to move to our sacred state. The LMC, Avatars and other organizations that belong to the Bright Martyr have all lost faith in the Bright Republic. With their departure, some of the members of your esteemed family are following suit. Will you be accompanying your enlightened relatives as well?"

Melinda shook her head. "I'm not part of this silly fight between Ves and Ghanso. I am committed to my duty, but not in the bone-headed way of my aggressive cousin. I plan to continue my service to the Planetary Guard. Bentheim and the Bright Republic still needs us Larkinsons."

"Ah. Your stance is the same as that of your honorable uncle."

"Uncle Ark is a true Larkinson as far as I'm concerned. He's the only expert pilot in the family who isn't trying to tear us apart." Melinda sighed.

"While it is disappointing that Colonel Ark Larkinson is still committed to his corrupt Mech Corps, we respect his loyalty and dedication."

Melinda only grimaced further when she heard that. No matter how hard her uncle tried to play peacekeeper, even he couldn't stave off the inevitable outcome!

Just thinking about the inevitable split-up of the family depressed her to no end! She never imagined that the Larkinson Family would ever break into two due to ideological differences!

Chapter 1748 Three Bentheimers

Not a lot of Larkinsons wished to divest themselves from the Bright Republic.

Despite all of the recent drama, many Larkinsons still valued their commitment to the Mech Corps and the state they vowed to protect.

More importantly, almost every Larkinson couldn't bear to part with the friends and family who lived in the Bright Republic.

It simply wasn't possible to move their entire social circle to an entirely different state!

What complicated the matter even further was that the Ylvaine Protectorate held very little appeal to the Larkinsons.

The Ylvaine Protectorate pretty much mandated belief in their state religion. How could the Larkinsons, who all grew up in the Brighter tradition, put down all of their skepticism and engage in superstition?

It was impossible! While the Ylvainan Faith was fairly mild, some of its tenets were very controversial, particularly the one that stated that humans and aliens were all brothers and sisters!

Nonetheless, some Larkinsons, especially the younger ones who weren't tied down by their spouses and children, decided to take the plunge.

They believed that a bright new adventure awaited them if they followed Ves Larkinson in quest to make the Larkinsons greater than ever before!

Those who were still obliged to serve the remainder of their tours of service were still stuck in the Bright Republic. However, as soon as they got free, they would definitely leave and join wherever Ves wanted to go!

Some Larkinsons had already become convinced that Ves would find some way to bring them all to the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!

Once they arrived at an entirely new galaxy, their future prospects were bound to be bright!

Of course, only the earliest enthusiasts and loyalists of Ves had already made the plunge. Many others who were tempted still remained undecided.

After all, the leader they put all of their hopes in had gone missing. How could the Larkinsons ever dream of surpassing their current height when the main person responsible for carrying them upwards was nowhere to be found?

Raella Larkinson crossed her arms as she oversaw a crew of mech technicians servicing the Proudful Soldiers and other mechs of the Blood Claws.

She made for a slightly unusual sight. Not only was she wearing a caste, but much of her body and face was covered by a special medical fabric.

A woman wearing overalls and a poofy beret soon approached her side.

"How goes the repair?"

"Not very good." Ketis responded and wiped some metal dust from her firm hands. "I've taken a good luck of your Prideful Soldier, what is left of it anyway. How did you even survive a direct series of hits on your mech?"

"It takes more than a random barrage of lasers to take down a Larkinson!" She grinned.

"Aren't you supposed to be exiled from your family?"

"That's just to shut the old coots up. Their nagging drove me crazy. Even if my name is not in the family rolls anymore, my blood still flows true."

"Maybe you have an opportunity to go back. I've heard the Larkinsons are splitting up. I'm sure that Ves will welcome you to his half of your family!"

Raella looked uncertain, which was highly uncharacteristic of the ferocious Blood Captain. "I've already built a new life here. I left the Larkinsons in order to accomplish something by myself. So far, I've succeeded."

As Ketis had been working alongside Raella for some time, she knew that the rebellious Larkinson truly valued her independence.

However, working all alone meant that she had no one to lean on when she needed some help!

Even the Swordmaidens depended on their fellow sisters! No one can survive on their own!

"You just brushed past death a few days ago." Ketis gestured to Raella's limp arm. "When we pulled you out of the ejected cockpit, your left side was marred with third-degree burns. If your cockpit had been hit again, nothing but ashes would have been left of your body!"

"Well, I got better. These kinds of flesh wounds are trivial. I'll be ready to thrash the sandman as soon as I become accustomed to my regenerated tissue!"

Her Larkinson identity came in very handy this time. The Blood Claws did not hesitate to offer her the best treatment they could provide.

"Sometimes, you behave just like the Ves I know. The two of you aren't as different as you think." Ketis pointed out.

"Ah, shut up!" Raella weakly punched the mech designer's arm. "I hate being compared with my cousins!"

"I don't mean to make you feel bad. I just think that this lone wolf routine of yours is not going to last you forever."

"I'm perfectly fine on my own!"

Both women held this argument many times. For now, Raella was determined to continue on her own. She didn't need Ves to achieve greatness!

Elsewhere in Bentheim, Vincent patted the leg of his battered Adonis Colossus with satisfaction. "Keep on fighting, old soldier."

"Your popularity has reached a new record, Vince!" His PR manager manager said ecstatically. "Over ten million people viewed your stream, and many of them have donated to your fund!"

Vincent scoffed. "That's not good enough! That figure isn't concurrent! I have no use of people who drop by my stream for a couple of seconds before switching to another one! And bright credits are pretty much worthless these days! It's already worth half as much as a month ago!"

Every member of his crew looked rather helpless at that. Hyperinflation evaporated most of their savings!

At these dire times, only their mechs and ships retained their value!

"This is just the start, Vincent. With the Mech Corps refusing to live stream their soldiers, the rest of the competition is manageable. As long as you continue to show up in battle, you'll definitely reach the top!"

His way with people and his unusual mech turned him into a popular figure. Though his battle performance still hadn't reached an impressive level, his increasingly more proficient showmanship was enough to make a memorable impression!

Vincent would have never been able to succeed so well if not for his Adonis Colossus! Not only did the mech inject him with a massive boost of confidence, its codpiece and masculine appearance also attracted the attention of a lot of ladies!

"The good times won't last. The Ylvainans showed up, and they brought their latest superwomans."

"Only three have arrived so far. It still takes time for more Hunters of Ylvaine to arrive."

"It doesn't matter. Those Deliverer mechs will steal all of my thunder soon enough."

"You sound awfully confident."

Vincent chuckled. "I know Ves. His mechs never fail to live up to their promises. The Deliverer is exactly what it says on the tin. It's going to save us all. So as far as I'm concerned, the good times are about to end."

The PR manager looked stunned. "We'll have to adjust our plan if that's the case. I don't think we can meet our targets if we can't showcase you in battle."

"I'll just find something else to excel in." Vincent smiled and looked up at his mech. "It's too bad my Adonis Colossus is a spaceborn mech. If it was a landbound machine, then I could have brought it to the dueling circuit."

Throughout his participation in the war, Vincent experienced many battles. Taking part in these encounters and witnessing the deaths of many soldiers forced him to polish his skills. This gave him the confidence to succeed in duels!

However, that was not enough to sustain his popularity. There were many idols in the dueling circuit, so a newcomer like Vincent wouldn't be able to gain any traction at first.

He needed to do something bigger to attract attention.

A few ideas ran through his mind.

"What do you think about taking part in the Komodo War?"

"Are you crazy, Vince?! Your fancy mechs will get crushed by a single hit! The level of destruction of that far exceeds what any of us can handle!"

"I thought it would be interesting to teach the Hexers what a true man is like!" Vincent idly grinned.

"Whose side would you even want to fight for? The Friday Coalition?"

"Of course not! Those bastards kidnapped the designer of my mech! Where will I ever get my Adonis Colossus Mark II if my buddy Ves is gone?!"

The PR manager couldn't believe it. "Are you actually thinking about fighting for the Hexers?"

"Why not?" Vincent grinned, showing off his gleaming white teeth. "Those repressed women can't get any satisfaction from their emasculated boys. I'm sure I can change their minds about men once I show how great I am! Whether it's on or off the battlefield, those sizzling hot chicks will fall before my knees!"

Lunatic! The Hexers would rather kick his codpiece than submit to a man!

While Vincent indulged himself in unrealistic ideas, elsewhere in the star system a certain woman met with a certain spy.

Leland Toll slowly placed a data pad on the desk. The woman took it up and read through the contract.

"I don't recall saying anything about divesting my stake in the LMC. I earned those shares far and square when I placed a bet on Ves!"

"Ordinarily, you're right, Mrs. Bollinger. However, the founder and principal shareholder of the LMC is very discontent with you. In the interests of maintaining friendly relations, we have decided it is best for you to relinquish your shares to Sibillant Asset Management. Please don't be concerned. Before you ask, we are more than willing to pay what they are worth in the form of exotics instead of bright credits."

Marcella's fist slammed against her desk. "Do you think I'm stupid, you little spook! All the exotics in Bentheim can't compensate for the loss of a 5 percent stake in the LMC! It was your idea to approach Ves and convey Senator Tovar's suggestions to him! I was just a mouthpiece! How can he possibly blame me for following the instructions of a founding family?!"

"Regardless of what you think, after today, your 5 percent will no longer be in your hands."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a statement of truth." Leland confidently smiled. "Even if we don't step in, your future as a minority shareholder of the LMC has already become a relic of the past. Right now, we need to do as much as possible to repair our relations with Mr. Larkinson. As the Devil Tongue, he is never kind to his enemies."

Though Leland didn't adopt a threatening posture, the pressure he exuded was substantial.

Though Marcella wasn't exactly sure which spy agency Leland worked for, she was definitely sharp enough to know that she wouldn't be able to resist a branch of the government.

As a consummate Bentheim insider, Marcella knew more than most locals.

She took the data pad and reread the contract several times. Despite the lengthy passage of time, Leland waited leisurely for the businesswoman to come to terms with reality.

Eventually, she let out a deep breath. "What will you do with my shares?"

"We'll simply hold it unless the situation changes."

"Do you really think Ves will accept the government maintaining 26 percent ownership in his company? That's 1 percent more than the shares owned by the Larkinson Estate!"

"You don't have to be concerned about that. We will make our own arrangements with Mr. Larkinson. We merely expect you to sign the contract."

Though Marcella wanted to resist, she simply couldn't summon up any resistance.

Even if she refused today, the government would find some other way to get what they want. This was something she clearly understood as a mech broker in the busiest star system of the Bright Republic.

The moment she signed the contract and added her virtual authorizations to it, Leland happily took back the data pad.

"We'll take care of the paperwork. We will transfer your payment by the end of the day."

As Leland bid the woman goodbye, Marcella couldn't help but leave a parting shot!

"Ves won't let you go! He might not trust me anymore, but he probably hates your guts! There is no way he ever holds any affection for our state anymore!"

The intelligence operative did not bother responding to her words. He completed his mission. That was all that mattered.

Chapter 1749 Painful Choice

After Ves finished searching Aisling's quarters for goods and information, he made a modest haul.

Though Aisling brought along a lot of personal effects, he had no use for most of them. The only gains worth his notice was the unidentified vial he suspected to be a gene boost elixir and the information she left behind on her terminal.

Aside from being able to glean many insights and insider knowledge from Aisling's correspondence, Ves also gained other useful data from her terminal.

First was her detailed logs, design schematics and technical documents of her own designs. As long as Ves studied them in detail, he would definitely advance his proficiency in second-class mechs, particularly those designed to work in close coordination!

Second was her library of exclusive knowledge. Ves not only encountered the virtual versions of the textbooks that Lady Curver printed out, but also found many other Clarion University textbooks that covered other fields and more advanced subjects!

While most of their contents already overlapped with his prodigious knowledge, they were all specifically tailored for second-class mech designs. This made them very worthwhile to skim through.

As far as Ves was concerned, all of this knowledge that was exclusive to Clarion University students and graduates was his most worthwhile gain.

He believed that even without receiving lessons and tutoring from others, he would still be able to become a qualified second-class mech designer after half a year of focused study!

"Aisling is pretty sloppy for leaving all of these textbooks behind."

If the Scarlet Rose's internal network connected to the galactic net, then her terminal would probably receive an instruction that would wipe its databanks.

Fortunately, Ves already isolated the ship's quantum communication node, preventing anything but an isolated control module to connect to the rest of the galaxy!

After verifying that the files did not contain any hidden viruses or other nasty surprises, he transferred them over to his System comm.

"Hehehe. All of this is mine now!"

Though Ves was disappointed that he didn't find anything of immediate use such as a high-quality suit of armor, beggars couldn't be choosers.

At least Aisling wasn't as cautious and reserved as Patricia. He still blamed his old classmate for being too prudent for her own good. The least she could bring was a spare shield generator or something!

Though Ves managed to take over the Scarlet Rose and everything the former crew and passengers had left behind, none of them enhanced his ability to return to safety.

This was a distressing outcome, especially when he had to evade capture for at least a month!

He took some time to consider his chances and found that there were too many things that could go wrong. The likelihood of the Friday Coalition or one of their helpers catching up to his fleeing ship was very substantial!

If Ves wanted to overcome this crisis, then he needed to increase his immediate combat and evasion capabilities!

"If I want to increase my chances of success, I'll have to increase my capabilities in another fashion."

He directed his attention to something he long neglected: the Mech Designer System.

When he activated the System, he first reviewed the DP he recently earned.

[Design Evaluation: Deliverer DL-A-01]

Model name: Deliverer DL-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Marksman Mech

Armor: E-

Carrying Capacity: D

Aesthetics: B-

Endurance: C

Energy Efficiency: D

Flexibility: E

Firepower: A

Integrity: B-

Mobility: D+

Spotting: B

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: C+

Project involvement: 86%

Original component composition: 14%

Overall evaluation: The Deliverer is a marksman mech that only excels at offense. Its powerful Executor gauss rifle model grants the Deliverer extended range when dealing physical damage. The Deliverer's shortcomings in defense and mobility makes it highly depended on other mechs for protection. The Deliverer is able to achieve unprecedented performance when certain mech pilots are able to excite its Guided Aim and Prescient Movement abilities.

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Adonis Colossus AC-A-01]

Model name: Deliverer AC-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin

Weight Classification: Medium-Heavy

Recommended Role: Custom Spaceborn Hybrid Mech

Armor: A-

Carrying Capacity: C

Aesthetics: A+

Endurance: C

Energy Efficiency: C+

Flexibility: E-

Firepower: B

Integrity: B

Mobility: C

Spotting: C

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: D-

Project involvement: 56%

Original component composition: 21%

Overall evaluation: The Adonis Colossus is a custom spaceborn hybrid mech designed for Vincent Ricklin. The mech is notable for featuring a prominent masculine

appearance and a stylish codpiece. The Adonis Colossus is able to output substantial ranged firepower with its Sandbreaker rifle, shoulder-mounted missile launchers and nail drivers. Though it is also issued with a backup sword, the mech is not optimized for melee combat.

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Holy Soldier DS-H-01]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Resentful Soldier DS-R-01]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Prideful Soldier DS-P-01]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.].

...

Ever since the System renewed the rules for earning Design Points, designing mechs was the only way for him to earn DP.

The sales potential of a mech no longer affected his DP outcome. Only the quality and usefulness of a mech design determined how much DP he earned.

The advantage of this new remuneration scheme was that he would be able to get all of the DP upfront. The downside was that he couldn't milk any more DP out of the system once he finished a design!

What distressed Ves the most was that the System heavily reduced the rewards for designing a variant.

While Ves could easily earn 100,000 DP for designing an adequate original mech design, he could only scrape 10,000 DP for a variant of the same quality!

Clearly, the System did not wish for him to waste too much time with designing different versions of his existing work!

Even though it took almost as much time to design the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier as their base model, Ves only earned a tenth as much in the same amount of time!

Earning 10,000 DP for one or two months of intensive design labor was incredibly inefficient. He'd have to waste an entire decade to accumulate 1 million DP, which was ludicrously slow compared to his previous earning rate!

"Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 1,333,622

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.6

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.2

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 1.8

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency IV] - [Assembler Proficiency IV] - [Masterwork Mech Assembly I]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I] - [Custom Mech Design III] -

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - [Mech Hacking III] - [Programming III]

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration IV] - [Energy Storage IV] - [Conductors III] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage I] - [Power Reactors I]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography III] - [Crystal Laser Propagation II] - [Lithic Materials I]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman - [Simulations IV]

[Mechanics]: Senior - [Jury Rigging IV] - [Speed Tuning IV] - [Mechanical Fault Detection I] - [Fine Motion Control I]

[Metallurgy]: Senior - [Alloy Compression III] - [Fixed Armor Specialization III] - [Flexible Armor Specialization I] - [Smart Metal IV] - [ASMAS III] - [Internal Structure Specialization I]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor IV] - [Spiritual Senses II] - [Spiritual Exploration I] - [Spiritual Manipulation II] - [Spiritual Engineering II]

[Interfacing]: Novice - [Neural Interface Optimization I]

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization III] - [Gamma Laser Weapons I] [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] - [Optics III] - [Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Novice

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A qualified Journeyman Mech Designer whose products gained prominence for their unique and distinctive glows.

His prior self-study paid off as his Status added several new Sub-Skills to the list. He particularly took note of Neural Interface Optimization I, which signified his ability to tweak neural interfaces to achieve greater performance.

Of course, this wasn't anything impressive compared to neural interface specialists such as Aisling Curver. Ves could only turn a few knobs at most while the Clarion graduate could pretty much design a neural interface from scratch!

Ves was a little bit undecided whether he should expand his expertise in this field. With the help of all of the textbooks that he gained from Aisling's terminal, Ves obtained enough material to do more with neural interfaces.

The downside was that he hadn't actually gained any authorization from the MTA to employ this knowledge in his mech designs.

The only way he could make use of his expanded capabilities was by designing another underground mech such as the Devil Tiger!

"It's not worth it." He shook his head.

He was only interested in Aisling's research in unifying the minds of different mech pilots. What if he could use some of her methods to increase the cooperation of the mech pilots of his mechs?

Whereas Aisling relied on neural interfaces to form a connection between mech pilots, Ves believed that it might be possible to form a more intangible bond through the use of a design spirit!

Ves already formed some ideas on how to make this work, but this wasn't the time to delve into something so distant.

"I need to focus on my immediate needs."

Right now, escaping mattered more than increasing his design capabilities!

With over 1,300,000 DP in reserve, Ves gained a lot of choice in how he could strengthen himself!

If he wanted to, he could try his luck and squander it all on lottery tickets.

Considering the precariousness of his current situation, Ves did not dare to gamble with his life and freedom!

Even if he won something, chances were his prize wouldn't actually be useful at this time!

Ves ruled out spending his DP on Skills and Sub-Skills. He already possessed more than enough knowledge to control the Scarlet Rose. The System didn't offer him any Skills related to starships, which was another reason he dismissed this option.

Perhaps the only field that was useful to him was to expand his expertise in hacking.

Ever since he evolved his design philosophy in a certain direction, he no longer objected too much at becoming more proficient in hacking.

However, Lucky already covered all of his hacking needs. What Lucky couldn't hack, Ves wouldn't be able to accomplish anything.

That left the Store. Only by purchasing and upgrading his items would he be able to increase his immediate survival capabilities!

Ves dove into the Shop and sought out an upgrade that he had long been eying.

[Comm Upgrade - Privacy Shield - Level 2 - Full Stealth]

Price: 1,000,000 DP

Duration: 30 Minutes

Temporarily upgrades a level 2 Privacy Shield to emit an overpowering field that disrupts any means of observation. It is capable of obfuscating every possible means of observation that is known to the Mech Designer System.

Compared to his current Full Stealth augment, the level 2 upgrade extended its charge by 20 minutes!

With 30 minutes of complete and total stealth, Ves could probably assassinate the entire crew of a moderately-sized ship!

"Still, 30 minutes is not enough for 1,000,000 DP!"

Ves would have bought this upgrade immediately if it extended his use up to 60 minutes! With an entire hour of stealth, Ves could not only empty entire ships of their crews, but also infiltrate all manner of high-security facilities!

As it was, 30 minutes was barely enough for him to consider spending so much DP. The System was such a greedy profiteer that Ves would have to give up other possible goodies if he purchased this upgrade!

While this option significantly enhanced his personal security, it was no use at all in enhancing the Scarlet Rose's ability to evade pursuit!

After a long moment of consideration, Ves ultimately decided to upgrade his Full Stealth augment.

"If I have to, I'll give up the Scarlet Rose. She's just a ship. My own life is much more important!"

Chapter 1750 Converting Gear

The moment he spent 1,000,000 DP to upgrade his Full Stealth augment, a heavy weight lifted off his shoulders.

Losing so much DP meant that he wasn't plagued by choice anymore.

The System's Shop offered a lot of overpriced personal equipment that only truly started to become useful at 100,000 DP or more.

At the 1,000,000 DP price level, the System did offer various useful equipment. However, Ves no longer had to think about purchasing any of them now that his DP reserves dwindled to around 300,000 DP.

Ves decided to keep the rest in reserve. Just like last time, he could redeem a number of useful medicine or some other gadget to overcome a crisis.

Of course, the downside of this was that Ves wouldn't be as strong as he could if he spent the DP beforehand.

This was his mistake last time. If he had redeemed some better gear, he might have been able to avoid sustaining so many injuries!

"Well, I'm not as helpless now."

He managed to salvage an intact suit of medium combat armor. While he was anything but proficient in its use, he could still move around while enjoying the protection of second-class infantry armor plating.

This was enough to resist nearly every form of third-class small arms fire!

As for firepower, Ves not only possessed the Amastendira, but also the quaint but powerful laser pistol dropped by Aisling's female Benny.

The laser pistol aroused a lot of interest from him. As soon as he finished spending his DP, he decided to get the rest of his gear in order.

"It's too bad I blew up the armory." He muttered with regret.

He had already inspected it early and nothing useful was left! Every piece of useful gear had been destroyed by the cascade of explosions that demolished the entire compartment and turned the security compartment into a total mess!

The only weapons and gadgets he managed to scavenge came from the bodies of the former crew and guards. Aside from some multiscanners, none of them were useful to his situation.

He decided to rely on the compact laser pistol as his new primary armament. It packed more than enough firepower to handle most threats, and it was remarkably compact, easily allowing him to hide it underneath his clothes.

While he experimented with a heavy assault rifle, Ves quickly found out that they were very bulky and difficult to handle without training.

This was because the rifles were designed to work in unison with combat armor. This meant that unless Ves mattered the latter, he could forget about making full use of the former.

Though Ves wasn't really proficient in their use, he decided to mount one in his armor holster anyway.

In any case, the rifle came with many interesting firing modes and other useful functions. As long as he didn't have to aim too much, the rifle could definitely unleash a lot of devastation!

The heavy assault rifle incorporated three different damage types. Aside from lasers, the rifle was also capable of firing particle beams and kinetic rounds.

The variety of damage types was the main reason why the rifle was so comically bulky.

While the Scarlet Rose traveled quietly in FTL, Ves took the time to inspect and tinker with his new gear.

With Lucky's help, Ves delved deep in their programming and made sure to neutralize every single backdoor and precaution against unauthorized use. Second-class gear was very powerful, and therefore very dangerous in the wrong hands!

Only the compact laser pistol that belonged to Aisling's assistant gave him some difficulties.

Its security precautions were on an entirely different level. Not only did it contain various hardwired security measures and identity locks, they were also interconnected with each other!

As long as he tampered with one security precaution, the other security precautions would automatically trip, rendering the weapon completely useless!

Fortunately, Ves was a very capable engineer. By utilizing Lucky's hacking capabilities to unravel the software precautions while using his technical abilities to resolve the hardware precautions, he could slowly convert the weapon for his own use.

"It's like a puzzle. I can solve it as long as I plan out my steps."

The excessive security precautions did not seem characteristic of the Coalition Reserve Corps. Aisling's assistant was probably a spy or something.

Though it took longer than he thought, he finally managed to defeat every security precaution!

Afterwards, he reengaged some of the identity locks, but with himself as the sole authorized user!

Only after this did he feel confident in using the gear he scavenged from the Scarlet Rose.

The only gadget that Ves sorely missed was a working shield generator.

He did not regret leaving his two shield generators behind when the Mech Corps took him into custody.

There was no guarantee that Ghanso would pass them along to the Fridaymen during the handover!

"Oh well. As long as I take advantage of my stealth and my new combat armor, I shouldn't have to depend on a shield generator."

Of course, all of these preparations only enhanced his personal safety.

With regards to improving the capabilities of the ship, Ves had to make do with the Scarlet Rose's current capabilities and the supplements provided by Calabast.

"This isn't enough." He judged.

The Scarlet Rose was just a mobile supply frigate. While she was designed to outrun or evade all kinds of threats, she wasn't expressly designed to facilitate extended escapes.

As the ship was about to translate back to realspace in a couple of hours, Ves became a bit more apprehensive about what he would encounter upon emergence.

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "The Coalition should definitely be aware of my last-known position and my likely flight directions."

Just like last time, Ves expected to encounter an outfit or two who had been hired to intercept the Scarlet Rose.

There was a small but real chance that his ship would emerge within interception range of these hunters after exiting FTL.

If this ever occurred, Ves would have very little means of resisting.

"I'll just have to bite the bullet when it comes to that."

As the hours ticked down, the ship entered yet another lifeless star system. The weak glow of the red dwarf star illuminated a handful of rocky satellites that barely qualified as planets.

The Ordent Republic, which had become quite dependent on the Friday Coalition, did not possess a large and powerful mech military.

Its private sector outfits weren't anything impressive either. Just like the decadent Kamon Republic, Ordent mainly focused on developing its economy and culture.

"Seems like there aren't many formidable mercenary corps in Ordent." He commented from the bridge as he observed the ships skulking in the star system.

The Scarlet Rose detected seven light carriers spread out in three different groups across the star system.

None of them happened to be within a light-hour of the Scarlet Rose, which meant that Ves did not have to worry about interception.

Though one pair of light carriers actually possessed a head-start on the Scarlet Rose due to their relative motion, Ves did not worry too much.

He called up an interface and performed some quick calculations.

As long as the Scarlet Rose immediately started flying away, it would take far more than the time required to cycle of her FTL drive for the mercenaries to catch up with his ship.

In short, unless the FTL drive or propulsion system malfunctioned, he was safe.

"Well, I shouldn't be too complacent." He shook his head. "I can't forget about hidden threats."

Just like before, he engaged the active sensors and dialed them up to full power.

The Scarlet Rose would definitely be able to detect stealthed mines and vehicles in advance!

Once he issued the necessary commands, he sat back and observed the local situation for a time.

"If nothing unexpected happens, I won't face any threats."

Ves found it notable that he hadn't encountered any pursuers from the Friday Coalition yet. After reading Aisling's correspondence, he wasn't surprised by their absence.

Right now, the Komodo War forced the Coalition to retract most of its peripheral assets.

After Operation K, the partners of the Coalition became so alarmed that its leader reflexively recalled at least half of the assets stationed abroad!

Unless the Hexers invested more assets in a foreign state for some reason, the Fridaymen weren't inclined to waste their own assets.

Reading the messages and documents stored in Aisling's archive gave Ves a sporadic understanding of the war situation, particularly in the perspective of the Gauge Dynasty.

As the most powerful partner of the Coalition, the Gauge Dynasty became known for its domineering posture. It always aimed to be the best in anything and often competed against the other partners in many different competitions.

Yet as soon as the Komodo War broke out, the Gauge Dynasty quickly abandoned this posture and instead adopted a more diplomatic and conciliatory stance!

Though the other partners such as the Konsu Clan and the Vermeer Group knew that the Gauge Dynasty was only lowering its head due to the greater threat, they cooperated anyway.

They had no other choice! As long as the Gauge Dynasty offered an abundant amount of help, the state that was famous for its internal division would shed its biggest weakness!

It was pure fantasy to think that the partners of the Friday Coalition would continue to squabble amongst themselves while threatened by the Hexers!

While Ves mused about the Komodo War, the Scarlet Rose quietly remained out of reach of her pursuers long enough until her FTL drive finished cycling.

The moment the ship transitioned back to FTL, Ves finally relaxed.

In the next week or so, the Scarlet Rose repeated this routine. Each time, the ship emerged in a star system patrolled by at least two or more outfits.

In none of those cases did the stolen ship come anywhere close to these hostile bounty hunters.

Though the mercenaries transmitted all kinds of threats and offers to the Scarlet Rose, Ves did not even bother going through them. As long as his ship left the star system, it was unlikely that any of his pursuers could keep up with his ship!

The tech and quality disparity between their ships was simply too big!

Even the swift, third-class corvettes were unable to match the speed of the Scarlet Rose, let alone the Barracuda!

By the time the Scarlet Rose left the territory of the Ordent Republic and crossed into the space claimed by the Great Zona Republic, Ves made it through a fourth of his journey without encountering any threats.

Ves did not expect the good times to last.

"Great Zona is very different from Ordent." He observed. "While it's close to the Friday Coalition, this aggressive state has always pushed the boundaries and conquered a lot of neighboring states on flimsy excuses."

If not for the rebel groups stirring up trouble in its conquered territories, Great Zona would have continued its conquest spree until it rivalled the Sentinel Kingdom in might and territorial acquisitions!

As it was, Great Zona's instability provided fertile ground for many pirates, mercenaries and other scum.

Ves immediately experienced the difference between Ordent and Great Zona as his ship immediately sounded the alarm upon transitioning back to real space!

He expected to encounter the same scattered presences as before.

Instead, the Scarlet Rose emerged at a point in space that was very close to a formidable-looking mercenary corps!

"Five light carriers, all part of the same fleet!" Ves gasped! "And they're all close!"

The local plot quickly updated with more information as the sensors captured more data.

All five light carriers had instantly started to close in on the Scarlet Rose!

According to the Scarlet Rose's estimates, the fleet would come into combat range within 40 minutes, which was far too soon for the Scarlet Rose to escape back into FTL!

Ves was in true trouble this time!