

Chapter 1351 Safe Harbor

As Ves woke up the next morning, he did not take the latent security threat lightly. However, he did not panic either. The presence of sophisticated listening devices did not mean that someone was determined to make a move.

Fe Nitaa and the mercenaries he hired had already been informed of the findings. As Ves was enjoying a quiet breakfast delivered to the hotel room, he listened to a report by Nitaa.

"Commander Meivin of the Vindar Dustravens reached out to his contacts to determine who might be responsible. So far, he ruled out that any of his local allies and acquaintances are involved."

"I take that to mean that the Bloodwellers and some of the neutral Redwellers aren't responsible." Ves replied.

"I'm not certain if that's the case, sir. The Bloodwellers are far from united. They may share the same banner, but each of them believe in different methods to keep the Redwell Province out of the Hinson Protectorate's hands."

The conflict between the Bloodwellers and the Whitewellers did not interest Ves at all. He had no intentions of meddling in their long-running spat. Whether the Redwell Province remained a part of the Chuko Republic or defected to the Hinson Protectorate did not affect his personal interests in the slightest way.

Even if the crisis resolved one way or another, the Chuko Republic or whatever took its place would simply become another market in his eyes. Even so, Chuko was significantly smaller and weaker than the Bright Republic, and combined with the distance in between, Ves did not anticipate selling a lot of mechs here anyway.

That was completely fine to Ves. His lack of commitment to the state meant that he did not have to worry about treading too carefully between all of the interest groups. Even if he pissed a couple of them off, it wasn't going to bite him back in the butt as long as he never returned.

In a way, Ves partially treated his year-long trip through the Komodo Star Sector as a trial balloon for his future grand expedition. The small lessons he learned and difficulties he encountered would give him a better picture of what it was like to travel through various new locales.

Already, he and his advisers took plenty of notes on how they ought to prepare for a multi-decade expedition.

"If there is one issue that bothers me, it's that we're far from allies here." Nitaa noted with worry as she rubbed her slightly-weary eyes. "Aside from hiring the Dustravens to act as our local fixers, we don't have any local support. There is no place in the Redwell Province or the rest of the Chuko Republic where we can take refuge if we are under pursuit."

"There is the Hinson Protectorate, I suppose."

"The Hinson Protectorate is weeks away, and that's only if we take the most direct FTL routes. Also, the Hinsoners will only care about us because they don't want to displease your girlfriend."

Ves knew that it was foolish to rely on the unmitigated support of the Hinson Protectorate. Perhaps they might decide it was in their direct interest to assassinate Ves and pin the blame on the Redwellers!

As he reminded himself of this possibility, he lost some of his previous joviality. Fe Nitaa pointed out a very poignant problem. Ves lacked a convenient escape route. The closest possible safe harbor was the Hexadric Hegemony, but his fleet would have to travel straight through Hinson space in order to reach the border to the second-rate state.

Even then, the problem still persisted! Not everyone saw his relationship with Gloriana in a favorable light! Ves was not a Hexer and would not be able to find a home anywhere in the Hegemony except for the star systems occupied by the Wodin Dynasty.

In short, the only true safe harbor for Ves right now was either Centerpoint or the Bright Republic!

Unless he reached one of those two destinations, he would never truly be in the clear. Being surrounded by uncertain allies, hidden enemies and a lot of people who didn't care about his troubles did not do his paranoia any favors.

Nonetheless, the sons and daughters of the frontier lived under these conditions for their entire lives. Many of them adapted to this dangerous reality. Some of them even thrived under these conditions.

While Ves did acknowledge that it would be prudent of him to secure strong allies in the vicinity, he would rather solve his problems on his own.

He never forgot the instance where all of the friends, allies and other friendly connections failed to bail the KNG out when the famed mech company became embroiled in a scandal.

As long as the threat surpassed a certain scope, no one was willing to stick out their necks to lend a hand to a beleaguered friend.

It was also for this reason that Ves did not plan to seek any long-term allies in this region of space. He shared little to no connection to anyone in the Chuko Republic. Sheer distance alone would cool any connections he made during his visit to the Redwell Province.

"It's good I have a fast fleet at my disposal. If nothing else, hardly any vessel can beat the Barracuda's pace."

Securing a powerful fleet ought to be a high priority to him. His current fleet possessed a very crucial mobility advantage that allowed them to outrun most enemies trying to corner them during their travels.

Considering that Gloriana started to look into whether she could obtain a factory ship for their grand expedition, Ves would not be able to rely on the same advantages in the future.

No matter how well the Hegemony built their technologically-advanced factory ships, the fundamental nature of this humongous ship class meant that it was a pipedream for these huge behemoths to outrun smaller ship classes.

Without any inherent advantages in mobility, Ves would just have to resort to building up his might.

This issue had been a thorny subject for Ves in the last couple of months. One of the biggest issues that Ves faced was whether the escort detail should consist of second-class mechs, third-class mechs or both.

Right now, Ves did not have the earning potential to support a large second-class mech force. He doubted that would change in the future. Only when he transitioned to designing and selling second-class mechs would he be able to bear the immense burden of supporting so many expensive mechs.

Yet what would remain of the Avatars of Myth? From the start, his personal mech force recruited a handful of native Brighters. They were highly capable of piloting third-class mechs, but transitioning to second-class mechs would require years, perhaps decades of training.

Not every Avatar would succeed in the transition.

This left the Avatars of Myth in an awkward state. He might find himself in the unenviable situation where he had to rely on his girlfriend to fund another outfit that could protect them a lot better than his own home-grown mech force!

For now, Ves still struggled to find a way to resolve these issues without harming his pride and the pride of the Avatars of Myth.

Having a Hexer as a girlfriend gave him a lot of headaches, that was for sure!

"I've been thinking about what we've been doing as well." Gavin spoke at the table. "Right now, we are not expanding the LMC's footprint at all. Shouldn't we do something to further our company's reach?"

"Maybe." Ves spoke. "The problem is the business climate in the Chuko Republic. No one is interested in facilitating access for a far-away mech company when they are more worried about keeping their heads above the water."

"You're right."

Ves deliberately visited an unstable and insecure state, so it was already a given that there wouldn't be any business opportunities on the table.

"The LMC will naturally expand once I begin expanding its mech catalog, Benny. The next generation is getting closer and closer. It might even arrive shortly after we return to the Bright Republic. That will be the period when I'll really start to pump out designs."

"Won't you need a design team for that? You recently lost one of your two subordinate mech designers. Only Ketis is left to assist in your design work."

Gavin hit the issue right on the mark. The lack of assistants was a sore point for Ves as he hadn't managed to expand his design team for a very long time.

"I'll be on the lookout for interesting mech designers who are willing to work for me." Ves eventually shrugged. "Hopefully I can find a couple of mech designers along the way who are willing to stick around for the long haul."

They added the finding trustworthy mech designers to augment his design team to their long list of objectives.

After they finished sharing their thoughts to each other, they began their new day by visiting one of the local black markets.

Underneath a tarnished and largely shuttered industrial district in the outskirts of Wilxyl, a bustling underground trade operation took place.

Getting there was a bit complicated. It wasn't as if Ves could directly fly there with his shuttle in the open.

They also couldn't approach the black market under full escort. Both the landbound mechs of the Battle Criers and the aerial mechs of the Dustravens attracted way too much attention.

This meant that Ves had to leave most of his protection detail behind. As Ves stepped inside an unmarked aircar, he only brought a limited retinue along this time.

Commander Cinnabar opted to stay behind to babysit his idle mechs, so Ves could only rely on Lucky, Nitaa and Commander Meivin for protection.

The latter looked a bit apologetic at these demands. "My apologies for all of these restrictions, but the black market that I'm taking you to don't enjoy government sanction."

"I understand." Ves casually waved his hand to brush aside the issue. "Black markets that operate under the noses of the government aren't really black markets in the first place. I hope the goods on offer at the place you're bringing me to will be interesting enough to justify the hassle."

"Oh, have no doubt about that, Mr. Larkinson. I dare say you'll have the opportunity to purchase plenty of valuables."

Though Nitaa had a lot of second thoughts about this trip, Ves remained calm. If worse came to worst, he could quickly don his custom Sparous Vize armor which Nitaa brought along in suitcase form. She herself had already donned

her combat armor as well so she was more than capable of fending off any sudden attacks.

The windows of the vehicle had turned completely dark, preventing the occupants from seeing where they traveled.

During the journey, the aircar they rode made a lot of detours before landing at an abandoned underground parking zone.

The group transferred to another aircar which followed another circular route before finally arriving at their real destination. Ves spotted easily over a hundred identical aircars in the abnormally barren and sterile underground parking zone.

"This place is kept as clean as possible in order to defeat any tracking measures." Commander Meivin mentioned before he passed them a number of robes stored in the aircar. "Wear these in order to hide your identities. It's best not to let anyone know you've been here."

They did as instructed.

Currently, the mercenary commander acted as their local guide. He led them towards a checkpoint where they underwent a very casual security check before they were let through.

Everyone immediately noticed the disturbance in the air. It was like they were all being massaged by invisible waves.

"This entire black market is subjected to a jamming field!" Gavin gasped.

Having spent a lot of time in various different jamming fields, Ves became very good at judging their strength. "This isn't a light jamming field. A lot of juice is being pumped into the jammers to keep this underground hall secure."

Meivin grinned. "I was serious when I said the government isn't involved. Only those we invite are privileged to enter this market."

Compared to the extraordinarily public black markets of the Reinald Republic, the one he had just entered was a lot quieter and less frequented.

Rather than a bazaar, Ves had the feeling he had entered an exclusive, high-class shopping venue. Only a handful of people browsed the small shops and stalls in the open. Most donned obscuring robes or other identity-concealing outfits to do their business.

Despite the lack of traffic, Ves immediately recognized a lot of valuable goods for sale. Visiting this black market may be a lot more fruitful than he thought!

"Meow!"

Even Lucky sensed a number of highly interesting exotics. His nose tingled with excitement!

Chapter 1352 Double Benefits

While Ves spotted various valuable wares, a lot of cheaper junk was for sale as well!

The place had the air of a flea market for distressed businessmen and other wealthy individuals. Each stall or store offered peculiar collections of goods that made Ves suspect that the owners simply cleaned out their vaults or offices and dumped them into the black market to raise some capital.

All of the sculptures, paintings and other works of art put on display had to come from somewhere.

None of the disguised figures threw a glance at these ornaments. In times of hardship, why would anyone want to spend their dwindling capital on useless status symbols?

"Art is the first to suffer during a period of deprivation." Gavin muttered.

"I'm not so sure about that, Benny. It is during the most difficult times that symbols become all the more important. Art can help unify a scattered people or keep hope alive."

"Well, tell that to all the fancy exotic-laden statues dumped in this underground market."

Ves smiled. "These gaudy or meaningless pieces of art only serve to satisfy the vanity of their owners. They are different from other forms of art that serve a societal function. The streets outside are filled with outpourings of emotions."

"You mean the graffiti plastered all over the walls of the abandoned buildings? All I saw was urban decay and a complete and utter neglect by the city government."

The two continued to argue with each other as they neared the closest stalls.

Ves found it refreshing to argue with Gavin. Despite their huge disparity in status, their common roots as well as their familiarity with each other made it so that his assistant didn't hesitate to voice his opinions.

Although there was a time and place for compliance and presenting a unified front, Ves always encouraged his gatekeeper to speak his mind. Good communication was essential in preventing any misunderstandings that might lead to a dysfunctional relationship.

As long as Gavin freely voiced his own opinions, Ves was much less likely to lose his grip on reality or make strange decisions.

If he pushed through with his choices regardless, at least he would do so knowing that he was doing something weird. Sometimes it got harder and harder for him to determine whether he was still acting normally at all.

"Meow."

"Oh? You're interested in this mineral, Lucky?"

Carrying his cat around almost defeated the purpose of their disguises. While Ves held Lucky underneath the dark and flowing robe he'd been issued, it wasn't every day that a visitor came along who brought a mechanical cat.

Well, Ves figured it was no big deal. He wouldn't be staying on Vindar VII for long. He already visited the three local mech designers he intended to have an exchange with. Other than shopping for curiosities, nothing here compelled him to stay.

To Lucky's disappointment, Ves declined to purchase the exotic shaped as a pockmarked yellow egg. The vendor greedily asked him to pay the equivalent of two billion bright credits.

He hated being ripped off! Ves didn't need to employ his spiritual senses to realize that the slimy and greedy salesman thought he was an easy mark!

Ves may be a mech designer, but he also sold mechs for a living. Although he couldn't really estimate the actual value of the egg-like mineral, it emanated very little energy, which meant it was likely a low-grade exotic.

If the Vendor demanded the equivalent of 2 million bright credits, then Ves would have said yes.

"Just let it go, Lucky. We'll find better stuff elsewhere."

"Meow!"

Though Lucky fussed and scratched underneath the robes, Ves resolutely turned away.

After passing over a few uninteresting stalls, he quickly found something of interest.

"Is that.. a shield generator?" Ves asked with some astonishment.

The bored seller perked up from his seat. "Why yes, dear sir! It is a modern, portable shield generator that is guaranteed to protect you from many threats! These devices are rarely sold outside of the heavily-regulated stores at Centerpoint!"

Ves inspected the shield generator and noted that it was not that different from his own. They shared a common origin. The same supplier likely sold a significant proportion of shield generators circulating in the Komodo Star Sector.

Since he possessed some familiarity with this type of device, he could immediately tell that it was an older model. Not only that, but its hidden charge indicator did not look very healthy.

"This shield generator is almost out of juice. There's only a five percent charge left." Ves flatly stated to the seller. "If the shield generator still comes with a decent amount of charge, then it shouldn't be languishing at your stall like a forgotten child."

The seller nervously laughed. "Hahaha, you have a sharp eye, foreigner."

Ves decided to apply his Spirituality to exert some pressure on the salesman. "This shield generator is almost worthless. It might be able to protect someone against small arms for a time, but even then its protection won't last. There are combat armors that offer much greater protection than this short-lasting gadget!"

"That's not true!" The seller dramatically protested. Evidently, the spiritual pressure exerted against the norm did not suppress his salesman instincts! "A shield generator can be an enormous life-saver in the right situations! It is much smaller and more concealable than wearing a conspicuous suit of combat armor! The utility of this shield generator is priceless in the right circumstances!"

"The key phrase here is right circumstances." Ves knocked his fist against the surface of the stall for emphasis. "What if I'm surrounded by a mob of rioters? What if a rifleman mech is aiming its humongous rifle at me? This ancient shield generator is only useful in an extremely limited set of circumstances!"

The two continued to argue over the merits of the shield generator for a few minutes. They began inserting price offers as well.

Eventually, Ves managed to negotiate the final price down to the equivalent of 553 million bright credits.

Ves did not even bother to pay attention to the local currency. He simply ordered Gavin take care of converting and transacting the money.

Once they concluded the trade, Ves walked away with a new shield generator in his pocket.

"Is that gadget truly worth paying the price of nine premium mechs?" Gavin asked with obvious skepticism. "I know enough about shield generators that they're a lot more valuable than the sum you paid, but its almost at the end of its life."

Ves only chuckled at that. "Hehe. This shield generator might be almost spent, but I might be able to breathe new life into this gadget."

The shield generator was an absolute steal! The seller should have obtained the device through irregular means, otherwise he wouldn't have sold it for such a cheap price!

During the bargaining, Ves quickly realized that the seller only possessed superficial information about shield generators. The man treated it as a finite, disposable protective device.

Once a shield generator ran out of energy, the device lost its value. The price that Ves had paid was close to what he might earn if he recycled the spent shield generator!

That was an enormous waste! If Ves proceeded to pull the shield generator apart and broke it down by material, a lot of active exotics incorporated in the device degraded enormously.

However, if Ves kept the shield generator intact and instead replaced its spent ultracompact battery with a new one, then much of the value of the device would be retained!

He could subsequently sell the shield generator for a fortune, but Ves wasn't stupid enough to do so. This was a shield generator! Aside from the one he received from Master Olson, Ves never managed to get his hands on a second one!

"One man's trash is another man's treasure." Ves satisfyingly gushed.

As long as he scrounged up the materials to cobble up an ultracompact battery, he had an extra means of possession.

The only issue that weighed on his mind was who he should lend the shield generator to if he managed to replace its charge.

Lucky didn't need it. The shield generator would completely ruin Lucky's adorable shape. This alone was a reason to rule out his cat!

What about Gavin? The man would surely appreciate the gift. Out of every person on his staff, Gavin was by far the most vulnerable because of his civilian background.

Yet Ves decisively crossed him off the list as well. As much as Ves appreciated Gavin's advice and friendship, his executive assistant was ultimately expendable.

If the worst ever happened, Ves might shed a tear at Gavin's funeral. However, as callous as it sounded, he would easily move on from the loss.

Obtaining another executive assistant to replace Gavin's job shouldn't be too difficult. Ves just had to find a trustworthy person among the crowd.

So if Lucky and Gavin fell out of consideration, who should he give it to instead?

Ketis emerged at the forefront of his thought. Unlike Gavin, Ves really didn't want her to die. He cared a lot about her and he wanted her to be safe.

Right now, she was far away from him. In addition, she wouldn't stick around forever. Ves felt very conflicted at the thought of gifting her a fully-working shield generator!

It was far more reasonable to issue the shield generator to Nitaa. As his loyal Kinner bondswoman, keeping his bodyguard alive effectively meant keeping himself alive as well.

Yet... why give away the shield generator at all? Why not make use of it himself? As far as he knew, nothing prevented him from wearing two shield generators under his clothes at a time!

Though the shield generators wouldn't work at the same time, using one after another effectively doubled his window of protection!

"Brilliant!" Ves lit up his eyes.

He could never protect himself too much! With all of the danger lurking in the shadows, Ves shouldn't let this opportunity pass him by. As much as he cared about the others, he was under no illusion that he would always be the primary target!

After obtaining this fantastic bargain, Ves eagerly browsed the wares for additional hidden gems.

Sadly, his hopes quickly dashed as he encountered an unending selection of artwork, useless trinkets and other knick knacks of little practical value.

Perhaps poignantly to Ves, he came face to face with a lot of trinkets celebrating the past glories of mech designers. Commemorative mech miniatures, old trophies and other awards all alluded to Vindar's once-lively mech industry.

Now, most of those mech designers went bankrupt, got fired or still presided over a husk of their mech companies. A golden trophy for winning a past mech design competition no longer held as much value as insuring one's basic needs.

"Mech designers are in a pretty bad shape in the Chuko Republic." Gavin remarked. "When money is easy to come by, a lot of mechs get sold. Now that hardly anyone can afford to buy a new mech, what's the point? Only those who are lucky to work for the government or military are still secure."

"That's the nature of doing business. It's inherently intertwined with risk." Ves sagely replied. "Mech designers are better off in this regard. They might lose all of their assets, but they can never be robbed of their knowledge. As long as they moved elsewhere, it's not impossible for them to start anew."

This was easier said than done. Foreign mech designers were hardly welcome in many states. Most Novices and Apprentices would never be able to make it as independent entrepreneurs.

Only Journeymen and higher enjoyed better opportunities. Regardless where they went, a high-ranking mech designer always had a use. Even Ves harbored some ambitions of hiring one, though keeping them loyal and subordinate to him was another problem entirely.

Of course, even if he gained the employment of a valuable Chukan mech designer, he still had to smuggle them out! With all surface-to-orbit traffic

under the complete control of the local authorities, he could forget about sneaking a couple of mech designers out of Vindar VII!

Chapter 1353 Crisis Managemen

Ves spent hours trawling through the underground black market. He found a lot of past glories of once-successful mech designers, business magnates, famed artists, entertainment stars and more.

A plethora of historical mementos of Vindar VII's once glorious high society turned into cheap and disposable souvenirs.

None of these trophies, awards and other aesthetically beautiful but functionally useless objects aroused his interests.

He focused his attention solely on the useful and practical items among the trash.

Unfortunately, he was far from the only buyer who trawled the black markets for hidden gems. Savvy buyers who perused the wares much earlier than Ves already picked up the most obvious treasures with considerable utility or resale value.

The goods that remained failed to impress Ves at all.

So far, he only obtained the nearly-spent shield generator as a bargain, and he couldn't put it to use immediately. He still had to find a way to cobble up an expensive ultracompact battery to truly revitalize his second-hand gadget.

"It might be your stuff that would be put up for sale one day." Gavin muttered.

"Unlikely." Ves shook his head underneath his hood. "All of the mech designers who got ruined are mostly the low-ranking ones. Seniors are still well-off while Journeymen can also find employment from the government if they don't have anywhere else to go. It's just that a couple of mech designers such as Old Man Terrence are too proud to abandon their past accomplishments."

It was not as if mech designers literally starved on the streets. The demand for domestically-produced mechs had simply dried up. Mech buyers were short on money and did not wish to squander their dwindling reserves on mechs made more expensive due to the scarcity of materials.

With so many enterprising mech designers running out of business, they had no choice but to find alternative employment. Working for the government or larger mech companies who still managed to make ends meet had always been reliable refuges for mech designers with at least some level of skill.

These kinds of transitions already took place in better economies such as that of the Bright Republic. The only difference between his home state and the Chuko Republic was that the latter's bar for success had been raised to a ridiculous height.

In this awful business climate, hardly any Novice or Apprentice could keep their independent businesses aloft!

"Maybe you have a point, boss. Mechs designed by Novices and Apprentices always compete on price. In an economy where the supply of raw materials are constrained, their only advantage of offering cost-effective mechs is gone. Who wants to buy an inferior mech that practically costs the same of a superior mech designed by someone better?"

"The availability and affordability of materials is critical." Ves emphatically noted. "As long as the materials required to produce a mech are unavailable or priced out of proportion, it isn't viable for a mech manufacturer to produce their mechs."

"I bet when scarcity hit the Chuko Republic, the bigger mech manufacturers probably managed to make a deal with the surviving suppliers. As for the smaller mech companies..."

"They're too far down the line." Ves noted. "Even the troubled raw material suppliers seek certainty and stability in troubling times. They don't care about the small fry. Maintaining favorable relations with a Senior or well-performing Journeyman is far more important than keeping thousands of inconsequential Apprentices afloat."

The harder it got, the more ability and competence mattered. Only in a prosperous and bountiful mech market offered enough space for low-ranking mech designers to do business.

Ever since he founded his company, the LMC operated in a relatively good business climate. Even during the height of the recent war, the Bright Republic's robust infrastructure ensured reasonably stable distribution of vital materials.

This was to the credit of the Bright Republic, whose long history of wars had forced the government to invest in various measures that ensured the continued flow of goods and materials to Bentheim even with the Vesians wreaking havoc on the Brighter supply lines.

Yet what if the supply of materials dried up to a much greater extent? What if prices of the materials that remained for sale multiplied by two? Could the LMC still stay in business in such an unfavorable climate?

No.

Even if the LMC mostly sold premium mechs at generous profits, it was exactly the upper end the mech market that declined the most!

With every outfit and mech buyer facing diminishing reserves of money, they could hardly afford to splurge on expensive, high-performing mechs.

From what Ves had observed of the Chuko Republic's anemic mech market, the most predominant mechs sold these days fell into the budget category.

Consumers no longer indulged in luxury. Subjective taste made way for pure practicality. Mech models aimed at maximizing the price-to-performance ratio in an inexpensive package dominated Chuko's mech market.

The sad thing about it was that most mechs sold in the Chuko Republic consisted of imported mechs!

States that didn't suffer from Chuko's instability and deteriorating market circumstances still retained their strong economic advantages. Foreign mech manufacturers eagerly swooped into Chuko like hungry vultures and outcompeted the faltering domestic mech companies!

Having observed all of these interactions and seen the consequences of failure through all of the goods put up for sale, Ves fell into an increasingly contemplative mood.

He intended to visit different locales in order to learn. Already, the Chuko Republic taught him many valuable lessons.

The one he grappled with right now was the importance of preparing for adverse economic circumstances.

"My company isn't set up to survive a disaster that has struck the Chuko Republic." Ves morosely declared.

"To be honest, we've only ever experienced growth, boss. There has never been a period where our growth has declined. The worst periods we've lived through was when our sales started stalling."

"That's nothing compared to the calamities that have befallen the Chukan mech companies."

Both Ves and Gavin saw the need to shore up the LMC's reserves so that it could continue to operate during extremely difficult times.

"I'll raise some suggestions to the folks back home." Gavin muttered. "While I don't think the Bright Republic will deteriorate to the level of the Chuko Republic, it's best to take some precautions while times are still good. It will be far too late to implement new measures while we are in the middle of a crisis period."

Ves waved his hand, signalling his assent. "It's a bit irresponsible for a company as large and significant as mine to overlook proper crisis management. It's evident that a lot of mech companies on Vindar VII haven't done that enough."

To be honest, the implications did not concern him too much. If the LMC ever shuttered due to catastrophic circumstances, Ves would still be okay. His ability as a Journeyman guaranteed that he'd be able to regain what he lost and surpass his old accomplishments.

The only requirement to do so was to remain free and unfettered from any existing shackles. The Chuko Republic experienced such a severe brain drain that they strongly held onto their existing talent.

If Ves ever got caught up in such a net, he could forget about starting his business anew!

He wouldn't be immune to these circumstances even if he started to operate from an expeditionary fleet. There may be times during his upcoming grand expedition where his fleet might stumble into a region with enormous troubles.

Keeping his expeditionary fleet under his control would be a major challenge. He also had to take into account that the regional business climate may become so unfavorable that his operations would have to keep running at a deficit.

Planning for these circumstances could make the difference between a successful expedition and total failure.

As Ves continued to weigh the additional preparations he needed to do to shore up the grand expedition, Fe Nitaa suddenly bumped him with her armored hand.

"Sir, I've detected something critical at the shop ahead of us. It's an item that might prove very vital to you in the future."

He followed her subtle direction to what appeared to be a gaudy golden figurine of a human DNA strand. "What's so special about this ornament?"

"The smell of it is unusual, sir. Upon further study, I believe it is a one-time receiver from.. the cult. These receivers are often handed to moles in deep cover."

Ves widened his eyes. The cult in this case could only mean the Five Scrolls Compact!

"Will you be able to use this receiver?" He whispered back.

"I'll only be able to determine if it has received a message. As for interpreting the contents, it's unlikely that I'll be able to overcome the encryption."

"Then what use is the receiver?"

"For objects of this nature, security is paramount. It works through very different principles from ordinary receivers. I doubt you'll be able to detect anything amiss when you point your multiscanner at it. The only cost to this disguise is that it will only be able to receive a single short message before it no longer works. The cult therefore only passes these objects on to agents planted in very critical positions with orders to act normal for years or even decades. Not even the cult itself retains any records on their moles in order to ensure maximum confidentiality!"

That was quite a scary method! Who knew if someone important secretly worked for the Compact?

"I see. If the cult takes so many precautions to keep their moles secure, then they won't send anything but the most critical messages to these one-time receivers. For example, the arrival of reinforcements followed by the mobilization of many hidden assets spread throughout the star sector."

The message sent to the one-time receiver might carry a different message entirely. Yet if the receiver remained dormant for an entire decade, only to become active shortly afterwards, then that might signal something ominous!

The envoys of the mythical Ruined Temples may have arrived at the Nyxian Gap!

"Alright, you've convinced me." He said. "Let's go buy it. If it is truly issued by the cult, then it may hold more surprises."

Obtaining the ornament depicting a golden DNA strand posed no challenge to Ves. Because of its lack of utility, Ves managed to snag it for the equivalent of fifty-thousand bright credits.

Even then, he probably paid at least three times its apparent worth. The seller grinned gleefully at earning a hefty profit.

Ves passed the object on to Nitaa, who had to retract the armored gauntlets of her combat armor in order to study the ornament by touch.

"Anything?"

"It's definitely related. I'm sure. As for what else this receiver holds, I'm afraid I can't say."

"That's fine. I'll take it to my lab and see if I can find anything noteworthy."

He didn't have much hopes of finding anything in the scan results. If the Five Scrolls Compact readily issued these items to their moles, then they were probably capable of defeating nearly every scanner in existence!

Only a nose as remarkable as Nitaa's had been able to sniff it out! Not even Ves with his spiritual senses had been able to sense anything amiss!

In fact, Ves had scoured more than half of the black market by now and hadn't found a single object that reacted to his Spirituality!

Ves encountered very few exotics for sale. Most exotics in the collections of mech designers possessed very high resale value if they hadn't been processed.

His hopes of stumbling another sample of the P-stone began to fade. Perhaps the only reason why he hadn't given up entirely was because the P-stone's true value was not apparent on the surface. Most people mistook it as a marginal low-grade exotic with extremely dubious value.

Sadly, after another hour of trawling the offerings, Ves made no more gains.

The shield generator and the one-time Compact receiver had been his only gains from this visit.

"I've seen enough. Let's return." Ves instructed.

Chapter 1354 Hidden Receiver

Once Ves had his fill of the black market, he and his group left through the same method of shuttling between a number of blacked-out aircars.

Nothing amiss took place, though Ves half-expected something to happen. Nitaa and Lucky constantly remained on high alert in case the aircar brought them somewhere dangerous.

Ves especially trusted Lucky as the aircar's attempt to blind its occupants failed to work on the cat. If his pet wanted to glimpse outside, he could simply phase through the structure of the vehicle.

Fortunately, Commander Meivin's promises stayed true. Ves encountered no attempted robberies or extortion or anything like that. The black markets on

Vindar VII couldn't afford to scare away the few foreign buyers who were brave enough to frequent their sites and inject some extremely valuable hard currency in the local economy.

Ves had money. A lot of money. He also showed his willingness to spend his fortune. That made him a king among beggars in the Chuko Republic.

The way Commander Meivin regarded Ves had obviously increased by a few notches. Spending the equivalent of half a billion bright credits on a single transaction spoke volumes about his foreign employer's financial strength!

The Vindar Dustravens snagged a loaded client!

From the way Commander Meivin looked so satisfied, Ves was sure that the Dustravens received a commission for the money he spent at the venues he was brought to. This was already to his expectations.

As long as everyone amply benefited from the current arrangements, they wouldn't be tempted to resort to more unpleasant options to earn a big payday.

Ves knew that this was simply the price of getting in bed with a local snake.

Once everyone finally returned to the hotel, Ves went up to his room and called up Nitaa to study the DNA-strand figurine in greater detail.

Lucky sniffed the hand-sized ornament with a curious expression.

"Meow."

"It's okay, Lucky. Your nose is just geared in a different way." Ves soothed his disappointed cat as he configured the settings of his Vulcaneye.

Right now, Lucky covered the entire hotel room in his ECM field. This posed a lot of hindrances to his multiscanner's operation, but different from inferior devices, his Vulcaneye could pierce through the jamming as long as Ves held it very close and dialed up its power.

In the meantime, Nitaa kept turning the disguised receiver in her hands as she tried to decipher its secrets.

No luck.

"I really can't tell anything about this statue aside from what I've already determined." She said with a downcast expression. "The only other guess I can make is that it may have been designed to be identifiable to people with empowered noses like mine."

Ves agreed with her assessment. "That is a very strong possibility. Even if the Compact has done its best to erase any records of their hidden moles, they still need some way of tracing them somehow. I think it's quite ingenious since I doubt even the MTA or the CFA developed means of tracing these mysterious scents."

This also meant that they might be incurring some risks in carrying the ornament around. Who knew if they'd be approached by a Compact agent one day who held the mistaken belief that Ves and Nitaa were hidden assets of the cult!

Nonetheless, as long as carrying the one-time receiver did not lead to immediate hostilities, Ves found the risks acceptable.

The object represented his canary in the coalmine! As long as it started hooting, they would know that something drastic had changed.

Otherwise, by the time Ves realized that he should launch his grand expedition, the Compact bloodhounds might have already marked him as a person of interest!

That reminded him of another priority for this trip. He should really look into obtaining more geril spice. In fact, Ves wanted to do more than buying the finished product. He desired to obtain the unique plants the Nyxians processed into their trademark pungent spice!

"Will geril spice be able to obscure the smell of this trinket?" Ves curiously asked. "It might be prudent to hide it from your former compatriots. I only want it for its ability to receive a critical message."

"It's worth a try."

Ves retrieved his packet of geril spice from his pocket and sprinkled it over the figurine. Though it looked rather silly of him to flavor an inedible object, Fe Nitaa looked optimistic.

"I think it worked. The spice won't stay fresh when exposed to open air, but as long as it remains effective, I can't distinguish the hidden receiver anymore."

This was a welcome development. With one less worry on their minds, they continued to study the ornament.

Sadly, they made no further gains. His System-bought Vulcaneye scanned the object at close range in multiple modes, but all of the data he received indicated that it was nothing but a piece of decoration made with slightly-valuable materials.

His multiscanner detected absolutely no circuitry, crystals or other weird objects that might be responsible for receiving a transmitted message. The object presented a very interesting puzzle to Ves. His knowledge on signals and communication was too shallow to even begin to fathom how the object functioned as a signal receiver.

After they stopped their investigation, he waved Nitaa to the side while calling Gavin to his room.

As Ves sat while idly playing with Lucky, Gavin took his seat at the couch opposite to his own.

"What's up, boss?"

"With everything I've observed so far, I think it's time to fill you in on the details of one of my more ambitious plans."

Ves began to enlighten his assistant of his grand expedition. Though Gavin might have picked up some clues just by interacting so much with his boss, this was the first time he heard of something so incredibly significant!

"This is.. this is crazy!"

"It's not as outlandish as it sounds, Benny. What I'm doing is no different from what the spaceborn clans have been doing for millenia. I'm simply doing it on a temporary basis."

"Even so, abandoning a fixed and stable career in the Komodo Star Sector for the unknown doesn't make any sense!"

It did make sense. Just not to someone working on incomplete information like Gavin.

Even if Ves did not communicate the threat of the Five Scrolls Compact to Gloriana, she still bought his excuses of accelerating his progression by experiencing new cultures.

"Look, I've already made up my mind on this decision. I've also filled Gloriana who has already begun to make her own preparations on her end."

Seeing how it was hopeless to persuade Ves from changing his course, Gavin moved on to the consequences.

"The LMC back home won't be the same without your presence." He stated.

"Mech companies are highly defined by their lead designers. Unless you can find a mech designer with stature to hold the fort, the LMC's growth will inevitably be hampered."

"I've already said that it's fine. We can compensate for the slowdown in growth in the Komodo Star Sector by fostering growth elsewhere. That's one of the purposes of the grand expedition."

"I'm not sure if you'll be able to succeed. You're still a foreigner, after all." Gavin pointed out.

Ves smirked. "I think the unique advantages that my mechs have to offer will definitely appeal to customers regardless of their origins or cultural backgrounds."

They began to discuss the greater implications to the company if Ves really brought a significant chunk of people along.

"The company will be split up if you do this, boss. The employees who volunteer to join your expedition will develop in a different manner than the employees you left behind. Will the latter still hold any admiration towards you when you've been so distant for so long?"

Ves casually waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Most of the LMC's workers aren't critical. They are cogs in the machine. If a couple of cogs have turned rusty, we can easily replace them with new ones."

"Is that how you see your employees? As cogs in a machine?"

"I'm a mech designer, Benny. As long as someone is replaceable, they're not worth excessive consideration. If my employees get grumpy just because the boss of the company isn't physically present, then why are they working for the LMC in the first place?"

"You.. it sounds as if you don't care about the LMC anymore."

Ves shook his head in denial. "I still care, but it's not as critical to my development as you think. As long as the company falls in line, it is still a valuable asset."

He needed to make a lot of money if he wanted to fund his future research and development projects. The only caveat was that the money did not have to come from the LMC.

Gavin still looked disturbed. He could foresee the enormous amounts of damage the grand expedition might do to the LMC's cohesion.

As someone who was involved in the company at its earlier stages, Gavin possessed a lot of emotional attachment to the LMC!

"If you're gone from the LMC, you still need to leave someone behind at its headquarters to represent your interests."

"Calsie has been doing a good job so far."

"She might not be enough." Gavin warned. "Even though she's my friend, she is far from ready to assume the highest post. She has made her doubts pretty clear to me during our private discussions. You'll have to find someone else to take the helm of the portion of the LMC that you are leaving behind."

That was a difficult issue. Other than Calsie, Ves could think of no other person to lead his mech company in his absence.

"Um, what about you, Benny?"

"Hahahaha! I'll be honest. I never thought about sitting on the big chair. I don't have what it takes to inspire confidence and to ensure stability over the company!"

Well, that left Ves with very little names aside from the senior retainers sent by the Larkinson Family.

Just as Ves was contemplating some alternatives, Gavin made a strange suggestion.

"Why not place a Larkinson at the top? There are so many Larkinsons in your family that have the leadership ability and experience to preside over a

company. While they might not be up to speed on how to run a mech company, they can always learn on the job. The most important factor is that they have the spine to be in charge of thousands of employees and billions of credits worth of assets."

That caused Ves to interrupt his other thoughts. Put a Larkinson in charge?

If it was in the past, the idea would have repelled him. The LMC was his baby, and he did not want his family members swoop in and freeloader off his hard work and accomplishments.

Yet as the LMC continued to expand, his ability to influence the company continued to diminish. It had grown too big for him to implement arbitrary decisions and expect the entire company to play along.

His extremely sudden decision to go on a grand expedition in the future was exactly the kind of development that might fracture the LMC!

This made it all the more important for him to place someone trustworthy but also authoritative enough to hold the LMC together when its lead designer merrily began his decades-long adventure.

In addition, ever since Ves advanced to Journeyman, he began to value his own progression over the growth of his company. Although the two were intricately related, Ves would not face total ruin if the LMC ended up mismanaged.

"I think your suggestion has a lot of merit." Ves slowly said. "Try and come up with a list of Larkinsons with the requisite leadership or business experience that can take over as director or CEO."

Obviously, Ves did not completely think through what his departure from the star sector would mean to the company he left behind. He founded the Living Mech Corporation to help him fulfill his dream of propagating a different kind of mech.

If he failed to manage the upcoming changes properly, all of his previous efforts in building up his company might go to waste!

Chapter 1355 High Maintenance

Ves and Gavin held a very fruitful discussion about maintaining the stability and continuity of the LMC if the grand expedition ever took place.

Obviously, the LMC likely wouldn't be as it once were, but perhaps that was for the better. By slowly implementing multiple policies over the following years, Ves might be able to minimize the shock of the sudden departure of the lead designer.

"Right now, the LMC is very much centered around you." Gavin noted. "That's not inherently bad because it simply reflects the truth that mech companies are all about their mech designers."

The lack of mech designers under the LMC's employ had been a consistent weak point for Ves. When he left the Komodo Star Sector in order to go on his grand expedition, he would not only deprive the LMC of the personal presence of its founder and CEO, but also its sole lead designer!

Naturally, Ves could still remain in touch via comm calls and remote conferencing and the like.

However, time and time again it has been proved that running a company completely by remote was not a healthy development for the long term. This made it all the more important that he placed competent surrogates in the positions he left behind.

In essence, this not only meant he had to prioritize the director, but also the presiding mech designer at the Mech Nursery!

Right now, Ves could at least resort to promoting a proven Larkinson as the director of his company. Yet who could fill the huge void he left behind in his paltry design team?

Ketis would have been perfect for the position. Bright, resourceful and loyal, she was the perfect candidate to head all mech design-related matters that needed to be addressed back home.

Yet she had made her opinion about returning to the Swordmaidens abundantly clear. Her attachment to Ves and the LMC could never overcome her devotion to her fellow sisters.

It would have been great if the Swordmaidens moved to Cloudy Curtain...

The idea suddenly interrupted his train of thought. What if it was possible to take the Swordmaidens out of the frontier and place them in civilized space?

Such an operation would not be easy. Civilized space repelled pirates for a very good reason. Smuggling in Ketis might have been okay as she was just a single person with a very good counterfeit identity. Smuggling in hundreds of slaving, robbing pirates was another thing altogether!

Even if Ves somehow found a way to forge the identities of so many women who popped up out of nowhere, would they even agree? The Swordmaidens explicitly fought for the daughters of the frontier who lived much worse lives than the women in civilized space. Their central mission was incompatible to moving to civilized space.

The only way the Swordmaidens might willingly decide to accept the offer to move to civilized space was if they were no longer able to survive in the frontier.

Whether this would happen or not depended on how well Commander Dise managed her outfit's relations with the local pirate powers of the Faris Star Region.

Ves mentally put this unrealistic option aside. He couldn't rely on lucky breaks to retain Ketis in his company. He would have to find someone else who could

take his place and address any acute design-related problems at the Mech Nursery.

After swapping a few ideas with Gavin, the executive assistant came with another surprising idea.

"Why not resort to your family again, boss? Aren't your relatives in the process of raising a few bright seeds to potentially inherit your mantle?"

The suggestion had some merit, but Ves quickly shook his head. "The young Larkinsons being nurtured as mech designers are way too juvenile. Even if they can graduate from a good mech university in time, they'll be way too green to handle most of the problems that might pop up from time to time."

"They can always call you if they need your help."

"That's true, but I'm not always available. What if I end up in an anomalous zone? What if the expeditionary fleet is being pursued by pirates? A lot can happen when I'm away from the Mech Nursery. The mech designers that I've left behind will have to be adaptable and resourceful enough to handle all kinds of difficult technical problems."

Perhaps one way to solve this problem was to feed some candies to the young seeds. With brighter minds, they could breeze through their mech design courses and maybe even receive additional nurturing.

Yet the lack of struggle in learning might breed arrogance and complacency in the seeds. Ves encountered plenty of spoiled brats in his profession to realize that it was better if mech designers were tested beforehand than if they were thrown head-first in a situation where mistakes could plunge the LMC into ruin!

Someone like his old friend Carlos would have been a great choice. Hardened by his wartime experience, his friend possessed a much greater practical grasp on mech design than any fresh graduate.

Yet that was not an option in this case.

Ves sighed. He still had a decade to address this problem, so his current lack of choices did not reflect the future.

"Let's shelve this issue for later. We might not have a dearth of candidates when the time comes to make a decision. Is there anything else you believe we need to address?"

"Hmm..." Gavin thought for a moment. In truth, he still worried about many issues, but most of those problems could be solved by others. Only a few required special attention. "You've already thought about most of the critical issues, but what about your destination?"

"I've already selected some options, but I haven't made up my mind yet." Ves admitted. "There are too many choices, to be honest. Many star sectors in the galactic rim have their own distinct inclinations. It's too difficult to make a choice right now."

Star clusters usually consisted of multiple varied star sectors. It was quite rare to see a homogenous star cluster unless a powerful first-rate state gobbled everything up and turned it into their own playground.

Most star sectors developed rather independently from each other. While the Komodo Star Sector lacked a distinguishing trait due to its relative youth, other star sectors may be different.

With a lot more history under their belt, older star sectors already developed a lot of distinctive characteristics.

Each of them offered very interesting circumstances for him to focus his exploration towards.

For example, one star sector might be filled with religious states, while another had fully converted to the bestial supremacy movement.

The mechs designed from these eclectic states all inherited some of the characteristics of these distinct cultures. Ves mentally salivated at the thought of witnessing a huge variety of strange and unusual mechs.

Just as he began to mention some of his favorite options, a knock sounded at the door. Ves ordered Lucky to deactivate his ECM field before commanding the door to slide open.

Fe Nitaa entered the room with a somewhat troubling expression. "My apologies, sir. Miss Gloriana Wodin called. She is quite insistent on speaking with you this instant."

"Is it urgent?"

His bodyguard shook her head but merely repeated her words. "She is quite insistent."

That must be quite an understatement if Ves gauged Gloriana correctly. He helplessly waved his hand. "Let's resume this discussion later, Gavin. Go ahead and inform Calsie of my plan. She will have to prepare the LMC for the upcoming transition as well."

"Will do, boss. You're really putting us in a difficult spot, though. The LMC would be much better off if you stayed behind."

"A mech company's strength is determined by the strength of their lead designers, Benny. If there is an opportunity for me to progress faster in a sustainable fashion, I won't hesitate to take it. The next few decades may be challenging, but the payoff will be more than worth it for myself and the company."

"By that time, many of the workers who joined the LMC at the start will have retired by then." Gavin morosely muttered.

His remark reflected the lack of understanding between normal people and mech designers. As a Journeyman, Ves had already crossed the extraordinary threshold and therefore became increasingly more inscrutable. Even his assistant, who had spent a long time by his side, couldn't figure him out sometimes!

This problem would only exacerbate as Ves continued to progress and distance himself from his normal human roots.

Once Gavin and Nitaa left the room, he accepted Gloriana's thirty-seventh call attempt.

The woman that appeared looked grumpy. And gorgeous. Dressed in a body-hugging white sweater that accentuated her slenderness and a skirt that showed off her delicate legs, his 'girlfriend' immediately appealed to him in a very primal way.

"Gloriana." He began. "You look.. pretty."

"Oh? Just pretty?" Glorian twirled a lustrous lock of her raven hair. "Is that the extent of what I deserve?"

"You're gorgeous! If you weren't in front of me as a projection, I would have embraced you by now!"

"Hihihi! That's better!"

After a bit of small talk, they settled down. The reason why Gloriana called was because she finally received some news about the promises she made.

"I've been looking into how to obtain a factory ship with the specifications we need." She began with a serious tone. "The Wodin Dynasty owns stock in many different businesses spread through the Hegemony. We have close ties to a number of shipbuilding companies and have commissioned them to build many of my dynasty's starships. The only problem is..."

"Factory ships are expensive. And complicated."

Gloriana nodded. "Exactly. As much as I want to commission the best, I don't have the money to afford one. Even if I contribute to numerous mech design projects in the next ten years, I still won't be able to pay off more than a tenth of the cost!"

"We don't need the best. As long as they are properly built, we can always upgrade them later. Also, we don't have to commission a second-class factory ship from your home state. It's a lot more affordable to commission a third-class factory ship so that—"

"—NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT! I WILL NOT TRAVEL AROUND WITH YOU IN A SHABBY RUST BUCKET!"

"..."

Ves was afraid of this. Gloriana's perfectionist tendencies had cropped up in the worst time!

"Gloriana... unless your Wodin Dynasty helps with the financing, there's no way we can obtain a good ship. I've seen the prices the shipbuilding companies charge for this class of vessels. Why not look for cheaper alternatives such as buying a second-hand factory ship?"

"No! Don't speak nonsense, Ves! I will not have our time together be ruined by inadequate facilities and equipment breakdowns! Our factory ship will be our flagship and our home for the next couple of decades! Our children will grow up running through the halls!"

"Err.. kids?" Ves became stumped.

Wasn't this too fast?!

"We owe it to our cute little children to provide the best nurturing environment!"

As Ves still puzzled over the mention of kids, Gloriana already moved on as if this issue wasn't in question!

"Don't worry, Ves. I don't expect you to be able to help me in the financing. I can manage on my own, I think. I've been sounding out my parents and the rest of the Wodin Dynasty for a potential deal. With my potential, I'm sure I can get them to agree to an accommodation. The only concern I have is that they might make some problematic demands."

Factory ships were expensive, so even the Wodin Dynasty wouldn't be able to shrug off their cost. Even if Gloriana was a part of the family, there were rules she needed to abide by. No one was allowed to squander the dynasty's fortunes!

"Please don't make too many promises." Ves pleaded. "We don't need all the latest toys and whistles!"

His girlfriend completely ignored his words! "You don't have to worry about anything, Ves! If everything goes well, the shipbuilding company will begin construction of our fantastic new factory ship in a couple of years! Our new vessel will put all the other privately-owned factory ships in the Hegemony to shame!"

Chapter 1356 Growing Risk

Ves let out an exasperated sigh as he ended his call with Gloriana. His 'girlfriend' showed almost no regard to his input! It was as if only her opinion counted!

"She's so high maintenance." He lamented.

He predicted that this would become a recurring problem. Ves should feel lucky that Gloriana at least didn't impose unattainable demands such as trying to obtain a first-class factory ship built by the MTA or a first-rate superstate!

In addition, even if Gloriana asked for much, right now she did not place any expectations on Ves to help her pay for her expenses! As a Hexer, she already assumed the role of the primary earner!

In essence, even though she was a high-maintenance girlfriend, she essentially paid for herself!

Ves shouldn't have anything to complain about. Yet why did he feel awful? As a man, he really felt diminished in front of Gloriana!

If he earned enough money to pay for the factory ship, then he wouldn't be bowing his head in front of her all the time!

"I have to do something about this in the future." Ves slammed his fist against his palm. "I can't keep leeching off her money all the time!"

Designing third-class mechs wouldn't cut it in the long term. Even if he sold billions of them over the next half century, he would still be unable to catch up to his girlfriend!

If Ves wanted to make the really big bucks, he would have to venture into designing second-class mechs at some point.

"I should start studying their design principles." He determined after some thought. "Although it's not going to be easy for me to become familiar with the properties of second-class mechs, the earlier I begin my familiarization, the sooner I can take off in this entirely different class of mech market."

He added yet another goal in his long list of objectives he had to fulfill. The amount of design projects he would have to complete in order to shorten his to-do list became quite burdensome!

Designing a complete collection of third-class mechs already demanded a lot of time, but adding a whole raft of second-class mech designs on top of that threatened to overwhelm his agenda!

If he wanted to design the largest amount of mechs in the least time possible, Ves needed to prioritize the nurturing of a large and robust design team!

Yet where could he obtain the subordinate mech designers that could make up such a vital group?

So far, Ves possessed a rather mixed relationship in the mech industry. His Class IX design philosophy, his past public antics along with his Devil Tongue nickname already turned him into an unpalatable figure!

If not for his astounding and remarkable effects of his design philosophy, Ves might not have any chance to attract other mech designers!

"It's too bad I haven't been able to buy any mech designers from the Kinner Tribe." He rubbed his chin. "Even if I did, they generally won't amount to anything anyway."

The education system of the Kinner Tribe firmly emphasized quantity rather than quality.

The Kinnners in general already made for poor mech designers due to their lack of creativity and ingenuity. Combined with the way they were raised, hardly any Kinnners managed to advance to Journeyman, let alone the higher ranks!

Even slaves in spirit if not in name had their limits!

The special properties often popped up in his mind recently. So far, the Kinnners he hired or bought at Bloodstone all performed to his satisfaction.

Fe Nitaa and Michael Crindon already served as his additional left and right arms. Their addition into his staff considerably improved his personal and virtual security presence.

As for the Battle Criers, Ves called up Commander Hugin Cinnabar to his hotel room to discuss their employment.

"How have your Battle Criers been faring so far under my service?"

"It's a bit more quiet than we are used to, but that is not a bad thing, Mr. Larkinson." The red-bearded man replied seriously. "Overall, we like what we see, but we haven't experienced enough to make up our minds. There are some Battle Criers who are in favor of working for you on a permanent basis, but there are also doubters in my rank who are holding out for a better employer."

"I'm sure that will change at the end of this trip." Ves confidently smiled. "Is there anything you want to say?"

The Kinner mercenary commander shrugged. "Nothing much. I do appreciate the trust you put into us. Despite being Kinnners, we've dealt with plenty of employers who mistrusted us or think their judgement is better. I'm very grateful that you've left most of the operational decisions to me. My men won't easily listen to other people's orders."

Ves hadn't done anything exceptional in this regard. Commander Cinnabar was an experienced and competent mercenary commander, so Ves did not hesitate to delegate every decision concerning his mech security detail to the Kinner leader.

"How are the two Ingvar siblings doing so far in your service?"

Imon and Casilla Ingvar still remained on the Ion Tracker high up in orbit. As spaceborn mech pilots, they played no role on the surface.

The same applied to Commander Cinnabar as well, but he fell back to coordinating the escort detail while staying close.

The Kinner grinned. "Casella has been adjusting pretty well. The woman is a lot humbler than what I expected out of noble brats. She's got a smart head as well and learns quickly. It's a shame she's rather stiff. Despite her willingness to adjust, she still hasn't let go of her highborn roots."

"What about Imon Ingvar?"

The mention of the male Ingvar caused the commander to grimace. "He's adjusted less than well. He's always dragging his heels whenever we give him an assignment. Casella has tried to persuade her brother to behave numerous times, but she hasn't managed to get the stubborn kid to adjust his snobbish attitude."

"Keep working on it." Ves responded. "If we ever stumble across trouble in the coming months, just throw the Ingvars head-first into the fighting. If Imon happens to survive the encounter, I'm sure he'll have a much higher appreciation of your Battle Criers and a much better assessment of his own strength."

"You sure about that?"

"I hired them to protect me and fight on my behalf. If they aren't even willing to do that, they're not worth the money I've thrown at their feet. No one is allowed to slack off under my employ!"

While Ves still possessed a considerable interest in the Ingvar twins, he wouldn't be able to make use of them as long as their old attitudes remained.

Unlike the Kinnners, Imon and Casella couldn't be bought. As ordinary mercenaries, the Ingvar siblings could pack up their bags and leave whenever their contract ran its course.

If Ves wanted to make use of their remarkable spiritual potential, he first had to win them over!

He had several ways of doing that. One method would be to pamper them and proactively invest in their development. Yet the thought of investing so much money and other resources into improving a pair of mech pilots with uncertain loyalties left a sour taste in his mouth.

What if they subsequently decide to leave and use their elevated abilities for someone else's benefits?

Investing in human resources only made sense if those resources remained in his possession!

Therefore, Ves concluded that the first step to securing their allegiance was to adjust their personalities and attitudes.

What better way to force them to go through a reality check than to throw them in the middle of a battle? According to their stories, neither Ingvar twins actually fought a real battle as of yet. House Ingvar fell way too quickly for them to put their training to good use.

"What is the overall risk of encountering pirates or other threats while we travel through the Redwell Province?"

"Not that high, sir." Cinnabar confidently replied. "Our Battle Criers might look shabby, but our battle accomplishments can't be faked. Pirates and the like know better than to attack a fleet like ours. Not only can we outrun most attackers, but we'll fight like hell if they manage to corner us. Sacrificing so many mechs and mech pilots just to attack you doesn't make much sense."

Pirates preyed on the weak and avoided the strong. While Ves and his escorts fell somewhere in between, that was enough for most of the pirates and irregulars operating in the Redwell Province to let them pass.

Too much risk and not enough payoff! Unless the attackers specifically targeted Ves, there shouldn't be any reason for them to be attacked!

Regardless of these circumstances, Ves knew better than to assume he wouldn't be attacked along the way. He had seen way too many stupid pirates to believe that each of them would adhere to logic.

In addition, the sophisticated listening devices inserted in his hotel room the other day did not portend any good.

"Be on the lookout for any threats targeted in our direction." Ves warned.

"What do you think about Commander Meivin and the Dustravens?"

"They're reliable so far. I don't regret introducing them to you. It's only..."

"What's the problem?"

The commander frowned. "I've been spending a lot of time with Meivin lately, and while he's still an old friend, he's a changed man."

"He strikes me as a Bloodweller."

"My thoughts exactly. While he's professional enough to keep his political inclinations from interfering with his work, I'm concerned that the Whitewellers will try something."

That sounded weird to Ves. "The Whitewellers can't attack us in the open. As citizens who are agitating to defect to the Hinson Protectorate, they can't afford to be seen as attacking a Hegemony-aligned mech designer."

"You know how these things are done. The assailants will never reveal their true allegiances."

That was true, Ves admitted. "I'm sure we can stay secure as long as we travel along the most frequented routes."

"That won't protect you in every instance. Many star systems are too big for patrols to cover every transition zone. The system patrols may also be less-than-enthusiastic about repelling pirates due to bribes, incompetence or lack of funding. Mixing up with the Dustravens only complicates our security situation even further as we can no longer claim to be strictly neutral."

That last point sounded very important!

"So what you're suggesting is that hiring the Dustravens may have afforded us protection against the elements of his own faction, but attracted the hostility of the opposing faction?"

"Correct, sir. While the Whitewallers aren't known for taking proactive action or launching attacks, they aren't as scattered and defenseless as you think. We'll have to be prepared for every eventuality."

With how serious Commander Cinnabar sounded, Ves could not maintain his nonchalance. Though he still maintained his confidence that he could come on top of almost every crisis that might occur during his stay in the Redwell Province, taking some extra precautions didn't hurt.

"Should we hire some extra mercenaries?"

Cinnabar shook his head. "That will only muddle the situation even further. Each mercenary corps that managed to survive in these difficult times have all attached themselves to a faction or powerful influence. It's not a good idea to mix them up."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

"Leave the Redwell Province as fast as possible."

"Out of the question. I still have at least a couple of destinations to go. There are several mech designers in Redwell that I still want to conduct an exchange with. They all reside in the safer parts of the province, so the risks of traveling to them aren't unreasonable."

Sadly, Commander Cinnabar hadn't been able to come up with any other suggestions. It was hard to improve their security situation any further without hiring additional mercenaries or leaving the troubled Chuko Republic.

"Sir, I really don't think you're making the right choice here. The chance that we'll come under attack will only grow larger the longer we linger in the Redwell Province."

Ves grinned. To him, that didn't necessarily sound like a bad thing. As long as their assailants didn't outnumber them, Ves was sure he could gain some benefits from the confrontation!

Chapter 1357 Prismatic Ligh

Vindar VII offered a lot more sights to visitors, but none of them interested Ves anymore. He already exchanged with the few Journeymen that remained and picked up some bargains from an underground market.

While Ves could spend his time on visiting the other black markets, his timetable was too tight for him to indulge in continuous bargain hunting.

He decided to move on from the Vindar System.

Ves and his entourage returned to Wilxyl's spaceport and left Vindar VII with some new company. The Vindar Dustravens continued to accompany Ves during his stay in the Redwell Province.

While they were based in the Vindar System, their contacts stretched throughout the entire province. They were part of a vast, informal network of other outfits and organizations. It wasn't a stretch to regard this network as an alliance of convenience.

A few weeks went by as Ves visited a number of specific star systems. He visited mech designer after mech designer, many of which yielded very little of note to Ves.

It couldn't be helped. Many mech designers were too selfish and narrow-minded to share their valuable insights.

They valued their own insights highly. Even if they failed to progress their design philosophy after advancing to Journeyman, they still stuck up their noses in front of Ves!

What could a weird mech designer with a Class IX design philosophy offer to them? The only reason they hadn't declined the exchange visitations was out of consideration for his powerful Hexer girlfriend!

For these reasons, Ves encountered many situations where his counterparts only cooperated in a superficial manner. Their lack of sincerity continually disappointed Ves and dampened his impression of Chuko mech designers.

Even if they all suffered under the economic malaise, they still clung to their pride as Journeymen! All of them believed that they were already good enough to live through this trouble period and bounce back to success in due time!

What was worse for Ves was that many older mech designers maintained similar sentiments. He deliberately adjusted his agenda to meet with older mech designers, only to be subjected to long-winded rants about how everything was better in the 'good old days' and endless boasts of how they won various design competitions forgotten by everyone else!

Ves failed to stumble across a second old mech designer who wanted to impart some life lessons to the younger generation.

It turned out that even among his generation, Old Man Terrence was still the exception rather than the rule!

The biggest reason was because Old Man Terrence was a famous recluse. He never married and never mentored any younger mech designers due to the restrictive nature of his design philosophy.

It was too hard to obtain a mech designer who specialized in neural interfaces!

Many other mech designers with more conventional specialties did not suffer this problem. With so many Novices and Apprentices on the streets, they could easily collect dozens of them and nurture the most promising ones into their heirs.

Even that wasn't entirely necessary as many mech designers opted to nurture their own children.

Nonetheless, even as Ves dejectedly returned from his exchanges with little to show for his efforts, he did manage to receive some useful tidbits here and there. Nonetheless, it became increasingly more difficult to find someone willing to hold a sincere exchange.

"Secrets have become too important to a mech designer's continued survival." Ves dreadfully observed after his fleet left yet another star system without any gains. "When times are plenty, mech designers are much more eager to expand their horizons and focus on their progression."

That wasn't the case right now. When times were bad, the mech designers who remained no longer thought about growing their capabilities. They simply wished to hold on to their existing accomplishments!

The lack of forward-thinking made many mech designers far too reticent to open their mouths to Ves. Holding onto their existing competitive advantages and preventing them from disseminating might mean the difference between staying in business and declaring bankruptcy!

Fortunately, Ves finally caught a lucky break when he met an unusual mech designer.

At a company headquarters located on a typical industrial planet in decline, Ves shook hands with a middle-aged female mech designer.

"Mr. Larkinson, welcome to Paisley I." The motherly woman greeted with a weary smile. "I hope you don't take our lack of hospitality to heart."

Ves returned a friendly smile. "I wouldn't be visiting the Chuko Republic otherwise, Mrs. Linzif."

As they seated themselves at her desk, they began to chat. Felicity Linzif had been a rather odd choice for him to visit. She specialised in multifrequency laser weapons and enjoyed enough success to gain a nickname from it. Within the local mech community, she started to become known as the 'Prismatic Light', which was very flattering.

Ves felt a little jealous that Mrs. Linzif received a nickname that drew attention to her capabilities while he got stuck with a moniker that made light of his tongue!

Fortunately, not everyone took nicknames seriously. Mech designers paid a lot more attention to a fellow mech designer's specialty and mech designs than their personal inclinations.

Many mech designers, particularly high-ranking ones, tended to be eccentric. If mech designers continually took offense at a fellow colleague's quirks, then how could they expand their network?

Of course, Class IX design philosophies still attracted a lot of scorn, so Ves still had to deal with a lot of prejudice regardless.

Mrs. Linzif didn't appear to be the same as other mech designers, though.

If only her design philosophy was more relevant to him. While her specialty interested Ves a lot, her area of expertise possessed little relation with his design philosophy.

"Mrs. Linzif, thank you for hosting me." He began. "I appreciate your willingness to accept my request for an exchange."

The woman smiled gently at Ves. "I'm not as narrow-minded as the other colleagues you've visited. Word is getting around about your visits. While

many of them have conspired to stymie your efforts to learn anything valuable from their mouths, Old Man Terrence speaks glowingly about you. If there is one thing I know, it's that Old Man Terrence is not in the habit of exaggeration."

Ah. Ves learned a lot from her words. He wasn't aware that the local Redweller mech designers he scheduled an appointment with all banded together against his visitations.

He also learned the reason why Mrs. Linzif took him seriously where many did not. Ves owed a lot to Old Man Terrence.

"Terrence Reedan is.. quite a mech designer."

"He's always been rather secretive, which is a necessity considering his restricted specialization." The woman explained. "I've always admired his ambition to make genetic aptitude strength irrelevant. He was always destined for failure, but he never wavered in his pursuits. That is how a true mech designer ought to act."

"Not many of us are courageous enough to upend one of the most impactful rules on mechs."

They quickly moved on from talking about Terrence. Ves hadn't come here to share in her admiration for an old and senile mech designer.

Though a number of customs had emerged to set the ground rules for professional exchanges between mech designers, they did not adhere to a structured format.

This meant that the discussions could take on any form. It all depended on whether the mech designers themselves were willing to divulge their more valuable insights.

For this reason, Mrs. Linzif started the exchange with a strange opening.
"What is the ultimate armament of mechs?"

This question completely came out of the blue to Ves. He could only answer according to his honest beliefs.

"The perfect weapon for mechs doesn't exist. Every weapon is associated with their own advantages and disadvantages. No weapon can possibly defeat every obstacle in existence."

"That's the most orthodox answer to this question." She said with an intriguing smile. "Yet what if we disregard this premise that the perfect weapon isn't possible to be made. What if one day, we can develop a weapon so powerful that every other weapon pales in comparison?"

"Is that what you are pursuing?"

"In a way. There are many different weapon types in existence. Ballistic rifles, kinetic rifles, missile launchers all the way up to primitive weapons such as swords and spears. Don't you think these weapons are rather lackluster in this day and age?"

"The Big Two and the first-rate superstates already make use of very advanced weapons such as plasma rifles and positron rifles. They're a lot more destructive than the armaments that are prevalent in the galactic rim."

"Ah, that is true, but that's not the point. Even the entities you've mentioned still make use of laser rifles, you know. Theirs are more advanced than ours owing to better technology and materials, but the basic principles are still the same."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Laser weapons are the ultimate weapons for mechs. They're scalable, universal and applicable in nearly every situation today."

"Not every situation." Ves replied.

For example, the hexapods of Groening IV absorbed seemingly limitless amounts of energy, rendering energy weapons ineffective against these creatures!

"For now. While I admit that certain defenses have emerged that offer extremely effective protection against laser beams, even they can't withstand the energy of a sun!"

"That is horribly inefficient. Trying to overpower a defense that is tailored against laser weapons with lasers is not a cost-effective endeavor."

"For now! That is not indicative of the future! I believe out of all the weapon systems that humanity has developed, none still hold as much potential as laser weapons! They have been with us ever since our civilization's first forays into space. From the Age of Stars, to the Age of Conquest and now the Age of Mechs, laser weapons are still alive and thriving!"

"You could say the same to ballistic, kinetic and missile weapons."

Mrs. Linzif snorted in debridement. "Those primitive weapon systems are always slower than light. Their limitations are plenty. In the future, mech combat will increasingly take place at a distance. The next generation is already a portend of this trend. The offensive might of laser weapons will continue to grow while defensive tech falls further and further behind!"

The woman continued to rant a bit about the supremacy of laser weapons over other weapon types. Ves did not share in her opinion, but he hardly managed to get a word in while she espoused her love for laser weapons!

Nonetheless, despite being subjected to a very biased opinion, Ves still kept his ears open because it sounded as if she possessed some insider information about the next mech generation!

"...the development and evolution of laser technology has achieved so many strides these last couple of decades that the proponents of other techs have tried to muzzle us! The upcoming new standards and specifications on laser weapons is much more conservative than what the leading experts in my specialization wished to impart!

"So the MTA is publishing a half-hearted set of standards for laser weapons?" Ves probed.

"Right! The lobbies for other weapons and defensive tech have managed to persuade the MTA to hold back in introducing radical innovations in laser technology! It's a travesty! If they didn't outnumber us all, we would have taught them a lesson!"

Ves wasn't interested in the infighting that took place within the research circles of the MTA. "Is there a way for mech designers like me to obtain the unadulterated specifications for laser technology?"

Mrs. Linzif grinned. "The new innovations will eventually leak into the mech community. Our efforts will not be in vain. When the new mech generation finally commences, you should do yourself a favor and withhold from designing any mechs armed with laser weapons. Newer and better licenses will quickly emerge in a year or two that will absolutely blow the crippled versions of the MTA out of the water!"

This was a very valuable piece of advice! He appreciated what she told him even if she did not offer him the insights he sought.

Chapter 1358 Dangerous Complacency

When a new mech generation commenced, a raft of component licenses and updated technological specifications became available to mech designers.

These additions to the mech industry fired off an explosive race to design the first mechs that made use of the new specifications and components!

Yet this was just the start. The first wave of mech designs in the new generations possessed a relatively short shelf life. In a couple of years, the second wave would emerge that made use of components derived from the ones published by the MTA but improved and tweaked in many different ways.

The MTA employed some of the best mech designers and researchers in the galaxy, but they did not encompass the full creativity and ingenuity of the entire mech industry! Individual geniuses or those who possessed unique advantages were occasionally able to design better components than the ones published by the Association!

Nonetheless, by the time the second wave already arrived, the mech designers who moved early enough to capitalize on the first wave achieved an abundant amount of sales.

The advantages they accrued by selling a lot of mechs of the first wave would be able to utilize their momentum to take the lead during the second wave as well!

In other words, it was critical for mech designers to accrue an advantage at the beginning. If they slipped up or delayed their mech designs, their competitors would have already captured the bulk of the sales they would have gained if they moved faster!

Most importantly, first wave mechs did not lose relevance just because of the advent of second wave mechs. The differences usually weren't large enough to warrant a full renewal, especially in the span of a couple of years.

As long as a first wave mech model performed well, its vast number of customers would ensure a good reputation that turned it into an enduring seller for a long time!

The mech company only had to tweak their prices downward for a little bit to retain their attractiveness in the face of newer mech models entering the market.

Mech designers like Ves were well aware of these dynamics and planned ahead. Designing a laser rifleman mech as one of his first mech designs for the new generation had definitely been on the cards.

As one of the most popular machines on land, in the air and in space, laser rifleman mechs represented the biggest and most lucrative mech types by sales volume!

That made the nugget of intel provided by Mrs. Linzif all the more important. If her claims were true that the second wave of laser rifleman mech designs would significantly surpass the first wave, then starting early with designing these mech types would be a grave mistake!

Because the first wave would practically experience a more severe devaluation than usual, putting them on par with last-gen mechs!

"Laser weapon development sure is incredible." He said as he tried to flatter his exchange partner. "It's amazing to hear that the specialists in laser technology have managed to achieve so much progress even if it is already a mature and highly-developed field."

The Redweller mech designer scoffed at his words. "Maturity is a false concept. I've never put too much stock in its predictions anyway. Our civilization is so vast and powerful that we've managed to overcome most plateaus. Laser weapons may have been in use for millenia, but there is always something to improve!"

"Can you tell me about the nature of the improvements that will likely be introduced in the next generation?"

She shrugged. "Oh, the usual, mostly. Updated technical specifications along with new applications using exotics that haven't been utilized before are responsible for most of the performance improvements. They're mostly aimed towards improving efficiency, I hear. More energy is being directed towards the laser beam and less energy is turned into waste heat. This means the next generation will feature more powerful lasers without cooking the weapon or mech too quickly."

This was another valuable piece of intel! Knowing how the next generation of laser weapons improved upon the previous generation would help him lay the groundwork for his future designs.

The information was not only relevant when he designed a laser-armed mech, but also the defensive mechs designed to withstand their improved armament!

"What do you think about laser weapons?" She abruptly asked. "Tell me your honest opinion."

"My answer to that question is similar to the answer I've given to your first question. It's a powerful, versatile and adaptable weapon system, but it is not the only weapon at a mech designer's disposal. I still believe there is a role for other weapon types."

"So do you think that I'm wrong when I state that laser weapons will one day reign supreme?"

Ves shook his head. He had to be very careful about expressing an opinion contrary to the deeply-held beliefs of his host!

"I'm just a simple mech designer. I am not a specialist in any particular weapon system. If laser weapons happen to become the premier weapon type, then I'll gladly embrace them when the time comes. The same goes if melee weapons or kinetic weapons experience a revolutionary leap in progress."

"I'm disappointed by your lack of faith, though I appreciate your honesty." Mrs. Linzif said with a frown. "There are so few mech designers who are willing to commit to a singular weapon system, even though we are responsible for most of the advancements."

Every mech designer was different. Talking to so many fellow Journeymen exposed him to the incredible diversity of people who broke through the extraordinary threshold.

Though Journeymen may be fundamentally different from expert pilots in many ways, Ves realized that both developed very strong beliefs.

Mech designers were perfectly capable of engaging in rational science. They were very inquisitive, did not take every assumption for granted and were perfectly capable of revising their understanding if proven wrong.

Yet as soon as the discussion turned to their specialty or area of interest, they instantly turned into fanatics!

Ves found them to be no different from the religious nuts of the Ylvaine Protectorate or the Five Scrolls Compact when they talked about their specialty!

Perhaps he was no different from the likes of Felicity Linzif.

This was nothing to be concerned about. Every mech designer possessed their own unassailable beliefs. Some were just better at hiding their inclinations, while others gleefully expressed their enthusiasm regardless how unhinged they came across!

After a considerable amount of discussion on laser weapons, they finally moved to another topic.

"Chuko's mech industry is in shambles. This is no secret." Mrs. Linzif spoke.

"Yet there is a reason why I have stayed where many of my fellow compatriots ran when the government still allowed them to go. Do you know why?"

"Because of family?"

"I do have a family here, but that's not the primary reason why I decided to stay. Don't you realize, Mr. Larkinson? The current conditions in the Chuko Republic's mech market is a test! Those who manage to keep their company aloft and continue to sell their mechs under these circumstances are the best of the best! As long as you can endure these adverse circumstances, you can do business in practically every other market!"

She had a good point. As tragic as the Chuko Republic fell backwards, the difficult market environment separated the wheat from the chaff.

Many mech designers failed to adapt to the circumstances. The bountiful black markets selling second-hand goods and junk made a profound impression on Ves. Yet out of ninety-nine mech designers who failed, at least one still endured!

"Many mech designers who still managed to stay aloft owe their survival to their patrons." Ves retorted. "I've met mech designers who haven't sold a single mech in the last couple of yours but instead resort to bartering with various local powers. Plenty of your colleagues have also shuttered their commercial activities in order to work for the provincial and central governments."

"That's true, but that doesn't detract from my point." Mrs. Linzif smirked.

"Sucking up to others in order to attain their protection is also a skill. There is nothing shameful about submitting to others for protections. The mech designers who are too proud to stoop to begging would have died if a real catastrophe has engulfed the Komodo Star Sector!"

This was a fundamental truth for mech designers. Each of them possessed a lot of valuable expertise. They were only allowed to earn a lot of money because the states that hosted them benefited as well.

If a mech designer did not have the protection of a state, then who prevented them from getting robbed or kidnapped?

Each of them were as vulnerable as the technicians and engineers who ended up in the hands of the pirates in the frontier!

"I see your point." Ves thoughtfully spoke. "But this also means that the conditions in the Chuko Republic is not the worst-case scenario. Mech designers can at least rely on some powers for protection. That's not always possible in worse places such as the frontier or the Nyxian gap."

In those places, who stopped anyone from enslaving mech designers outright?

Only those cultivated a ferocious reputation like the Skull Architect retained their freedom! Mech designers had to stoop to savagery in order to deter the numerous bad actors mingling in these lawless areas from appropriating their wealth and capabilities for their own use!

The female mech designers cast her eyes "Our human civilization has experienced many ups and downs. Right now, I believe the last three centuries stability and prosperity can rightfully be called a golden age for mechs. We've firmly turned our backs to the depravity and destruction of the latter days of Age of Conquest. Yet do you really think this unprecedented period of stability and prosperity will last forever? Humanity is still surrounded by countless alien races. How long will they abide by the truce of the previous age?"

"Either we attack, or they attack. Peace won't last forever." Ves readily agreed. Too many people forgot how much humanity had fought and

struggled to come out on top. "That said, the MTA and CFA aren't pushovers. Surely they're prepared against the inevitable resurgence of the hostile alien races. They may even be contemplating a preemptive attack!"

"All of that may be true, but do you really believe that human space will remain unaffected if this inevitable war breaks out?" Mrs. Linzif pounded her fist against her desk. "Wake up, Mr. Larkinson! If a war against the rest of the galaxy does happen to break out, frontier star sectors will likely be the first to croak! Our own will not be exempted!"

Ves had to admit that her wakeup call affected him quite a lot. He, like many humans, had been far too complacent!

The threat of alien resurgence had always been a distant and abstract threat. Even if everyone with brains knew that the Komodo Star Sector was situated right in the frontlines, no one had taken the threat seriously anymore!

What would happen if a war between civilizations finally started anew?

Even if the CFA and MTA fought back with all of their might, the frontier star sectors still faced the brunt of alien incursions!

"Just look at our reaction at the recent sandmen attacks! Aside from the states situated close to the border, no one else has paid them any mind! The Chuko Republic and all the other states that are furthest away from the frontier are completely ignorant about the dangers! The local leaders haven't made any moves to raise our readiness against the sandmen. If we aren't able to take our minds off our political machinations, how can we possibly resist a real alien invasion?"

Her verdict on the local powers made it clear that she had no faith that humanity would be able to unite against the aliens!

Though her predictions sounded extreme, Ves knew in his heart that she was probably right!

Chapter 1359 Fallback Option

His talk with Felicity Linzif yielded few insights related to his design philosophy. The Chukan Journeyman expressed a lot more interest in talking about her gloomy predictions of the future of the mech market and the Komodo Star Sector.

Ves still found the visit to be worth it. Mrs. Linzif's words served as a warning for Ves that he should not take the current golden age for granted.

One day, the Age of Mechs would enter its twilight. One day, the galactic rim would come under assault.

This realization only made him place even less emphasis on building up his presence in the Komodo Star Sector.

He equated the situation to the Bright Republic's border systems with the Vesia Kingdom.

Because war constantly broke out at those borders, the public and private sectors stopped giving a damn about them. They consistently withheld vital investments from these poor and forgotten star systems because it would all get appropriated or destroyed by the Vesia anyway.

Ves had a very frightening realization as just as he dismissed the border systems of the Bright Republic, the Big Two might feel the same way about the frontier star sectors!

"It's already obvious when you look at how frontier star sectors are so lacking compared to more inward star sectors!"

The star systems at the very edge of human space were so sparse and insufficiently protected that aliens would basically encounter only minor challenges when they invaded en masse!

From the perspective of a higher-up of the Big Two, the frontier star sectors served as a convenient buffer for any external invasions!

Ves looked depressed as he idly held Lucky to his chest. He didn't blame the MTA and CFA for taking the bigger picture into account. Their primary responsibility was to protect the human race. Nobody said anything about protecting every star sector, let alone the most far-flung ones with the least amount of value.

Perhaps even the Rim Guardians agreed with that sentiment.

While Ves already held the pieces, it took an oddball mech designer with an obsession of laser weapons of all people to show him how to fit the clues together. The resulting conclusions made him so alarmed that he began to see his grand expedition as something more than a temporary escape.

"I can also take up the spaceborn life if necessary."

A strain of humanity believed that their race should no longer be bound by planets. Rather than see them as precious living space and paradises, the true spaceborn clans saw them as nothing more than resource sites. Aside from extracting useful raw materials, they weren't good for anything else!

And that included living on their surface!

Much of humanity disagreed with their extreme views. Humans in general grew up happier on planets. Space was cheap and plentiful and they never had to worry about ships malfunctioning and killing every occupant because a technician forgot to perform routine maintenance on a critical ship component!

Yet despite all of the flaws of nomadic spaceborn life, the radicals always touted how living on the move ensured maximum safety.

In their view, anyone who decided to settle on a planet was asking to get bombed from orbit!

"To their credit, they were right in a way." Ves muttered. "Very few spaceborn clans got annihilated during the latter days of the Age of Conquest."

By far, most of the killing and slaughtering occurred when human battlefleets wiped out entire planets or scoured their surfaces with weapons of mass destruction.

Even if the citizens saw the existential threat coming, it was impossible to evacuate an entire planet in a matter of weeks! Far too few shuttles and ships existed to take an entire population away!

Even if the lucky ones did manage to get away, housing and settling the refugees became a huge problem! Most evacuation ships had been repurposed for the emergency and didn't hold the facilities necessary to support long-term residency in space.

A huge amount of refugees starved or suffocated to death when countless evacuation ships failed to find any safe harbor within their fuel range!

Though Ves still regarded the spaceborn life as unnatural, considering the latent threats looming over the horizon, it might be prudent to prepare a backup option!

The expeditionary fleet that Ves and Gloriana attempted to form represented a huge investment. What would happen to it after they completed their expedition? Selling them all or scrapping them for parts and materials sounded like an incredible waste.

Rather than get rid of the vessels, why not keep the expensive factory ship and other vessels around?

As long as Ves and Gloriana invested in maintaining the ships and keeping them up to date, they would always have a fallback option at hand if the Komodo Star Sector really suffered the brunt of an alien invasion one day.

Ves bet that he was one of the few mech designers around who even contemplated this option. Far too many mech designers who grew up in the same star sector had become so inured with centuries of peace and stability

that they no longer paid any attention to the shakiness of their deceptively comfortable positions!

"It's rank stupidity!"

Perhaps it was just his paranoia talking, but Ves felt less and less secure about his life at the very edge of human space!

With the MTA embroiled in an internal struggle over whether they should abandon the galactic rim and the CFA showing open contempt for fixed human settlements, neither of the Big Two would put too much of an effort to protect the frontier star sectors!

Repurposing the expeditionary fleet into a more permanent spaceborn-style caravan fleet sounded more and more prudent.

"Calamity might not strike in this century or the next, but it will certainly eventually."

If Ves only lived as long as a baseline human, then he might not even bother. Yet if he could potentially live up to five-hundred years or more, then it was very possible that he might see the transition to an entirely new age!

With such a long life ahead of him, the last thing he wanted to see was to see most of his hard work go up in smoke due to lack of preparation against a foreseeable calamity!

Speaking of foreseeable calamities, once Ves exited Mrs. Linzif's company headquarters, his armored bodyguard approached.

Fe Nitaa passed on her concerns through her full-face helmet. "There are observers staring at you from the surrounding buildings."

Ves pretended to scratch his cheek, thereby preventing his lips from being read. "People are staring at me all the time. Lucky and I are rather eye-catching."

"It's different, sir. These aren't bystanders who are gawking at you because you look wealthy. They've been stationed in the vicinity of this area specifically to observe you from a distance. From their methods, they're definitely trained."

"Are they spies?"

"I'm not certain at this time. I'm unable to determine whether they work for the government or for a smaller influence."

"How did you find them in the first place?"

"I always keep my eyes out. I take nothing for granted. The excellent gear that you've procured for me is indispensable. It is evident that they have never fathomed that you would have invested so much money on personal equipment."

Ves smirked underneath his hand. "The local Redwellers have been living under a severe economic depression for a long time. It's no wonder they've overlooked the capabilities of secure equipment."

"Regardless, the presence of so many observers is very concerning, sir. I do not advise you to board your shuttle. Even with the presence of the Battle Criers and the Dustravens, it only takes one attack to go through to disable your shuttle."

The shuttle they used carried a little bit of armor, but that did not give him a lot of comfort. The planetary government already appropriated every armored shuttle on the planet a few years ago.

Ves and his group lingered at the headquarters a little. Though the receptionists and guards obviously wanted them gone, they did not dare to shoo away a Journeyman.

Though no one appeared to have moved, one single entity was missing from their midst.

Lucky had quietly wandered as if he grew bored.

Half an hour went by as Ves discreetly discussed his security situation with Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar.

Due to the suspicion that any remote transmission might be intercepted, they did not dare to pass on any important messages to the Dustraven mechs patrolling above.

"Are the Dustravens involved, perhaps?"

"I can't say. Commander Meivin has changed a lot over the years." Cinnabar murmured. "It won't do his mercenary prospects any good if he stabs his employer in the back. However, if he has thrown in his lot with the Bloodwellers, then he may have decided to sacrifice everything in order to advance their cause."

"You're prepared against their betrayal, right?"

"Sure did, boss. On your orders, we brought down a lot more rifleman mechs than usual. My men on the ground have also gone through numerous simulation battles against the Dustraven mechs. All of our ranged mechs have brushed up their techniques targeted towards taking down quick and agile aerial mechs."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. Despite his familiarity with Commander Meivin and the Dustravens, Commander Cinnabar did not take their friendliness for granted.

"Can we count on any reinforcements?"

"We don't even know who to trust. Every mercenary corps on Paisley I is pledged to one power or another."

The lack of options made him consider whether to turn to Mrs. Linzif for help. He was sure that she would demand a very big price, though. She may even

be a part of the same faction as the people who targeted him for some reason!

The exchange he just held with Mrs. Linzif came back to the forefront of his mind. Now that he thought about it, he found it rather weird that she began to talk about the need for patrons and the difficulty of surviving under adverse conditions.

Was she trying to pass on a warning to Ves?

If she did, then Ves would have preferred a clearer warning instead of the roundabout one he received!

"Damn woman." He muttered.

"What was that, sir?"

"Ah, nothing." Ves rubbed his face. "Can we turn to the government for help?"

"I'm not sure." Nitaa grumbled behind her helmet. "If our hidden enemies have stationed an attack force nearby, then they may decide to launch their attack as soon as the planetary guard begins to mobilize."

The big variable right now was whether a hidden force of mechs was truly present. If not, then the Battle Criers could fend off most threats by themselves.

As Ves, Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar continued to speculate, Lucky eventually returned.

"Meow."

"Really?"

Meow meow."

"What is your cat saying?" Nitaa asked, confused at how Ves was able to interpret the meows!

"Lucky managed to sneak up on one of the distant observers. He then traced the signals the observer transmitted to another site, which housed a single occupant who is in touch with all of the observers. You're right, Nitaa. We are definitely being targeted right now."

Everyone quietly cursed. Gavin, who had been left to the side, began to wring his hands in worry. He wasn't cut out for this kind of dangerous business!

Meanwhile, Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar looked at Lucky in a very different light. They misjudged the pretty mechanical cat! The artificial creature functioned more than a plaything to a wealthy mech designer!

"Meow."

"Oh. Lucky did more than that. He also traced the encrypted messages the coordinator transmitted to an underground parking zone not far away from here. He encountered a dozen unmarked mechs!"

"This!"

Although a dozen mechs would not be enough to overcome the Battle Criers and the Dustravens, they didn't have to. As long as they destroyed the shuttle while in transit, then that was enough for them to declare their mission a success!

The evidence they gathered pointed more and more towards a planned assassination attempt!

"It's been awhile since I've landed in someone's crosshairs." Ves muttered before he slowly began to grin. "Unfortunately for them, they've lost the element of surprise!"

Chapter 1360 Preemptive Action

The surprise attack targeted towards Ves presented a great threat, but only if he remained oblivious about it. A dozen mechs could never defeat his entire mech security detail.

They had to rely solely on the element of surprise to give them the decisive edge.

Now that Ves discovered their presence, his assassins lost this advantage. What was even better for him was that the potential assailants didn't know that they'd been discovered! With Lucky's stealth, signal-tracking and phasing capabilities, they had no way of guarding against such a perverse cat!

"Good boy!" Ves hugged Lucky in order to show his gratitude. "I'll be needing you again, though. Are you ready to put your claws to use?"

"Meow!"

"Okay, okay, I'll be sure to give you a reward!"

Looking onwards, Fe Nitaa and Commander Cinnabar still looked at the two with doubt. Had the cat really discovered a dozen mechs hidden nearby? Whatever the case, they had no choice but to presume the worst.

The three began to discuss measures to turn the tables on their potential adversaries under a light jamming field.

"Our conduct alone is probably triggering some suspicion among the observers." Nitaa warned. "The individual coordinating this operation will definitely suspect that we're aware of something fishy."

"It's fine." Commander Cinnabar said. "They probably think we've detected their observers. Their mechs are a lot more hidden."

Ves slightly grimaced. "I think Nitaa does have a point. The longer we dilly-dally around, the greater the likelihood that our potential assailants will lose their patience. We need to decide on a course of action quickly."

Nitaa opted for the safest option. "I say we call for help. It won't reflect well for the planetary government if they allow us to die on their soil. The Journeyman

Mech Designer you've just met can lend a hand as well, either by continuing to shelter us or calling in her friends."

"Pah!" Commander Cinnabar huffed. "If we ask for help, we'll be bound to return the favor somehow. I don't think it's necessary to go through all of that trouble. Didn't we determine that the hostiles are relying on the element of surprise? Why not make it clear that we know exactly what they are plotting? As long as we transmit a message telling them we know exactly what they are up to, they'll likely abort the mission!"

Nitaa nodded in agreement. "Covert operatives are trained to strike only when they have a strong chance of success. They abhor variables and unanticipated setbacks. So long as we do what the commander has proposed, the chances are high that they will call off their attack."

Ves shook his head. "That's not the most optimal solution. We don't know who they are, who they work for and the reason why they targeted me specifically. We suffer from a severe information disadvantage. Scaring off the assassins might save our skins today, but this will only cause them to prepare more thoroughly next time. If we truly want to stymie our opponents, then we need to take the fight to them, or at least teach them a lesson."

The three argued over the best course of action. Even though Nitaa strongly objected to taking a proactive stance, Ves held the final decision.

"I've made my decision. Let's just roll the dice and see what happens. I think our odds are quite good."

The question was what they should do. Ves turned towards Lucky and contemplated where his cat should be put to use. His ability to sneak up under complete stealth and phase through solid obstacles was quite powerful! However, Lucky wasn't particularly fast, so Ves had to decide carefully where he should employ his strongest asset.

"It's too risky to send Lucky out to sabotage the mechs in wait." He murmured. "It's doable if the mechs are lying dormant, but according to my cat they've already warmed their systems."

"Can your cat sneak up to the figure who is leading this operation?" Nitaa asked.

Ves turned to Lucky, who raised his tail in an arrogant manner.

"Meow!"

"Lucky can definitely do it. There's a small security detail present but they won't pose a threat."

"Then I suggest you take him out, sir. The way this operation is set up makes me think this person is the key."

"Should we take him in alive?"

"Is that possible, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Lucky says he only has lethal options available."

Nitaa retrieved a vial containing an unknown substance from a cavity in her combat armor. "Here. As long as you splash its contents in someone's face, they'll be knocked out for a few hours. It won't work against people who carry standard antidote devices or implants, as many spies tend to carry in their loadouts."

"You hear that, Lucky?" Ves grabbed the antidote and placed it between Lucky's maw. "When you splash this stuff on the leader's face, make sure to prevent him from neutralizing it. We need this person alive and well enough to talk!"

"Mrwor." Lucky responded, his regular meows sounding garbled due to the finger-sized vial between its teeth.

After passing on a few instructions, Ves waved Lucky off as he began to sneak back to the hidden room where the suspected mastermind resided.

Ves turned back to the others. "Fifteen minutes from now, Lucky will make his move. If we want to accomplish anything else, we have to decide quickly."

"I say we make a move on the hidden mechs. My Battle Criers are far more suitable to go on the attack. Since we know where they are holing up, we can quickly take them by surprise by storming straight at their position!"

"I don't suggest we do so, sir." Nitaa replied. "We're operating on foreign soil. As guests of Paisley I, it is highly unbecoming of us to launch a seemingly unprovoked attack. The mechs in hiding may be working for a legitimate local power."

"And if this local power happens to be a part of the plot to take our employer's life?"

Ves scratched his head. "Both options are possible. We simply don't know enough. Nitaa is right, though. If we launch an unprovoked attack, we'll definitely get in trouble with the planetary government. With all of the political entanglements taking place in the Redwell Province, it's not impossible that certain elements of the government are in cahoots with the attackers."

"So we should let the attackers go?"

"I'm not saying that. We should simply ensure that we should not be the ones who launch the first attack. As long as we can get the other party to do so, we'll be justified in our reprisal."

Nitaa disagreed. "I don't think that excuse will necessarily hold up. Aggressive posturing is a naked provocation. If the attackers are smart enough, they'll

know what we are up to and will withhold their fire in order to prove they aren't related to any assassination attempts."

"Hahaha! That's not going to be a problem! My Battle Criers will make sure the hidden mechs will attack first. You can trust my word on this, sir!"

Though Ves was inclined to do so, Nitaa held another concern.

"There's another problem, sir. If we allocate all of the Battle Criers to the attack, only the Dustravens are left to protect us against hostile mechs. If they happen to be a part of the conspiracy, that will leave us all dangerously vulnerable."

"We can split our forces up." Cinnabar suggested. "Half of my mechs will move out as planned while the other half will stay behind. If I'm guessing right, then the mechs preparing to attack are mostly ranged mechs. They don't perform very well when taken by surprise. The underground parking hall won't offer them much distance against my melee mechs."

What the commander said made a lot of sense. Only the ranged mechs of the Battle Criers kept the Dustravens in check. Leaving behind half of the Battle Criers also protected Ves against the other cards the assailants held in reserve.

Yet.. the question was whether the Battle Criers could truly triumph against the dozen of hidden mechs. The Battle Criers only received permission to bring twelve mechs to the surface.

This meant that if Ves went through with this plan, he could only count on the six ranged mechs for protection. As long as the Dustravens were still on their side, then this would not be a problem.

Yet if the Dustravens did happen to be compromised, then the Battle Crier mechs would have to focus their full attention on deterring the aerial mechs. This left them vulnerable if another hidden mech force emerged!

"This talk is getting way out of hand." Nita spoke. "Regardless whether the Dustravens turn out to be hostile or not, they won't be able to do anything while we are still holding up in the lobby of Linzif's headquarters. Any operation that is targeted at us is likely aimed at taking out our shuttle. It's a lot harder to attack us while we are still inside this structure, especially from above. The most the attackers can do is collapse the entire building."

"They won't do that." Ves asserted. "Felicity Linzif is still present in the building. She managed to stay in business to a certain extent by aligning herself to at least one strong local patron. An attack on the headquarters is an attack aimed at her, and by extension her backers."

"What if the attackers don't care? What if Linzif and the attackers are in the same boat?"

"Then we'll just fight our way out." Ves declared. "Every modern office building of this size should be connected to an underground tunnel system. We just have to find one of the evacuation exits."

Time was running out. Almost fifteen minutes after Lucky departed, the orders that Commander Cinnabar discreetly passed on to his mech pilots began to take force.

Six of the Battle Crier melee mechs abruptly separated and headed towards a specific direction!

As befitting for an offensive mercenary corps, the mechs that departed all consisted of light and medium mechs that emphasized speed and offensive power. They traversed the largely-empty streets of the fallen office district with prodigious speed and reached the entrance of a closed underground parking hall.

The melee mechs stabbed their weapons through the thin protective cover and cut open a huge opening!

Since the material they were cutting through merely consisted of conventional alloys, the mechs faced very little resistance!

Within no time, the mechs formed a square opening through the metal cover. They filed through and engaged their alternate sensor modes in order to observe the completely darkened hall.

Back at the lobby of Linzif's headquarters, Commander Cinnabar impatiently stared at the projected interface of his comm. A message finally came through.

"They've spotted the hidden mechs! They're all grouped up and unprepared to repel an attack!"

"Are they firing at your Battle Criers?"

"So far, they've withheld their fire." Commander Cinnabar grinned. "We'll see how long that lasts."

In the meantime, Ves received a nonsensical message to his own comm. Although both the sender and the message itself consisted of garbled data, Ves nonetheless recognized a few prearranged patterns that in themselves conveyed a brief message.

"Lucky succeeded!" Ves smiled. "He managed to take out the guards and use the vial to knock the leader out! Evidently, they never thought they were already exposed!"

"Did they activate any boobytraps?" Cinnabar asked. "Sneaky folks like these often have the habit of preparing several traps and safeguards."

"I have confidence in Lucky. I've already instructed him to sabotage anything that looks dangerous."

The commander briefly paused as his comm received another notification.

"Sir, Commander Meivin has just sent an urgent message to me. He's asking what the hell is going on!"

Ves idly waved his hand. "Tell him to go on high alert and guard against any acute threats. Don't say anything else."

"The Dustravens won't like being kept in the dark. Commander Meivin isn't stupid. If we don't tell him anything, he'll realize that we're doubting his loyalty."

"He's a mercenary. Being regarded with suspicion and distrust already comes with the job. If he's truly innocent, then he won't take this incident to heart."

Even if Ves unjustly maligned the Vindar Dustravens, that was better than putting his blind trust in their loyalty!