

## Mech 1781

### Chapter 1781 Dictating Demands

Compared to the significance of the transfer in shares to the Ylvaine Protectorate and Ves, the matter of shares in the hands of the Larkinson Family was much more trivial to solve.

"The Larkinson Family owns 25 percent of the outstanding shares in the LMC." Ves summarized. "As you know, the inner turmoil in our family has led to an imminent split. A minority of Larkinsons are willing to follow me. The rest of the Larkinsons like my uncle and grandfather still have too many attachments to your state to start anew."

Leland looked amused. "I understand the nature of the problem. There is no agreement on how to split the shares between your side of the family and the other side of the family, is that it? There isn't any rule or existing framework that describes what must be done because your family never imagined that it would split."

The spy hit the nail on the head.

"Well, I just had a talk with my grandfather. It was not a good talk. The old family, as I call them, is being very presumptuous."

"I can imagine. They are Larkinsons. For all of their bravery and confidence in battle, they are not as adept in the delicate art of business and politics."

Of course, whether Ves shared this common flaw was still in question. While Ves was not as good as the likes of those born of higher station, he at least considered himself to be better in this regard than his mule-headed relatives!

"The point is that rather than dealing with them further, I might as well bring my requests to the government. I hope you can facilitate our family's impending separation and manage the transfer of assets in our stead."

Leland paused for a moment and looked at him in the eyes.

"You wish to go over the heads of your relatives who aren't inclined to follow you? That is.. not a proper course of action, if I may say so. No matter what you think about them, they are still your family. We know that matters a lot to Larkinsons like you. I advise you to reconsider and seek a more amicable settlement with your relatives."

Ves shook his head. He refused the advice out of hand.

"Our relations have deteriorated too far for us to have any amiability left between us. I don't have any patience left to deal with their obstinance and presumptiveness. Now, is the state willing to enforce a settlement or not? Tell me now so that I know I shouldn't waste my time any further."

"Oh, I am sure we can manage something as long as it is in the purview of our state." Leland immediately replied, though he showed a bit of hesitation. "Both the LMC and the Larkinson Family are within our jurisdiction, though our effective control only extends to the borders of our state. A matter like this is well within our means. However, just because we can, doesn't mean we should. Do you really want to deal with the other side of your family in this fashion?"

"I'm sure." Ves curtly affirmed.

"What is it you wish to impose on the family?"

Ves took a deep breath.

"Our Larkinson Family will split up. This is inevitable and I don't object to this in principle. There are two important points of contention. First is the right to draw on our heritage and continue to call ourselves Larkinsons. The old family wants to deprive the new family of this right. Suffice to say, I heavily disagree."

"This won't be a problem, Ves. I don't think the Larkinsons in the Bright Republic can even enforce such a demand. Our laws certainly won't, and the Ylvaine Protectorate is likewise unsympathetic."

"I know the conservative faction of the family." Ves spoke, recalling Ghanso's self-righteous words. "They'll kick and scream about this issue if they don't get their way. They are so stuck-up about their honor and the supposed risks we pose to their reputation that they'll never be willing to give any ground. Rather than deal with their whining, I just want your government to dictate once and for all that my side of the family is just as tied to the Larkinson heritage as their side!"

If the government itself put down its foot, how could the old family resist?

The very identity of the old family made them incapable of resisting the commands of the state!

Ves essentially took advantage of this weakness of the traditionalists. The only way to push back against this tyrannical imposition was to break the very tenets they swore to uphold!

He resisted the urge to laugh about how easy it was to outmaneuver his own family.

This just showed how badly the Larkinsons needed to move on and change with the times!

"What else do you require our assistance with, Ves?"

"The second point of contention is how to split up the shares in the LMC that the formerly-united Larkinson Family once held. The old family wants the lion's share of the stock, which is wholly unacceptable for me. Their reasons are contradictory and their motives are hypocritical. Since they're incapable of negotiating in good faith, I'll do it for them. Though their tone is presumptuous, I'm not unsympathetic to their reasoning. I can be generous if I want to be. I'll leave them with.. 1 percent ownership for old times' sake."

"That.. sounds rather small." Leland commented. "This means your side of the family will take 24 percent of the outstanding shares. Doesn't this sound a bit too lopsided to you?"

Ves grinned. "The Larkinsons never invested in my company until it was already up and running! I only agreed to bestow them with a fourth of the company because they offered to stand up to me! Even though I knew it was a bad deal, I still accepted it because they were family! Well, you know what happened next."

Since Venerable Ghanso Larkinson himself stabbed him in the back, Ves already possessed the right to tear his covenant with the family!

"I won't comment on the contentions within your family. If you truly wish to proceed with this distribution, then we will do our best to facilitate this outcome." Leland carefully responded.

"Good. I expect nothing less from the state who has the old family at their mercy."

"Please don't misrepresent our state due to the actions of the few. No matter what you believe, our state still acts according to our laws. We would never engage in arbitrary meddling."

Ves couldn't help but chuckle. The cynicism within him infused his laughter with resignation.

"What happened to me must have happened to countless Brighters over the years. My respect for my home state is completely gone now, and it's all your fault. You made me like this. If you guys haven't acted duplicitous to me and simply uphold your end of our deals, I wouldn't have been forced to relocate to the Protectorate!"

"You are making a mistake. The Bright Republic is not a single entity, and our government is not a monolithic whole. Our state would be a tyranny if we do

not allow for a diversity of interests, opinions and representation to have a say in its running! It is unfortunate that our commitment to sharing and delegating power has led to an instance of abuse. We promise you that we will make sure this will never happen again!"

"Oh, you'll meet your promise alright, because I'll never be in the position for the Bright Republic to take advantage of me again!" He shouted before abruptly calming himself. "I should thank you, actually. Your state has opened my eyes to the true nature of people and power. If I hadn't learned this very painful lesson, then I might have continued to be blind to threats from this direction!"

Leland truly looked perplexed this time, though Ves was certain the spy was still meticulously controlling his expressions.

"Ves.. we are not your enemy."

"Not now, and only because you guys are remorseful for what you've done."

"Again, General Cavendish does not represent the rest of the government."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Bla bla bla. Whatever. I've already conveyed my main requests. I don't have any further demands. The old family can keep the rest for all I care. Now, will the government meet my request or not? I want it done quickly if possible."

"I.." Leland paused as he seemed to listen to instructions passed through another channel. "I can assure you that the Bright Republic will meet your requests as fast as possible. We will get in touch with the representatives of both sides of the Larkinson Family and facilitate an accelerated settlement along the lines of your requests. There will be no problem in making the 'old family' accept our terms."

It was as if this was already a done deal!

This was exactly the reason why Ves skipped negotiation with his grandfather in favor of approaching the government.

Sure enough, as long as it was worth its time, the state was more than willing to intervene!

Performing this favor would do much to lesson Ves' animosity towards his home state. This in turn allowed the Bright Republic to feel more confident that it could maintain hold of the 7 percent ownership in the LMC.

The politicians and bureaucrats weren't stupid. They studied Ves and his possible growth trajectories in great detail and knew that he was definitely meant for greater things!

Even if he failed to advance to Master in his timeline, as a Senior he would already be one of the most impressive mech designers of his rank!

If the insanely wild success of the Desolate Soldier and the immense impact of the Deliverer were any indications, the LMC in a decade might grow to become a behemoth that spanned several star sectors!

With such bright prospects on the horizon, how could the Bright Republic ever allow itself to miss out on the party?

For this reason, the state should be just as eager as the Ylvaine Protectorate to maintain hold of some of the shares in his mech company!

Ves knew what the Bright Republic was thinking. He could accept their desire to cling to the LMC. As long as they didn't mess with the Larkinsons who continued to support the state out of misguided loyalty, then Ves could fully put down his worries and set his sights higher.

After discussing some lesser matters such as the future of the LMC's presence in the Bright Republic, Ves and the government of the Bright Republic finally forged a new understanding.

Through Leland, Ves conveyed all of his wishes, and the government almost bent over backwards in order to meet his needs!

It felt good to hold upper hand in a negotiation this time. Ves couldn't help but crack a smile as he considered the absurdity of imposing his demands on a powerful state!

An ordinary Journeyman would have never been able to make the government sit down and talk like this! Perhaps not even a Senior commanded as much respect!

The major difference between him and his fellow colleagues was the strength he possessed and the successes he accomplished.

Reality-defying mechs like the Desolate Soldier and the Deliverer served as the basis for his power!

As long as he remained an exceptional mech designer whose products were enormously influential, Ves would continue to be treated with care and respect!

Naturally, this also served a warning that he should never slack off and grow complacent. A continuous decline or an abrupt fall from grace would topple everything he built and strip him of the power he wielded with relish today!

Ves was not a politician. He was not a head of state, nor was he adept at leadership.

He was a mech designer. Everything he earned and everything he deserved rested on the basis of his ability to design fantastic mechs.

He had to continue to progress! Spending too much time on these distracting matters would only weaken him over time!

To a mech designer, designing mechs always came first!

The Stellar Chaser, Serendipity, Frozen Leaf, Scarlet Rose and Terrinac silently cut through the higher dimensions with utmost stability.

As second-class ships, their FTL drives were rated to withstand much greater gravitic instability.

Even the Scarlet Rose's unaddressed battle damage and recent lack of maintenance did not hinder the operation of her FTL drive too much. The prize crew dispatched by the Wodins expertly performed spot repairs and temporarily addressed many of the faults that had started to appear.

During these days, Ves spent a lot of time communicating with his allies, partners and subordinates.

Now that he was with the Hexers, he no longer held any scruples towards accessing the galactic net!

He had been out of touch for a long time. Too much had changed, forcing him to devote all of his time to getting up to speed and arranging some urgent decisions.

In the meantime Bright Republic approached the two sides of the Larkinson Family, which fell outside most people's expectations.

The Larkinsons became even more shocked when the Bright Republic essentially imposed Ves' demands. The state did not even bother to appear impartial this time!

The government's actions chilled many people, especially the Venerable Ghanso and the traditionalists within the family.

They did not expect the state they served for all these centuries to favor their side. However, the conservative faction at least assumed the government would stay out of their internal dispute or at least advocate for a middle ground.



For the Bright Republic to disregard centuries of loyal service by countless Larkinsons in order to favor an upstart was a big blow to their beliefs!

Benjamin Larkinson and Colonel Ark Larkinson all stood helpless as the executive and legislative branches of the government both colluded to push forward Ves Larkinson's will.

The bright senate even passed a law overnight to enforce the terms originally proposed by Ves! From this, every Larkinson gained a very shocking understanding how much power the only mech designer in the family really wielded!

To be able to convince the state to move on his behalf was a terrible ability!

Though the conservative faction regretted some of its actions enormously, most ordinary Larkinsons among the neutrals did not really think they paid a price.

What did it matter if Ves and his followers got to keep the Larkinson name? Soon enough, the division between the old family and the new family would become very clear.

The old family's insistence on monopolizing the family name was nothing more than a matter of honor. They wanted to preserve their heritage and be able to call themselves the most authentic line of Larkinsons descended from the Larkinson Ancestor.

Losing this monopoly did not really impact the material interests of the old family.

As for losing 24 percent of their stake in the Living Mech Corporation, why should the old family complain? They originally railed against Ves and his emphasis on increasing their prosperity. Why should the true Larkinsons be greedy for money they never depended upon?

The Larkinson Family survived and thrived without relying on excessive for over four centuries! The old family would just return to the old status quo after losing most of its shares in the LMC.

In fact, they were still better off than before because Ves at least left them with 1 percent of outstanding shares!

Compared to the 24 percent bestowed to the new family, this was an extremely paltry prize.

Only a handful of shrewd or business-minded Larkinsons comprehended the true value of these remaining shares. Their value was already formidable, but they would continue to grow in value as long as Ves did not meet with calamity!

This last kindness from Ves was enough to placate Benjamin and Ark Larkinson. Under their lead, the neutral faction did not show any objection to the Bright Republic's intervention.

The lack of support from the rest of the family robbed the conservative faction of any chance to resist the changes.

As the state's intervention forcefully ended the turmoil within the Larkinson Family, Ves already took the next steps and busied himself by organizing his kingdom.

The LMC, the Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans, the Larkinson Exobiology Institute, The Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels all exhibited some disarray after their hasty relocation from Cloudy Curtain. Each of them lacked direction because Ves neglected to flesh out the next steps in his contingency plan!

Though Ves tired of the tedious discussions and arduous decision-making, he slowly reintegrated into his old place in the center of his expansive network!

Even the Battle Criers finally returned from their months-long excursion to parts unknown! Ves' eyes lit up when he heard from Commander Cinnabar!

He issued a lot of errands to his band of former Kinner mercenaries. Now that they returned, Ves looked forward to harvesting their gains!

"Good job, Commander Cinnabar. Did you lose any men along the way?"

"We went through a few scrapes and lost a couple of men." The bearded Kinner grimly responded. "We avoided battle whenever possible, but the Sand War has destabilized the surrounding regions. Many pirates, criminals and other trouble makers have taken advantage of the lack of patrols to threaten trade convoys and refugee fleets. Some of them were even crazy enough to attack my mercenaries!"

"Oh. Those are good Kinner men we lost. Let's talk about how to replenish your ranks later when I arrive at Kesseling VIII, okay?"

This was a fairly delicate issue as the Battle Criers predominantly consisted of loyal Kinner bondsmen. While Ves was not averse to adding a few non-Kinners to their ranks like Dietrich Krotz, he wanted to maintain absolute trust in his second-most important mech troop.

To maintain his confidence, Ves seriously contemplated buying additional bondsmen from the Kinner Tribe.

With his reputation and prestige, there was no need for him to venture back to the Kinner Tribe to pick up his new human products. He could just leave the matter to Gavin and have him contact one of the Tribe's agents to arrange a shipment or something.

Aside from reconnecting with the Battle Criers, Ves received another surprise when he finally talked with a representative of the Ylvaine Protectorate.

What Leland told him turned out to be true. The Protectorate's attitude towards him was filled with gratitude and worship!

In return for all he had done for the Ylvainans as their blessed Bright Martyr, the Ylvainan government gifted him with 10 percent of the shares in the LMC! The paperwork was already done and the shares all came under his name!

Ves was inordinately pleased that the Ylvainans bestowed these shares to him without any strings attached. They truly treated him with sincerity this time!

Now that he essentially controlled 59 percent of the LMC, Ves finally felt he was truly in control of his own destiny.

The arrangements imposed by the Bright Republic's Ministry of Economy Development had finally been undone!

Now that Ves almost completely cut himself off from his home state, this artificial solution to restrict the power he wielded in his company had become completely meaningless!

As the Bright Martyr who contributed immensely to the Ylvainan people, the three leading dynasties did not dare to push for a similar arrangement!

Ves felt pretty good about this outcome. After all of the recent stock transfers, the new ownership structure of his company had been set.

The Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate owned 7 percent and 9 percent respectively.

This turned them into minority shareholders with virtually no say in the running of the company. Ves did not have to pay attention to their opinions at all!

The second-largest shareholder after Ves was the new family. With a whopping 24 percent stake in the LMC, they became a shareholder who Ves could not easily dismiss!

"Luckily, the new family is completely in my grasp! Those shares are as good as mine!" Ves exulted.

Yes! Ves essentially controlled the branch of the Larkinsons that left the Bright Republic, which meant that he could do anything with the shares, including transferring them back in his own possession!

He did not wish to do so, though. Those shares served as a foundation for the new family's commitment to the LMC and himself. If Ves selfishly took away those shares, what assets did the new family have left? They would have to directly depend on his charity to survive!

"I can't hog all of the benefits for myself." He judged. "Not if I want to continue to borrow from the strength of my relatives."

Though Ves felt tempted to buy back at least half or more of the shares in the possession of the new family, he restrained himself.

While a 24 percent stake sounded way too extravagant in relation to its current and future value, Ves knew he couldn't do everything alone.

He needed to follow the ways of other power players and cultivate his own power base.

Of all of the choices available to him, relying on his own family was the best choice. Many other influences made the same decision because sharing the same blood offered an extra way to tie people together!

The Larkinson Family, the Tovar Family, the Kronon Dynasty, the Gauge Dynasty, the Wodin Dynasty and so on were all examples of powerful groups who managed to maintain high cohesion. This allowed them to withstand the test of time and thrive for centuries where many other groups had fallen!

Of course, that was not to say that relying on family was without flaws. Nepotism and decadence often infected the families that forgot the drive that propelled them to success.

If Ves wanted to keep the new family useful, he needed to govern it with a firm hand! He could not afford the Larkinsons under his lead to grow fat and lazy!

He needed to employ both the carrot and stick to motivate the Larkinsons. Those shares formed a very attractive carrot. As long as he dangled it in front of their faces, they would do anything to earn their reward!

He contemplated various changes to the new family in order to hone their drive and compel them into dedicating their lives to him. All of this was very complicated and would likely provoke an intense reaction from his relatives.

"I should discuss this carefully with the elders of the new family."

In order to restructure the new family, Ves needed the involvement of other respectable Larkinsons such as Clinton Larkinson and Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

If he just imposed his new structure onto the Larkinsons without bothering to listen to anyone else, then Ves would quickly lose support!

Just because he appointed himself as the leader of the new family didn't mean he could rule it with impunity!

Ves understood that he still needed to keep his approval levels high and avoid crossing the bottom line of his relatives.

He scowled for a moment. "The larger the organization, the harder it is to retain control. I can't run everything by myself."

This made it all the more important to reimagine the new family and guide them towards a new identity.

The new family was no longer the Larkinson Family of before! It had already diverged from its original direction. Now Ves had to finish the realignment and point the forward for his splinter group!

He smiled. He already formed some promising ideas during his time aboard the Scarlet Rose. All of the time he spent in thought culminated in a blueprint for his interpretation of the Larkinson Family.

In other words, Ves had formed a grand design of the new family!

"Within five to ten years, the new family will chart its own course! Aside from some shared values, its trajectory will no longer intersect with the old family!"

Brothers and sisters must eventually leave the shelter of their own parents and find their own path in life!

If Ves had his way, the new family would turn into an entity that could fully keep up with his development, including his transition towards adopting second-class mechs!

#### Chapter 1783 Doggy

It took less time than he thought to get his organizations back in order.

The people he put in charge such as Raymond and Melkor weren't incompent. Even if they failed to get a handle on the situation, they still had each other to call for help.

In addition, most of the uncertainties plaguing the LMC and other organizations came from an inability to set a new direction. None of Ves' deputies wanted to commit to far-reaching decisions without his input.

What if Ves never intended to settle on Kesseling VIII? Investing in an extravagant headquarters on the Ylvainan planet would be an expensive mistake!

Therefore, Ves only had to spend enough time to settle these major issues. After that, he could leave the rest to his capable subordinates.

Calsie and Gavin proved to be very helpful in supervising his men. They acted as his agents and made sure that everyone followed his will.

Since everything started running smoothly, Ves took a step back and put his trust in his subordinates. Now that they received some direction, he didn't need to step in any longer.

During his stay on the Stellar Chaser, Ves occasionally met with Gloriana during mealtime and in the evening. His girlfriend was very occupied these days, forcing her to work by herself.

She never really explained her burdens to him in detail. She just brushed the matter off as makework and chores, but Ves didn't think it was so simple.

Unfortunately, Gloriana was too strong-minded to let him help.

"You should take care of your own business, Ves." She said while they were relaxing in the lounge compartment. "I'm a big girl, you know. I can take care of myself. It's just a bit of work. I won't be able to accompany you in designing another mech for some time."

Her rosy scent wafted over his nose like poison, lulling him in a state of fascination. He dearly missed her presence during his time of captivity and couldn't get enough of Gloriana's company!

"How long will you be preoccupied?" Ves asked.

If Gloriana became indisposed, Ves would lose the advantage that their collaboration brought. Not only would he lose out on her specialty, but he would also lack the synergy that gave his designs an extra edge!



"It depends. Don't worry. There aren't any urgent design projects on the agenda, right? The Ylvaine Protectorate is in a decent shape these days. The Deliverer is already doing great work in repelling the sandmen."

"That will only last until the sandman race evolves their fleets yet again." Ves cautioned. "They've already changed their methods several times over the course of the Sand War. What if they stop forming sandman swarms and instead rely completely on monolith configurations?"

This was a very valid worry that weighed on everyone's minds. The sandmen may not be particularly smart or quick in their thinking, but they weren't averse to change!

Once the sandmen switch gears and render the Deliverer's Ylvaine-blessed abilities irrelevant, how could his latest mech design play a meaningful role?

There was no need for accuracy or guidance to land a hit on a humongous, capital ship-sized monolith! Even the worst mech pilot could hit the broad side of a barn!

"The possibility does exist." Gloriana conceded. "Yet the Sandman Emperor is dead now. Without their highest direction, are they still as capable?"

"Who knows if they will appoint a new sandman leader to the position."

In truth, Ves knew that Sigrund was the true mastermind behind the suicidal sandman invasion. The Sand War had raged long enough and plenty of changes had occurred.

There was no way Sigrund seriously banked on the sandmen to wipe out every human in the Komodo Star Sector.

Even if this highly unlikely outcome took place, there was no way the CFA and MTA would ignore this supposedly weak alien race any longer!

No alien race massacred trillions of humans and got away with it! The dignity of the human race must still be maintained!

His intuition told him that whatever Sigrund was up to, he might have gotten what he wanted at this time. There was no need for the hybrid AI to strengthen the sandmen any further, especially because his actions had already started to touch Ves' bottom line!

Ves sighed and leaned against Gloriana's body. "We'll just see what happens. I'm not the only mech designer who contributed to the war effort, and the states under siege aren't princesses who only need saving. Our existing designs are more than adequate to handle any further challenges."

The Soldier product line still served a very prominent role in bolstering the states engulfed in the Sand War.

The handful of news articles he browsed when he wanted to catch up with current affairs even attributed the continued survival of several states to the spread of the Desolate Soldier!

One of the most prominent examples was the Reinald Republic, which has lost over half of its territory and population to the sandmen!

Though the state suffered enormously, many Reinaldians still managed to live with the help of his products!

Ves felt rather mixed about this outcome. He had no love for the Reinald Republic and would not shed a tear if it fell. For him to contribute materially to the survival of this half-rotten did not make him proud at all! Even now, they were probably attempting to pirate his designs!

Still, as much as he resented Reinald, the state had to survive, or else the other beleaguered states would fall.

"It's a shame you don't have the time to work on a project with me." He sighed. "I was planning on embarking on a new and revolutionary design project, but I guess I'll have to wait until you are free."

"Oh?" Gloriana raised her eyebrow. "What strange idea do you have now?"

"I was partially inspired by Aisling Curver's design philosophy. When I read some of the books and notes she left behind, I gained some inspiration from her research direction. Studying the four bodyguard mechs I've adapted into battle bots has given me even more ideas on how I should make use of this idea. It's quite radical, and I don't think there is anything like it in the existing mech industry!"

While Ves revealed some of his intentions, he didn't notice Gloriana dropping her smile and glowering when he mentioned Lady Curver's name.

The fact that his latest inspiration came from the woman who attempted to steal her precious boyfriend was a huge affront!

She clutched his shirt with an iron grip. "Enough! Is your kidnapper your only source of inspiration?!"

"You'll love it when I'm ready to explain it. Even I can't imagine I would ever come up with such a revolutionary new idea if not for this turn of events! I have to thank Aisling for pointing out this direction for me. If not for all of the help she inadvertently provided to me, my next mech design would never be as innovative!"

"VES! SHUT UP!"

Gloriana grabbed him by the collar and attempted to shake his upper body back and forth!

Unfortunately, his augmented physique turned him into a solid brick! There was no way her feeble arms could shake his body!

It was at this time that Ves finally realized the mistake he made. He got so caught up in his fantastic new design concept that he overlooked the impact of his words to his girlfriend!

"Stop, please. Calm down!"

After grabbing hold of Gloriana's arms and forcing her to stillness, Ves pressed his forehead against her own while looking intimately in her eyes.

"Inspiration can come from many sources. I know you don't like Aisling. I hate her as well. Yet that does not hinder me from taking advantage of my exposure to her and her specialty. We're mech designers. We should grab any chance to progress our design philosophies further, whether it comes from friends or foes. Understand?"

As a mech designer herself, she knew that Ves had a point. She subsided a bit. "Sorry, Ves. You're right. I don't want you to give up a way to improve just because I don't like the source of your inspiration."

"It's the same as if I held an exchange with a peer. By exchanging our views and learning from each other's methods, we can always crystallize radical new design possibilities."

Though the tension between them hadn't entirely dissipated, both of them missed each other too much to allow a minor spat to get in the way of their reunion.

It was as if they entered a honeymoon period. Each time they met each other, they ignored everything else and blissfully enjoyed each other's company.

Not everyone was happy with their silly moments together.

Dr. Ranya Wodin, who opted to stay aboard the Stellar Chaser in order to supervise Ves' recovery, faked a gag when she saw the lovebirds embrace each other for a kiss.

"Can't I enjoy my breakfast in peace?!" She slammed her fork against the table. "The two of you have been acting like love drunk idiots all morning now! Mr. Larkinson, don't you think you are being presumptuous against a Hexer? And Gloriana, have you forgotten your station?!"

Though Ves quickly withdrew as if chastened, Gloriana dragged him back and leaned on his arm and shoulder.

"Don't be so serious, Ranya." Gloriana smiled teasingly at her cousin. "Ves isn't like the other boys. Besides, this is my ship. I get to do anything I want here! You're not my mother!"

"I think your mother would be disgusted by how you are fawning over a mixed breed."

"As long as my doggy can bite, who cares about his breed? The other puppies from the Hegemony are more known for their bark than bite!"

"Not every dog from the Hegemony is useless, Gloriana. Your older brother is a prime example of that! There are more boys like him out there! I can introduce you to some if you want!"

"No thanks. Ves is perfect enough as it is. You just don't know it yet!"

Ves raised his hand. "Uhm, I'm a cat person."

"I know." Gloriana giggled. "It's just a figure of speech, Ves."

"It seems I will need to accelerate your treatment schedule." Ranya muttered and turned her attention away from the two divergent lovers.

They were too different! In Ranya's eyes, there was hardly any for them to be together! Gloriana was way out of this Brighter's league as far as she was concerned.

In fact, the Wodin Dynasty shouldn't have tolerated their relationship in the first place! How Gloriana managed to convince her famously strict mother to remain with Ves was a mystery.

After this small incident, Ranya promptly dragged Ves to the ship's infirmary and forced him to undergo numerous examinations and treatments.

Even if not enough time had passed for the next round to begin, Ranya still wanted to make Ves suffer!

"Ahh!" He screamed as an awfully long needle poked his buttocks! "Didn't you swear some kind of oath!?"

"I'm merely doing what is best for you." Ranya grinned as she brushed aside her odd green hair from her face. "Besides, didn't you originally invite me to perform an implantation surgery? I need to study the properties of your physical body in great detail to ensure it goes smoothly! With the sheer number of abnormalities in your body and genes, installing a cranial implant is anything but simple! The further you are from a baseline human, the harder it is to perform operations on you. Didn't anyone teach you this lesson?"

Ves was already aware of this to some extent, but he didn't know it added to the difficulty of installing implants.

"You know about the Archimedes Rubal implant, right?"

"Gloriana informed me. One of the exobiologists in your employ sent me the relevant data." Ranya notified. "It's a very sophisticated implant. Even if it's outdated, it is still very useful! I'm surprised you managed to stumble upon this relic."

"You'd be surprised what kind of treasures you can pick up from the frontier."

Ranya scoffed. "From the looks of it, you belong there."

Though Dr. Ranya hadn't warmed up to Ves at all, he wasn't concerned.

Gloriana was insanely protective of him. Now that she got him back, she turned into a veritable mother hen!

Though Ves was touched by her concern, he knew he needed to stand up for himself! How could he continue to rely on her girlfriend for protection?

The Glory Battalion wasn't under her control. Madame Constance Wodin was the true individual in charge.

Ves felt as if he had inadvertently been caught in the web of this woman's own design. The only problem was that he didn't know what Gloriana's mother thought about him. Was she disdainful towards him like other Hexers? Was she just allowing Gloriana to indulge in her latest fancy in order to mature her personality?

Whatever the case, he doubted that Madame Constance was sympathetic towards him. In the words of the Hexers, he was a mixed breed, a mangy mutt whose filthy paws muddied Gloriana's shoes.

His stay aboard the Stellar Chaser fully allowed him to experience the treatment he could expect if he traveled to the Hexadric Hegemony.

Every woman, even the lowliest ship rating, plainly looked down on him because of his gender!

Ves did not consider himself to be a vain person. He did not insist on earning everyone's respect. What did it matter if some strangers despised him for some inane reason?

Yet this was different. The constant denigration and casual dismissal towards the male gender did not reach the level of abuse, but came very close to it! Ves truly started to chafe at the prejudices expressed by Gloriana's crew!

These experiences made him even more determined to avoid the Hexadric Hegemony like the plague! There was no way he would ever be able to hold himself together if he visited Gloriana's state!

"I'll kill myself if I have to endure this nonsense on a daily basis!"

From his occasional interactions with Hexers who weren't Gloriana, Ves gained a very visceral understanding on their perspective on boys.

The very fact they refused to call any human of the opposite gender a man spoke for itself.

For their entire lives, the Hexers had been taught to look at males as inferiors!

Boys were immature. Boys were incapable of controlling themselves. Boys became naughty if left to their own devices.

All of these underlying assumptions had been baked so thoroughly in Hexer culture that none of the Hexers questioned their beliefs!

Even the male ship ratings did not show any dissatisfaction at being treated in such a poor fashion!

For them, the worst thing that could happen is to be seen as incapable!

Ves noted that every Hexer male yearned for validation. Nothing made them happier than when their female superiors complimented them for 'being a good boy'!

As Ves wasn't a prisoner, he casually strolled the sections of the Stellar Chaser. Everywhere there were people, he continually witnessed this degrading treatment towards the hapless Hexer males.

Even older males who developed numerous skills and competences over their careers were regarded as boys by female officers who were young enough to be their grandchildren!



Witnessing all of these travesties made Ves sick. He dreaded the infamous Hegemony even more.

He swore to himself that even if Madame Constance Wodin summoned him directly, he would do everything to run away!

Not even Gloriana's pleadings would deter him from avoiding her home state! Ves instinctively knew that if he ever dropped into the murky pool of the Hegemony, he would definitely drown!

At this time, Ves finally encountered a male Hexer who was a little different from the spineless males who served as low-level crew members on Gloriana's ship.

As soon as the small fleet of Hexer vessels emerged from FTL, the Hexers carefully scanned their surroundings as their FTL drives started cycling.

The expert pilot who rescued him from the Fridaymen finally gained the opportunity to visit the Stellar Dancer.

Gloriana practically snatched his collar and dragged him all the way down to the shuttle bay in order to meet his savior.

In addition, Dr. Ranya dropped by as well, but she didn't appear as ecstatic.

Obviously, Gloriana possessed a lot of affection for her brother! Ves half-expected that the stiff and powerful Wodins exhibited frequent internal competition.

Perhaps he wasn't wrong, but it didn't appear to apply in this case.

His girlfriend happily bounced on her feet as she waited for the arrival of the shuttle.

"What's your brother like?"

"Brutus is my closest brother." She replied. "He's the closest to my age in my family. My other brothers and sisters are a lot older than us, so I never played with them a lot. They were so busy with school or work that they weren't home very often."

"Is he like the other 'boys' in your state?"

"Of course not, Ves!" She slapped his arm. "Not every boy is the same. There are differences between females. Why can't there be differences between males?"

"What makes your brother different?"

"He's of higher birth, for once." She answered. "While our Wodin Dynasty isn't as powerful as the six matriarchal dynasties, anyone born in our family is destined to become remarkable! Just because Brutus is a boy doesn't mean he's allowed to shame our bloodline."

"Seeing that he's not only a mech pilot, but also an expert pilot, I'd say he's pretty successful in that. The Wodins must be proud of him.. right?"

Gloriana smiled with pride. "Every expert pilot is useful, regardless if they are boys or women. We don't look down on male expert pilots if that's what you are thinking. Brutus has proven himself. He even took upon himself to be my protector!"

The amused twinkle in her eyes signified that she didn't take Brutus seriously in that regard!

Anyone would be glad to obtain the protection of an expert pilot, but Gloriana still considered Brutus to be her childhood playmate!

Ves mentally shook his head. He heard enough. He still didn't entirely understand how males were treated by female Hexers. A male expert pilot

evidently enjoyed some actual respect, but it wasn't enough to turn them into equals.

The shuttle finally arrived. Ves studied the shuttle carefully and noted that it was a vastly superior model from other second-class shuttles. Though its acceleration and maneuverability was not much better, its armor and protective measures were on a different level!

Once the craft landed on the deck, the hatch opened up, revealing a single man in the blue-and-gold uniform of Glory Battalion.

Compared to the other mech pilots of the Glory Battalion, the newcomer's uniform was decked with various decorations. Some of them immediately made it clear that he was an expert pilot!

In truth, Ves did not need to read these markings to realize that the man was an expert pilot.

A strong, protective will radiated from the male Hexer's mind like a bonfire in the night. The entire shuttle hangar became charged in a faint, invisible embrace.

This was Venerable Brutus Wodin, the famous fifth offspring of Constance Wodin!

He was several years older than Gloriana, but already exuded the spiritual strength of a seasoned expert pilot!

His tall body and balanced physique immediately made it clear that he was a professional soldier. His strong, measured strides conveyed both strength and control.

Ves was very familiar with this kind of cadence. He had heard it from enough Larkinsons to get a better sense of Glorian's brother.

As soon as Brutus came near, Gloriana instantly left her boyfriend's side and threw himself onto her brother!

"Brutus! Welcome back!"

The expert pilot's serious face cracked into a smile. "I was only gone for a few days, sister."

"Hehe, I know. It's not about us this time. Let me introduce you to Ves!"

Gloriana cheerfully grasped her brother's arm and dragged him over to Ves. Even though her strength paled in comparison to her much bigger brother, Brutus never showed a hint of resistance!

"Ves. Meet Venerable Brutus Wodin. Brutus, meet Ves Larkinson."

For Gloriana's sake, Ves pushed down his skepticism and offered to shake Brutus' hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Venerable Brutus. Thank you for coming to the rescue a few days ago. I appreciate your aid."

Brutus stopped smiling as he turned away from his sister. His lips curled into a faint sneer. He stared at the offered hand as if it was covered in mud.

Before this moment grew more tense, Gloriana forcefully intervened. She used her continued hold on her brother's sleeve to force his hand to accept the handshake.

She clasped both hands and vigorously shook them up and down.

"Brutus! Be serious!"

Her brother was less than enthused about this meeting, that was clear to Ves. Just like Ranya, Brutus looked down on him. Changing his opinion would be an uphill battle.

"Eh, let's head up for a drink!" Gloriana suggested.

Under her lead, the two males followed her up to the lounge. Ranya followed them as well and casually chatted with Gloriana.

In the meantime, Ves walked alongside Brutus. He became unnerved when the expert pilot scrutinized him like a potential threat.

This became clear when Brutus unconsciously applied pressure on Ves with his force of will!

Ves was no vegetable. While he did not actively push back, he nonetheless showed no discomfort.

He had seen his fair share of expert pilots, and Brutus was still too young to match the stronger ones!

As excellent as he appeared, he wasn't necessarily better than his uncle Ark or Venerable Relia Foster.

This silent game served as an excellent opportunity for Ves to get a sense of Brutus' personality and core conviction.

Every expert pilot developed a single dominant emotion or ideal to dedicate their lives towards. Ves experienced enough varieties to identify the direction of an expert pilot's focus.

He immediately noticed some differences from the likes of Venerable Foster. The Vesian expert pilot possessed an aggressive and domineering force of will. This turned her into an awful opponent against her enemies!

Ves expected Brutus to adopt a similar force of will, but it turned out that the Hexer expert pilot followed the opposite direction!

The force of will emanating from Brutus possessed a very protective component. Ves found it similar to Qilanxo and Jannzi Larkinson's flavors.

While their overall directions were similar, each of these protective individuals interpreted protectiveness in a slightly difficult fashion. These small

differences often resulted in drastic differences in their personalities and approach towards conflicts!

Qilanxo's protectiveness was tinged with motherly love. As an ancient Sacred God who lived for multiple centuries, she spawned many offspring, some of which grew up into formidable giant exobeasts! Her protectiveness towards her children had honed her spiritual character down to her very soul!

Jannzi on the other hand was not as old. She didn't possess the life experiences of her patron, nor did she have the experience of a mother.

However, she had the blood of a Larkinson flowing in her veins. As a Larkinson mech pilot, the call of duty was carved in her bones!

When she broke through to expert candidate, Jannzi inherited Qilanxo's protectiveness, but also put her own spin on it. She began to see herself as a guardian and a protector to those who were vulnerable!

From what he heard, Jannzi improved by leaps and bounds when she participated in the Sand War. There was hardly a higher calling than protecting entire planets worth of civilians from heartless alien threats!

What Ves sensed from Brutus was very similar to Jannzi. It was almost identical in that Brutus saw himself as a guardian.

There was a crucial difference, however. Whereas Jannzi dedicated herself to protecting people regardless if they were strangers, Brutus dedicated himself solely to protecting his family or loved ones!

Ves could tell because he noticed something remarkable! Brutus' force of will seemed to flow towards Gloriana and wrap her up into a protective blanket or shield!

Even Ranya received a spiritual blanket, though it was a bit weaker than the one around Gloriana!

## Chapter 1785 Brotherly Affection

Three Wodins and one Larkinson settled down at the lounge.

To the consternation of the Hexers, Gloriana chose to sit besides Ves and compel him to wrap his arm around her. Though they often sat together like this, how could her brother and cousin feel at ease when a grubby third-rater put his paw on an exalted Hexer?

Though Ves noticed their dissatisfaction, most of his attention was placed on the strange activity exhibited by Brutus' force of will.

He encountered several expert pilots over his lifetime. The most recent one besides Brutus was Venerable Ghanso, who possessed a very offense-oriented force of will.

Both Ghanso and Brutus appeared to be ranged mech specialists, but they adopted different convictions.

Ghanso's force of will mostly centered around himself. His offense-oriented force of will was an expression of his belief that defeating his enemies was the best way to do his duty!

His force of will mostly honed his aggression and strengthened his commitment to duty. Part of the reason why he obsessed so much about obeying authority and completing his mission was because these values formed the spiritual foundation of his force of will!

In contrast, despite specializing in an offensive mech, Brutus piloted mechs for a very different purpose.

His main priority was to protect his family or the people he cared about. As Ves carefully sampled the 'protective blanket' that Brutus unconsciously formed around Gloriana, he knew that the brotherly love the expert pilot held for his sister was incredibly strong!

Ves quickly realized that this kind of love and devotion surpassed most instances of affection between brothers and sisters!

When any expert pilot dedicated the essence of his will towards a cause, they formed a lifelong obsession around it. Their spirituality, their personality, their thoughts and their emotions had all gathered together to birth this force of will, and in turn the incredible might of an empowered will fed back to its originators and warped them further into its image!

In essence, when expert candidates and expert pilots formed their empowered wills, the latter essentially began to hypnotize the former!

When a force of will further contaminated the rest of the mind of an expert pilot, their mentality became more and more compatible with the force of will.

This was a mutually-reinforcing cycle and one of the ways for expert pilots to advance and grow in strength.

As long as an expert pilot dedicated himself further towards the pursuit he had chosen, he would be rewarded by increasing the foundation of his strength!

Just like Pavlov's dog, the positive feedback stimulated the expert pilot into dedicating himself further towards his conviction!

What did all of this mean? Expert pilots placed a very high emphasis on sticking to their values and acting according to their principles!

This made them incredibly stubborn whenever these core values and principles were involved. It was virtually impossible to change their minds on the matters that touched their hearts and wills the most!

So when Ves witnessed Venerable Brutus caring so much for Gloriana that his force of will freely enveloped her like a shield, he knew that he had no choice but to overcome this hurdle!



An overprotective brother was bad enough, but when this person also happened to be an expert pilot, Ves could not brush him aside like he planned to do with every other Hexer!

No matter what, Ves could not avoid this test!

Once Brutus opposed his relationship with Gloriana in earnest, how could Ves rest easy?

Even if Brutus was just a 'boy', he was still a Wodin and an expert pilot! His ill impression towards Ves would definitely affect the stance of the rest of the Wodin Dynasty!

On the other hand, if Ves managed to gain Brutus' approval, he would get a very powerful helper.

While winning Brutus over was not as good as winning over a female Hexer, at the very least his protectiveness towards his sister could be exploited for many ends!

Once Ves made these silent calculations in his mind, he suppressed any dissatisfaction towards Brutus. When his interests were at stake, what did it matter if Gloriana's brother was less than enthused?

The only complication was that Brutus' dislike towards Ves actually affected the operation of the protective blanket.

Even as Ves kept trying to make small talk, as long as Gloriana's body continued to press against his own, her protective blanket continued to prickle him! It was as if a thousand spiritual needles were pressing against his skin!

A normal human would have felt incredibly uncomfortable or even pained if they faced this manifestation of Venerable Brutus' force of will.

Fortunately, Ves was very experienced in spiritual matters and possessed a certain degree of strength in this aspect. The protective blanket may be

threatening, but it mainly attacked the minds of those Brutus regarded with hostility.

Ves was very confident in his mental strength. Compared to spiritual attacks he experienced in the past, this kind of pressure was not enough to shake his intentions!

His continued proximity to Gloriana began to annoy Brutus further. Perhaps he wasn't used to seeing that the pressure he exerted had failed to make a difference.

"Gloriana." He spoke up, directing his attention towards his loving sister. His previous frown turned into a gentle smile now that he faced his sister. "When will you return to the Hegemony? We have all been waiting for you to go back. There is no point in continuing to meddle in the Sand War when the Komodo War will soon reach its peak. Our home state needs you! Continuing to play in this impoverished region and remaining vulnerable to Fridayman predation is highly inadvisable!"

"I already told you, brother. I'm staying with Ves until we are ready to return! Right now, we are still in the middle of exploring our synergies and finding ways to strengthen our specialties! You're not a mech designer, Brutus! You don't know what it's like to finally find a mech designer who can enable my passion! Let me show you what we have done in the last year."

Gloriana enthusiastically activated a central projector and began to highlight all of their successful design projects, starting with the Desolate Soldier!

"Don't underestimate this work just because it's a third-class design. Underneath its plain exterior, this mech hides a lot of strengths! Let me explain it all to you..."

To his credit, Brutus sat calmly and listened to his sister in earnest. He showed faint surprise when Gloriana mentioned the Desolate Soldier's glow, but he quickly grew disinterested.

As an expert pilot of a powerful second-rate state, he had encountered plenty of mechs with strange and powerful features. The only notable part about the glows was that they seemed entirely unique!

Perhaps mundane mech pilots might be more appreciative towards glows, especially if they experienced their effects in person, but expert pilots were not so easily shaken.

Their strong conviction and their iron wills made them even less appreciative towards external means of influencing other people's emotions!

Gloriana did not take notice of Brutus' dismissal towards glows. She continued to ramble on about her many collaborations with Ves. From the Adonis Colossus to the Deliverer, she poured out her passion for her recent works with no reserve!

Against her boundless enthusiasm, Brutus slowly shifted his expression. As someone who loved his sister dearly, he could never dismiss all of her words.

By the time her rambling finally subsided, Brutus took a deep breath and looked at her sister in the eyes.

"Are you happy with this boy?"

"You already know the answer to this, brother!"

She emphasized her words by pressing on to Ves even deeper! The happiness that overflowed from her could not be faked!

"Why him? Why not a proper Hexer?"

"You know the answer to this as well. You know what I think about those other boys. Even if they're pretty, even if their breeding is impeccable, they're all

useless to me! In fact, some of them are even hindrances if I pair up with them! I have searched half the Hegemony and failed to find a single boy who pleases me! Why did you think I visited Centerpoint in the first place?!"

"And Ves here is your answer?"

"Brother. Please understand that I'm not only a Hexer, but also a mech designer. I will do anything to pursue my goals in mech design! Of all of the mech designers I've met, none of them can possibly help me fulfill my ambitions more than Ves! Without him, my chances of attaining my goals are poor. Now that I found a compatible partner, my chances have doubled or even tripled! I am absolutely certain that the two of us can achieve the wonders I've already dreamt about! I won't let alone, including you, spoil my opportunities!"

Brutus looked discomfited, and so did Ranya.

"Cousin.. aren't you moving too fast?" The exobiologist questioned. "How long has it been since you met with him? A year's time is not enough to make up your mind!"

The lovesick Hexer stubbornly shook her head. "It doesn't matter! My love for Ves is real, and so is my desire to collaborate with him! The two of us are made for each other! What does it matter if his breeding is poor? As a mech designer with as much potential as me, Ves can easily match or surpass all of the mech designers from the Hegemony! This is why I've already made a promise to my mother for him to prove himself. Just wait, in about two years time, he'll blow your minds with what he can accomplish with me at his side!"

Both Ranya and Brutus were already aware that Gloriana's desire to be with Ves was more than a casual attachment, but now that Ves was back, she expressed her obsession in full!

Her ferocity astounded her brother and her cousin!

In the face of such a strong attachment, Brutus could no longer dismiss his sister's fascination towards Ves as a momentary crush. He knew his sister well enough that she was always serious when she became this committed. He decided to change his tack.

"Sister, cousin, could you please leave me alone with Ves? I want to have a private talk with him. Please give us a moment to ourselves."

Gloriana glanced suspiciously at her brother. "You aren't going to scare him away from me, are you?"

"I only intend to talk."

"Okay." She said simply. "Come on, Ranya. Let's give the boys some space." She quickly left with Ranya but not before pecking Ves on the cheek.

"Brutus can be kind of scary on the outside, but he's a big softie inside!" She whispered in his ear! "Do your best to make nice with him! It would break my heart if the two of you can't get along!"

With that, the two women left the lounge, leaving Ves to face the expert pilot alone.

Of course, just because they were the only ones left did not mean their talks were private. The monitoring system doubtlessly kept a very close on them while recording all of their words.

Both of them knew that. THE reason why Brutus insisted on talking to Ves alone was because he wanted to speak frankly without encountering an instant pushback from her sister.

"So.." Ves trailed. "What is it you want to talk to me about?"

Brutus crossed his arms. "I don't know how you managed to do it, but you completely put my sister under your spell."

"I think you are mischaracterization her affection towards me. I didn't seduce her! She seduced me!" Ves retorted. "I never actively pursued a relationship with her from the start. Gloriana insisted on staying together with me, and eventually we learned we got along very well. We are made for each other!"

This only caused the expert pilot to narrow his eyes. "Just because my sister fancies you does not mean the two of you are soulmates!"

It was clear that Brutus still disapproved of Ves!

#### Chapter 1786 Shared Values

When Ranya and Gloriana left the compartment, the manifestation of Brutus' will no longer became constrained.

The protective blankets that his force of will draped around his family turned into a formless field that suffused the entire lounge with his pressure!

His intense protectiveness changed the very nature of the air around them, turning it into a domain where his will prevailed!

Of course, these tricks did not affect Ves the slightest. As a Journeyman, his mind was not as defenseless as other humans, and the oppression radiating from Brutus hardly affected his stability.

Though Ves did not actively fight back against the pressure, the fact that he managed to stay solid earned a rare bout of respect from the expert pilot.

This was enough for Brutus to look at Ves in a different manner.

He decided to be direct. "Let me ask you plainly, Larkinson. Do you love my sister?"

"I do." Ves replied. In order to express his sincerity, he opened his mind and focused towards all of the moments he shared with his girlfriend. "I love Gloriana. I love her company, her enthusiasm, her passion and her smile. I love her so much that I'm willing to become an enemy to the Friday Coalition! I

did not hesitate in resisting Lady Curver's unsolicited advances! In order to return to Gloriana, I killed dozens of the Fridaymen and stole one of their ships! Don't forget that I did this all by myself! Can you imagine the depths a mech designer like me will go to remain faithful to the love of my life?"

His argument appeared to sway Brutus a bit.

While he took some liberties with the truth, Ves was truly being sincere in his love towards Gloriana! His entire mind and body radiated the earnest feelings he cherished in his heart.

This outward expression made contact with Brutus' force of will, allowing him to vaguely sense that Ves was being entirely truthful.

Ves truly loved Gloriana! This was not in doubt!

From this, Brutus understood that Ves was not trying to take advantage of Gloriana. Plenty of third-raters tried to marry second-raters in order to improve their station in life. It was such a common occurrence that Brutus had already put Ves in this category beforehand.

Yet now that he met Ves in person, Brutus found out that his sister's relationship was much more intertwined than he thought.

He cared about his sister. It would have been easy if Ves was just scheming to take advantage of Gloriana and the Wodins. Yet if both Ves and Gloriana were sincere towards each other, then trying to break them apart would harm the later enormously!

Brutus knew his sister pretty well! How could he not know she was absolutely committed to this relationship?!

"I respect what you have accomplished." He conceded towards Ves. "For a third-rater, and a civilian no less, you managed to resist the Fridaymen, and did not show any hesitation in doing so. For that, you are a friend to our state."

Ves proudly straightened his back and patted his chest! "I'm a Larkinson. While our family is not as powerful as the Wodins, there is fire in my blood and honor in my bones! I will do anything to protect Gloriana!"

Surprisingly, this answer did not have the effect that Ves intended. Rather than earn Brutus' respect, the expert pilot became more grave.

Ves immediately sensed the change became the oppression from Brutus' force of will increased!

"I worry about your influence on my sister." Brutus said while boring his eyes at Ves. "You aren't born a Hexer. You are a stranger to our beliefs and our customs. The number six is meaningless to you. You don't respect women as much as genuine Hexers. Above all, you have never been tamed!"

If proper Hexer boys could be likened to well-behaved dogs, then Ves was a feral mutt who was liable to hit any hand that attempted to feed him! Such a rabid dog ought to be wiped out before he could do more damage!

Ves realized his mistake. Hexers respected ferocity, but only from women!

This was because the Hexers believed in the myth that women were smarter, wiser and more in control of themselves!

A ferocious woman was a good thing, because she could be trusted to channel her energy productively.

A ferocious boy was a bad thing, because boys were too impulsive and immature to take the greater picture into account!

The more Ves portrayed himself as a strong and assertive man, the more Hexers believed he was a deadly beast who could lose control at any time!

Still, now that he had uttered his words, he could hardly take them back. Ves had been largely sincere up to now, so if he became less honest, Brutus would definitely be able to tell the difference somehow!



"Gloriana is a great mech designer, but she can't design the mechs she wants alone." Ves changed the subject.

"I don't believe that." Brutus crossed his arms and rejected his assertion.

"There are so many mech designers that there are doubtlessly more mech designers who can benefit her as well. Even if it turns out you are the only mech designer in the Komodo Star Sector who compliments her well, she can always find someone better from another star sector! There are a myriad of star sectors to choose from, and I don't believe there is no one in the entire galaxy who can fit her better than you! Even if there is no one suitable in the Milky Way Galaxy, then I will not hesitate to find a way to bring her to the Red Ocean to continue our search!"

"You Hexers aren't exactly popular outside your own state. No offense, Venerable Brutus, but many capable male mech designers who come close to meeting her standards will likely turn away once they learn about the Hexadric Hegemony!"

That caused Brutus to scrutinize Ves even more. "It sounds like you are sympathetic to them rather than to us. What is your stance on Hexers?"

Uh oh. Ves dreaded this question. This was a very thorny issue for him, and if he gave out his unvarnished opinion, Brutus would definitely not let this contradiction go! As a true Hexer, the expert pilot fully bought into all of the poisonous beliefs of his culture!

Fortunately, Ves did not come unprepared. He already prepared a countermeasure beforehand.

He quickly concentrated his mind and donned a mask he prepared beforehand.

It was nothing but a hastily-imagined impression of Hexer attitudes empowered with a decent dollop of spiritual energy.

His demeanor shifted a little. He hunched his shoulders a bit and became a little more deferential.

The demeanor he adopted was identical to the demeanor exhibited by the male crew members of the Stellar Chaser!

One of the reasons why Ves walked around and studied the submissive male Hexers was to prepare for this meeting!

The shift was quite subtle, because Ves knew that his audience would definitely question a more exaggerated performance!

A more restrained performance was much more believe. Ves wanted to make himself appear as if he became swayed by Hexers without adopting their beliefs entirely.

Only then would he be able to pass this hurdle!

Now that he put on his mask, it was time to stage a show.

"While I'm not a Hexer, I have a lot of respect for women." Ves told Brutus while displaying his deference towards the superior gender! "In my relationship with Gloriana, I feel at ease by letting her take the lead. She is so much more capable than me, and her judgement is far better than mine! One of the reasons I love her so much is because she is the woman that truly matches my tastes! I love a woman who can take charge! I'm helpless if I don't have someone like Gloriana to direct my life!"

His seemingly-sincere performance threw the audience off-balance!

For a moment, Brutus doubted his judgement and observation skills. Was Ves truly deferential to women and Gloriana, or was he only trying to say what Hexers wanted to hear?

Even Ves didn't know how much he said was true or fake! He just wanted to win over Gloriana's brother by any means possible!

"Is your so-called respect for women only limited to my sister?" Brutus asked skeptically.

"Goodness no!" Ves vigorously shook his head. "Women have their strengths! From my birth, I was taught to respect women and follow their lead whenever possible! My mother, who I love dearly, has been a huge influence to me! While she died early, I still respect her strength and the behavior she instilled in me! If every woman is like my mother, then the galaxy would truly be a better place!"

Somehow, Ves managed to connect with Brutus. The expert pilot's eyes sparkled a bit as he fully bought into the performance!

Ves sounded so sincere that even he became unsure whether he was lying! His mask was too effective! Not only did he empower it with a hefty dose of spiritual energy, it also fit him like a glove!

Regardless, Ves finally found a way to connect with Brutus!

"Mothers are very precious." Brutus smiled. "My own mother has shaped my entire life. If not for her love, guidance and strictness, I doubt I could have become as useful as I am today! It was my greatest dream to become Gloriana's shield and protector! With my mother's help, I managed to break through to expert pilot and gain the capital to protect my sister and family!"

Ves nervously smiled in return. That was some serious dedication, and it all happened to be true! The fact that Brutus' force of will reacted so strongly towards Gloriana was proof that the male Hexer's ambition truly centered around protecting his sister!

It made sense. The force of will of an expert pilot reflected their values and beliefs.

Since Hexers always pressed down the pride of boys among their ranks, their male mech pilots all turned towards altruistic desires to form the basis of their force of will!

It was a pretty good way for male expert pilots to gain acceptance from their female overseers.

Hexers did not forbid men from developing skills or growing stronger.

In the same vein, they did not stop male mech pilots from advancing to expert.

From a practical perspective, the Hexers couldn't afford to reject their strength!

While male mech officers were practically nonexistent in the Hex Army, there were a lot of boys serving in the lower ranks.

The chance to surpass the extraordinary threshold did not differ between men and women. Even the lowliest male mech pilot could break through under the right circumstances!

Since the Hexers needed as many expert pilots as possible to contend against the Fridaymen, they did not suppress the existence of male expert pilots.

Instead, the Hexers made sure to channel their strength to the proper ends!

Personal ambition was taboo among boys! Male mech pilots were only allowed to grow stronger as long as they dedicated their efforts towards protecting and advancing the interests of their betters!

After Ves made this realization, he became a bit more assured in his approach.

"We have more in common than you think." Ves smiled. "Our mothers are similar, and they both raised us to respect women. We both love Gloriana,

and we want nothing more than to keep her safe and allow her to fulfill her dreams."

"You.. have a point, but.."

"I'm not your enemy, Brutus, nor do I wish your sister any ill." Ves quickly said.

"Please believe me. Look at how content Gloriana has become these days. Was she always this happy before she hooked up with me? Has any other boy complimented her design style as well as mine?"

His argument sounded very compelling! As Brutus compared the Gloriana in the past to the Gloriana who was bubbling with happiness, he could not deny he preferred the latter!

#### Chapter 1787 Doub

Even though Ves managed to charm Brutus by finding something they supposedly shared in common, that did not mean that Brutus reversed his stance in an instant.

Expert pilots were never easily swayed. Regardless if Ves provided all of the right answers, he could never completely assuage the male Hexer's worries!

While Ves noted that his altered personality managed to connect with Brutus, it was difficult to go any further.

If Brutus ever asked him what he thought about Hexers rather than his mother, Ves would be placed in a difficult position!

He truly didn't like the Hexers! Even if his mask allowed him to massage the truth, his contradictory thoughts would definitely weaken his performance.

At worst, he might expose his falsehood, which was the last thing he wanted!

Ves drew back on his act after expressing his admiration towards women in a vague sense.

The conversation wound down as Brutus gained what he wanted. He developed enough of an impression of Ves to determine whether he was worthy of Gloriana.

Brutus was still on the fence.

To someone as precious as his sister, the male Wodin did not wish to gamble!

The reason why Brutus and the other Wodins vastly preferred Hexer suitors over Ves was because they knew exactly what the former brought to the table.

In contrast, Ves was a wildcard.

Perhaps Ves was more suitable than the Hexers boys the Wodin Dynasty set their sights upon. Maybe it was true that Ves empowered Gloriana's design philosophy. If he respected his mother and loved Gloriana as much as Brutus, then how could the latter spoil her sister's opportunity for happiness?

While Ves failed to win Brutus over, at the very least the male Hexer exhibited some uncertainty.

Even his force of will reduced its hostility towards Ves!

"I admit that you are different from what I expected." Brutus eventually said. "You've impressed me, and I'm starting to believe my sister isn't misguided when she set her sights on you. That does not mean I agree with her. No matter your qualifications, you are not one of us. That alone is a major problem."

"Your mother is willing to give me a chance." Ves stated.

This was a very simple but a very powerful argument! Male Hexers, even expert pilots like Brutus, did not have the right to make impactful decisions!

Only women were qualified to do so! And no one was more qualified to make decisions for Gloriana than her own mother!

Even though Gloriana was already an adult, she was still a member of the Wodin Dynasty. It was not that rare for women of her age and station to follow the arrangements of her parents or dynasty.

In addition, it wasn't rare for marriages to be arranged for people who were in their thirties, forties or even fifties!

The lives of those who were well-off lasted very long. The expected lifespan of a second-rate human almost certainly surpassed a century!

It was even more exaggerated for talented individuals like Gloriana. As a galactic citizen and a Journeyman, it was already assured that she would be able to live for at least two centuries!

As long as no one aimed at her life, Gloriana possessed plenty of time to find a suitable partner.

Of course, just because Gloriana could afford to take her time did not mean it was a good idea to wait too long.

The fact that Madame Constance Wodin extended three years to explore this pairing was already a very concession towards her favored daughter.

Ves was not a Hexer. This was a problem that continued to hinder his attempts to gain acceptance.

Not only was he a foreigner, he also came from a third-rate state. This was a very significant handicap that made it incredibly difficult for Ves to distinguish himself from the masses.

It wasn't enough to match the capabilities of a Hexer mech designer. He had to surpass his peers from the Hegemony in such a decisive fashion that he left no more room for arguing!

Gloriana was right. The best way for Ves to prove himself was to exhibit the capability to make a masterwork mech. Showing this ability while collaborating

with Gloriana at their young age would certainly raise a storm in the mech community!

The Hexers and the Wodins in particular should definitely push aside their concerns about his identity once he astonished them with such an accomplishment!

The only problem was that fabricating a masterwork mech was easier said than done. Ves and Gloriana attempted it several times, to no avail. Either their passion wasn't enough, the moment wasn't right or the chance simply wasn't there.

Ves and Gloriana only had a bit more than 2 years left to overcome this challenge. If they still failed to produce their desired result, Gloriana's mother would definitely lose patience with their relationship!

"I'm aware that my mother has given you the benefit of the doubt." Brutus said and stood up. "It seems she saw something in you as well. I'm willing to give you a chance as well. As long as you treat my sister right and keep her happy, I won't object to my mother's arrangement."

Ves inwardly felt relieved. He managed to convince Gloriana's overprotective brother to give him a chance!

Of course, it was just a chance.

A curious detail was that Constance Wodin not only looked out for her daughter's wellbeing, but also sought what was best for the Wodin Dynasty.

Brutus did not exhibit the same priorities. While he doubtlessly cared about the Wodins, he clearly loved Gloriana above anything else!

This was a very important difference! Ves realized that it might be possible to win Brutus over without committing to his state.



Even if Ves rejected the Hegemony, it would still be possible to gain Brutus' support! After all, the expert pilot wanted Gloriana to be happy, and that mattered more than anything else!

Of course, male Hexers did not have much say in their society. Even if Brutus supported Ves, his opinion hardly influenced the rest of the Wodins!

Naturally, Ves did not look down on this accomplishment. While Brutus might not be of help due to his gender, he would be an awful enemy if he became hostile to the relationship!

If Brutus thought that Gloriana was better off elsewhere, then he could probably take Gloriana away!

He was an expert pilot after all! If he believed that Gloriana was under threat or something, he would definitely act according to his force of will!

A few minutes later, Ves and Brutus emerged from the lounge.

Gloriana and Ranya waited right outside. Both women didn't seem to have listened in on the boys.

"What do you think, Brutus?" Gloriana asked.

"Let's just say that I'll reserve my judgement. I'm willing to let our mother decide whether Ves is the right person for you."

Gloriana grinned and clapped her hands. "Ves will definitely surprise you! Thank you for giving him a chance."

"I won't stop you from pursuing this relationship, but that doesn't mean our other brothers and sisters will follow suit."

"Heh, if Ves managed to impress you, then it's only a matter of time before our entire dynasty embraces him! Just you wait!"

While Gloriana and her brother discussed her relationship, Ranya turned to Ves and studied him with a curious expression.

"Huh. I didn't expect you to make Brutus give you a chance. I was really sure he would object to you. When it comes to Gloriana, Brutus is willing to do anything to ensure she's safe! There is no way a third-rater like you can protect her as well as a Hexer suitor who enjoys the support of an entire dynasty!"

"Gloriana won't be better off if you keep her in a cage." Ves spoke with conviction. "While I admit that I don't have the capital to protect my girlfriend as well as a Hexer, I still managed to kill a lot of Fridaymen! Since I have the courage to hijack a ship from captivity, I'll definitely protect Gloriana to the best of my ability! Don't look at my current strength and influence. I'm still in the early stages of my career. Once I develop for another decade or so, I'll definitely grow to the point where I can protect Gloriana against any second-class threat!"

Those were some very big words! Dr. Ranya clearly doubted his assertions.

"You don't sound very reassuring. If I had to choose between keeping Gloriana safe or keeping her happy, I would rather pick the former than the latter!"

"Let's leave the decision up to Gloriana." Ves replied. "To her, separating from me will definitely ruin her career! I'm not lying about this. Since Gloriana is very passionate about mech design, robbing her of the opportunity to fulfill her ambition will definitely break her as a person!"

"Absurd!"

"It's the truth." Ves stated. "It's a mech designer thing. Just ask her if you don't believe her. She'll give you the same answer. At this point, our collaboration has grown so close that we're practically inseparable! Neither of us will be

able to make any accomplishments in our fields if we no longer enjoy each other's support!"

He was exaggerating a bit. The consequences to him weren't very serious. While it would be a shame to lose Gloriana's design philosophy and the synergies she enabled, Ves would live.

His design philosophy still followed a direction that Ves could develop through his own efforts.

Even with a collaboration partner like Gloriana or Aisling, Ves still possessed the confidence to advance to Master by himself!

It was a different case for Gloriana. After Ves contaminated her with his insights, she decisively shifted her design philosophy to accommodate spiritual components, or divine components in her words!

Since Gloriana lacked the spiritual perception that Ves took for granted, it was extremely difficult for her to make any accomplishments in this area!

There was no way she could replicate his feats and obtain a design spirit, let alone instilling it into a design!

Now that Gloriana received this revelation, she could never go back.

Ordinarily, the only way to recover from a possible breakup was to correct the direction of her design philosophy.

The only thing she needed to do was to discard the use of spiritual components in her mech designs.

Yet.. could she even do that?

As a mech designer who wanted to design the perfect vessel, it was crucially important for her to leverage every possible method to reach perfection!

Now that she became aware to the value that spiritual components added to her mech designs, how could he deprive her perfect vessels of this powerful component?

From a logical perspective, Gloriana would never be able to justice the absence of this component!

For this reason, Ves did not fear Gloriana's betrayal. Knowing that his specialty was essential to her own development, Gloriana should be doing her best to stay by his side!

Ranya didn't know this, and she obviously didn't believe that Ves was being truthful. To her, Ves was simply blowing his horn.

Typical boy.

"Don't think you've won. Brutus is just her youngest brother. You need to convince two more brothers and three more sisters to win over my cousin's siblings. Then you need to overcome their mother. Let me tell you that my aunt is one of the strictest Hexers that I have ever met! She's harsh on herself and harsher on her children! Every Hexer must meet her ludicrously high expectations, or she will make her wrath known!"

This sounded very worrisome. Ves truly feared Gloriana's mother. He heard so much about her to know what Ves shouldn't even be able to come within her sight if not for his excellence.

He had to grow stronger! This was the only way to resolve his issues with Gloriana's mother and the Wodin Dynasty!

His urge to design a second-class mech and fabricate a masterwork mech grew even stronger!

He couldn't afford to fail!

After Ves and Venerable Brutus had their private moment, they moved the mech workshop along with Gloriana and Ranya.

It turned out that Gloriana tweaked and updated the Star Dancer's design in the last couple of weeks. Because of her limited involvement in the design of her brother's expert mech, she could only propose some minor improvements.

Gloriana brought her brother to a projection of the Star Dancer's design and enthusiastically showed off some of her latest efforts. She improved considerably when she worked alongside Ves, so it wasn't a surprise for her to be able to correct some of her shortcomings in her existing products.

Normally, a mech designer did not bother to update a mech design. Any revisions they wanted to do could wait until they comprehensively combined all of the corrections as well as tech upgrades in another revision.

Ves himself wanted to wait until he became more proficient in next generation mech design before he designed the Aurora Titan Mark II for example.

Of course, if a mech designer really cared about a design or customer, there was nothing stopping them from publishing minor updates.

Expert mechs were some of the most important machines to the mech community. With the insanely high skill of expert pilots, even minor differences might result in drastic swings in battles!

With so much at stake, mech designers involved in these prestigious design projects often continued to iterate on them despite finishing the job!

In this instance, Gloriana had an extra reason to pour more effort into updating the Star Dancer.

Her brother's life depended on it! Since she possessed the capability to work on its design, she would do her best to draw out as much strength out of it as possible!

Ves made sure to keep a distance from the siblings. He held back his curiosity and tried his best not to listen in or study the projected design.

An expert mech always incorporated numerous advanced technologies and design applications. The Star Dancer almost certainly incorporated many innovations exclusive to the Hexers or the Wodins.

Since Ves wasn't formally involved in the project, he had no right to be exposed to the Star Dancer's design!

"Miaow."

While Gloriana outlined her improvements, Clixie somehow ended up in Brutus' arms. The severe-looking brother finally softened his grave expression and played with the cat in his arms.

"Huh. Turns out being a cat person runs in the blood." Ves remarked.

"Meow."

Ves turned to the cat biting at his shoes and kicked his naughty pet away.

"I know you're anxious to return to the Scarlet Rose, but we can't leave yet! Be patient and make do with Gloriana's snacks!"

"Meow meow!"

Lucky angrily swung his tail at Ves before skulking off.

Ever since they were rescued by the Glory Battalion, they hadn't been given an opportunity to return to the ship they hijacked from the Fridaymen.

Neither Lucky nor Ves were pleased!

With all of the Breyer alloy the mysterious escape pod could produce, Lucky felt wrong to be deprived of what he considered to be his rightful prize! After all, it was mostly due to his abilities that they managed to conquer the Scarlet Rose!

As for Ves, he formed a lot of ambitions for this valuable material. It wasn't any day that Ves randomly found a seemingly endless source of Breyer alloy! As long as the loop he discovered continued to supply him with materials, he could use it to build a lot of powerful assets!

He formed a lot of ambitious plans. Depending on the maximum sustainable output of Breyer alloy, he could completely transform his life in a couple of years of time!

Yet now that Gloriana not only dragged him away from the Scarlet Rose, but also placed a prize crew onto his newly-conquered ship, Ves couldn't help but be worried.

It had already been several days. Before he departed, Ves made sure to halt the loop and keep the anomalous escape pod shut in its launch tube.

Would the escape pod and its frightening occupant remain in place?

Ves didn't know the answer to this question. As time continued to pass, he couldn't help but dread what might happen.

It would be awful if the Hexers discovered this secret! Any day now, the mummified woman might wake up, or her escape pod might start appearing on the Stellar Chaser!

Any change was detrimental to his interests. Ves was not among his Avatars, Battle Criers or Sentinels right now. Every single ship in the fleet belonged to the Wodins! There was nowhere he could hide this anomaly.

Once the Hexers discovered the potential worth of the self-replicating escape pod, they would probably claim it for themselves!

Fortunately, nothing happened so far. The Hexers didn't appear to have discovered the unusual escape pod. The undermanned prize crew tasked with

running the Scarlet Rose were too busy repairing all of the damage and neglect she accumulated over the past month.

While Ves chatted with Ranya, Lucky decided to take solace in Gloriana's company.

At least she never kicked his body for no reason!

"Meow."

"Oh Lucky! Are you hungry, little buddy?"

"Meow!"

"Hihihi! You're so cute. I've got plenty of shiny minerals stashed in my workshop. I'll go grab some."

While Gloriana left for the storehouses, Lucky jumped up to the work table and called for Clixie.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

The furry cat squirmed out of Brutus' grasp and landed next to Lucky. The two cats pressed against each other and conserved in their cat language.

In the meantime, Brutus stared at Lucky in fascination.

Gloriana returned soon afterwards and fed Lucky a chunk of medium-grade exotic, much to the cat's delight!

While Lucky crunched the hard mineral with his teeth, Brutus glanced at his sister.

"I thought you only had one cat."

She casually stroked her hand on Lucky's back while he was occupied with his latest snack.



"Oh, Lucky here isn't mine. He belongs to Ves!"

"Truly? While I'm not as good at understanding technology as you, this cat looks extraordinary! Even I know that any creature that is capable of eating exotics is just as valuable as Clixie, if not more!"

"Don't bother asking me where you can find a cat like Lucky. I've already tried to search where I can buy one myself, but not even the Terrans and Rubarthans are offering a mechanical creature that is anywhere close to him. He's unique as far as I know, and Ves upgraded him several times. His tiger stripes weren't there before!"

Brutus spent some time twinkling his eyes at the fascinating cat, but in the end he got back to listening to Gloriana's work.

An hour went by until he finally returned to the Serendipity. The fleet was still in unfriendly space. The Crecia Republic was no friend of the Hexadric Hegemony. While unlikely, the chance the Fridaymen might launch an ambush on their fleet was still a possibility!

With the departure of Brutus, Ves felt a lot less tense. Even when he was far away from Brutus, he still experienced the expert pilot's influence in the form of his force of will.

Expert pilots always influenced their surroundings with their expanding spiritual manifestations!

Even when Brutus decided to give Ves a chance, he still felt as if he was being scrutinized all the time! With such an expansive force of will, Ves had to go to the opposite side of the Stellar Chaser in order to escape its reach!

"What an overprotective brother!" Ves muttered and shook his head.

He found it curious that all of the other expert pilots he met before did not interact with their surroundings as much as Brutus. Why did the latter's force

of will react more actively to the presence of people? Was it due to the nature of his force of will, or did the Hexers utilize some methods to grant their expert pilots more strength?

"Maybe the second-rate states truly grasped a method to enhance the strength of expert pilots!"

Even if that was the case, it wasn't anything Ves could access for now. His identity and power was wholly insufficient to access such secrets.

Besides, Ves didn't really have to worry about expert pilots for the moment. For now, he should focus on strengthening the mundane mech pilots under his employ. The foundation must be built up first before he could think about adding upper-level strength to his forces!

As the ships finished cycling their FTL drives and transitioned into the higher dimensions, they would soon be arriving back to the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Unlike before where Ves had to avoid enemy pursuit, the Wodins clearly weren't as concerned about any possible attacks. They directly charted a fairly direct route back to the Ylvaine Protectorate in order to leave the Crecia Republic as soon as possible.

Ves looked forward to reuniting with his family and subordinates. He still had a lot to do when he reached the Kesseling System. Both the LMC and the new family needed to find some new directions to focus upon for the upcoming years.

Already, a lot of time had passed since he made the decision to leave the Komodo Star Sector. With the Five Scrolls Compact's shadow starting to loom over this star sector, Ves felt more and more compelled to get away as fast as possible!

At the very least he had a very clear goal to work towards now. With the opening of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, he could couch his decision as something other than a cowardly decision to avoid danger!

"I still have a long way to go before I'm qualified to enter the Red Ocean."

Thinking about all of the MTA merits required to earn passage through a beyonder gate continued to be a thorny problem.

Even many mech designers from the first-rate states weren't capable of earning so many merits! Ves had to find ways to make extraordinary contributions to the MTA in order to accumulate so many merits in a short amount of time!

More and more, the thought of partnering up with others capable of earning MTA merits came to mind. As long as he and Gloriana found eight more partners, they could split up the burden amongst each other!

Trying to earn with 10 million MTA merits sounded a lot more doable than trying to earn 100 million MTA merits!

Yet whenever he thought about sharing power and resources, Ves quickly rejected the option.

There was no way Ves was willing to put his trust in others! Only Gloriana deserved his trust! As for others, forget it! After Ghanso and the Bright Republic screwed him over, Ves vowed to never put his life in someone else's hands again!

"With my abilities and advantages, I can definitely find ways to earn lots of merits!"

He needed to start with completing missions for the Rim Guardians right away. The sooner he began to earn some merits, the sooner he was done!

"I'll have to put all of my efforts on promoting William Urbesh to expert candidate as fast as possible!"

While there was still plenty of time left to complete this task for the Rim Guardians, Ves believed he already took far too much time. If not for his kidnapping, he probably would have been able to move on already!

Ves gained a lot of inspiration and enjoyed a lot of time to think over his plans in recent times. Along the way, he didn't neglect what he should do with Silent William.

As long as he succeeded with his experiment, then not only should he be able to elevate William to expert candidate, but also any other mech pilot with spiritual potential!

Of course, Ves couldn't make much use of this experimental method lest he draw the MTA's attention to himself. Besides, Ves only formed some assumptions in his mind. He still needed to test them thoroughly, and to do that he needed lots of test subjects!

#### Chapter 1789 Dog Bowl

Ves woke up in his cabin aboard the Stellar Rose. He stretched his arms and tried to rise from his bed, only to find his leg was being shackled by a six-sided manacle.

"Lucky!"

"Meow?"

Lucky stopped eating his messy black hair and jumped from his head in order to chew apart the metal manacle. Its material was just as hard as Breyer alloy, but which just happened to serve as breakfast for his cat.

Once his pet freed his leg, Ves yawned and entered the bathroom. He took a quick shower while making sure to leave his Synthra Umbra underwear on.

He made sure to wave his hand at the blinking eyeballs that made up the bulkheads, deck and ceiling.

Certainly, stepping onto all of the eyeballs was an extremely unpleasant experience, and Ves hurried to clothe himself as fast as possible!

Just like every day, Gloriana already prepared his outfit for the day for him. Her tastes grew odder and odder by the day. Ves really didn't want to wear the puppy costume she picked this time, but it wasn't as if he had any choice.

His cabin didn't contain any other clothes! The closet was completely devoid of any fabric and he sure as hell wasn't going to beg a Hexer for some scraps!

After he put on his dog collar on his neck, he exited the bathroom, only to meet Lucky's ridicule.

"Meow meow."

"It's not as if you are wearing a collar as well!"

"Meow."

"Don't make fun of me any further or I'll exchange our collars! At least yours has a stealth module!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"What do you mean its radius is not enough to hide my body!? There is plenty of room as long as I compress myself into a ball! I'll show you how it's done!"

Before Lucky could skedaddle, Ves concentrated his mind and tried his best to wrap his scaredy cat up with his spiritual projection!

Shortly afterwards, they exchanged collars. While Lucky tried to scratch the dog collar from his neck, Ves affixed the miniaturized stealth generator onto his neck.

Once he activated it, a stealth field with a diameter of one meter partially enveloped his body.

This led to a very weird sight where his legs and parts of his waist still remained visible.

Though Ves thought about crouching and rolling his way to the dining hall, there was no reason for him to hide his presence.

He shrugged and decided to walk upright.

This resulted in the strange sight of a pair legs exiting the cabin and heading towards the dining hall.

In contrast, a cat wearing a dog collar was nothing special!

Once they reached their destination, Queen Gloriana had already seated herself on the throne.

His queen wore a regal outfit that consisted of a multilayered dress. The finest fabrics of the galaxy as well as sparkling exotic jewels all enhanced her majesty to an incredibly majestic sight!

"%@\$\*%."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Ves did not approach the dining table in the center of the compartment. Instead, he moved to the side where a brightly-colored doghouse had been placed and squirmed his half-invisible body inside.

"#\$#%^#\$\*@."

A number of bots carrying various breakfast dishes entered the compartments. While most of them carried exquisite gourmet foods, only a single bot arrived to serve Ves breakfast.

The bot carelessly dumped the six-sided dog bowl in front of the doghouse. Ves looked pleased as the bowl contained the exact same nutrient pack mixture he tasted more than a thousand times already!

"Bon appetit!" He said to himself with a smile.

Ves lowered his face to the bowl and began to eat the dry mixture without any hesitation. He gorged himself so fast that it only took a couple of minutes to finish his morning meal!

Since nutrient packs didn't contain any moisture, Ves had to quench his thirst with the second bowl delivered by a bot. He lapped up with water with his tongue, which was a very inefficient way to hydrate himself.

It couldn't be helped. Ves was a dog after all.

Once he waited for Queen Gloriana to finish her breakfast, she rose from her throne and slowly brought her highly-decorate robe to the doghouse.

At this time, the stealth generator's charge had run out, thereby revealing Ves in all his glory. His silly puppy costume made him look like a pug. His fuzzy pale yellow coat and his curled tail looked extraordinarily cute on him! Ves could probably win some prizes if he appeared at a dog show!

At this time, Queen Gloriana extended a leash towards his neck. Even though his miniaturized stealth generator didn't come with a hook, the end of the leash unfolded and clutched the 'collar' like a claw.

"##%##@, !#^%\u0026."

"No." Ves answered.

Queen Gloriana scrunched her face. "@#\u0026%\u0026%?"

Even though Ves was still hunched over in his doghouse, he still grinned at his girlfriend like a shark.

"Your Majesty, if you are truly the Gloriana I know, you would have kissed me six times by now. Also, dressing me up as a puppy and making me eat from a pair of dog bowls is an excellent act. I don't know where you got the idea from, but you obviously don't know my girlfriend well enough! As soon as I laid my eyes on a dog bowl, I realized the flaw in this dream."

Queen Gloriana's face turned ugly. "@\$\u0026\u0026%@"?

"The true Gloriana is a cat person, not a dog person! She would have dressed me up like a kitty!"

Just because most Hexers had a tendency to refer to the boys in their state as puppies didn't mean they were all inclined to see them this way.

At the very least, if Gloriana was truly in charge of this charade, she would definitely dress him up like a cat!

"I admit that you managed to hoodwink me for a time, but apparently you don't know Gloriana well enough! Now that I've spotted the flaw in your illusion, there's no way I'm letting this farce run its course! Break!"

Ves leveraged his entire Spirituality and pushed it out, breaking some sort of shackle that had taken hold over his mind!

A dreadful scream emanated from Queen Gloriana as the illusion broke apart! Instantly, her radiant skin and her regal dress disappeared, revealing the true culprit behind this trap!

"I knew it! It's you!"

A mummified female body wearing an outdated vacsuit uttered an unnatural scream at Ves! Her raging voice overlapped like a thousand screaming hags!

"@Y#\u0026\*##\*%^@#\u0026\$\*#\$\$#\u0026%^!"

Unfortunately for them both, Ves didn't understand Cassandra Breyer's words at all. This was incredibly odd as Ves could talk with cats and exobeasts with



no problem. How come he failed to understand the mummified woman's voice?

If he was unprepared, then the woman's unintelligible screams would have damaged his mind. However, it was too late now that he actively shielded his mind!

The spiritually-charged words washed against his mind without gaining entry. Ves became as firm as a rock as he let the attack pass him by!

"BEGONE!"

The remnants of the illusion tore apart entirely after another outburst! Ves managed to free himself from his hijacked dream!

As Ves woke up for a second time, Ves immediately leveraged his Spirituality and inspected every part of himself and his surroundings.

Lucky woke up from his place at the foot of the bed and looked at Ves with curiosity.

"Meow?"

"Looks like you're real." Ves sighed in relief.

Now that he was alert to the possible threat, Ves scrutinized everything in far greater detail. Nothing seemed amiss, both visually and spiritually.

Though the illusion that had trapped him somehow managed to bypass his defenses and contaminate his mind, it wasn't perfect.

Ves inspected his own mental space over and over again but found no hidden threats or other abnormalities.

"What a frightening attack!" Ves whispered and touched his face as if to confirm it was still real!

The illusion that engulfed him seemed to be completely nonsensical, yet Ves behaved as if it was all completely normal!

Being shackled to his bed, surrounded by eyeballs while he showered, putting up a dog costume and eating his breakfast like he was a puppy should have alarmed him right away!

The fact that he didn't question it until he spotted an obvious flaw was very concerning to Ves! This mental attack was far more sophisticated than anything he experienced before, and the frightening part about it was that it could very well happen again!

"This witch!" Ves cursed.

He had no doubt that the undead woman was behind this insidious attack. Whether she wanted to kill him or take over his mind, there was no doubt in his mind that she had bad intentions!

Of course, it was partially his fault for inviting such an attack. He knew that Cassandra Breyer was clearly an extraordinary spiritual sorceress, yet he greedily exploited her self-replication ability anyway!

If Cassandra didn't counterattack in some way, then she wouldn't have lived up to his expectation of her strength.

"It seems I'm truly in trouble now!"

One of his fears came true. Now that he stopped the production loop, the mysterious escape pod was left intact, giving the corpse inside plenty of time to perform some tricks!

Ves had a lot of questions right now. For one, how could she launch an attack on him while the fleet entered FTL travel?

"Can she ignore the obstacles isolating the Scarlet Rose and the Stellar Chaser?"

Perhaps Cassandra possessed the capability to launch an attack on him no matter the distance!

A more important question came to mind.

"Can I resist this attack again?"

While the illusion that gripped his mind was extremely sophisticated, it didn't actually carry much strength! Ves was able to break it after two spiritual outbursts.

Either Cassandra held back, or her condition limited her strength.

Ves guessed that the latter was the case. Cassandra was already dead and there was plenty of weirdness going on with regards to her circumstances.

His best guess was that spiritual sorcesses like Cassandra and his mother both employed techniques that preserved their lives after death.

However, everything had a price. His mother had to live like a ghost, while most of Cassandra's spiritual strength was occupied with maintaining the existence of her corpse and escape pod.

If Ves assumed that most of Cassandra's strength was locked in maintaining her own state, then she didn't actually have that much strength left to mess with his mind.

He relaxed after coming up with this theory. While he wasn't sure if this guess was correct, he intuitively felt that he wasn't far from the truth.

In any case, the automatic operation that allowed her body and escape pod to replenish over and over again must place an incredible burden on Cassandra Breyer! Even if she was one of the strongest spiritual sorceresses in the galaxy, continually converting energy to matter was an enormous burden!

Ves grew confused as he recalled some of his experiences while he fell under the illusion.

Even though he treated it as an attack, was that truly the case?

"It could have been a nightmare."

Maybe he was overthinking the matter. It might be that he had just been subjected to a dream created by his own unconscious mind!

Ves shuddered.

"That's certainly not the case! This is definitely a deliberate attack! It doesn't have anything to do with me! I would never enjoy such an odd dream!"

After making up his mind, he grew somber as he began to consider how to guard himself against a similar attack.

Cassandra Breyer could pull him into an illusion once. What stopped her from doing it again?

If Ves was awake and alert, then he had plenty of confidence in foiling such an attempt.

Now that he was aware of the possibility, he could easily detect if his mind was being influenced!

Yet the problem was that Ves wasn't always awake and alert!

Even when he was awake, he couldn't concentrate his mind every single second of the day!

As for the times when he fell asleep, there was no question that his mind would fall into its most vulnerable state!

"This is a calamity!"

Chapter 1790 Radical Approach

After surviving a suspected mental attack, Ves grew incredibly grave.

Since he woke up a few hours before his usual waking time, he didn't hurry to get out of his bed. Instead, he scratched Lucky's chin while he contemplated ways to guard himself against this insidious attack.

The most frightening part about this attack was that it could sneak up to him without alerting him! Before he knew it, the illusion warped his cognition until he completely took its absurdities for granted!

"I need to find a way to guard my mind!"

Before, Ves always thought that his mind was a fortress. As a mech designer, his design seed guarded the core of his mind. Anything that encroached on its territory would invite a terrible counterattack!

Not even Ves' attempt to investigate Gloriana's mind yielded much result after her design seed detected the intrusion!

Even though his spiritual projection turned into a dormant spiritual fragment in her mind, it only maintained its existence because Gloriana adored his presence.

Ves thought that his design seed would be just as alert and guarded. Yet when Cassandra Breyer tampered with his mind, his design seed completely dropped the ball!

Was there a difference between their functions? Was Gloriana's design seed much more sensitive to abnormalities due to her specialization? Was his design seed defective?

"No. It's because my adversary is too strong!"

Even if he suspected that most of her strength was locked away, she still possessed all of the knowledge and advanced techniques she accumulated over her shrouded lifetime!

How old was she? One century? Two centuries? Seven centuries?

Whatever the case, Cassandra was definitely strong enough to outmatch him on these fronts!

Ves could only take consolation in his defensive advantage and his edge in the amount of spiritual strength he could leverage.

"This is problematic."

If Ves had to make a choice, he would always prefer finesse over power. This applied both to mechs and spirituality.

What was the use of maximizing power if it couldn't be controlled?

Right now, Ves felt as if he was a child in front of Cassandra Breyer. He only received a minor lesson on how to employ his Spirituality. He learnt the rest of his spiritual repertoire on his own!

"Without a teacher, without a textbook, how can I possibly match against a master in this art?"

Ves believed that Cassandra was definitely connected to the Five Scrolls Compact.

The Compact appeared to be the highest or even only organization in human space that developed a systematic understanding of this phenomenon.

Even though the MTA seemed to be aware of spirituality or 'psionic power' as they called it, Ves suspected that they weren't even close to matching the cultists!

He was quite jealous of those who had been taught their arts. Instead of groping in the dark like Ves, these Compact members all received teachings accumulated over centuries or even millenia!

Comparing Ves against Cassandra was like comparing a caveman to Nitaa in full battle gear.

There was no contest!

"Is it even possible to block every attack?"

Ves couldn't assume that his defenses were infallible. As long as he slipped up even once, he would definitely be vulnerable to hallucinations!

"I have to resolve this problem as fast as possible." He whispered.

Fortunately, it only took half a week for the fleet to arrive at Kesseling VIII. Once they reached the LMC's new headquarters, Ves would probably be able to gain possession of the Scarlet Rose.

"Hopefully."

He wasn't sure yet. What if the Hexers tried to make a claim at the ship? That would be a disaster to Ves! Not only would he lose a valuable second-class vessel, he would also lose the mysterious escape pod or provide it with opportunities to plague him with spiritual attacks!

"I need to get some clarification from Gloriana." He muttered.

Until he regained control over the Scarlet Rose, Ves needed to employ a stopgap solution. He needed to find at least some way to repel or mitigate follow-up attacks.

He didn't have a lot of good ideas except for the obvious. After a lot of thought, Ves simply shrugged and formed an empowered spiritual shield over his mind. He invested just enough spiritual energy in it that it would take an entire day to replenish.

His mental space instantly felt more secure now that he invested in its defense. He estimated that he was a lot more resilient against external pressure now!

Whether it was a spiritual attack from a suspected Compact associate or an aggressive force of will from a hostile expert pilot, as long as he maintained a

shield of this strength, he would definitely be better off than if he relied on his natural defenses!

Ves made an important realization. "I should have done this before."

Anytime he didn't need to accumulate his excess spiritual energy into a P-stone, he should use up his spiritual energy instead of letting it go to waste!

Even if the chance of suffering a spiritual attack was almost zero, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Just like a shield generator, Ves didn't need the protection most of the time, but when he came under attack, he would be infinitely grateful for his decision!

As the shield settled down and wrapped around his mind, Ves tried to judge its defensive capabilities.

It would definitely work against most attacks of a spiritual nature, but would it work against a master in the arts like Cassandra Breyer?

"She's way too fearsome." He shuddered.

It could be that Cassandra could easily pierce or bypass his attempt at shielding his mind.

Compared to other other products of spiritual engineering such as the Grand Dynamo and Cassandra's insidious illusion attack, his shield was completely devoid of sophistication.

It wasn't as if Ves wanted to strengthen his spiritual shield, but he didn't know how.

When Ves inspected his spiritual toolbox, he discovered to his dismay that most of them pertained to mechs and design spirits.



As a mech designer, Ves devoted most of his research on spirituality to developing his design philosophy and enhancing his ability to empower his mechs.

There was very little reason for him to develop other applications of spirituality.

Perhaps he unconsciously repelled other applications of spirituality because he didn't want to follow the footsteps of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Just thinking about its insane cultists and researchers shook his very soul! There was no way he wanted to descend into madness!

"Mechs are familiar. Mechs are safe. Mechs are normal!"

Ves believed that as long as he anchored his spiritual gift towards his passion for mech design, he'd be able to avoid the madness that seemed to afflict the entire Five Scrolls Compact.

If this assumption held true, wouldn't he be sabotaging himself by letting go of his restraint?

"I have no choice." He sighed. "If I don't do anything, I'll continue to be susceptible to these kinds of attacks."

It was as if he was designing a knight mech that was impervious against physical damage but extraordinarily vulnerable against energy damage.

As long as his knight mech fought against opponents wielding ballistic rifles, it could probably last for hours! Yet as soon as a single laser rifleman mech showed up, his work would quickly fall!

Only under certain conditions was it acceptable to design a mech with such clear vulnerabilities.

For example, his Desolate Soldier and Deliverer designs ordinarily fared poorly against enemy mechs, but that was okay because they were only meant to fight against the sandmen.

Ves had fallen into the trap of assuming that he would only have to fend against 'normal' attacks.

This was why he placed a lot of importance on his shield generators.

Yet now that Cassandra Breyer exploited one of his vulnerabilities, he had no choice but to divert some time into patching it up. Even if he didn't intend to follow the path of his mother, he should at least develop some self-protection capabilities.

When Ves studied his simple shield made out of pure, solid spiritual energy, he became increasingly more dissatisfied.

"I'm a mech designer and an engineer. How can I possibly be satisfied with such a simple product!?"

Could he apply his professional expertise in spiritual sorcery?

His eyes lit up. Though it would be difficult to translate his expertise in mech design towards spiritual applications, at least some principles should be the same!

Could he design and 'fabricate' a spiritual version of a mech in his mind?

It was easy for him to construct an image of a draft design. Yet drawing out a complete and viable mech was incredibly difficult, especially at his current cognitive capabilities!

In order to construct a spiritual mech in his mind, he needed to be extremely accurate about its sizes, dimensions and material composition.

This was practically impossible! Not even Seniors or Masters might be able to keep track of so many technical details!

In fact, not even Ves was capable of tracking more than a hundred components at a time! His mental multitasking simply wasn't that good!

As long as he made even one mistake, the mech was liable to fall apart or become inoperable!

Naturally, Ves did not necessarily have to replicate a spiritual version of one of his full-fledged mech designs from scratch.

Anything involving spirituality was partially based on intent rather than reality.

In other words, it was fine if he was a little fuzzy on the details. As long as he possessed a clear intent about the outcome, his spiritual products would still come online somehow.

Yet.. was he willing to dumb down his mech design and adopt a different approach to construct his spiritual mechs?

It was the easier path, and one that would definitely push him towards developing completely new paradigms in mech design!

Yet Ves did not wish to pursue this path. Relying on intent to make up the shortcomings of his spiritual mechs was a lazy approach. It would also make him dependent on the more mysterious aspects of spirituality, which might push him even stronger towards the Five Scrolls Compact!

Ves much preferred to stick to his roots as a mech designer. He specialized in designing mechs. The core of his spiritual strength, his design seed, solely existed to amplify his primary profession!

If he tried to abide as closely as possible to conventional mech design, he could focus on translating as much of his existing mech design capabilities into the spiritual domain as possible.

While this would prevent him from broadening his spiritual applications, it was the more efficient option.

Ves was a mech designer. He should be pouring all of his time and efforts into making a masterwork mech and finding ways to earn 100 million MTA merits!

The only reason why he was willing to divert some time into creating mechs out of pure spirituality at all was because he needed to address a shortcoming.

As long as he was creating something that did the job, there was little reason for Ves to invest more time in this field!

Now that he made his choice, Ves had to find some way of realizing this method.

"I don't have to design a new mech. I can just reconstruct one of my existing mech designs in my mind." He muttered.

He knew his own designs the best. He could recall a lot of aspects of the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord, Aurora Titan, Desolate Soldier, Deliverer and his custom mechs.

Yet while his Intelligence Attribute was high, Ves did not think it was capable of tracking hundreds of thousands or millions of components that made up a modern mech!

"How can I possibly memorize and keep track of the properties of so many components and subcomponents?" Ves scratched his head.

A solution came to mind. Wasn't his Archimedes Rubal implant dedicated to expanding a human's memory and data storage capacity?

As long as he successfully integrated this CFA implant, he could definitely employ this unprecedented approach to empower his personal spiritual capabilities!