

Mech 1771

Chapter 1771 Exchange of Fire

Hidden beneath the bunker installed on the surface of the Scarlet Rose, the Kravon and the Selzer unleashed a lot more firepower than their opponents anticipated!

The Kravon fired rounds that splintered off into deadly shards. The Terrinac did not expect to encounter this type of ammunition!

What surprised the six mech pilots from the Friday Coalition the most was that these shards were not as trivial as they thought!

The shield of the space knight and the exterior of the other mechs bore various scars. In the worst cases, the shards managed to dig deep enough to remain embedded in the material!

Suffice to say, the Terrinac quickly figured out that these shards actually consisted of high-quality materials!

"Where did this come from?! Did Lady Curver withhold any information?!"

The crew of the Terrinac formed all kinds of guesses.

Perhaps the Scarlet Rose picked up a shipping container during her flight.

Perhaps Ves managed to make a black market transaction back in the Great Zona Republic.

Perhaps Lady Curver secretly used her mission to smuggle a batch of high-value materials.

Whatever the case, the Kravon posed a lot more threat than before!

Obscuring their formation in a particle cloud didn't help much at all, since the spread of the shards was already beyond the Kravon's control!

Though getting hit by a shard did not immediately spell disaster, the frequency of hits would soon take a toll on the mechs if they got hit!

The light skirmishers that ordinarily would have tried to avoid getting hit by taking advantage of their superior mobility had to take care the most!

Ves estimated that their defensive prowess was similar to that of the Fliskin. While this granted them superior mobility, there was no meaningful way to cheat the random spread pattern of continuous bursts of shards!

Therefore, hidden inside the particle cloud, the light skirmishers all converged behind the space knight. The mechs hid their slim profiles behind the larger and thicker space knight and its prominent shield!

Even though the shield featured numerous shards, it was resilient enough to hold out for a long time against this dispersed bombardment of shards!

However, the space knight and the other exposed mechs did not just have to contend against this rain of shards.

The Selzer also outputted a considerable amount of firepower! Though its expanding laser blasts only transferred a minute amount of damage to the stricken mechs, its large area of effect basically guaranteed that all of the mechs barring the hiding light skirmisher endured some heat and energy damage!

This was not that much of a problem at the start, but the continuous absorption of heat began to burden their own heat management systems while beginning to melt some of their surface layers!

The damage dealt by the Kravon and the Selzer was considerable when taken in isolation, but not enough to threaten the integrity of the Coalition mechs!

However, when the damage dealt by the two mechs overlapped, the enemy mech pilots started to feel some discomfort!

The constant heat and energy damage applied to the exterior of the mechs softened up the surface layers of their armor coverage.

This allowed the sporadic shards that hit the mechs to dig in deeper and deal more serious damage!

As Ves observed the approaching particle cloud while two of his battle bots bombarded it with their weapons with abandon, he became a little frustrated at the lack of information.

He could only guess what was going on inside this obscuring cloud! As long as the two rifleman mechs kept releasing particles, Ves had no way of confirming the results of his tactics.

Fighting against the forces of a second-rate state was much more challenging than he expected!

None of the people on the enemy's side was incompetent! Their mechs, mech pilots and commanders all represented the might of the Friday Coalition!

The mechs of the Terrinac didn't allow the ranged battle bots to beat them up with impunity.

As soon as the particle cloud entered within effective range, the ranged mechs finally started firing their weapons!

Unlike the Selzer, the rifleman mechs opted to fire particle beams!

Since the mechs had been designed to release the obscuring particle clouds, their sensors and targeting systems had been specifically tuned to overcome their interference.

The Coalition rifleman mechs accurately managed to hit the bunker atop the Scarlet Rose with their particle beams!

A pair of bright blue beams impacted the top of the bunker in an instant, causing its upper sheets to endure a considerable amount of physical and energy damage!

However, as the beams sputtered out, only a few surface layers exhibited some damage!

Breyer alloy was just as tough as the high-quality compressed armor plating of a second-class mech!

While the Friday Coalition used better alloys, they were incredibly expensive!

The advantage held by Ves was that he was not short on Breyer alloy! Even though the particle beams managed to penetrate some of the sheets after repeating, the bunker consisted of five layers of alloy sheets, which basically made the bunker as thick as a defensive mech shield!

Though it was not impossible for the bunker to get breached, it would take a long time before the two enemy rifleman mechs got through all of the layers!

Even then, his enemies still had to defeat the Kravon and the Selzer as well!

"It's all moot if those melee mechs manage to close the distance, though."

Ves replaced his grin with a frown.

The enemy rifleman mechs were just meant to soften up his battle bots, which Ves managed to forestall by installing a bunker.

The true threat still lay in the space knight, striker mech and light skirmishers!

The interception continued. Because the Coalition mechs were chasing a fleeing target, it took quite some time for the former to catch up to latter.

Ves made the most out of this window of time by ordering the Kravon and the Selzer to fire their weapons with abandon!

The Kravon's gauss cannon came under an increasing amount of stress as Ves did not hold back in maximizing its firing rate!

He had studied the weapon carefully and already knew exactly how far he could push without breaking the weapon.

Each shot consumed a considerable amount of energy, causing the Kravon to go through a lot of energy cells in a short amount of time.

What was worse was that the Selzer turned into an energy hog as well! The huge buildup of heat and the frequent swapping of heatsinks was a very obvious indicator to how much energy the mech consumed!

The energy expenditure got so bad that the stash of energy cells rapidly ran out!

"It's a good thing I've already anticipated this outcome!"

A couple of lifter bots emerged from the mech hangar, sneaked through a hole built into the side of the bunker, and dropped the recharged energy cells they carried onto a magnetic plate.

The bots then picked up the energy cells that the Kravon and Selzer already expended and flew back into the mech hangar. From there, the bots hooked up the energy cells to a dedicated charging machine that rapidly replenished their reserves!

The power supply of a starship was a lot more formidable than that of a mech! It was no problem at all for the Scarlet Rose to recharge the energy cells a hundred times!

All of these arrangements that Ves improvised beforehand allowed his two battle bots to output a lot more damage than his enemies expected to meet!

Ves was sure his opponents were starting to get worried, especially as the enemy rifleman mechs still hadn't been able to breach the bunker!

He did not grow complacent though. As the enemy mechs continued to sustain more and more damage from the shards and dispersed laser blasts, they would surely be in a bad shape by the time they caught up to the Scarlet Rose.

How could his enemies ever allow that to happen?

Hidden within the particle cloud, the striker mech that ordinarily should have been effective at close range suddenly started to shift.

Several protruding modules built onto its back and shoulders started to open up, revealing several launcher tubes!

Forty missiles suddenly launched out of the striker mech! Several more salvos followed until the mech released 160 missiles in total!

The four salvos diverged from each other and arced towards the Scarlet Rose from four different directions!

Their acceleration varied minutely in order to ensure that all of the missile salvos impacted their targets at the same time!

Ves cursed when he noticed the missile launch.

"I knew their mechs weren't so simple!"

Missiles were some of the most thorniest weapon systems he could face. Almost every missile looked the same, but their payload and other properties varied enormously.

Ves had no idea how dangerous these missiles were! At best, the missiles were standard-issue and contained just enough power to fracture a single sheet of Breyer alloy.

At worst, their payloads actually consisted of a tiny amount of anti-matter, which was enough to crack the Scarlet Rose in half!

"The missiles shouldn't be so potent, though." He muttered.

Because the missiles had been launched from a secondary weapon system, it was unlikely for them to be too powerful. It was too uneconomical to supply

extremely potent missiles to mechs that didn't specialize in missile weapon systems.

Ves also guessed that the Coalition Reserve Corps shouldn't enjoy a budget that was extravagant enough to supply their mechs with such excessive firepower.

While the missiles rapidly boosted towards the Scarlet Rose, Ves tried to glean their details by scanning them as best he could manage.

Unfortunately, the missiles came with a very sophisticated ECM system that just happened to be tuned against the Scarlet Rose's sensor array!

It was impossible for him to glean any details out of the missiles, let alone trying to intercept them before they struck their target!

"Since you like missiles so much, here's mine!"

The Kravon boasted missile launchers as well! After positioning them over some narrow slots in the bunker, the mech fired its own missile salvos!

A lesser amount of missiles closed in on the enemy mechs. Because they were continually closing in on the Scarlet Rose, the missiles released by the Kravon happened to reach them first!

Soon enough, the missiles reached into the particle cloud, where they soon disappeared!

The high amount of interference from the particle cloud also rendered the missiles blind and deaf once they got inside. The chance of any of the missiles hitting their targets was miniscule!

Ves regretted that he didn't have the time to modify the payloads of the missiles. If he could have just one or two weeks, he could convert several salvos of missiles into releasing shrapnel made out of Breyer alloy upon detonation!

As it was, the missiles launched by the Kravon could only act on their programming and explode randomly as soon as they entered the particle cloud.

"No damage?"

The enemy rifleman mechs still maintained the particle cloud, but its density suddenly dropped in half!

"Yes! At least some missiles managed to score a hit!"

One of the rifleman mechs definitely sustained some damage! Not only did it stop releasing particles, its rifle also fell silent!

Ves did not have long to study the effects of the Kravon's missile salvos, because the enemy missiles soon reached the Scarlet Rose!

The four separate salvos, which had dispersed in the first half of their journey, were all converging on a single point on the Scarlet Rose's hull!

Rather than hitting her propulsion system or any vulnerable areas, the missiles all impacted the bunker, causing it to become engulfed in a cascade of rapid explosions!

Ves held onto the control panel and braced himself as the Scarlet Rose shuddered from the repeated explosions!

While none of them were powerful enough to breach the ship, the large amount of missile detonations still posed a considerable threat!

Chapter 1772 Lost Advantage

As the aftermath of the missile detonations subsided, the Scarlet Rose stopped shaking from all of the shockwaves.

Ves opened his eyes and studied the exterior feed from the Scarlet Rose.

The bunker appeared to be in a very bad shape! The potency of the missiles fired by the mechs of the Coalition surpassed that of the missiles fired by the Kravon!

"That's unfair!"

The enemy not only came prepared, but also better equipped!

That had been clear through the initial appearance of the Terrinac. Unlike Aisling's bodyguard mechs which were mainly designed to repel opportunistic attacks, the mechs of the Terrinac were fully kitted out for battle.

This reflected in the increased amount of mechs the Terrinac was capable of deploying as well as the quality of their missiles!

Ves waited for another wave of missiles to appear, but none ever arrived. The small CRC strike force didn't seem to rely too much on missiles.

Of course, the effect of their initial salvos of missiles had been quite potent. After suffering from 160 different missile explosions, the bunker appeared to be a shell of its former self!

A jagged hole had formed at the top which negated virtually all of the frontal protection afforded the mechs inside!

The Kravon and the Selzer both suffered from their extremely close proximity to the detonations. Their surface layer and supplemental Breyer armor plating all featured a significant amount of cracks, indicating that they suffered considerably!

What worried Ves even more was that both mechs sustained significant damage to their weapons.

While the gauss cannon and dual-type rifle were robust enough to withstand at least some damage, Ves noted that their telemetry conveyed various warning signals.

He couldn't afford to stress the weapons any further! Seeing that he had no choice, Ves altered the Kravon and the Selzer's instructions, causing them to leave the bunker and take up other positions while slowly firing at the approaching mechs.

At least they knew where to fire this time. Since one of the rifleman mechs stopped releasing particles, the other rifleman mech stopped as well.

Just one source of particles was not enough to block out the Scarlet Rose's sensor systems, especially as the distance between them had closed!

As enemy flew closer and closer, their counterattack intensified. With the Kravon and the Selzer firing their weapons at a much-reduced firing rate, the Coalition mechs came under much less suppression!

Though the shards fired by the Kravon and the laser blasts fired by the Selzer had inflicted a significant toll on the two rifleman mechs, the most threatening mechs still remained intact!

The space knight's shield happened to have been struck by a missile or two as well, causing most of the shards embedded onto its surface to be blown away.

What was left of the shield was not sufficient to cover the space knight anymore, but that was hardly a problem for the defensive mech! Its sheer bulk and armor was enough to endure the damage outputted by the two ranged mechs.

The striker mech, which had to withstand the sporadic attacks without any shield, all took the damage in stride. Its defensive prowess was just as good as the space knight, so the mech hadn't lost any functionality even as its surface layers looked awful!

The only mechs that suffered the most happened to be the pair of rifleman mechs. They weren't as strong in defense as the space knight, had they been able to avoid all of the spread attacks.

Though they were still firing particle beams at the Kravon, their cadence had dropped. Ves flicked his gaze to one of the sensor readouts and noted that the rifleman mechs had heated up considerably!

Though it appeared they came with an excellent heat management system, they had still reached their limit.

If the mechs fired their rifles any faster, they were bound to overheat!

"Still, the damage is done, more or less." Ves muttered.

The Kravon became a sitting duck due to its lack of mobility. Particle beam after particle beam continued to hit the mech even as it flew behind the Scarlet Rose in order to shelter behind her bulk!

At this distance, the accuracy of the ranged fire of both sides increased. Even if they didn't fire as frequently, the hits kept on coming!

Knowing that there was only a short time left before the enemy melee mechs reached the Scarlet Rose, Ves issued two commands.

First, the Paravin and the Fliskin stopped hiding behind the Scarlet Rose and started take position while firing their secondary armaments.

While neither mechs were very strong at ranged combat, at least they contributed a little bit in making the enemy ranged mechs a little uncomfortable!

Second, the Kravon and the Selzer concentrated all of their remaining firepower on the striker mech!

As a mech type designed to counter melee mechs, Ves dreaded it the most. If its energy projector released plasma or some other potent matter, the Fliskin wouldn't stand a chance!

For this reason, he did not hesitate to order his two ranged mechs to concentrate their fire on this mech as opposed to the other possible targets!

The enemy rifleman mechs had already expended much of their firepower while the space knight had already lost its shield.

The two light skirmishers remained the biggest threat, but Ves had no way of getting at them as they continued to shelter behind the space knight.

Though the Striker mech already endured a lot of damage, the defensive mech hardly incurred any damage to the internals.

This soon changed as the Kravon started to pound the mech with solid gauss cannon slugs!

Since the range between the two sides had decreased, Ves no longer bothered to chamber the Kravon's gauss cannon with fragmenting rounds.

Instead, the former artillery mech soon started to fire solid slugs at the striker mech!

As a defensive mech whose bulk rivaled that of the space knight, the striker mech was not very agile. Its evasion pattern wasn't too impressive, though its ECM system was enough to ensure that most of the slugs missed the mech!

However, even as only 10 percent of the shots hit their mark, the damage dealt was extremely considerable!

The full might of the gauss cannon not only shattered the damaged armor of the striker mech, but also damaged some of its internal components!

The slugs made out of Breyer alloy were just as tough as the armor of the striker mech, which meant that they wholly succeeded in transferring all of their kinetic energy onto the target without wasting any of it by shattering!

The high-quality ammunition made a huge difference at this time as each infrequent hit broke down the armor of the striker mech step by step!

As the mechs flew nearer and nearer, the accuracy of the Kravon continued to increase! The striker mech's ECM system started to have less and less of an effect as the Scarlet Rose's powerful sensor arrays forcibly overpowered it through brute force!

No matter how sophisticated a mech's ECM system worked, it could not compare against the power of an entire starship!

The decreasing effectiveness of the enemy's ECM systems also benefited the Selzer. Though it had already overheated by quite a bit, Ves did not hold back and finally commanded it to switch its dual-type rifle's firing mode to particle beams!

The bright blue beams kept hitting the striker mech with unerring accuracy! At this range, there was little challenge in hitting a relatively immobile target with a large energy signature.

Even a bot could reliably land a hit!

Under the sustained attacks, the striker mech finally incurred significant damage! Even without firing its short-ranged weapon even once, the mech plainly lost battle effectiveness as an awful tear in its abdomen area caused its internal power systems to be thrown into chaos!

"Yes! It's useless now!"

The mech pilot of the striker mech still managed to retain control, but that was only because the mech featured a lot of redundancy. Without all of these backup systems, the striker mech would have been inoperable by now!

While the mech was still capable of keeping up with the formation and participate in the battle, the commander of Terrinac evidently thought better.

There was no need to sacrifice an entire mech!

Soon enough, Ves noted that the half-crippled striker mech as well as the two spent rifleman mechs withdrew from the formation.

Ves managed to take out at least half of the Coalition mechs deployed against him! This was an incredible success, especially considering that none of his mechs had been paired with skilled human mech pilots!

"Yet.. is it enough?"

Though Ves managed to inflict much greater damage onto his enemy than either side expected, his advantage wouldn't last for long!

"They're getting close!"

Ves always possessed a decisive advantage in ranged combat. With the help of his preparations, he managed to make the most out of this advantage.

Yet the Terrinac still retained three mechs! The heavily-damaged space knight might have lost its shield, but it was still a considerable threat to the ship!

Even now, Ves directed the Kravon and the Selzer to direct their remaining firepower against this hardy mech, but there wasn't much time left to disable it completely!

"I'm out of time!"

The two light skirmishers that the enemy team had protected up to now finally reached the Scarlet Rose!

Ves hastily directed the Paravin to entangle the opposite space knight. There was no use in directing this cumbersome battle bot against the light mechs!

To deal with the two light skirmishers, Ves directed all three remaining battle bots against these agile target.

The Kravon and the Selzer both functioned as fire support. While the Kravon's gauss cannon was too cumbersome to hit the light skirmishers, at the very least it added to the pressure!

Ves placed a bit more hope on the Selzer. Though it was reaching its limits, Ves disabled all of its safety limits and forced it to fire its rifle regardless of all of the damage it sustained by overheating its systems!

He would rather wreck the Selzer than lose this battle!

Ves did the same for the Fliskin. Since it lacked a human mech pilot, the mech was able to perform maneuvers that surpassed the tolerance of its inertial dampeners, allowing it to accelerate more abruptly and perform more extreme maneuvers!

Yet as the Fliskin finally met one of the light skirmishers in battle, his battle bot instantly incurred a huge cut!

At the moment the two machines clashed, the Coalition mech cleverly evaded the Fliskin's predictable charge and swiped its side with one of its ultrasharp daggers!

Though the layer of Breyer alloy applied on the Fliskin managed to mitigate some of the damage, the battle bot still suffered significantly!

If not for the additional armor plating, the mech might have been disabled straight away!

As the two light machines circles around for another pass, the Fliskin lost the exchange yet again!

This time, it lost a third of its leg!

In the fourth pass, it lost one of its arms, causing its battle effectiveness to drop in half!

Finally, the enemy light skirmisher managed to circle behind the faltering Fliskin and damage critical parts of its flight system!

"NO!"

The Fliskin, which failed to land a single scratch on its opponent, lost all mobility in space as its flight system completely shut down!

Even though the Fliskin was still able to move its remaining limbs, without any solid surfaces to step on, the battle bot helplessly drifted away in space!

In the meantime, the other light skirmisher hadn't been idle either. It rapidly flew towards the Kravon and instantly circled around the cumbersome former artillery mech and stabbed out in various places.

As if knowing exactly where to strike, the mech pilot of the light skirmisher quickly managed to force the Kravon to lose power entirely!

The machine soon joined the Fliskin into drifting off from the battlefield!

The two light skirmishers, having disabled half of the battle bots, both approached their remaining targets!

Ves practically saw two daggers of doom each striking out at his remaining protectors! There was nothing he could do to stop these attacks!

Chapter 1773 Display of Might

The Paravin and Selzer were practically sitting ducks against these supremely agile mechs! Ves practically despaired as he expected his last two war machines to go down in quick order!

Yet before the light skirmishers closed the distance, two laser beams that appeared out of nowhere accurately struck their flight systems, causing them to veer off in their attack runs!

"What?! Who's there?!"

Due to the intensity of the running battle, Ves had tunnel-visioned into controlling and directing his battle bots as best as possible in order to fend off the Coalition mechs.

This caused him to neglect the Scarlet Rose's alerts when her sensors detected a couple of ships that emerged in the vicinity of the battlefield!

Though the distance between the new arrivals and the battlefield was fairly vast, a single mech managed to score two extremely accurate hits from an extremely long range!

Ves widened his eyes! Though laser beams traveled at the speed of light, in practice it was incredibly hard to land a shot on a target at such an extreme range!

Just a 0.0001 degree deviance in the aiming angle was enough for a laser beam to go wide!

Yet not only did the mech deployed by the new arrivals managed to strike the enemy light skirmishers, but also hit their flight systems in a way that crippled their mobility!

"What a supreme display of marksmanship!"

Only mech pilots and mech designers understood how challenging it was to achieve pin-point accuracy at such an extreme range! Not even second-class mech pilots ought to be able to accomplish this feat!

The distant ranged mech didn't stop after releasing those shots. As it continued to accelerate towards the battlefield, the mech rapidly released a

series of powerful laser attacks that systematically dismantled the two hapless Coalition light skirmishers as if they were meat on the chopping block!

Just a dozen seconds later, the light skirmishers finally succumbed when the new mech struck their cockpits and instantly killed their mech pilots!

Ves stood frozen behind his control panel as he witnessed a single defeat the two mechs as easy as drinking water!

After finishing off the two swift targets, the approaching mech quickly directed its firepower at the enemy space knight.

Though the Coalition mech did a good job at beating up the Paravin, the moment the distant mech attacked it, the space knight fared no better than the light skirmishers!

The power of the laser beams increased, yet the firing rate hadn't declined! Powerful rays of lights continued to strike the various weak points of the space knight, causing it to lost a limb with every shot!

"This is incredible! How can a laser beam dismember a space knight so easily?!"

The power of those laser beams was beyond comprehension to Ves! A defensive mech should never succumb so easily! Even if his battle bots managed to destroy the space knight's shield and soften up its surface armor, it would still take dozens of concentrated attacks for his Selzer to separate a limb!

Yet this new mech easily destroyed the space knight with a handful of high-powered shots!

"The Selzer's rifle would quickly blow up if it attempted to fire such an overpowered laser attack!"

There was no sign the distant mech suffered from any overheating or other damage! In fact, the Scarlet Rose had a lot of difficulty trying to observe the distant mech.

"Even its ECM is powerful!" Ves gasped.

Once the new arrival wrecked the three mechs attacking the Scarlet Rose, the mech quickly redirected its flight and quickly struck down the retreating rifleman mech and striker mech that Ves had damaged earlier.

Due to their awful conditions, the remaining three mechs dispatched by the Fridaymen went down without a fight!

All six hostile mechs met their end within a single minute. Ves turned numb at the ease and speed in which these Fridaymen mechs fell like dominoes.

Even if Ves weakened them considerably, a single mech shouldn't have been able to topple them over so easily!

The battle situation changed at an instant due to the intervention of a third-party. The Terrinac, which lost all of her mechs, instantly turned around and overloaded her propulsion system!

The Fridaymen knew they faced a fearsome opponent!

Though the Terrinac fled a lot faster than Ves thought, her acceleration paled in comparison to the new mech!

Ves watched with astonishment as the Scarlet Rose tracked the movements of his savior with difficulty.

"What is this acceleration?! The mobility of this rifleman mech is insane!"

The blue-and-black mech sped up towards the fleeing Terrinac like a shark smelling blood. While its powerful ECM system prevented Ves from studying the mech in detail, he could still observe its acceleration and compare its mobility to other mechs.

Ves made an astonishing conclusion. "It's acceleration is multiple times greater than that of the Fliskin!"

The Fliskin was already a premier light skirmisher designed by Lady Curver. It was incredibly difficult to design a mech that accelerated just 20 percent faster, yet this new mech overpowered to such a degree that Ves suspected that it might be first-class mech!

Did the MTA's Compliance Department come and save him or something? Why would they ever intervene in this battle?

"No! It's not the MTA!"

Once he got over his shock, he stopped trying to observe the powerful new mech that would assuredly intercept the Terrinac.

Instead, he directed his attention towards the three ships that appeared some distance away from the Scarlet.

Unlike the sole mech they dispatched, the three ships did not hide their presence behind an ECM curtain. They openly announced their identities with their transponders as if they had nothing to hide.

Ves widened his eyes as he spotted a familiar name!

"The Stellar Chaser! Gloriana!"

Gloriana had finally come and rescued him! Not only that, she brought friends as well!

Ves briefly furrowed his brows. Shouldn't Gloriana be stuck in friendly space? The Glory Battalion would never allow her to stray too close to danger!

Yet the Stellar Chaser somehow entered the space claimed by Crecia Republic without her usual escorts.

He did not recognize the two ships flanking the Stellar Chaser. He could only go by the information transmitted by their transponders.

The smaller civilian corvette was called the Frozen Leaf, and didn't appear to be geared towards battle at all. Ves doubted the powerful mech came from this tiny vessel.

He scratched his head at her familiar name.

However, it was the other ship that truly caught his attention. The Serendipity was a sleek and aggressive-looking frigate that shared some common points with the Terrinac. While the former was smaller and possessed a smaller mech hangar, she was probably faster.

According to her transponders, the Serendipity was a ship that belonged to the Glory Battalion.

Ves understood why Gloriana left her usual escorts behind in favor of the Serendipity. The combat carriers that accompanied her to the Bright Republic were too large and cumbersome to sneak through unfriendly space.

All three ships that showed up in this star system were all fast and agile enough to evade most Fridaymen hunters.

Yet what if they met an ambush? What gave them the confidence to traverse the potentially dangerous territories of the Crecia Republic while possessing hardly any space to carry any mechs?

Ves knew that the Stellar Chaser could only carry a couple of mechs at best.

The Star Dancer probably resembled the Barracuda in that she could only bring along a single mech.

The Serendipity was a little better off since she was designed for combat like the Terrinac, but her mech hangar could only fit four mechs by his estimate.

This meant that the three ships could only bring eight or so mechs in total, which was an extremely precarious number!

Ves couldn't help but glance back towards the sole mech the Hexer fleet deployed. The obscured mech already started to bombard the fleeing Terrinac with powerful kinetic strikes!

"What a powerful gauss rifle!"

The mech seemed to have switched its weapon. The round fired by its gauss rifle impacted the Terrinac with a force that surpassed that of the gauss cannon rounds fired by the Kravon!

Glowing round after glowing round systematically damaged the propulsion system of the hapless Terrinac. Though the CRC frigate was virtually doomed without the protection of mechs, the crew still tried to do their utmost to escape this calamity!

Yet the hammering impacts from the powerful's gauss rifle put a stop to any attempt at escape!

The glowing rounds instantly reminded Ves of something. Ordinary gauss rifle rounds didn't glow when fired.

Only when imparted by some sort of energy would they leave bright streaks through empty space!

Ves belatedly moved his hand and expanded the data collected by the sensors of his ship.

"Resonance!"

One of the sensors designed to detect and measure resonance had become active!

The mech that saved him and went on to capture the Terrinac turned out to be an expert mech!

Gloriana somehow managed to gain the assistance of a Hexer expert pilot!

"How did she do it?! How much did she pay to enlist such powerful help?!"

Expert pilots ought to be precious even to the Hexadric Hegemony. With the Komodo War raging in the border regions of the two second-rate states, Ves could scarcely imagine why the Hexers allowed one of their expert pilots to travel so far away from the frontlines.

Yet no matter the circumstances, Ves felt incredibly relieved that his ordeal had finally come to an end. With Gloriana here, he could finally let down his guard.

With an expert mech under their wing, no Fridayman raiding force stood a chance against its might!

At this time, the Scarlet Rose finally received an incoming communication request from the Stellar Rose.

Ves instantly accepted the call.

"I'm here!" Gloriana's projection brilliantly smiled. "I'm so sorry I couldn't be in touch with you for so long! I had to work hard to convince my stubborn family to go out and meet you halfway. We also had to restrict our communications once we set off in order to avoid giving the Fridaymen too many clues."

"It's fine!" Ves held up his palm. "I managed to do fine on my own for so long. Don't underestimate me. I do appreciate your arrival. How did you manage to get an expert pilot, by the way?"

She sighed, though she still looked incredibly pleased. "It's a long story. Let's talk it over when you transfer to my ship. I have missed you so much! It was unbearable for me to be away from you for an entire month!"

Ves felt incredibly warm when he heard her words. He sensed no duplicity from her at all. She was truly sincere with her feelings.

The love they shared between them hadn't weakened at all. Their month-long separation reinforced how much they enjoyed each other's presence!

Though Ves wanted nothing more than to run up to her and pull her into his embrace, he considered what would happen to his spoils of war.

The Scarlet Rose was his possession! He didn't want to give her up to his rescuers!

Not only that, Ves wanted to keep the mysterious escape pod and Cassandra Breyer a secret! There was no way the Wodin Dynasty would ignore a renewable source of high-grade exotics!

"Ehm.. can you come to my ship instead? I don't want to let go of the Scarlet Rose. She's my prize, after all. I risked my life to capture this ship!"

Gloriana briefly looked sideways and quietly conferred with someone outside of the range of her projection. She soon turned her attention back to Ves with an apologetic expression. "The Glory Battalion won't allow me to step foot on your captured ship. She's not secure enough in their eyes. Just transfer to my ship. I'll tell the Glory Battalion to station a small prize crew on your capture in order to bring her back. Will that be okay?"

He knew that Gloriana would never allow him to stay put. She would probably go crazy if he refused to reunite with her when they were so close!

Knowing that his departure from the Scarlet Rose was set in stone, Ves at least wanted to receive some assurances.

"The Glory Battalion won't force me to give up the Scarlet Rose, right?"

Gloriana looked amused. "I'll make sure you get to keep your stolen ship, alright?"

Ves looked relieved. "Okay then. Can you give me some time? I have to wrap up some matters here."

"Fine, but don't take too long!"

Chapter 1774 Disdain

It took some time for the small Hexer fleet to reach the Scarlet Rose. Ves took advantage of the delay to deal with the aftermath of the battle.

He first retrieved the wrecks floating in the vicinity of his ship. Before the Hexers arrived to the rescue, Ves lost two of his four battle bots.

The Paravin and the Selzer still remained functional, but the enemy light skirmishers made short work of the Kravon and the Fliskin.

Ves bled his heart out at the sight of the two broken machines. Fortunately, the light skirmishers disabled them by relying on finesse rather than overwhelming force.

The Kravon's frame was still in one piece. The enemy light skirmisher that attacked the artillery mech merely managed to cut all of its essential power lines with high precision.

Since Lady Curver designed the Kravon, she probably taught the CRC how to disable the mech as efficiently as possible.

The Fliskin was in worse shape. As a former light mech, its armor coverage was really too thin, and its limbs could easily be separated by an opposing mech!

Just as Ves predicted, a pilot-less light skirmisher stood no chance against an identical machine piloted by a skilled mech pilot!

"Battle bots are really too ineffective against piloted mechs." Ves helplessly observed.

Fortunately, Ves could still restore the Kravon and the Fliskin as long as he retrieved them. He could also convert the battle bots back into proper mechs, thereby adding four valuable second-class mechs to his arsenal.

Second-class mechs are very hard to come by to Ves. He especially valued the quality and comprehensive documentation on the four bodyguard mechs.

As long as he could retain possession of the machines, he could derive all sorts of benefits from tinkering with them! Due to the urgency of his flight, he hadn't studied them as much as he wanted. As long as he could examine their construction at his leisure, he would probably comprehend the essence of second-class mech design in a couple of months!

That wasn't all. Once Ves was done with them, he planned to pass on the four restored mechs to the Avatars of Myth so that they could gain some valuable experience in piloting second-class mechs!

"Simulation training is all well and good, but all of my Avatars should have the opportunity to train with the real deal!"

It was incredibly hard for third-class mech pilots to learn how to pilot second-class mechs. Without any practical experience in piloting the mechs, the Avatars wouldn't be able to tell whether they were truly qualified to pilot these powerful machines!

The four second-class mechs neatly solved this problem for his Avatars of Myth. Though Ves did not intend to rely on Lady Curver's products to outfit his Avatars of Myth for battle, they still served as excellent training mechs!

"I have to make sure I get everything I can salvage off this battlefield!"

He passed on instructions for the Paravin and the Selzer to salvage remains of the Kravon and the Fliskin. He also ordered them to salvage any pieces of the Fridaymen light skirmishers while they were at it. The mech hangar and the cargo bay still offered enough room for some extra spoils.

Once he did so, Ves turned away from the control panel and threw a glance at the stacks of Breyer alloy a short distance away.

Knowing that a prize crew would come and take command of the Scarlet Rose, Ves needed to clean up some of the traces.

There was no way Ves wanted to give up this endless source of Breyer alloy!

"Let's get to work."

He began a very hasty cleanup. First, he halted the loop and let the mysterious rest in the tube. To avoid attracting any attention, Ves ordered all of the tubes to seal themselves, thereby blocking access to the escape pods.

While this wasn't exactly standard, Ves hoped that the prize crew would pay attention to other aspects of the Scarlet Rose. There shouldn't be much of a reason for them to inspect the escape pods!

Afterwards, Ves accessed every bot and system in the vicinity and wiped out the logs and archival data related to the loop he formed.

To be absolutely safe, he even opened up the forging machine in order to pull out the data chips containing the logs and destroyed it entirely!

No hard proof should be left that this machine managed to process a large amount of identical escape pods in the last week!

Ves wasn't entirely satisfied, though. While he managed to clean up all of his traces, he wasn't sure what Cassandra Breyer would do if she was by herself for an extended amount of time.

Would her mummified body eventually resuscitate after being left alone for a few days?

Would her escape pod disappear from the Scarlet Rose and instead begin to the Stellar Chaser?

Would she somehow manage to find out what he had been doing towards her and take revenge?

He had no idea what would happen! He really didn't want to leave his ship for this reason!

If Ves had his way, he wanted to stay aboard the Scarlet Rose and keep the Glory Battalion away!

Yet that would not make any sense at this time. Ves may have taken over the Scarlet Rose, but he hadn't subverted all of her systems. Much of her running still depended on Fridayman programming.

Not only that, but the ship had been operating without a crew for almost a month. This inevitably caused some of the components of the mobile supply frigate to degrade.

The increased time required to cycle her FTL drive was just one of many indicators that the ship was deteriorating due to lack of maintenance!

The chance of malfunctions would drastically increase if Ves insisted on running the Scarlet Rose without a crew!

Since Gloriana was a mech designer, she should know the risks. She would never allow Ves to have his way!

While he didn't mind telling her about Cassandra Breyer if he had to, Ves did not trust the other Hexers. The chance of leaks was too great.

"I'll just have to keep my mouth shut and hope for the best!"

Perhaps the Hexers would find out about his secret anyway. Ves still wanted to do his best to secure his spoils!

Some time passed by for the three Hexer vessels to reach the Scarlet Rose.

Before they arrived, the Stellar Chaser already dispatched a shuttle that flew ahead and docked alongside the Scarlet Rose to transfer over a prize crew.

Ves held Lucky in his arms while the passenger hatch opened up to reveal a number of Hexers in the familiar gold-and-blue uniform of the Glory Battalion.

A female officer led the small procession of engineering and ratings. She immediately commanded them to secure the bridge and engineering section before turning to the person responsible for capturing the ship.

She looked at him with a mix of respect and disdain.

The former likely came from her admiration towards his seemingly-impossible feat.

The latter came from the ingrained female Hexer's attitude towards men.

"We'll take over from here, Mr. Larkinson. Miss Gloriana has ordered us to keep this Fridayman ship together while we shepherd her back to the Ylvaine Protectorate. You are instructed to board this shuttle and . Do you need to bring back any luggage?"

Ves shook his head. "That's not necessary. I left one of my tailored outfits behind in my cabin. I would appreciate it if you kept it safe."

With all of his last-minute cleanup activities, he didn't have the time to change his generic business outfit for the Pride of Dusk he originally wore when Ghanso transferred him to Lady Curver.

"We'll keep your possessions safe. Miss Gloriana specifically instructed us to that end." The officer nodded dismissively before turning away to head to the bridge.

The Hexer's imperious attitude rankled Ves a bit. He clearly sensed the woman looked down on him because he was a man. The only reason she talked to him at all was because he was Gloriana's lover!

Ves shook his head and obediently stepped into the shuttle.

Since the Hexers saved from the Terrinac, he could hardly act ungrateful. What did it matter if they hurt his feelings? As long as he didn't lose the Scarlet Rose and return to captivity, everything else was fine!

As Ves took his seat in the empty shuttle, the vehicle slowly detached from the Scarlet Rose and flew back to the Stellar Chaser.

Lucky leisurely squirmed out of his grasp and curiously explored the passenger compartment.

Much like any possession of Gloriana, the shuttle was a high-quality model. Its interior exuded luxury with its padded chairs, carpeted surface and various decorations.

Ves was already used to such displays from the Stellar Chaser and the Scarlet Rose. He considered much of it to be excessive.

While he appreciated art, there was a point where luxury stopped being useful. Ves would rather spend his money on a plainer but more functional shuttle model.

As Ves allowed his thoughts to wander, the shuttle finally returned to her berth.

When the hatch opened up, Ves and Lucky carefully stepped out onto the shuttle bay.

A missile immediately struck Ves against his chest!

"Ves!"

"Gloriana!"

Warmth bloomed between the two reunited lovers as they finally embraced each other after a long and sudden separation!

The two mech designers embraced each other tightly before locking their lips in a heartfelt kiss!

Neither of them held any coherent thoughts in their minds. Only pure emotion remained as they drank in each other's presence!

"Wow, Gloriana." A skeptical female voice interrupted their passionate kiss. "Is this the boy you set your sights upon?"

The unknown woman forcibly ruined the moment. Ves awkwardly straightened up while Gloriana angrily turned towards the offending woman!

"Ranya! We talked about this! It's my choice who I want to share my life with! I already made a deal with my mother, so don't think of spoiling my relationship with Ves! He's much more impressive when you get to know him. Just give him a chance!"

A very remarkable-looking woman accompanied Gloriana to the shuttle bay. She immediately caught his attention due to her very sophisticated white lab coat and odd green hair that seemed to wave in the air.

Ves already recognized her even without Gloriana calling her name.

This was Dr. Ranya Wodin, a young exobiologist and biotech expert that Gloriana invited to Cloudy Curtain some time ago. She was supposed to work together with Dr. Lupo to implant the Archimedes Rubal in his head!

He never expected her to show up at this time, and with powerful company as well!

While Ves studied Dr. Ranya, his girlfriend exchanged tepid words with her cousin.

Dr. Ranya didn't seem to have a good impression of Ves!

"You're really letting the Wodin Dynasty down by association yourself with a third-rater like Mr. Larkinson here." She shook her head in disappointed.

"While I admit that his accomplishments are impressive for a boy of his background, he is a mutt compared to the purebreds of our state. Just look at what happened. He couldn't even take care of himself! He needed your brother to save his skin!"

"You're being unfair!" Gloriana shouted back while clutching Ves even tighter as if she was afraid he would disappear! "You can't expect a mech designer to defend himself like a mech pilot! Don't forget he managed to turn the tables against the crew of the Scarlet Rose by himself! That's something that neither you and I can do! For a brave third-rate citizen like Ves to overcome those odds, he at least deserves some appreciation!"

"We'll see." Ranya crossed her arms across her chest. "Bring him to the infirmary. Since you care about him so much, let me check up on him and make sure the Fridaymen haven't left any unpleasant surprises in his body."

She turned away and headed towards the exit without another word.

Ves and Gloriana looked at each other with a bit of helplessness in their expressions.

Chapter 1775 Girl Gossip

In the next hour, Dr. Ranya subjected Ves to a comprehensive examination at the Stellar Chaser's infirmary.

The compartment held a lot of sophisticated medical machines, many of which looked nearly identical to the ones aboard the Scarlet Rose.

Ranya demonstrated a high proficiency with the machines as she manipulated their settings with ease.

The machines went to work by scanning and injecting various chemicals in his body. Ves worried a bit about his impromptu treatment, but Gloriana was watching her cousin carefully.

"Your boyfriend's body is remarkably tough, but his internal organs still show signs of recent damage." Ranya commented while her fingers danced over a control interface. "It seems he suffered from a very severe blow when he fought the Fridaymen and took over their ship. What is really 'impressive' about your boyfriend is that while he is smart enough to subject himself to an automated treatment regime, he stupidly interrupted it and relied on his physique to heal his lingering wounds!"

"I couldn't afford to lay low. I had to wake myself up to direct the Scarlet Rose through hostile territory!" Ves meekly defended himself while he lay on a treatment table.

"Shut up! You'll only exacerbate your recovery if you talk while I'm in the process of remedying your lingering wounds! Many of them haven't healed properly! I'll have to examine you and treat you at least half-a-dozen times over the course of a month in order to undo the damage you've done to your own body! If you aren't Gloriana's latest boy toy, I would have passed you off to another doctor!"

"Don't forget who's paying you, Ranya." Gloriana sternly reminded her relative. "You'll have plenty of funding to support your research on exoplants as long as you take good care of Ves. Haven't you made some breakthroughs recently?"

"I did. If I'm fortunate enough, I'll attract some investment or receive the attention of a professor."

Gloriana scoffed. "Don't kid yourself. No one wants to play with plants while our state is locked in a war against the Friday Coalition! During the Komodo War and several years afterwards, only war-related research projects will receive funding."

Though Dr. Ranya resented Gloriana's remark, she couldn't exactly refute it. Unless her research projects were capable of affecting the Komodo War, the biotech industry didn't have any reason to pay attention to her work!

For a young exobiologist who harbored ambitions of her own, this was an extremely unfortunate outcome!

If she happened to graduate and launch her career at any other time, then she probably would have been able to achieve some success by now. Yet because the Komodo War just broke out, the Hexadric Hegemony entered into a full war footing, which meant that the Hexers had to pour all of their resources into the Hex Army, the mech industry and other war-related endeavors.

"I'm doing well enough on my own so far." Ranya defended herself. "Some of my products have caught on. You're not the only entrepreneurs among the Wodins."

"Don't think I don't know how you are earning a living these days. What will my mother say when I tell her that you've been supplying addicts with illicit stimulants?"

Ranya immediately looked distressed.

Cadence Wodin was the Minister of Security of Scimitar II. Part of her responsibilities encompassed policing duties, which meant that Ranya would definitely be at fault!

In fact, even if Gloriana's mother wasn't in charge of the police, Ranya would still be afraid of catching her attention!

"You wouldn't dare."

Gloriana smiled in victory. "I won't do anything to you as long as you treat Ves honestly. Don't try and harm him in order to sabotage our relationship. I promise you that you'll regret it if you lay a hand on my boyfriend!"

"Sheesh, Gloriana! Who do you think I am? I'm a professional! I have taken an oath! As long as Mr. Larkinson is my patient, I'll treat him to the best of my abilities!"

"I just want to make sure. Too many people disapprove of my relationship with him. You can't blame a girl for protecting what she wants."

Time continued to pass as Ves felt more and more uncomfortable. Various machines continued to prod and poke his body. He could practically feel his body changing from the inside as various sophisticated medicines and tools messed around with his insides.

Fortunately, none of the treatments brought him any pain. He only felt frustrated because he had no clue what was going. Ranya didn't appear to be in the mood to explain her work, and Gloriana didn't seem curious either.

Instead, Ves was forced to lie down and remain still while listening to the banter between the two Wodins.

Neither Gloriana nor Ranya bothered to shield their conversation from his ears. Both of them fell into the typical Hexer habit of neglecting the presence of boys.

Ves wasn't complaining. He gathered a wealth of information about the second Odin he came into contact with. As the doctor responsible for installing his implant in his head, it would be prudent to know her better!

"If you think my reaction to your odd choice of lover is bad, you should see the responses from the folks back at home."

"I don't care about them." Gloriana dismissively said. "As long as I can convince my mother that Ves is meant for me, she'll stand up for me. Not even Matriarch Xiaphna will rule against her!"

"You seem very sure of that."

"Once you realize what Ves is capable of, our Wodin Dynasty will definitely appreciate him! Just wait. In two years, both of us will blow your minds!"

"I'm not sure if any of us have the time to pay attention to your boyfriend at that time. The Komodo War will be in full swing by that time!"

"What do you mean, Ranya? Hasn't the war already started?"

"The war is still ramping up. Even though we struck the first blow, our state couldn't make too many preparations for fear of revealing too many clues. Even now, our Hegemony is still in the process of mobilizing all of its reserves. According to our matriarchs, it will probably take a lot of months before the Coalition and the Hegemony are both ready to launch any major offensives. If not for this delay, your brother wouldn't have been able to accompany me to this appallingly underdeveloped region of space. I still regret agreeing to your request even now!"

"What is the current state of the frontlines?"

"It's mostly skirmishes I've heard. There's a lot of fighting, but not a lot of border systems are changing hands at the moment. That's all I know. It's not as if I have any relations to the military. You should ask your brother if you want to know the details. He promised to visit your ship as soon as he cleaned up the Fridaymen. I think he's quite pleased with capturing their ship. It's nothing impressive, but at least he earned some merits to offset this diversion."

"How long will he be staying?"

"Again, you should ask him, Gloriana. I think he'll only stick around for a couple months before he has to go back. I think he's hoping to bring you away from this squalid region before that, though. He thinks the same way about your latest fling as I. You deserve better than this low-class specimen of humanity. Just look at his body scans! There's nothing normal about his abnormal half-alien physique!"

"It doesn't matter." Gloriana released a loving sigh while she stared at the scans. "Ves is great the way he is right now. At least he won't die so easily!"

Ranya let out a frustrated grunt. "Expect to face a lot of flack once you get home. Your decision to enter in a relationship with Mr. Larkinson resulted in a minor scandal back home. A lot of Wodins don't think well of you at this moment! Not only did you abandon your responsibilities at home, you also snubbed all of the dynasties who lined up potential suitors for you. Some of those boys are pretty yummy, you know!"

"Bleh." Gloriana exaggeratingly gagged. "I know what you're talking about. Even if they are cuter, Ves is already handsome enough! While I like a tasty snack as much as any other Hexer, those good-looking boys at home are too useless! When it comes to mech design, I would take Ves over any supposedly-talented mech designer!"

The conversation between the two female Wodins quickly devolved into a comparison between Ves and the boys from the Hegemony.

Ves really didn't need to know all of this information! He mentally closed his ears and impatiently waited for the first round of treatment to end.

Eventually, Ranya finished her treatment regime. After injecting one last fluid in his bloodstream, she allowed Ves to leave.

"This is it for now, Mr. Larkinson." Dr. Ranya glanced at him with a disinterested expression while she wrote up some notes. "Don't perform any

exercise or make any strenuous movements until you go through my follow-up sessions. You still have a lot to go before your body is fully restored. If your physique and genes aren't so warped, I would have been able to finish your treatment sooner. As it is, you'll just have to be careful for a month."

"Do I need to watch out for anything else?" Ves asked with some respect.

Though Dr. Ranya did not show any respect to him at all, Ves still found it prudent to treat her as a benefactor.

If not for requesting her help all those months ago, perhaps this rescue would have never happened!

"You should watch your diet and avoid eating too much junk. I'll send a note over to you and Gloriana's chefs so they can adjust your meals."

After that, Gloriana practically dragged him out of the infirmary.

As Ves had spent some on the Stellar Chaser already, he recognized that Gloriana was bringing him straight to the lounge compartment.

Once there, she deposited him onto the loveseat before sitting next to him with a loving gaze.

"We're finally alone!"

Ves briefly glanced at the bodyguards that followed her and took up position at the sides. "Not really."

"Oh, just ignore them!" She giggled before turning to a floating cat bed that hovered in the corner. "Clixie! Come over here! Bring Lucky with you as well!"

So that was where his cat went, Ves noted.

Lucky and Clixie curled up together on a circular cat bed and licked each other's necks for some reason. As soon as Gloriana called them up, they jumped from the bed and padded over and hopped onto their laps.

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

"Oh, look! Clixie missed you so much!" Gloriana grinned while stroking her hand over Lucky's smooth back. She soon noticed his tiger stripes. "Lucky looks different. Did you upgrade him, Ves?"

"In a way." Ves vaguely replied. "He's been very helpful to me. He's one of the main reasons why I was able to escape captivity."

Gloriana immediately glowered. "Those Fridaymen went too far! That Curver cow had no right to take you away from me! Tell me you didn't fall for her, Ves."

Knowing how touchy she was on these matters, Ves answered her question seriously while looking straight into her eyes.

"I love you, Gloriana. I never wavered in my commitment to you. If I didn't love you anymore, I wouldn't have taken a huge risk and killed off all of the crew of the Scarlet Rose. I didn't hesitate in burning my bridges with the Friday Coalition to declare my devotion to you! I'll kill millions of Fridaymen for you if that is what it takes to prove my love to you!"

"Oh Ves.."

Gloriana practically melted against him while she reciprocated his gaze. All of the tension in her body faded away as she finally realized that Ves was back and here to stay!

For his part, Ves felt happier than ever to be reunited with his girlfriend. The trust they shared between each other was something he sorely missed!

Chapter 1776 Missed Company

Two minds intertwined with each other as Ves and Gloriana blissfully enjoyed each other's company.

After so many weeks of separation, the joy they felt when they finally got back together was indescribable!

Both of them put down all of their concerns and simply basked in each other's presence.

Touching each other, kissing each other and cuddling with each other cured the sickness that gnawed at their hearts.

All of these weeks of spending their time alone taught them both a very serious lesson.

It was a curse to remain alone, and a blessing to enjoy the company of their earnest lover!

The love they held for each other hadn't diminished in the slightest. Neither of them had 'woken up' or found any reason to reconsider their relationship.

Instead, like junkies, they yearned for each other's company even more!

Now that Gloriana returned to his side, she dropped all of her airs and turned into a happy girl who did not hold back in her delight!

"I missed you, Ves." She sighed as she pressed her head on his chest. "I missed you too as well, Lucky!"

"Meow..."

Lucky contently purred while he rested on her lap. Staying stuck with Ves all the time was not his idea of fun!

At least Gloriana didn't kick him around or threw him in the air for no reason!

For her part, Clixie purred while basking in Ves' warmth. As someone who made her owner happy, Ves had long earned her approval!

The fact that he understood her at a deeper level also helped. Sometimes, it was hard being a cat!

"How has it been back home?" Ves idly asked, his finger rolling one of Gloriana's locks of hair.

"The LMC and your other organizations are doing fine. The Bright Republic hasn't touched the Mech Nursery or any of your property. Both the LMC's tangible and intangible assets are still intact. In fact, with how much you matter these days, your home state has an even greater reason to make sure your rights are respected."

"Hahaha!" Ves released a cynical laugh. "That's rich, coming from the government that allowed one of their generals to trade me away like I'm nothing more than livestock!"

"If we didn't design such a pivotal mech like the Deliverer, the Bright Republic probably wouldn't have reversed its stance so quickly." Gloriana shared his opinion.

"How is the Deliverer faring?"

"It's doing as well as you expected. The Eye of Ylvaine that the Protectorate has formed some time ago is making a name for itself throughout the region. Every Hunter of Ylvaine has become a welcome presence on the battlefield due to their ability to channel the will of Ylvaine. While every Ylvainan piloting a Deliverer is able to do so to an extent, their prophet is slowly concentrating his power onto the Eye of Ylvaine."

This development came as a surprise to Ves. He hadn't given Ylvaine's spiritual fragment any instructions to restrict his powers to this small, elite group of Kronon mech pilots.

It made sense for the sentient fragment to restrict the bestowal of its favor. If the Deliverer kept excelling with its supernatural abilities, soon millions of Ylvainans would adopt the mech!

What happened if all of those millions of devout Ylvainan mech pilots requested supernatural aid?

The fragment would quickly exhaust itself!

In order to keep the Deliverer relevant without running a spiritual energy deficit, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment evidently decided to make its blessing exclusive to this small group of chosen Kronon mech pilots.

"How many mech pilots have joined Eye of Ylvaine?"

"There are about five-thousand Hunters of Ylvaine at the moment. It's quite a rapid expansion for the Ylvainans, as they don't have many Kronons who specialize in piloting spaceborn marksman mechs. It's not that easy to recruit more because those who aren't as good in marksmanship will largely waste Ylvaine's blessing."

Ves already understood this. Though five-thousand chosen mech pilots didn't sound like a great figure, it was enough to cover many important star systems in the region!

"The Ylvainans should have lent their Hunters of Ylvaine to other states by now, right?"

Gloriana nodded. "That's right. Every other state has tried to make use of the Deliverer model, to no avail. Only true Ylvainans are able to make adequate use of our mech model, which is exactly what you intended! The Protectorate knows this as well, and has made great use of this advantage. Over the last month, they have been both smart and generous about their terms for assistance."

"Tell me what they have done."

"The Protectorate negotiated deals with the Bright Republic, Vesia Kingdom, Reinald Republic and every other state pressed by the sandmen. The

contents of the deals are secret, but the press has done a decent job at guessing the concessions the latter states have made to the Protectorate."

"Did they bleed themselves?"

"Almost certainly, but not as much as you expect. The Protectorate is being farsighted by all accounts. They aren't demanding the Brighters and Vesians to give up their territories or empty their entire treasury. Aside from some direct transfers of wealth and resources, the Ylvainans mainly want to improve diplomatic ties, open up trade, and receive a guaranteed right to proselytize their faith abroad without any hindrance."

"I take it the states that are knocking on the doors of the Protectorate aren't entirely pleased about those concessions." Ves guessed.

"They're not very happy." She nodded. "They acquitted, though. With the sandmen constantly deepening their attrition, they have no choice to but to beg the Eye of Ylvaine for help!"

"It sounds like the Protectorate could have taken more advantage of the distressed states."

"It's true that the leaders of the Protectorate have held back. Since the Deliverers have relieved a lot of pressure in their state, the three leading dynasties aren't fixated solely on the Sand War anymore. Instead, it's the Komodo War that is increasingly weighing on their minds."

Both of them paused for a moment. Ves and Gloriana had always directed their efforts towards the Sand War because this conflict happened to be closer to where they stayed. It was also the conflict where their products would be best appreciated.

The Komodo War was an entirely different beast. While Gloriana possessed the qualification to design second-class mechs, Ves was not at that level yet.

He still had much to go before he became confident his products would be on par with the mechs designed by Hexer or Fridaymen mech designers.

Now that the Sand War reached its turning point, there was even less of a reason for them to design a mech for this market.

The later stages of a war and the recovery period that happened afterwards always resulted in a drop in demand.

Both the military and the private sector exhausted all of their reserves, and even went deep into debt. With the cessation of most fights, there were no good reasons to buy any mechs at this time!

In fact, many organizations would attempt to downsize at this time in order to cut costs and gain some liquidity. A lot of second-hand mechs would flood the market after every war, making it even harder to sell pristine mechs at their list prices!

Therefore, the Bright Republic's mech market would enter into a very big depression period. Ves had no doubt that a number of struggling mech companies would either shutter their doors or get bought out by better-performing competitors.

With all of this upheaval taking place, there wouldn't be many opportunities for the LMC to do business in those hard-hit states.

"The states that survived the sandman onslaught won't be in any shape to participate in the Komodo War." Ves remarked. "If the Protectorate helps them win the war, they'll probably earn a lot of gratitude from those states, most of whom happen to maintain friendly ties to the Friday Coalition."

Gloriana smiled. "That's why the Ylvainans are doing their best to make those Coalition-aligned states grateful to them. When the Protectorate has literally rescued billions or trillions of citizens from complete annihilation, it would be very difficult for those states to turn around and attack their savior. That is if

they have any forces left to threaten the Protectorate. The Brighters and the Vesians have pretty much exhausted almost every resource."

"Even the states that aren't affected by the Sand War will be reluctant to gang up on the Ylvaine Protectorate." He cleverly noted. "The Protectorate has acted very morally in extending their aid when they could have just let those states fall. The entire Komodo Star Sector aside from the second-rate states will honor them for their contribution! Even the MTA will extend their appreciation to the Ylvainans for striking the critical blow against the aliens."

While gaining the appreciation of many people was not a guarantee, it would be very hard for the Friday Coalition to persuade its vassal states to attack the Ylvaine Protectorate.

At the very least, doing so would inevitably tarnish their reputation and cause them to appear more tyrannical in the eyes of every third-rate state.

Such an act might hand the Hegemony an advantage in the longer term!

"For this reason, I think the Protectorate will be fine when the Komodo War heats up." She told him, as if to reassure him about the safety of his now-favorite state.

Ves wasn't sure whether he appreciated the Ylvaine Protectorate or the Bright Republic the most. He still wanted both states to do well, though.

He still cared for the Bright Republic because it was the state that the Larkinson Family called home. Many of his family members still stubbornly stuck to the state despite the recent upheavals.

For the good of his relatives, Ves could not wish his home state any ill.

He felt a bit mixed about the Ylvaine Protectorate as well. The Ylvainans had been very helpful to him, but that was predicated on the popularity of his work.

The moment he stopped delivering the goods, he would stop gaining as much appreciation from them! Certainly, Ves could still coast along for some time by depending on his legacy, but that would probably fade in time.

In truth, Ves did not wish to repeat his mistake by leaning too much on a single state. A faction in the Bright Republic had already screwed him over, so who could say that the same wouldn't happen again in the Ylvaine Protectorate?

For this and several other reasons, Ves did not plan to settle permanently in the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Of course, for now Ves had nowhere else to go, so he would probably stay in the Protectorate for as long as it took to reorganize the LMC. Moving his headquarters and main operations away from Cloudy Curtain was a very disruptive move that did not do his company any favors!

"What about the Larkinsons?"

"They're still arguing about how to split themselves up. Now that you're back, you should get in touch with your relatives. Your lack of input is one of the biggest reasons why the talks within your family has stalled."

Ves sighed and rubbed his hand against her thin arm. "So the Larkinson Family as we know it will come to an end. I almost feel guilty for precipitating this event."

"If you ask me, not every Larkinson deserves your patronage. I think it's good if you separate the chaff from the wheat."

"Your words have merit, but.. I doubt it will be that easy. The majority of Larkinsons have opted to stay with the old guard, right?"

"That just makes it even better." She smiled. "This means that only the Larkinsons who are truly committed to you will be left. All of those Larkinsons

who have doubts or aren't willing to let go of their old ways are gone. You can do whatever you want with the family who are truly willing to follow you to the ends of reality!"

The way she framed the split sounded very compelling to Ves. He no longer felt as remorseful for splitting up the family.

"As long as I have some loyalists, it's not impossible for my branch of the family to surpass the one led by the guard!"

Chapter 1777 Second Base

As much as Gloriana wanted to turn herself into a barnacle, she couldn't stick with Ves forever.

She still had some responsibilities to attend to, though she didn't elaborate very much to Ves. It was for his own good, she claimed.

"Just because I've left the Hegemony doesn't mean the Hegemony has left me." Gloriana gently patted his head as if he was a puppy. "Sometimes, a girl's gotta work. I still have many obligations to the Wodins, and the customers of my old products are still entitled to support."

He smiled and briefly pulled her into an embrace. "Alright. Go do your thing, then. I have plenty of tasks to do as well. After separating from my company for so long, I'm worried whether it will fall apart if I remain absent for much longer."

"Your subordinates are doing a good job in keeping the LMC together. You don't have to worry on that end. They don't depend on your leadership as much as you think."

That was probably because Ves delegated so many duties, he conceded. He had never been a hands-on leader when the LMC ceased to be a one-man operation.

"Regardless, I'm sure they'll welcome my presence. I'm pretty much the only mech designer aside from you who can perpetuate its success."

Before they separated, Gloriana made one more remark.

"There's one more thing, Ves. My older brother wanted to meet you, but subduing the Terrinac and putting it under our control has taken longer than we thought. While our Glory Battalion has managed to take control of the ship, our fleet must soon leave this star system before any rescuers from the Friday Coalition arrive to block our escape."

They were still in the middle of unfriendly territory. While the Crecia Republic was by no means an enemy of the Hexadric Hegemony, it still hosted several known and unknown Coalition assets.

Ves didn't look very concerned, however.

"Don't you have an expert pilot protecting you? Even if the Fridaymen somehow manage to scrounge two mech companies on short notice, your fleet won't come under serious threat."

"We can't underestimate the Fridaymen." Gloriana shrugged. "Now that I have you back, I won't risk losing you again!"

Well, she had a good point.

"By the way, who is your brother and what is he like?"

Gloriana grinned. "My brother is the one who saved you earlier today. He's the pilot of the Star Dancer!"

"The expert pilot?!" Ves widened his eyes.

"Exactly! Didn't I tell you that there is an expert pilot within my family? If I didn't beg him to save you from the clutches of the Fridaymen, you would have become their prisoner again. He wants to meet you when we reach our next stop. Be nice to him, okay?"

Ves recalled the earlier conversation between Gloriana and Ranya.

"Doesn't your brother think poorly of me?" He pointed out.

She waved her hand in dismissal. "I'm sure the two of you will get along with each other! You're a mech designer and he's a mech pilot! I know you don't like to stay in the company of female Hexers, so you should definitely be more comfortable with a Hexer who shares something in common with you, hihhi!"

He wasn't so sure about that. Ves recalled the time he inadvertently participated in the trials held by the Rim Guardians. He met his first Hexer back then. The male Journeyman was just as stuck up and dismissive towards Ves as the female Hexers!

"What if we don't get along?"

Gloriana swiftly stepped up to him and held him tightly on both arms. Her face almost pressed up to him with an intense expression!

"YOU HAVE TO BEFRIEND MY BROTHER, VES! IF YOU CAN'T EVEN GET ALONG MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, HOW CAN YOU EVER GAIN THE APPROVAL OF MY MOTHER?! OUR VERY RELATIONSHIP IS AT STAKE! BE SERIOUS AND DON'T MESS THIS UP! I'LL PUNISH YOU IF YOU MAKE THINGS DIFFICULT!"

"I-I-I'll do my best!" Ves hastily responded in shock.

Gloriana had turned twice as frightening as the mummy that haunted him back on the Scarlet Rose!

If he had a choice, he would rather deal with a centuries-old undead witch than an angry Gloriana!

When she received the response she wanted to hear, Gloriana quickly regained her composure and gently kissed his cheek.

"It's for a good cause, Ves. We can't move our relationship forward until my family and my mother are okay with it. What I'm doing is already at the limit of their tolerance. If not for all of the promises I've made and the turmoil back home, my mother would have recalled me by now."

"I understand. We always knew it won't be easy to get the Wodins to like me. If my contribution to the Sand War hasn't changed their minds, then it will probably take a huge effort for us to change their minds."

"It's not as difficult as you think. You know what we need to do to change their perception of you." She reminded him. "As long as we make one good masterwork mech, everything will change!"

Ves hadn't spent all of his time aboard the Scarlet Rose for nothing. He already formed some ideas to improve his odds of fabricating a masterwork mech. He couldn't wait to put some of his ideas into action!

They finally separated from each other. While Gloriana approached the bridge, a guard escorted him to his quarters, which was right next to Gloriana's stateroom. Their cats followed their owners as well.

"You are free to move around, but we suggest you stay in place until you are called." The female guard perfunctory said. "Our fleet will continue to remain on yellow alert throughout our journey back to the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"I understand. I'll stay put."

The guard left him alone in his quarters once he got the message.

Not that he enjoyed any actual privacy. This was Gloriana's personal starship, and Ves bet that every corner of his quarters was bugged to an insane degree!

He smirked and patted his lower waist. "It's a good thing I'm still wearing the right pair of underwear!"

While it disconcerted him somewhat that he was still wearing the same article of clothing for more than a month, with the existence of advanced washing options, he was still able to maintain a satisfactory hygiene standard!

"It's not like my Synthra Umbra underwear has turned smelly." Ves sniffed the air just to be sure.

"Meow."

"Thank you."

"Meow meow."

"Are you happy that you reunited with Clixie?"

"Meow!"

"Hahaha, don't delude yourself. The two of you are completely different beasts!"

"Meow meow!"

Ves ignored Lucky's complaints and sat himself down behind a desk. He activated its terminal and saw that Gloriana thoughtfully loaded it with his favorite software and settings.

In fact, the configuration of the desk terminal was virtually identical to that of his old office at the Mech Nursery!

"Did she copy my files?" Ves frowned.

He shrugged. He didn't really store anything too important at the company. Ves always stashed the truly important data in his System comm, which he already placed back in his intangible Inventory.

The comm he was wearing now was just a generic device he fabricated on the fly.

"I should ask Gloriana for a replacement comm. No. That's a bad idea. I should get one from another source!"

His girlfriend already possessed an uncomfortable degree of access to his life. There was no reason to make things easier!

He shook his head and focused on his priorities. He should really get in touch with his subordinates.

He first decided to call Calsie. It only took a moment for her to accept the call.

"Ves! We've heard that the Hexers managed to rescue you! I can't tell you how much of a relief it is to see you again!"

Ves chuckled. "I'm glad to be free as well. How much do you know?"

"Ah, not much. Gloriana only sent a brief message to us. She estimates that it will probably take a week or so to bring you back to the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"Do you know where exactly they are bringing me?" Ves asked. "Where are you residing, by the way?"

"We're currently based in the Kesseling System. While it's not exactly our first choice, the Protectorate heavily encouraged us to found our second headquarters at Kesseling VIII."

Wasn't that the star system where he designed the Transcendent Messenger? Wasn't it also the place where the Ylvainan Inquisition put him on trial and almost sentenced him to death on spurious charges?

"The Kesseling System.. is not my first choice."

"There are good reasons to settle on Kesseling VIII." Calsie calmly replied.

"First, it's an industrial planet that has managed to fare well in the Sand War so far. While it's not the biggest production center in the Protectorate, its significance has increased due to all of the events that took place in the past.

It's becoming a real pilgrimage site, you know. Local support for the Bright Martyr is the highest here! You won't get a better reception elsewhere."

"That's not enough."

"Some of the companies there have also been contracted by the Curin Dynasty to produce the Deliverers for the Eye of Ylvaine. This makes it easier for us to partner up with or potentially acquire these mech companies in the future."

That sounded viable to Ves, though he preferred to raise his own facilities rather than taking over someone else's company.

"What else?"

"We already formed a branch office here. Do you remember the LMYC? The subsidiary you've formed between the LMC and Madame Cecily Curin has grown significantly, to the point where it is able to materially assist our integration in the Ylvainan mech industry. Without their assistance, it would have been multiple times harder for us to root our company in a foreign state!"

Ah, he forgot about that. With Calabast pulling the strings through her holding company and her influence within the Ministry of Trade and Industry, she could provide a lot of assistance.

"So how is the current state of the LMC?"

"We're building a second manufacturing complex in the outskirts of Krent, the capital city. It will be just as impressive as the Mech Nursery. There was some discussion within the company whether we should invest more or less in this complex, but we decided to stick to the same and wait for your input."

Ves paused for a moment to consider his plans for the future. "Try and make the second complex more secure, but don't invest too much in its production facilities. It's fine if you leave a lot of room for future growth, but don't sink too

much money in too many production lines. How is the company holding up financially?"

"We're doing very well, even if most of our cash reserves have dwindled in value due to inflation. Whether it's bright credits of Reinaldan marks, we've only earned a fraction from the sales of the Desolate Soldier and other mechs. They're still worth something, though. It's more than enough to rebuild the LMC."

She provided him with some figures and explained all of the foreign cash reserves the LMC accumulated during its peak.

Even now, the LMC continued to make at least some business in selling its existing lineup of models. Plenty of states outside of the ones affected by the Sand War discovered the usefulness of the Desolate Soldier and its glow.

While the Soldier product line wasn't optimized to fight against mechs, their glows made them very useful for various purposes!

Its enduring popularity along with the modest sales of the other models of the LMC ensured that it earned plenty of money to sustain its operations!

Best of all, the revenue earned from the more stable states came in currencies that weren't affected by hyperinflation!

"This will be the foundation for our second rise." Ves declared after he got the gist of Calsie's explanation. "Transmit all of the documents you think I'll need to read in order to get back up to speed. I've already formed some plans while I was away, but I want to study our exact circumstances before I make up my mind."

"Will do, sir."

He ended the call shortly after she transferred the relevant documents. Ves still had several people to talk to before the day was over.

"After I call Benny and Raymond, I suppose it's time to talk to my grandfather." He mused.

Chapter 1778 Points of Contention

Before Ves called his grandfather, he first sent him a message to see if he was available to talk. He also wanted to give his grandfather some time to prepare for their conversation.

Fortunately, his grandfather wasn't asleep or restricted from talking to him. After setting a quick appointment, Ves soon moved on to call his other helpers.

"Benny!" Ves smiled. "How's my favorite assistant?"

Gavin's projection awkwardly smiled. "Do you have any other assistants?"

"Well, I've met several of them, but all of them seem more capable than you. How come you're the only Benny I know that can't fight?"

"That's not my job description."

"That's the main reason you're my favorite assistant. I don't have to be on guard against you. You're the most incompetent Benny out of all of the ones I know. You deserve a prize for that!"

"Excuse me?"

"On second thought, it's kind of embarrassing that my Benny isn't up to standard. I should drop you off at an elite commando training camp or something. You should really pick up some of the necessary skills that is expected of someone in your position. If you can hijack a second-class starship with minimal assistance like me, you're qualified to call yourself a Benny!"

"My name is Gavin, boss." The perplexed assistant reminded his employer with gritted teeth.

"I know, Benny. Your name is one of the most important parts about your identity. Cherish it well!"

For the next ten minutes, Ves let go of everything and continued to ramble to Gavin like a demented teenager. He hardly asked any questions about the LMC other than to gain his assistant's perspective on the LMC's market position.

Of course, what Gavin told him did not differ much from what Calsie already mentioned.

Ves truly felt he was back in the saddle now that he got in touch with Gavin again. It was too bad that Gloriana hadn't taken him aboard her ship when she mounted her rescue.

After he finished getting back in touch with Gavin, he regained his composure and called Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

As the most senior executive of the LMC who actually ran the company, Raymond possessed a much more comprehensive understanding of its current condition.

Ves first quizzed the COO about the areas which Calsie already explained. He received both a confirmation and some elaboration on what he already learned.

"The LMC is running on autopilot pretty much." The business-minded Larkinson elder remarked. "Even if you are absent for half a decade, our company will still be able to turn a profit. While our mech catalog is still small, the Soldier product line is such an enduring success that it will continue to function as our cash cow for many years to come."

"So there is not a lot of financial pressure on the LMC, is that right?"

Raymond nodded. "Part of that is also because we don't have that many expenses. While we are investing a significant amount of money in building our second base at Kesseling VIII, our warchest is still replenishing. It's enough to expand our reach in every third-rate state that is open to using our products!"

"Ves pressed his lips with his finger. "That sounds nice, but I take it we don't have enough money to compete in a second-rate state, right?"

"Is that what you plan to do? Expand the LMC to a second-rate state?"

"It's.. in consideration." Ves vaguely said. "I already told you that I intend to become proficient in second-class mech design. I'm still committed to this. In fact, if there is one benefit to my impromptu vacation, it's that I've made a lot of progress on this front!"

"Who will you sell your mechs to, Ves? The Fridaymen? Ordinarily, they should be quite receptive to your products once they discover the benefits of your glows, but..."

Ves chuckled. "Slaughtering an entire crew of Fridaymen is a good way to block my access to their mech market."

"Quite. As for entering the Hegemony mech market, will the Hexers even approve of your designs? From what I've learned, a panel of matriarchs must approve every design, and I doubt they will take you seriously!"

"That's only in the cases where men are the lead designers." Ves added, showing little concern. "Even if my involvement is problematic, one of my.. partners is already working on this issue. I'll let you know if we have made a breakthrough on this matter."

If Calabast and Gloriana's arrangements somehow fell through, then Ves would just have to find another market to push his products.

Vicious Mountain had always been known as a hotbed for low-level conflicts. Its odd culture of putting mech pilots in charge often led to spats between rivaling states and groups.

While the warmongering states of Vicious Mountain generally didn't fight each other to the death like what was happening in his home star sector, the wars occasionally escalated into major conflicts that only ended when one side gained a significant advantage!

This pattern persisted for centuries, which meant that its sector-wide mech market had grown very vigorous!

Aside from mech pilots, mech designers also enjoyed a lot of respect there. Ves would probably be able to find a very willing audience if he decided to enter this market!

Of course, Ves hadn't made his choice yet. He still had to find a way to get into the good graces of Madame Constance Wodin and the other Wodins in order to advance his relationship with Gloriana.

This was why he still wanted to enter the Hegemony's mech market despite all of the difficulties he faced.

Ves continued to discuss some other matters about the LMC with Raymond until he became satisfied with what he learned.

"Before you go, I'd like to hear from you what you think about what is happening within our family." He said. "What is your opinion on the impending split?"

"The tension between the factions is irreconcilable." Raymond stated with absolute certainty. "While your words managed to wake a lot of Larkinsons up, how they responded to your rant is different from individual to individual. Some have reaffirmed their old values and commitments. Others decided that following you is worth giving up outdated vows."

"Why have most Larkinsons decided to remain in the Bright Republic?"

"Taking part in your ventures is considered a risk, Ves. Not everyone is willing to take a major gamble that will decide how they will live out the rest of their lives. It's mostly the younger and more restless Larkinsons who have decided to follow you to the Ylvaine Protectorate. The Larkinsons who decided to remain in the Bright Republic are mostly those who are already content with their lives and station. They're not ambitious for anything greater and they're not in the mood for an adventure."

"Understandable. I take it many of them decided to stay for the sole reason they are already tied down by their families, right?"

Raymond nodded. "When you are a husband with numerous young kids to take care of, uprooting your entire life in order to pursue an uncertain future is the last thing you want. This is actually the main reason why many Larkinsons who are neutral in the dispute within our family have decided to decline our invitation."

"How many trueblood Larkinsons have followed us? Those who share our blood, I mean?"

"I'd say about ten percent so far. Almost none have reconsidered, though. A steady number of Larkinsons in the Bright Republic who haven't joined us at the start are still signing up with us. I think this situation will persist over the next years as more and more younger Larkinsons grow up and want to take part in a more exciting venture."

"There's also the Larkinsons who are still serving their tours in the Mech Corps." Ves recalled. "I imagine that some of them will likely defect to us once they finished their commitments."

"That's why I suggest that you keep our doors open to the 'other' Larkinsons for the foreseeable time. None of the Larkinsons who approach us come with bad intentions. It behooves us to accept their applications as they come."

Ves thought about it for a moment before nodding in agreement. "That sounds fine. I'm about to talk to my grandfather Benjamin about the future of the Larkinson Family. Do I need to know anything before I call him? What we'll decide will very likely affect our direction!"

"Benjamin will tell you all you need to know. Just keep in mind that Ark and him are in the neutral camp who decided to stay where they are. Both of them have lived a full life in the Bright Republic, and they both feel they have a responsibility to lead the rest of the family."

That was something Ves had already expected. Though disappointing, he agreed with their stance.

Where Ves was taking his side of the Larkinson Family was anything but stable and conventional!

In this regard, he was more than happy to pick up the Larkinsons who were still young and retained their ambitions.

At least Ves wouldn't feel guilty if he led them to disaster!

He cut off his call with Raymond shortly afterwards. After a brief moment to collect his thoughts, he pulled the trigger and called his grandfather.

Since he had already been notified beforehand, Benjamin Larkinson picked up his call in an instant.

His grandfather looked much more fatigued than before. His projection practically oozed exhaustion! His grey-white hair and wrinkles had grown even more intense, making him appear as if he was one step closer to the end of his life!

Fortunately, seeing his grandson's projection lifted some of his weariness.

"Ves. I can't tell you how happy you're free again."

"You look.. overworked. Are you still hanging on, grandpa?"

"Don't worry about me. I still have plenty of years in my bones. I won't drop down tomorrow because of what has taken place. The Larkinsons still need a steady hand at the top to guide them through our current.. difficulties."

Ves looked steadily at his grandfather's projection. Despite his age, his customary formal attire still conveyed a lot of strength.

He was still the bedrock of the Larkinson Family!

"What's your take on the split?"

"I have already discussed this issue extensively with Raymond. We're on opposite sides of the negotiating table, after all. Both of us agree that a split is inevitable. The problem is that the 'old family' and the 'new family' both disagree on who gets what."

"What are the most important points of contention?"

"It all boils down to two broad categories." Benjamin raised his finger. "First is the issue of identity and heritage. Our Larkinson Family is a very successful military family with a very stellar reputation in the Bright Republic. The old family wants to retain sole possession of the Larkinson name. They're afraid that the new family under your lead will do something that will tarnish the honor of the Larkinson name in the Bright Republic and abroad."

Ves wanted to rub his ears. "What? Those selfish conservatives want to strip us of our very own family names?! Are they serious?!"

"It's a very major sticking point to them, Ves. Honor is everything to them! You've already proven yourself to be a Larkinson who doesn't shy away from upending tradition."

"We're never going back to the Bright Republic!" Ves angrily exclaimed. "We'll be going far away from the Bright Republic in the future! Whatever we do won't affect the old family at all!"

"Plans can change."

"Let's not go into this right now." Ves forced himself to calm. It wouldn't do to yell at his grandfather, especially since it wouldn't do any good to his health.

"What is the second point of contention?"

"The distribution of assets. I think it's pretty clear that the old family will retain possession of the Larkinson Compound and most of its existing assets."

"I'm not interested in the real estate portfolio of the Larkinson Estate." Ves confirmed.

"The only asset that the old and new family are arguing about is how to split up the shares of the LMC. Currently, our family owns 25 percent of the LMC. The old family wants at least 20 percent of it. They claim that you owe much of your success to your Larkinson heritage, so they are entitled to some of the fruits of your labor."

"THAT'S ABSURD!"

Chapter 1779 True Negotiation

Ves went through several negotiations throughout his career. He learned how to give and how to take. He learned how to understand the needs of his counterparts and match them against his own to seek out a harmonious agreement.

The most ideal outcome for both parties involved would be to reach a win-win arrangement.

When both sides obtained the concessions they wanted while giving up something they didn't value as much, both of them would do their best to uphold the deal.

Yet how easy was it to reach an amicable deal like that? The very need to hold a negotiation implied that a straightforward agreement was out of reach.

This meant that in order to reach a deal, both sides had to give up some advantages they would rather retain. The more a side conceded, the more they felt pained about the deal.

Compromises were never clean. Both sides had to give up so many significant concessions that the end of a negotiation always left a sour taste in their mouths.

When he heard the demands from the conservative faction that led the old family, Ves forcibly paused and forced himself to think.

He saw beneath the surface of the old family's outrageous demands.

The faction that counted Venerable Ghanso Larkinson among its supporters certainly asked for much.

First, the old family wanted the new family to lose the right to call themselves Larkinsons.

This was nothing else than robbing Ves and the other Larkinsons who followed him of their heritage!

Second, the old family wanted to claim most of the shares the formerly-united family held in the LMC!

For the old family to covet 20 percent ownership in the LMC while leaving the new family with the remaining 5 percent was nothing more than pure greed!

Ves couldn't help but chuckle. "Aren't the traditionalists being hypocritical? On one hand, Ghanso and his ilk detest the so-called 'corrupting' influence of money. Yet now they are shameless asking for twenty percent ownership of an unimaginably wealthy mech company!"

"There isn't a contradiction as long as the wealth is put to good use."

Benjamin answered in the stead of the conservative faction. "The purpose of claiming ownership is not to enrich individual Larkinsons. It's to secure the prosperity and continuation of the old family. The dividends would flow into the family's coffers, which will mainly be used to fund our mech academies, upgrade the training of our mech pilots and ensure a generous pension for our retirees and any families our deceased family members have left behind."

All of that sounded noble, but that was hardly different from what Ves already intended! He was just a bit more direct about how he could benefit the Larkinsons!

"What a dumb excuse." Ves did not hesitate to tear down the veil in front of his grandfather. "The conservative faction is being hypocritical, and you know it. Why are you even speaking on their behalf? I thought you didn't pick a side."

"Someone has to speak on their behalf in front of you." He said. "Being neutral doesn't mean we lack sympathy for the conservative faction. Even though I dislike Ghanso as much as any decent Larkinson, the values he is standing for are still worth fighting for. While I'm your grandfather, I'm also a Larkinson. Since you are more than capable of standing up for yourself, it falls on me to represent the Larkinsons who have decided to stay in the Bright Republic."

Though Ves resented these circumstances, he knew that his grandfather was doing the right thing. As one of the oldest and most respected Larkinsons in the family, Benjamin took his responsibilities seriously. That was just the kind of man he was. Ves did not expect his grandfather to be anything less!

Though facing a family member who was dear to his heart made Ves inclined to soften his stand, this was too important for him to give any ground!

The Larkinson Family owned a fourth of the LMC! One of his goals in usurping the leadership of his family had always been to reclaim this ownership stake!

Of course, if Ves really wanted to, he could turn his back to the first company he founded and start anew with an entirely new venture.

While it would hurt him a lot to give up the tangible and intangible assets of the LMC, as a Journeyman he could still rely on his personal reputation to accelerate his second attempt!

The only issue was that Ves really didn't want to part with the constant revenue earned from the continued sale of the Soldier product line. He also didn't want to lose the rights of all of his designs, which had all been put under the umbrella of the LMC for administrative reasons.

Ves always contemplated refreshing the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and other legacy designs. Losing the right to continue to work on pivotal designs like the Aurora Titan would be an exceptionally painful loss!

More than losing all of the assets as well as the formidable reputation of the LMC, Ves would also break some of his principles by abandoning the venture he started.

In the mech industry, it was considered to be dishonorable for a mech designer to abandon a company over something as banal as disputes over stock.

Mech designers always needed cash in their earlier years. When they were at their weakest, money was often difficult to come by. For investors to take a leap of faith and invest in the company of a mech designer was a very essential step in the rise of many successful mech designers.

For these mech designers to profit from the risks their investors had taken, only for the now-successful entrepreneurs to stop developing mechs for the company in order to start another company was very dishonorable behavior.

Of course, what use was honor in the face of concrete benefits?

With the power and personal wealth of a mech designer of their station, Journeymen no longer had to beg for scraps from wealthy industrialists and greedy investors. They could own a company completely, or as much as the state where they incorporated their new business allowed!

Yet as Ves already discovered, honor, fame and reputation played a very outsized role in the interactions that took place in the upper echelons of power.

When trust was hard to come by and laws too weak to be enforced, only trust and mutual benefit ensured that an agreement would continue to be upheld.

Ves knew he would have to pay an invisible but very severe price if he abandoned the LMC when it still held much promise.

The stain on his record would be one he could never wipe out. The stain on his principles would also be something that would haunt his mind for centuries to come.

For all of these reasons, Ves deeply preferred to avoid this outcome. The price was much more unbearable compared to the petty material gains of starting anew.

He turned his attention back to his conversation, no, negotiation with his grandfather. Though he ruled out the possibility of abandoning the LMC, that did not mean he had to take the opposite side's opening bid seriously.

What he should ordinarily do was to raise his temper, vent his thoughts on the conservative faction's unreasonably high demands, and offer a ridiculously low counter offer.

From there, the conservative faction would do its best to raise a stink and take the moral high ground demanding a little less, say a 19 percent stake in the LMC, as a show of giving ground.

Ves slowly shook his head as he realized the pointlessness of this dance.

He had been through several negotiations to make a very important realization. He wasn't compelled to play a game of chess just because someone shoved a chess board in front of his face.

If Ves was strong enough to flip the chessboard and make the entire game invalid, then he might as well do so! Why should he pay any mind to family sentiment and fall into the conservative faction's insidious trap?

A grin appeared on his face as he leaned back on his luxurious desk chair. He wrapped his fingers in front of his chest.

He did not look like someone who contemplated a painful concession.

Instead, he exuded the vibe of a conqueror!

"Grandfather, I think you are very mistaken about some facts. While I respect the values the old family continues to uphold, the whole point of breaking our traditions and embracing new ways is to expand our prosperity and leverage the power it conveys! The new family that is led by me is very different from the old family that you have stuck with! Unlike you old fogies, I'm more than willing to throw my weight around!"

Benjamin started to have a bad feeling about this conversation. "What are you on about, Ves?"

"Why should I even pay attention to the conservative faction in our family? The old family has nothing except for its honor and its storied legacy! While I admit that these are very valuable accumulations, they don't convey any concrete power! It's one of the main reasons why I wanted to change the

Larkinson Family, after all! Since people like Ghanso reject any changes, let me teach them why it is a mistake to discount my ways!"

"What is it you are intending to do, Ves?!" His grandfather grew alarmed.

Ves grinned. "The old family is not qualified to negotiate with me. You and the conservatives you shelter are too weak to decide your own fate. Since you continue to subject yourselves to the laws of the Bright Republic, I'll just switch to negotiating those who master these laws! Unfortunately, unlike you, the government doesn't necessarily have the old family's interests at heart!"

"Wait! Don't be so hasty, Ves! I'm just conveying the initial stances of the most stubborn members in the family! Let me talk to them so that—"

"—Too late!" Ves cut his grandfather off. "I'll proceed to negotiate with someone who isn't as stodgy and hypocritical as Ghanso's ilk!"

He cut the comm connection before Benjamin could put in another word.

Though he found it hard to treat his grandfather this way, Ves was acting as the leader of an entire faction of Larkinsons right now.

To mistake this negotiation as a grandson talking to his grandfather was a very irresponsible mistake. In order to maximize the benefits of his Larkinsons and prevent the old family from gaining concessions that they didn't deserve, Ves had to act like a leader.

Though his heart bled a bit, his vindictiveness against Venerable Ghanso and his like-minded idiots quickly pushed out the sympathy he held for his grandfather and all the other neutral Larkinsons.

While the neutrals weren't his enemy, their stance essentially coincided with that of the conservatives.

They were two sides of the same coin. They were joined at the hip. Even if Benjamin and Ark Larkinson were more respectable than the likes of Venerable Ghanso, Ves would be a fool to grant them any favors!

After he regained his composure, he decided to call someone who could represent or at least liaise on behalf of the Bright Republic.

He called Leland.

As if expecting the call, the Flashlight operative quickly picked up the call.

"Ves. It is good to see you again." The slimebag's projection smiled at Ves.

"I've heard of some of your exploits. For some reason, it doesn't surprise me at all that you managed to outwit and outfight the Fridaymen. I have always judged that you are one of the most remarkable mech designers our state has ever produced!"

"Spare the meaningless flattery. We need to talk."

"Ah, for whatever reason?" Leland innocently asked while adjusting the tie of his formal suit.

"Let's talk about the future of my relationship with the Bright Republic. Are you able to represent the will of the state?"

"Not exactly, but give me some time to contact my superiors. I'll make myself available so that you can convey your wishes to the officials who can make the decisions you seek. Senator Tovar will definitely be interested once he hears what you have to say."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That sounds great. It's nice to talk with someone who understands the true score."

The true negotiation soon commenced.

Chapter 1780 Ownership Shuffle

Over the span of his short career, Ves rapidly rose in prominence.

His grand accomplishments as well as his success raised his stature to a height that put him above the level of commoners.

While Ves still took his humble roots to heart, it was undeniable that he had gained enough power, wealth and influence to negotiate with entire states!

Even a great statesman like Senator Tovar had to take him seriously!

With such a status, why should he continue to entertain his grandfather who attempted to mediate on behalf of the old family and the conservative faction?

They were barely different from the common citizens of the Bright Citizens!

Despite all of their accomplishments, the traditionalists in the family still abided by the laws and customs of their home state!

Though this was a very righteous and honorable stance to uphold, the true beneficiary of this tradition was the Bright Republic rather than the Larkinson Family!

Ves literally pointed out this truth on the day that Venerable Ghanso took him away, but it seemed his grandfather and the rest were still too accustomed to the old status quo to realize their

The old family possessed no bargaining power to speak of!

Without real power, how could they ever think to push their demands onto a Journeyman, a galactic citizen, a war hero, and most recently a savior of many states?

He was the Bright Martyr! He enjoyed the worship of almost every Ylvainan!

He was a Journeyman! His mechs were celebrated throughout the star sector!

He was a Larkinson! Unlike his more indoctrinated relatives, he was actually willing to wield his power for his own ends!

The difference was too vast. Not even the former and current expert pilots in the family were capable of dragging him to the negotiating table. Like feeble slaves trying to push a statue, their paltry arms would just break if they attempted to drag his vast might from his place!

The Larkinsons who were used to their old ways didn't understand. Why should they? None of the older Larkinsons ever thought to use and abuse their power to enrich themselves or pursue greater benefits!

It went against their principles! The Larkinsons ought to be humble servants of the Bright Republic. The family always kicked out the relatives who disagreed with their ways like Raella, thereby ensuring that the long-standing consensus was never threatened!

The continuous lack of challenge to the tenets the Larkinsons abided by would prove to be the downfall of the old family.

Ves was in no mood to be generous to them, not after Venerable Ghanso sold him to the Fridaymen like livestock!

If Ghanso was heartless enough to sell out his own family, then the faction he belonged to shouldn't complain if Ves paid them back!

Once he contacted Leland, he patiently waited as the spy got in touch with his superiors, who in turn contacted the relevant higher ups.

It took some time to set up this daisy chain, especially when Ves requested to talk to Leland only.

He wasn't in the mood to talk to a shrewd official like Senator Tovar. His tolerance towards these high-minded power players was very poor after they allowed General Cavendish to

Knowing that Ves would react poorly if he faced a senior representative of the government, the state was okay with allowing Leland to be their spokesperson.

The fact that the government readily made this concession to Ves was very telling.

The Bright Republic still wanted to maintain relations with him. Perhaps it even wanted to repair the damage it had done in the last month.

Certainly, Ves did not feel very inclined to treat his home state earnestly, but for the good of the Larkinsons, he would not tear the veil of civility between them unless he had cause to do so. If the government knew what was best for them, they ought to play along.

"My apologies, Ves. This took a bit longer than we thought due to the suddenness of your request." Leland interrupted his musing.

"So can we actually talk frankly, now?"

"Certainly."

Leland's projection exuded more certainty now that he was tasked with representing the will of the state.

For his part, Ves did not only represent himself, but also the LMC as well the new family.

An unspoken understanding had formed between the two. The agreements they made today would have far-reaching consequences.

"Before we begin, let me inform you of some developments that pertain to the ownership structure of the LMC. In the weeks you were gone, some of the shares have exchanged hands."

"Oh?"

"Two major transfers have occurred. First, Sibilant Asset Management managed to buy out Marcella Bollinger's stake in the company. That increased the holding company's ownership in the LMC to 26 percent."

Sibilant Asset Management was a front for Flashlight, which in turn represented the government.

All of this basically meant that the Bright Republic's stake in the company had grown.

Ves couldn't help but smile suspiciously at Leland. "Mrs. Bollinger is a shrewd businesswoman. Her entire career is built on her business acumen. I can't imagine why she would ever relinquish her 5 percent ownership in a mech company that has already earned an astronomical amount of money and is on track to enrich her even more."

"Everything can be negotiated." Leland replied with a coy expression. "After much persuasion, we have managed to convince Mrs. Bollinger to sell her stake in exchange for a rich reward. We made sure that she hasn't suffered a loss."

That was pure nonsense. Ves did not have to think too hard to guess that the government essentially did the same to his old backer as he did to his grandfather!

This was yet another lesson in why it was best to pursue greater power.

If Ves was as powerless as the likes of Mrs. Bollinger, he would have never been able to drag the state to the negotiating table! They would merely take advantage of their power and dictate the terms as they did to other powerless people!

"So does that mean the state owns more of the LMC than the Larkinson Family?"

That sounded very concerning. It essentially signified that the Bright Republic could potentially team up with the Larkinson Family and gain total of the company! Ves, who owned 49 percent of the shares, could not legally go against the wishes of the holders of 51 percent of the shares in his company!

The only caveat was that such an outrageous takeover would definitely burn the few bridges between them that still remained.

Despite the damage to his reputation, Ves would rather turn his back to the LMC than subject himself to the control of a majority that did not deserve to profit from the fruits of his labor!

Leland, Flashlight and the government knew that as well, Ves could tell. Their reaction wasn't as pushy as it could have been.

"The Larkinson Family is not affiliated with Sibilant Asset Management. The two are two separate shareholders. I can't imagine that both will march in lockstep." Leland described.

Openly, Leland didn't lie. Yet Ves did not believe the government was above co-opting the Larkinson Family in order to influence their votes whenever a decision was brought up to the company board!

Ves did his best to remain reserved and crossed his arms. "What else has happened?"

"The Bright Republic has recently signed a treaty with the Ylvaine Protectorate. I'm sure you have heard of it, right?"

How could he not? He couldn't help but smirk. "If General Cavendish hasn't driven me away, I would have facilitated this agreement myself."

Leland looked a bit ugly. "It's a pity that such a shameful event has taken place. In any case, the Ylvaine Protectorate agreed to lend us their Hunters of Ylvaine and their remarkable Deliverers in exchange for a number of

concessions. One of them happens to pertain to the shares owned by Sibillant Asset Management."

Ves widened his eyes! "Don't tell me.."

"Your guess is on the spot. We have sold a portion of the shares to the Ylvainans. They've driven a hard bargain, from what I'm told. I won't tell you how these secret negotiations proceeded. I don't know the details myself. The result of these talks is that our government has agreed to relinquish 19 percent of our shares to the Transcendent Investment Authority, an Ylvainan sovereign wealth fund."

That much?! Ves didn't hide his surprise. The Ylvainans truly made good use of their superior bargaining position! With the power of the Deliverer mechs under their control, the Ylvainans succeeded in fleecing the Brighters!

Ves clapped. "Bravo! It turns out the Ylvainan people are good at something other than praying to their prophet!"

"Is that the tone that a Bright Martyr should adopt to the people who hold him in high regard?" Leland asked with an intrigued look in his eyes.

"Oh, I have nothing but respect for them. Anyway, does this mean that the Ylvainans own 19 percent of the LMC while you are left with 7 percent?"

"Not exactly. You're correct about our ownership stake, but from what I've been told, the Protectorate has already let us know that it intends to transfer a 10 percent stake to you at some point in the future."

"What? Why?"

Ves never heard of this! Neither Calsie, Gavin or Raymond informed him of this development!

"The Ylvainans are waiting for you to arrive at the Protectorate before approaching you with this matter. We believe that they are partially willing to

offer you to buyback some shares out of gratitude for what you have done to their people. Another reason for doing so is to secure your continued support for the Ylvainan Faith and its people."

That.. made a lot of sense, Ves considered. As the Bright Martyr, his products stimulated their faith like nothing else! The Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer mechs all proved that Ves possessed an exceptional connection to one of the objects of their worship!

Almost no one was able to channel the Great Prophet as him, let alone allow others to experience the notable figure's majesty through his mech designs!

"I guess another important talk is in store." Ves muttered with anticipation.

"In any case, are you content with our diminished amount of shares in your company?" Leland pressed. "It was very difficult for us to come to this decision. We gave up much in order to accommodate the Ylvainans and you. Many people within our government strongly opposed this sacrifice."

The deliberate use of the word 'sacrifice' was meant to make Ves believe that the government attempted to make amends for his kidnapping.

Though Ves still did not forgive the Bright Republic for allowing this scheme to happen, Ves had to look past his private grievances this time.

It would not behoof him to blow up at Leland. He wouldn't be able to get anything out of it other than to worsen his already-tense relationship with the Bright Republic.

He had to admit that allowing the state to retain just 7 percent ownership in the company was a palatable outcome.

It was a bit too much than he was comfortable with, but not enough to surpass his tolerance.

Ves had already decided beforehand that he would never allow the state to retain possession of 21 percent of the outstanding shares of the LMC, let alone 26 percent!

The Bright Republic, which was led by many smart and wise officials, likely predicted his stance and moved to forestall his response.

Allowing them to keep 7 percent despite everything that happened was barely acceptable to Ves! At the very least, he didn't feel like quibbling over this matter.

Let the state hang on to these shares. As long as the Bright Republic possessed a meaningful stake in his company, it would still be in their best interest to protect the Larkinson Family and treat them right.

For the sake of Benjamin, Ark, Melinda and Raella Larkinson, Ves did not wish to break this protection.

This was especially important if the Komodo War ever spread to this region! He could not allow the Friday Coalition to pressure the Bright Republic in mistreating the Larkinsons who still stuck to the old ways!