

### **Chapter 1461 Low-Quality Products**

The Circle of Mota's temporary marketplace differed remarkably from the other black markets Ves visited.

While a surprisingly large amount of people managed to gain entry here, almost everyone kept to themselves. Even the figures who seemed to be nobles by the way they put on airs underneath their disguises mostly remained discreet.

No one trusted each other. No one wanted to poke into other people's business. Transactions dominated the marketplace as most people just wanted to obtain the goods and services they required before heading out as fast as possible.

One of the threats looming over their heads was the risk of discovery by the authorities. While the Circle of Mota insisted on numerous requirements that made it extremely difficult for the Planetary Guard to track them down, nothing was fool proof.

Raids had happened in the past. Those instances usually spelled disaster to the people visiting the marketplaces because they usually got caught up between opposing mechs!

No matter how august they were underneath their robes, the authorities did not have the time nor the inclination to pay attention to their wellbeing! Every person trading with pirates was scum in their book!

Everyone who took part in the Circle of Mota's trading activities knew the risks. Ves sensed a permanent tenseness in the air as everyone remained on guard. They not only guarded against each other, but also against external threats.

Accompanied by the hulking form of Nita, Ves passed through a peculiar quarter in the underground city.

"Starship engineer for sale! 35,000 firthals! He's young, but he's healthy and vigorous! He'll last a long time under your care! His brains are completely untouched and ready to be brainwashed under your specifications! We offer a fifty percent discount if you make use of our brainwashing services!"

"Are you lonely in your lives? Do you require some company? High-class pleasure madames for sale here! They are completely organic and unsoiled. We promise!"

"No one offers cheaper labor than us! Our clones have been grown to be completely pliable to your commands! Our products are smarter than bots, cheaper to maintain and more amusing to torture! Don't let your bots do the cleaning. Use our clones instead! Buy one, get one free, starting at just 4,999 firthals!"

Ves grimaced underneath his helmet as he saw how prolific the trade of slaves turned out to be. While he always knew that slave trade happened in the murkier corners of the galaxy, to witness human products being hawked around like cabbages left a foul taste in his mouth.

At least the Kinner Tribe managed to dress up their slave trade with a veneer of civility and mutual benefit.

Not so for the slave traders associated with the Circle of Mota. They unabashedly sold humans kidnapped from various places without any reserve.

What Ves found even more disturbing was that they sold a lot of clones as well. Cultivated and grown under abominably inhuman circumstances, their mentalities were completely deficient.

Of course, this also made them ideal for jobs that required dumb labor.

As for why someone preferred to use clones over bots? It was all about reducing maintenance requirements!

Clones were especially useful in the Nyxian Gap because bots required frequent maintenance while their human counterparts would just make do with nutrient packs and water.

Due to the scarcity of technical services in the deprived regions of the Nyxian Gap, clones or brainwashed humans were much easier to deal with for pirates who didn't know the right end of a wrench!

Numerous disguised visitors approached the shops and stalls of the slave traders. Lots of people desired slaves for various purposes, and they weren't very bothered by the implications of exploiting those who had no choice in their lot in life.

Different from the expensive human products sold by the Kinners, the slaves offered under the auspices of the Circle of Mota were cheap. Unimaginably cheap.

The Circle of Mota mainly transacted in firthals, the predominant currency of the Nyxian Gap.

Just like the frontier's K-coins, the firthal was based around firthal ore, one of the most prevalent low-grade exotics from the Nyxian Gap. With varied applications, the demand for firthal was constant and stable, thereby making it suitable to be used as a reliable form of hard currency in the notoriously anarchical and chaotic region.

Right now, 1 firthal was worth 24 bright credits, so even if Ves mentally translated the prices for slaves to his most familiar currency, they still seemed unimaginably cheap!

"What do you think?" Ves asked softly.

"Poor quality. Unreliable. Defective.

"Of course you'd say something like that."

Whereas the Kinner Tribe emphasized quality, the slave traders were not so discerning. Their human products were generally low quality. Those with valuable skills were usually kidnapped and subject to extensive brainwashing.

While the brainwashing ensured their obedience, the rough and pervasive treatment also affected their other competences.

The customers didn't mind. Those that wanted to purchase Kinner slaves mostly consisted of the upper echelons of society. They had the money to afford to buy a number of permanent Kinner bondsmen.

Ves guessed that the people that purchased slaves here mostly consisted of Nyxian pirates or various underground outfits. These types of unsavory organizations always struggled to acquire skilled or highly-educated labor.

"Mech designers for sale! Whether you need them to repair, modify or upgrade your mechs, our mech designers can do it all! Some of our more premier slaves can even design completely new mech designs that are perfectly suited for your outfits! We sell Novices starting at 3 million firthals! Our Apprentices can be yours starting at 8 million firthals! You won't get a better deal than ours!"

His mood dropped considerably as he brushed past the enslaved mech designers. The poor sods who had fallen into the clutches of the slave traders had been subjected to the same brainwashing regimes as most of the other slaves.

The quality of their work left much to be desired, especially since much of their profession relied heavily on creativity and inspiration. Ves did not believe a single brainwashed mech designer would ever be able to match the design prowess of a willing mech designer.

Nonetheless, as Ves observed the types who eyed the mech designers for sale, he figured that most buyers simply wanted to obtain them to service their existing mechs. The clientele mostly appeared to consist of dark mercenaries and hidden forces.

Reflecting their nature, they demanded a certain level of quality without costing them too much. The human products also had to be expendable. The mech designers sold at the Circle of Mota fell exactly within their demands.

Ves shook his head underneath his helmet as he saw these poor fellows who studied so hard to become a mech designer meet such a poor end.

From listening to the brief exchanges between the buyers and sellers, most of the mech designers who lost their freedom only had themselves to blame.

They borrowed heavily in order to fund their startups. When their businesses failed to take off, they eventually drowned in their debt.

In regular cases, mech designers who failed to start their own businesses simply declared bankruptcy and moved on while leaving the lenders on the hook for the unpaid debt.

To some mech designers, funding was very difficult to come by. They approached gangs and other loan sharks for money, and this was where they fell into trouble.

Mech designers that had to resort to unconventional funding sources weren't very good to begin with! When they eventually failed, the loan sharks immediately seized the assets of the company as well as the mech designer themselves!

Most of the mech designers already went through mental reprogramming, rendering them unattractive to Ves.

Who knew what kind of hidden instructions the brainwashers seared into their minds. Perhaps they had been programmed to transmit information about their buyers to the slave traders.

A number of imprisoned mech designers still looked fresh, though. Unlike their poorer colleagues who had been subjected to crude brainwashing, the untouched mech designers were still mentally sound.

Ves observed a variety of expressions behind the transparent cages that showed their dejected forms. He spotted anger, helplessness, despair, self-recrimination and more from their faces.

Though he sympathised with their fates, he did not feel compelled to help out his fellow kind. Most of them willingly played with fire and got burned. If they accepted that they weren't good enough to attract seed money from legitimate investors, then they shouldn't have insisted on founding their startups.

The mech market was too competitive to tolerate trash!

What really dampened his mood was that some mech designers had fallen in the clutches of the slave traders through no fault of their own!

Perhaps the passenger ship they boarded had been waylaid by pirates.

Perhaps their business rivals engineered an ambush on the streets.

Perhaps their bodyguards betrayed them when they were at their most vulnerable.

Whatever the case, Ves could have easily suffered the fate of these innocent and unwilling mech designers if he wasn't so thorough about his protective detail!

He thanked his paranoia for keeping him on his toes. Coming across so many mech designers who had their futures cut off made him more resolved than ever to invest in his Avatars of Myth.

"You are staring a lot. Are you interested?" Nitaa gruffly asked.

"No."

Though Ves deeply lacked design talent, he knew better than to purchase an enslaved mech designer! Whether brainwashed or not, the mech designers were already tainted the moment they fell into the clutches of the slave traders.

Though it took some effort, Ves strongly believed he could fill up his design teams through legitimate hiring practices. Unlike some of the other organizations that frequented the Circle of Mota, there was no need for him to resort to slaves to address his lack of mech designers.

As Ves and Nitaa both marched through the slave trade quarter, they continued to pass by slave traders hawking their mech designers.

As much as Ves tried to steel his heart against these sights, his mood nonetheless grew worse and worse. As someone who loved to design mechs, he hated the sight of others sharing the same passion succumbing to such awful fates.

Not even his empowered mask was capable of holding back his inner thoughts! As a mech designer, some sights were simply too abominable for him to remain quiet!

"Mech designers deserve better." He muttered, venting his frustration.

"Mech designers are just as vulnerable as other humans." Nitaa calmly replied. She shared none of his feelings concerning mech designers. "The strong prosper and the weak suffer under their yoke. This has always been the nature of the galaxy."

"In the many millennia since our species have risen up, we've advanced our civilization by an incredible degree. Yet sometimes I question how much

we've really progressed when we still engage in barbaric practices such as enslaving our own race."

A part of him hoped the MTA would come and smash apart the entire marketplace. The former expectations he held for the Circle of Mota had almost completely evaporated now that he witnessed the depths of their depravity.

To Ves, it was one thing to sell regular people. It was another thing to sell mech designers! The latter firmly crossed his bottom line!

He only relaxed a bit after they finally passed through the slave trade quarter and entered a section devoted to the sale of rare materials.

The sight of samples of exotics on display brought a smile on his face. This was familiar territory for him. The bounty of the Nyxian Gap was fully on display here! Already he spotted plenty of rare and expensive exotics that he hadn't encountered at the Peacekeepers branch on Cinach XII.

Best of all, due to his constantly-improving knowledge on Metallurgy, he understood a lot more about the properties of metallic exotics for sale here. Some of them were really useful for certain applications!

"Let's browse the wares carefully."

Not only was the selection of goods wider here, but their prices were considerably cheaper as well!

#### **Chapter 1462 Bounty of the Nyxian Gap**

As much as Ves wanted to snap up numerous samples of medium to high-grade exotics, he restrained himself as much as possible.

He only converted a certain amount of his money into firthals, and intended to reserve most of it for the acquisition of P-stones, F-stones and other spiritually-reactive exotics.



Nonetheless, his resolve wavered numerous times when he carefully brushed his gaze past exotics with useful applications.

Now that he was in the process of assimilating Senior-level Metallurgy, he recognized a wide variety of metallic exotics with known applications. He memorized their most relevant properties and also gained a sense of their prevailing market values.

Prices fluctuated considerably here. Not every exotic was sold at a bargain, and not every bargain offered a lot of savings. Part of the reason for that was the intense bargaining taking place.

Whenever a customer wanted to buy a product, they entered one of the nearby negotiating chambers administered by the Circle of Mota and bargained as if their lives depended on their efforts!

Both the buyers and sellers negotiated aggressively, so much so that a lot of people who finished their transactions stomped out of the negotiating chambers in a fit of fury!

The use of negotiating chambers to conduct transactions in relative privacy benefited both sides when they engaged in expensive transactions.

Their presence made it difficult for Ves to gauge the level of trade that went on. While all sellers drove hard bargains, he was unable to gauge which one was better at ripping off their customers than others.

Meanwhile, the buyers also maintained discretion. None of them looked forward to showing off the amount of firthals they carried to the unscrupulous guests of the Circle of Mota.

After trawling the stalls and shops for half an hour, he abruptly found his first lucky score.

When his spirituality brushed over a black chunk of rock, he immediately encountered the tell-tale reaction of a P-stone!

Ves casually raised his hand with one finger pointing upwards. It was his signal to Nitaa that he encountered a good that he really wanted to obtain!

Considering the extremely sharp bargaining abilities of the sellers, Ves did his best not to show his interest in the exotic.

Just like before, he approached the stall selling the P-stone slowly, expressing interest at other goods before considering the P-stone.

Though the dance stretched on for twenty agonizing minutes, he eventually managed to purchase the P-stone in exchange for the measly price of 7 million firthals!

For an exotic that possessed the rare property of storing his spiritual energy or spiritual entities while protecting them from decay, this was an absolute steal!

Of course, considering the P-stone's lack of properties, the seller didn't find this price to be so low. Unaware of its true applications, the P-stone had been mislabeled as a marginal low-grade exotic with unknown properties!

In a place like Centerpoint where an enormous amount of wealthy mech designers and other people came to shop, the vendors there jacked up the prices of such unknown exotics to a ridiculous degree!

In the Circle of Mota, such practices didn't fly as well here. The clientele was a lot poorer here. The sellers also couldn't afford to wait for years or decades until some random mech designer arrived and snapped up the goods at a ridiculous premium.

Ves was under no illusion that all of the firthals he paid would fall into the hands of pirates and other unsavory organizations.

Each and every guest of the Circle of Mota directly or indirectly facilitated the pirates each time they completed a transaction.

They did this through purchasing their sometimes ill-gotten gains, thereby placing a lot of firthals into their hands.

The visitors also supplied the pirates with valuable goods and services that were very difficult to come by in the Nyxian Gap but were essential to sustain their deplorable activities.

Nonetheless, even though Ves knew he indirectly enabled the pirates when he purchased the P-stone, he didn't care. Spiritually-reactive exotics were simply too valuable for him to let his conscience get in the way of empowering himself!

In fact, he was even willing to give the Five Scrolls Compact a hand if they bribed him with P-stones!

"Who knows if I'm already doing so." He quietly muttered as he received the floating container that held his third P-stone.

Though Nitaa still hadn't ascertained whether the Circle of Mota was tied to the Compact or not, they had only been able to explore a portion of the underground marketplace.

Most notably, the center of the city was closed off to most visitors. Only a small proportion of close associates of the Circle of Mota gained permission to enter. Ves had no clue what happened inside, but he had a feeling that more than just a couple of incidental trades took place in the core region.

If the Compact really had a hand in the Circle of Mota, then gaining entry to the center was the best way to obtain evidence!

It was times like these that he hated his mother's incredibly inconvenient appropriation of his Devil Tiger.

A masterwork mech was incredibly valuable! If Ves arrived at the Circle of Mota with such an incredibly valuable mech on offer, he might have gained enough regard from the organization to enter the inner marketplace. Who knew what he was missing out on now that he lost his only means of leverage.

He consoled himself with the acquisition of his third P-stone. Just like his first two P-stones, its appearance and physical makeup diverged as well. Yet even though it consisted of completely different materials, it possessed the exact same properties as the other two P-stones.

The addition of yet another P-stone in his arsenal was of immense value to him! Not only did he increase his external spiritual energy storage capacity by fifty percent, he also gained an extra container to hold living spiritual entities!

The appearance of a P-stone in the Circle of Mota confirmed his suspicion that the Nyxian Gap likely held more. There might even be a major deposit at one of its asteroids or larger satellites, just waiting to be excavated!

Filled with hope, Ves tried to restrain his urgency as he resumed browsing the shops and stalls. While the somewhat quiet and restrained bazaar failed to match the exuberance of normal bazaars, Ves was having the time of his life!

This was because he encountered three more P-stones!

Three!

Within a matter of hours, he instantly doubled his reserve of P-stones! He had even been forced to procure a floating coffer in order to hold his new acquisitions!

Due to their lack of perceived value, Ves managed to purchase them without significantly denting his budget. He still had plenty of firthals left to spare for other purchases!

"This is remarkable. I never expected to encounter so many useful samples here."

He understood why. All of the P-stones he obtained so far weren't very energetic. The curated marketplaces at Centerpoint and elsewhere preferred to sell something of more obvious value, while the Circle of Mota was much less discerning.

His only regret was that he hadn't encountered any other variety of spiritually-reactive exotics throughout his entire search of the rare materials quarter. He visited each and every shop and swept his spiritual senses over each and every stupid rock.

No luck. Now that Ves got his fill of P-stones, he wanted to supplement his exotics collection with F-stones and materials with different reactions to spirituality.

The F-stone he obtained at the Peacekeeper branch ought to have come from the Nyxian Gap as well. Why hadn't it shown up here? Could it be that certain people discovered their uses and kept them for themselves?

That spelled bad news for Ves, because the likeliest people to hog the F-stones was the cultists of the Five Scrolls Compact!

"Look to your left." Nitaa suddenly said, interrupting his troubled thoughts. "An auction is starting soon inside."

Ves frowned. "Auction halls are where high-value goods are put on offer." Goods like his Devil Tiger mech.

"Maybe you can find what you are seeking inside."

"That's true, but the auction is too conspicuous. Attracting attention is not our goal."

Even though the auction venue probably did its best to hide the identity of its auction goers, Ves still harbored misgivings over entering it. Right now, he was just one of many anonymous guests of the marketplace.

If he wanted to participate in the auction, he had to demonstrate his ability to spend. From what he saw, the auction only allowed guests with greater access passes or lots of firthals at their disposal.

However, if he skipped the auction, he might miss the opportunity to procure another spiritually-reactive exotic if one went up for auction.

The problem was that the auction hall did not list out the goods it was about to auction. Guests continually approached the auction workers in order to submit their high-value goods.

Just as Ves gave up on the idea of participating in the auction, he halted. After a brief consideration, he decided to take a risk.

He swept his spiritual senses outwards and into the auction hall.

This was a very risky course of action. Before, Ves only limited himself to extending his spiritual senses within arms length or a bit further if he wasn't allowed to get closer to the exotics for sale.

He didn't dare to leverage his Spirituality out of his body too much in case some monitors from the Five Scrolls Compact kept their eye on such phenomena.

Yet the auction hall's potential offerings simply tempted him too much. The goods up for auction should definitely be a cut above the rest!

As his spiritual senses stretched forward, he tried to sweep the interior of the theatre-like auction hall as fast as possible. In order to minimize the risks of discovery, he eschewed precision and depth in favor of speed and reach.

His spiritual senses stretched further than he had ever tried to do before in the material realm. Due to the dispersion of his senses, his sensitivity and discernment ability became worse!

Rather than carefully inspecting the interior of the auction hall, Ves instead swept out his spiritual senses in a rapid pulse that lasted less than a dozen seconds!

Like an active sensor that pulsed out a signal and awaited a return signal, Ves only sought to ascertain if his senses bumped into something unusual.

Surprisingly, his senses encountered two different bumps during the brief period of exploration!

The first instance occurred when his spirituality encountered a wall of some kind that blocked his senses from going any further. It was as if the object possessed the capability of blocking spiritual snooping!

"Useful!"

The second instance his senses encountered something remarkable was when he suddenly brushed against something large. His spiritual senses immediately became stagnant when it encountered the large object. It was as if it had entered into a swamp and got stuck in the morass!

Ves sensed a hint of something else buried deeper in the large object, but his sweep of the auction hall quickly finished.

Considering the continued risk of extending his spiritual senses so far, he reluctantly decided to retract them all. In any case, he got what he wanted out of the attempt.

"Let's enter the auction hall." He abruptly spoke up again.

Nitaa didn't question his U-turn. Both of them calmly stepped in line and awaited their turn. Once they arrived at the front, Ves handed over his data

chip which presented proof that he possessed enough firthals to compete in the auctions.

"Pass." The impassive guard said while handing back the data chip. "Behave yourself inside. Don't attack anyone inside and don't bid for something that is beyond your means to pay. We reserve the full right to ascertain whether you are violating our rules and dole out the necessary punishment. Is that clear?"

Though the warning sounded sketchy as hell, he heard the same spiel just before he entered the marketplace.

"We understand."

"Then make way and head inside. You are blocking the way."

#### Chapter 1463 Anonymous Exchange

Inside, the auction hall's dark, drab but roomy interior did not detract from the interest the upcoming auction attracted.

Already, hundreds of wealthy guests awaited entry into the main hall!

Meanwhile, the more privileged auction goers with better access passes headed for the less-congested balconies and private boxes upstairs.

Ves did not wish to bid for goods in the main hall where everyone could see him. He approached one of the workers.

"How much for a private box?"

"100 million firthals."

"Too expensive!"

That sounded like pure extortion! There was no way Ves would pay the equivalent of 2.4 billion bright credits just to secure a private box!

The worker looked at Ves' disguised form with contempt. "Temporary pass holders like you don't merit anything better. To gain the right to enter a private



box, you must either upgrade your pass to one of the higher tiers or convince someone with an upgraded pass to invite you inside. The only other alternative is to offer a high-value good for auction that exceeds the value of 100 million firthals."

"Understood.."

Ves stewed in his mind as he turned away as soon as he learned he had no means to obtain a private box.

It would have been a different story if he still possessed his Devil Tiger! Let alone 100 million firthals, the mech was definitely worth more than a billion firthals!

He mentally imagined shooting his mother over and over again with the Amastendira as he and Nitaa stood at the back of the waiting crowd.

He found out that they had come to the auction a little early. The doors to the main hall would only open in an hour, with the auction starting half an hour later.

The Circle of Mota who organized the auction wanted to make sure they attracted as many moneybags as possible.

Strangely enough, the normally quiet and standoff-ish guests began to converse with each other.

Only a certain caliber of guests were allowed to participate in the upcoming auction. They possessed a greater amount of wealth, strength or connections.

Despite knowing nothing at all about each other, the robed and disguised figures carefully approached the people next to them. Ves even witnessed a number of transactions taking place!

Soon enough, a group of recently-arrived guests approached Ves and Nitaa. The group of three immediately gave Ves the impression that the figure

wearing identical shadow attire as him was a noble. The two larger figures following deferentially behind the person in the middle hadn't done a good job at hiding their bodyguard tendencies.

A distorted voice sounded out over the low din of conversation.

"The dark sun will collapse."

"Pardon?" Ves couldn't help but respond.

"Nothing. I was merely curious if you are in the know."

"Well, I'm not part of your club."

The unknown figure turned towards Nita. "You're a big fellow."

"Yes."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Everything."

"What an eloquent answer." The unknown figure replied dryly. "But interesting nonetheless."

Ves was pretty sure now that he faced a noble. Whether the figure underneath the pitch-black robes and hardsuit was a man or a woman, he couldn't tell.

He did sense he faced someone of the same age or younger as him. He could discern at least this much from the unknown noble's speech and movement patterns, though someone like Calabast could probably figure out more.

"You're kind of stiff." The noble spoke. "You really don't give me much to work with, stranger."

"That's the intention." Ves replied flatly.

"The Circle of Mota can be a dangerous place if you get caught, but we are all on the same boat here. You won't be able to make any deals if you keep up your stiff act."

"That's not a problem."

"This must be your first time here."

"Yes." Ves admitted.

He didn't mind exposing this bit of information, as it was hard to pretend he knew what was going on. He got the sense that plenty of rituals took place in the Circle of Mota.

"What do you do for a living?" The figure asked again, this time to Ves.

"You don't need to know the answer."

"You'd be surprised how much I can be of use if you tell me something about yourself."

"What is in it for you?" Ves probed.

"I'm curious about the two of you. I know more about the Circle of Mota than a first-timer like you. I can introduce you to the auction if you tell me what you are or what you do. Don't be shy."

Though Ves felt tempted to push this annoying fly away, he reconsidered. He needed a source of information, and the fellow who approached him seemed sincere.

In fact, that was pretty much what most people were doing in the waiting hall. They approached random disguised people and carefully probed each other. If they liked what they heard, they befriended each other or engaged in impromptu transactions.

"Alright. I'm a mech designer."

"Oh." The disguised noble did not sound excited. Cinach VIII hosted a lot of mech designers, in part due to the presence of institutions such as Rawlings University. "What rank?"

"Journeyman."

The instant Ves spoke those words, the noble immediately perked up. His body language made it clear that he became a lot more attentive!

"Truly?"

Ves refrained from scoffing. "Truly. Believe what you will."

"I have a better idea. Are you willing to prove your assertion?"

"Depends."

The noble raised his arm and activated his comm. After a bit of manipulation, he presented a very complicated-looking mechanical puzzle.

"I'm told that only Journeyman are able to solve this puzzle."

"No problem."

Ves immediately grasped the essence of the puzzle. In fact, now that his Mechanics Skill was in the process of upgrading to Senior-level, he could easily solve it within a matter of seconds!

Still, in order to avoid standing out, he deliberately took his time and slowed down his responses. His fingers slowly manipulated the puzzle for a couple of minutes before he finally inputted the final solution.

"Astounding! You solved it in three minutes and eighteen seconds! That is definitely within the range of a Journeyman! You're the real deal!"

"I did not lie."

"You'd be surprised at how many Novices and Apprentices I've met who pretended to be bigger than they actually are. High-ranking mech designers

are rare in these parts. Most of the time, they dispatch representatives to conduct business on their behalf."

"I see."

That sounded like a clever solution. It added some separation between the high-ranking mech designer and the subordinate visiting the Circle of Mota. A Senior Mech Designer could not afford to get caught associating directly with this notorious organization!

If one of their subordinates got caught, the Senior could easily disavow the unlucky representative and claim that the miscreant acted on their own accord!

Whether the authorities accepted the excuse or not, Ves didn't know. The strategic value of Seniors to a state was very high though, so the Sentinel Kingdom was probably very reluctant to tear down one of their precious assets.

"You must be here on your own accord, right? You don't have to hide it from me. If you were sent by your mentor or boss, you would have gotten a better clue of what is going on. You're very brave."

"Why are you here, then?"

"I'm bored. The Sentinel Kingdom is so boring. Don't you think the Nyxian Gap is a lot more exciting? While I'll never step foot there, I can still take part in the gatherings organized by the Circle."

To be honest, the noble disgusted Ves a bit. The man lived a privileged life, and what did he say? He was bored! Billions of commoners in the Sentinel Kingdom would love to swap lives with a noble!

Fortunately, his muted mask helped a lot in repressing his inner Devil Tongue from lashing out. It wasn't as if he was any better than the noble either.

Despite knowing that the Circle of Mota served as an enabler of piracy, Ves still sought them out and partook in several transactions.

""Say, what's your budget, mech designer?"

"That's none of your business."

"Just give me an approximation. Did you bring more than 100 million firthals?"

"Yes."

"But not that much more, right?"

"..Maybe."

"Hah. You don't have to lie. Don't get me wrong. 100 million firthals is enough to bid on a couple of lower-tier goods on auction. Some of the goods are sold in batches, so you don't have to compete against other bidders for a single rare good. It's the auction hall's way of giving paupers an opportunity to come away with the satisfaction of winning at least one winning bid."

"It's not enough, you think?"

"Not if you want to obtain something of significant value. Don't get me wrong. The lower-value goods on auction are already notable enough. It's just.. the real excitement happens afterwards. Some of the choicier goods of the Sentinel Kingdom and the Nyxian Gap will appear on the auction block. These are what makes the auctions organized by the Circle truly worth visiting in person."

Ves thought about his spiritual sweep over the expansive venue. The auction hall stored at least two objects that reacted to spirituality!

One of which was of a much larger size than any spiritually-reactive material he encountered before! In fact, it felt so exceptional to him that he suspected that its value must not be low!

Though he initially thought his budget ought to be sufficient to bid on this mystery object, now he didn't feel so sure. If the anonymous noble didn't lie, then there were doubtlessly a lot of people participating in the auction with a much bigger war chest than he could ever compete against!

As the most powerful third-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector, the Sentinel Kingdom also happened to be a lot wealthier than a regular third-rate state like the Bright Republic. Nobles and other wealthy magnates earned considerably more!

Ves paused a bit. "You did not bring up this topic without cause."

"Correct. Ever since I heard you're a Journeyman, I've been considering a proposal. Do you want to earn some easy money?"

"How much?"

"Up to a billion firthals."

"That's a lot of money."

That was an understatement! 1 billion firthals equated to at least 24 billion bright credits! Though Ves frankly owned a bit more cash than that, he only converted a limited portion of his money into firthals.

He was very loath to drain his bank accounts even more, as it might attract unwelcome attention!

"Are you interested?"

"It depends on what you want. I am unwilling to commit too much time, so if you want me to design a mech for you, you're out of luck."

"Ah, that is not what I am looking for. I want you to upgrade a series of identical mechs with the parts and materials I've supplied. Use your Journeyman prowess to turn my batch of mechs into something truly exceptional."

"Why not approach a Journeyman the regular way?"

"The mechs are rather.. Delicate."

Ves frowned inside his helmet. "Are you supplying the mechs to a Nyxian pirate outfit?"

"Let's leave this question open, shall we? What I seek is someone who can upgrade a batch of mechs without leaking anything. Are you open to this offer?"

"You will have to reveal more about the mechs and what you expect from me. It is hard for me to make a judgement without any relevant information."

"Understandable. Look, why not follow me to my private box and discuss some of the details? You can stay with me when the auction starts. If you encounter something that you can't pay for, why not let me pitch in? If it isn't beyond my means, I can cover the cost. If I win, I can hold the object in my possession and exchange it to you once you finish the job I give you. Doesn't that sound like a good deal?"

This... Ves began to grow suspicious. What kind of upgrade job did this anonymous noble expect from Ves that was worth a billion firthals?

The entire deal sounded shady as hell!

#### **Chapter 1464 Spyre Helix**

Though Ves hesitated for a time, he eventually accepted the unknown noble's offer to walk up to his private box.

Ves, Nitaa, the unknown noble and his two bodyguards all moved up the stairs after a cursory inspection. The auction hall workers immediately let the disguised noble pass after they checked his pass.

Evidently, the fellow that invited Ves upstairs was an honored guest of the Circle of Mota.



Such an eminent person's identity or background must not be weak. What bothered Ves was that such people shouldn't have a lot of difficulty in convincing a Journeyman to complete a design-related job.

Yet instead of approaching more familiar mech designers, the unknown nobleman instead attempted to solicit him for a private commission.

Considering their current venue and the amount of care the nobleman showed in bringing up the topic, the job should have some issues. Serious and illegal issues. Why else would Journeyman refuse to accept a quick commission that earned them the equivalent of 24 billion bright credits?

There had to be a lot of issues concerning this job! Even if the noblemen of the Sentinel Kingdom were very wealthy, no one slung around 24 billion credits like candy!

It sounded far too good to be true!

Perhaps the only reason why Ves continued to entertain the idea was because his intuition did not signal any insincerity in the offer.

That was enough for Ves to stick around. It was unlikely he would receive a similarly-generous offer from someone else anyway. He still hadn't accepted any deals so he had the right to walk away anytime he wished.

As they reached the shielded and quiet box, they sat at the adjustable chairs and began to chat.

"It's tiresome for me to think of you as 'the mech designer'." The nobleman began. "You can call me Finlay. What about you?"

"Call me.. Rho-Sigma." Ves spontaneously blurted out.

He wanted to reveal as little as possible, so stringing along two random letters together sounded as good as anything.

That the letters happened to be 'rho' and 'sigma' was purely a coincidence, of course.

"Typical." Finlay shrugged just enough for his shadow attire to jerk. "You people always invent sciency names for yourselves."

"That's because they are common words in our profession. Every mech designer throughout the galaxy uses them as symbols in their work."

Darkness obscured the main hall beyond the one-way wall. Ves only perceived the outlines of many hundreds of seats stretching out below, with a lot of space in between. Paths led up to an empty auction stage big enough to accommodate several mechs.

With so much space, the auction hall could have hosted tens of thousands of people, though in reality only a few hundred bidders and their entourage would actually enter and take part.

"So where do you come from, 'Rho-Sigma'? While you hide your traits fairly well, it's obvious that you're not a commoner or noble from our state. You would have reacted differently to me if that was the case. Either that, or you're very good at pretending."

"Who knows. Stop fishing for information."

"It was worth a try." Finlay mirthfully said, though the distortion of his helmet did not convey his feelings that well.

Ves did not care too much that 'Finlay' found out that he was a foreigner. He wasn't a spy like Calabast who could seamlessly integrate in a completely foreign culture.

As an educational and research planet, Cinach VIII attracted a lot of mech design students as well as mech designers. A significant proportion of teachers and researchers were foreigners. Nonetheless, the amount of foreign

mech designers currently on Cinach VIII who also happened to be Journeyman did not amount to a high number.

This meant that Finlay could narrow down the possible identities of Ves to a single list of names.

Of course, Ves could also be a skilled actor who pretended to be a foreigner. Finlay still had to take that possibility into account.

Nitaa already signalled an obscure hand signal towards Ves. It was another predetermined code that stated that Ves should hold himself back.

She even spoke out. "Tell us of the job you have in mind for Rho-Sigma."

"And who might you be, big guy?"

"Big Guy."

Finlay was momentarily rendered speechless. "What an.. inventive moniker."

"Speak up. You have left us in the dark long enough."

"Oh well." Finlay sighed. "Here goes. The job entails two companies worth of mechs. The mechs are rather unusual and not very common around these parts."

"How many mech models are we talking about? The more models there are, the longer it takes for me to modify their designs."

"You don't have to worry about that. The mechs are all identical. One model."

"Just one?" Ves skeptically asked.

Almost every mech company featured a mixed mech roster. Perhaps some exceptions existed where multiple companies were meant to fight alongside each other. In those cases, using one model for every mech company wasn't as stupid.

Still, for two mech companies to consist of just a single mech model sounded quite far-fetched!

"Tell me about the model."

"They're doom crawlers. They're very expensive, but they're worth it. The mechs pack a very strong punch and they can take a lot of hits. See for yourself."

Finlay projected a doom crawler model from his comm and also listed out its spec sheet.

Apparently, the model was called the Spyre Helix, and its design was an absolute beast!

Doom crawlers were some of the most notorious heavy mech types in existence. The mech model that Ves currently studied did not put its mech type to shame!

The overall shape of the Spyre Helix resembled that of a six-legged tarantula scaled up to the size of an office building. Its legs looked meaty and thick because of all the heavy armor plating they had been clad with. They were incredibly resilient against damage!

The six legs held aloft a large and heavily-armored torso that had been designed to accommodate an entire arsenal's worth of weapon hardpoints.

Four large ballistic cannons provided devastating firepower at medium-to-long ranges.

Eight smaller laser rifle barrels placed throughout the chassis provided all-round protection against closer and swifter threats.

Two missile launchers installed at the top of the mech added a considerable amount of versatility.

The incredible amount of weapons mounted on top of a heavy mech that already bore a significant amount of armor sounded prohibitively expensive!

However, as Ves studied the spec sheet closer, he realized that while the Spyre Helix was a genuine heavy mech, its actual construction was quite economic!

The reason why the doom crawler became so large was because it was made up of relatively cheap materials!

He quickly estimated the price range of the doom crawler.

400-500 million bright credits. That was how much each mech cost. That placed the Spyre Helix on the cheaper end of the doom crawler mech type.

Nonetheless, that did not detract from the Spyre Helix's capacity for destruction. A force of eighty doom crawlers was enough to flatten the landbound defenses of a minor planet! This was some serious firepower!

After studying the Spire Helix's design some more, he noted a few remarkable details that suggested a very disturbing picture.

"The Spyre Helix is an illicit mech design. I highly doubt the MTA ever approved of its design."

"Correct."

Ves recently finished an illicit mech design project himself, so he knew what it was like to design a mech that did not abide by the MTA's strictures.

"The Spyre Helix is a pirate design. It's designed and meant to be used by pirates. Nyxian pirates."

"That is also correct. I'm impressed you realized this so quickly. Perhaps I approached the right mech designer after all."

"These mechs are already very deadly, Finlay. The pirate designer who is responsible for creating the Spyre Helix is very competent."

So far, the design appeared to be the work of a very experienced Journeyman. Not only that, but Ves also guessed that the pirate designer used to work for the military or a company with close ties to the military before he or she went rogue.

Such mech designers ought to be very infamous and very dangerous. Ves began to harbor more doubts.

"These doom crawlers must be very hard to acquire. I don't think there's any manufacturing facility in the Sentinel Kingdom that is daring enough to fabricate these mechs in such quantities."

"You'd be surprised what you can get away with on an uninhabited star system. Besides, we already bought these doom crawlers just a few days ago from the Circle of Mota."

"They are here?!"

"Yes, but stored somewhere safe."

A lot more questions emerged. Why did the Circle of Mota ship so many illicit mechs onto Cinach VIII? What did Finlay intend to do with these incredibly destructive pirate mechs?

However, even if he harbored a lot of questions, Ves knew better than to voice them. Whatever purpose Finlay or his superiors had in store for the doom crawlers, it must be something extremely delicate.

Nonetheless, he still needed at least some answers.

"What do you wish to upgrade?"

"I'd like to upgrade its weapon systems and some other aspects." Finlay answered with a gesture. "Their existing armament is already powerful, but I

require more. The doom crawlers need to be capable of unleashing great destruction."

"The current weapon loadout of the Spyre Helix is already optimal. It's enough to fend off a large range of landbound and aerial mechs."

"That's the problem, you see. The doom crawlers are great against mechs, but we are targeting more than mechs."

"What do you need, exactly? Be more specific."

"The doom crawlers have to be capable of wide-area infrastructure destruction. We want you to pull out all of the stops. We've already gathered some materials and some component designs to replace the existing weapon systems of the doom crawlers, but finding a Journeyman who is willing to incorporate them in an upgraded design is surprisingly challenging."

"Show me."

Finlay projected the new weapon systems.

The ballistic cannon mounts that fired conventional shells had to be replaced with a different cannon system that fired a very specialized shell type. One that carried a very destructive nuclear payload!

The laser rifle barrels mounted on the doom crawler had to be replaced with more advanced and more demanding energy weapon systems. While the new weapon system was capable of firing conventional lasers, its alternate firing mode turned it into a gamma laser weapon!

As for the missile launcher system, Ves didn't have to make a lot of changes. He just had to make additional room so that the doom crawler carried additional nuclear missile salvos!

Ves was shocked at the sheer audacity of the proposed modifications! Not even pirates dared to be so unscrupulous as to make use of so many taboo weapons!

He could easily imagine the sheer horror that eighty doom crawlers modified for absolute destruction could unleash! The amount of firepower the doom crawlers would carry was enough to wipe out an entire metropolis in a matter of minutes!

"I can see why no mech designer dared to accept your commission." Ves said very mildly. "The nature of your demands is very problematic."

That was an understatement! If the MTA ever got wind that 'Finlay' attempted to turn a bunch of doom crawlers into apocalyptic engines of destruction, then they would probably send out an entire warfleet after his heels!

"Don't leave yet. It's not what you think!" Finlay raised his hand towards Ves. "We have no intentions to turn the Spyre Helixes against the Sentinel Kingdom! The mechs are all meant to be put to use against a highly entrenched stronghold operated by a pirate alliance in the Nyxian Gap."

"What kind of pirate fortress requires this much firepower?"

"One that is very sturdy and large."

"Regular weapons are already capable of doing the job."

"We know. It's not about destroying a pirate stronghold, Rho-Sigma. It's about sending a message. We want to unleash as much destruction as possible in the most brutally direct fashion as possible!"

Ves widened his eyes behind his helmet. This sounded more than just a calculated attack. Instead, he suspected that Finlay may be driven by a vendetta!



## Chapter 1465 Excessive Force

"You're right. It's personal." Finlay admitted when Ves probed the disguised nobleman yet again. "It's the only way to teach the Nyxian pirates a lesson. They're so used to brutality that they rarely pay attention to ordinary threats."

"Even so, the modifications you have in mind are very gratuitous. Replacing the regular ballistic cannons with specialized nuclear cannons is more than enough to turn your Spyre Helixes into highly destructive mechs. Adding the gamma lasers and nuclear missiles to your mechs is excessive."

"Nothing is excessive when it comes to the opponent we are targeting." Finlay glowered darkly. "The Spyre Helixes that you are modifying will only be put to use in a single operation. Once they have finished the job, we will immediately dismantle and break them down so that no trace of them are left. They won't ever show up again, Rho-Sigma. I promise that."

Ves pursed his lips behind his helmet. He sat impassively as he tried to judge whether Finlay actually spoke the truth.

His shadow attire made it very difficult for Ves to glean clues out of the nobleman. His spiritual senses caught nothing as Finlay did not possess any spiritual potential that could give away any clues.

All Ves could rely upon was his intuition and his logic.

His intuition didn't sense anything egregious about Finlay, but then again his intuition didn't have much to go upon. Plenty of people had lied to Ves before and got away with it. Spies and nobles adept in social manipulation tended to be highly trained in the art of deception.

Though Ves probably figured that most of what Finlay said must be true, the Sentinel might have taken some liberties with some crucial details!

What if Finlay deployed the doom crawlers against a Peacekeeper base?

What if Ves woke up one morning and read a devastating news report about several cities in the Sentinel Kingdom being laid to waste by a bunch of mystery doom crawlers?

The doom crawlers possessed enough firepower to wipe out billions of humans by launching all of its nuclear weapons in quick succession!

Not a single defensive force would be able to react in time if the doom crawlers were smuggled into place without tripping off any alarms!

A huge shadow loomed over Ves. This job sounded extremely sketchy to him. Even if Finlay truly believed that the doom crawlers he acquired would merely be put to use against a bunch of pirates, he was just an errand boy.

The people who truly possessed the power to decide where to employ the doom crawlers stood above someone like Finlay! Ves doubted that the young nobleman knew every detail about the intended use for the modified doom crawlers.

Who knew if the owners of the Spyre Helixes held different ideas from Finlay?

No matter how much sincerity Finlay tried to convey, Ves couldn't put much stock in the nobleman's words.

The more he thought about it, the more Ves feared that the doom crawlers would be put to use against targets that didn't deserve to die in a sea of nuclear fury!

"You said that you've already approached other Journeymen, right? They made the right decision. The changes that you demand is too abominable to see the light of day."

"I already told you. Their only purpose is to annihilate a heavy-defended pirate fortification! That is all!"

"Not even pirates deserve to die with the cruel and inhuman weapons you wish to mount on your Spyre Helixes."

"Heat is heat! Explosions are explosions! Who cares whether the heat and explosion comes with a dose of radiation? Someone who is directly struck by a laser beam will die regardless whether it's radioactive or not!"

"If there is little difference in lethality, then there is hardly any point in replacing the Spyre Helix's conventional weapon systems."

"As I said, regular weapons aren't enough! We have to send a forceful message!"

Again, Finlay repeated this ostensible goal.

"Is it personal?" Ves boldly asked.

"...Yes." Finlay admitted. "I'll be honest, Rho-Sigma. A few years ago, one of our elite Peacekeeper outfits deployed in the Nyxian Gap fell into an ambush. A lot of mech pilots died, but those who survived ended up in the clutches of the pirate alliance that orchestrated the trap. Those who survived... did not meet good ends."

"I take it there were very important people among those survivors. Those of noble blood."

"..Yes. This is not a secret. If you check the galactic net, you can read the public news articles."

"Let me think for a moment."

The Circle of Mota did not offer a connection to the galactic net, so Ves had no way of confirming the incident.

He didn't think that Finlay was lying, though. Ves could easily confirm the news by asking bystanders about this ambush.

However, even if the ambush actually took place and provoked some nobles into plotting revenge, Ves still maintained some suspicions.

How could a pirate alliance determine the precise route of a premier Peacekeeper outfit and set an ambush that the scouts failed to detect in time?

Ves suspected that the pirates had help. Inside help.

What if the avenging nobles not only acted on the same suspicions, but managed to pinpoint the traitors within the Sentinel Kingdom, who knew if the doom crawlers would be deployed against their strongholds instead?

The pirates may have done the deed, but they may have merely been the knife wielded by the actual masterminds!

If the masterminds happened to be a noble house in control of a planet, then smuggling eighty doom crawlers onto the surface was a good way to tear them down from their lofty height!

Perhaps it was just his paranoia going overboard again, but Ves seriously believed it was plausible that the modified Spyre Helixes would actually be put to use against 'civilized' opponents!

It was one thing to employ taboo weapons against scummy pirates who had forsaken their human rights. It was another thing entirely to employ prohibited weapons of mass destruction on a civilized target like House Laterna or House Gin Tefa!

"I think we are done here." Ves spoke and stood up. "I will not entertain your proposal any further. It is sheer madness."

"Rho-Sigma! Please don't go yet! The auction hasn't even started yet! The Circle of Mota always offers a lot of highly unusual goods in their auctions! If you truly want to obtain something but don't have the firthals to outbid the other bidders, I can still help!"

Ves momentarily halted in his attempt to stand up. Though he found Finlay's proposed commission to be extremely problematic, who knew what he might miss out on if he left the private box.

At best, the objects that attracted his attention might not be as expensive as he feared.

At worst, he could just decide to forgo the spiritually-reactive objects entirely.

With some reluctance, Ves decided to remain after all. Leaving would only deprive him of an opportunity while giving nothing in return except for cleansing his conscience.

The value of the former was much greater than the value of the latter.

If Ves had to put a price on his conscience, then 1 billion firthals sounded kind of cheap. He had the feeling he might be able to milk Finley out of even more money if he stringed the fellow along.

Finding a Journeyman willing to perform the modifications he demanded must be very challenging.

While capable and experienced Apprentices could also do the same job, they required a lot more time to implement all of the modifications. The results wouldn't be as good as Ves could manage, as all of those powerful weapon systems required more space and more power to accommodate their prodigious firepower.

Therefore, Ves was at least assured that Finlay wanted him for his skills and didn't target him for some other reason.

As time passed by, Finlay kept chatting with Ves. Though they didn't talk about anything sensitive, the disguised nobleman put some effort to ingratiate himself.

Ves learned a fair bit of useful information, particularly about the Circle of Mota and the Nyxian pirates. This kind of information was very hard to come by as only nobles were exposed to the bigger picture.

"Do you know why we've never attempted to wipe out the Nyxian pirates despite the cancer they pose in our region?" Finlay asked.

"Too difficult and costly."

"That's true, but the Sentinel Kingdom could have done much more to suppress the pirates. Aside from the Peacekeepers, we can also bring our military and all of the household troops to bear against the Nyxian Gap. Even if we can't root them out entirely, we can bleed them enough so that they won't be able to launch any attacks against us for the next fifty years. To some people, that is still worth it. Yet each time a proposal is put forward, it's always shot down. Don't you find that interesting?"

Ves crossed his arms across his chest. With his understanding on how society was run, he formed a very solid guess.

"The current status quo favors the royals and nobles. The Nyxian pirates exert considerable pressure against the state, but not to the point of threatening its sovereignty."

"Right. The Nyxian pirates can't be wiped out, but also aren't that bad to have as neighbors. We grew strong as a state because of how the Nyxian Gap changes the dynamics in its surroundings. Destructive wars are much less common, though small-scale raids are still rather frequent. The damage is tolerable, though. Instead of damaging the lifeblood of our kingdom, the pirate attacks instead serve to remove the rot from our state."

Perhaps the decadent nobles who did not invest enough in defending their holdings deserved to fall. Ves wasn't so sure if the commoners toiling for their masters and suffering the brunt of the pirate attacks deserved the same.

He should never mistake pirates as benign!

"Is this the prevailing opinion among the nobility?"

"Yes. Our conflict against the Nyxian pirates has raged for centuries that we've settled on a tenuous balance. Our state not only founded the Peacekeepers to organize our resistance towards the pirates, but also modulate our counterattacks to a level that is tolerable to the pirates themselves."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "The state is afraid that a greater attack against the pirates will provoke a more destructive response."

"Right."

This put the commission that Finlay offered to him in a whole new light.

"The doom crawlers that you have bought. If they are upgraded according to your demands before being put to use against the pirates, then that will break the balance you are talking about, right?"

"Hehe." Finlay chuckled inside his helmet. The distortion made his laugh sound considerably more ominous! "That's right, Rho-Sigma. Destroying a single pirate fortification in the most barbaric fashion possible is not our end goal. It is a catalyst. The Nyxian pirates have sat on their comfortable thrones for too long. Launching an attack while employing a judicious amount of outrageous weapons is a provocation that no pirate can ignore!"

The implications sounded explosive! What Finlay just said had wider implications towards the entire region!

"I do not understand. The status quo is beneficial towards your class. Why provoke the Nyxian pirates to such an extent?"

"You're partially correct, mech designer. While it's true that the status quo is not that bad for us, both sides involved require some shaking up. The ambush

that felled our elite Peacekeeper outfit has gone too far. The pirate alliance responsible for torturing and killing our fellow nobles has grown too comfortable in its seat of power. If we wish to topple them and make room for a new power structure, we have to resort to drastic action."

"It's not just about taking revenge for a single ambush, then."

"Yes. We have accumulated other grievances. While our state is willing to keep the pirates aren't, it doesn't matter which pirates are in charge. Some have outlived their usefulness. We are merely helping them retire."

#### **Chapter 1466 Tainted Commission**

As much as Finlay's explanations made sense, he was only a single, biased source.

Ves would be a fool if he believed everything Finlay said. At the very least, he had to take into account that Finlay distorted or omitted the facts. The Sentinel's one-sided account only shone a single light to the story.

One of the downsides of staying at the private box was that Ves had no one else to ask for a second or third opinion. While the box provided him with some needed privacy, the isolation from the majority of the auction goers also played into Finlay's intentions.

Nonetheless, Ves accepted the circumstances because he believed he gained a rare glimpse into the true thoughts of the ruling class of the Sentinel Kingdom.

Everything he heard so far sounded plausible.

Time continued to pass by as Ves eagerly harvested more information from Finlay.

In the meantime, the doors to the main hall opened up. A crowd of robed, suited and armored figures slowly entered the hall and took their seats.



Groups of them shoved their seats together to form an island within the darkness.

So far, the auction hall was still dimmed in darkness. Only the faint ceiling light and the lights shining from the guests themselves prevented them from bumping into obstacles.

Seeing how many wealthy guests attended the auction, Ves began to wonder how much support the Circle of Mota enjoyed.

"How many Sentinel nobles have taken part in the Circle's exchanges?"

"Every noble house."

That was a surprising answer! "Everyone?"

"Perhaps not at the same time. Some houses are much more opposed to pirates than others. However, not every noble in a single house thinks the same way. There are always a couple of black sheep in the family who believe there is little harm in dealing with the Circle. They do not make up for a lot of people, though, so only a third of the noble houses are truly eager to take advantage of the services that the Circle of Mota provides."

The picture that Finlay painted spoke of a closer interdependence between the Sentinel nobles and the Nyxian pirates. While both were ostensibly enemies, they depended on each other as well.

"The trade between certain houses and pirates is very lucrative." Finlay continued as the auction hall continued to fill up. "You can even say that certain nobles and certain pirates have grown very comfortable with each other."

"They became partners." Ves remarked.

"Yes. Certain pirate alliances are secretly backed by certain noble houses and vice versa. Well, backing is not the right word."

"They benefit from having closer ties to each other while still remaining wary of each other."

"Yeah! That's how some of the shadow alliances have formed. For the most part, we accepted that certain parties made friends across the other aisle. In order to facilitate these partnerships and provide a better infrastructure to conduct exchanges, the Circle of Mota emerged to provide a way for both sides to get in touch with each other."

"Who founded the Circle? Who controls the Circle?"

"I don't know. That's not something that is commonly known. It's best if you don't poke around too much."

"I see."

The question who was actually in charge of the Circle of Mota continued to gnaw at Ves. It was one thing if the Circle was led by a hidden consortium of nobles and pirate leaders. He wouldn't even raise his eyebrow if the royal house pulled the strings.

However, if the true masters of the Circle turned out to be the Five Scrolls Compact, then Ves had to be extra careful!

There was a possibility that the Compact or an agent of them kept an eye on the spiritually-reactive goods that were about to come up for auction. If Ves appeared too eager to obtain these two goods, then he might be drawing attention that he really didn't mean to attract!

Ves turned his gaze from the increasingly more occupied main hall to the disguised form of Finlay.

If Finlay bid on the goods that Ves wanted to obtain, then the extra layer of separation served as a form of protection.

It wouldn't be of much use if the Compact controlled the auction hall, but it was better than nothing.

"Why are you so insistent on adding taboo weapons onto your Spyre Helixes?" Ves asked again. "I understand the argument you try to make, but with the amount of money you are willing to spend, you may as well employ five-hundred normal mechs instead."

"It's too risky." Finlay's shadow attire jerked. "We can't let the attack be traced to us. The retribution that we will be subjected to would ruin us all. With regards to covert operations like these, the less people we involve, the less likely it will leak. The operation has to be conducted with as little mech pilots, ship crew and support personnel as possible. One additional person more means bringing on an extra risk factor. It only takes one informer to warn the pirates of an impending attack."

Ah. That explained the rationale for using expensive doom crawlers instead of cheaper mechs. Finlay's superiors wanted to bring a certain amount of destruction towards a target. However, they were unwilling to employ too much manpower for fear of leaks.

Under these conditions, it made more sense to employ a smaller force of high-value mechs than a larger force of weaker mechs.

Yet another question quickly emerged in his mind. "Who will pilot these mechs?"

"We aren't investing our own forces to this endeavor. As I said, we can't let this operation tie back to us. We have to keep the pirates in the dark. We've employed a large and somewhat trustworthy dark mercenary corps for this operation."

"Doom crawlers aren't easy mechs to pilot. Every heavy mech requires special training to pilot proficiently. Most pirates have never come in touch with a doom crawler."

"We have already taken that into account." Finlay replied confidently. "The entire reason why we went out to buy the Spyre Helixes in the first place is because it's a doom crawler design that is native to the Nyxian Gap. I'm told that it's been designed to be easier and simpler to pilot than normal. If we bought doom crawlers designed in civilized space, then they would have been inoperable in the hands of mech pilots who aren't trained in their use."

"There's a good reason why doom crawlers require special training."

"It's unnecessary for the Spyre Helix model of doom crawlers. I'm told that they are highly automated and that even an advanced mech cadet can pilot them. It's not as if doom crawlers require fine control. The dark mercenaries we've retained for this operation have already expressed their confidence that they have enough mech pilots to put the Spyre Helixes to good use."

Ves frowned when he heard that. He always disliked too much automation in mech. While it was important not to overload the mech pilot with too much irrelevant input, the degree of automation in the Spyre Helixes was so extensive that it sounded as if the mech pilots were barely in control over their own machines!

"The automation of the Spyre Helixes are tailored to its conventional weapon systems. If you want me to upgrade their design with different weapon systems, then the programming will have to change as well. That requires a lot of work."

"Is there a problem?"

"Depending on the adaptability of the Spyre Helix's programming, it may take a lot of time to adjust its programming towards the use of nuclear cannons

and nuclear missiles. Otherwise, the doom crawler is liable to launch a nuclear missile at a target that is merely fifty meters away, expecting a smaller explosion but getting a much bigger and more destructive one that damaged its own frame!"

"...It's fine if the Spyre Helixes do their jobs. We don't expect more from you. None of our people are piloting the doom crawlers anyway. If a number of them end up firing at themselves, then at most we will have to pay additional compensation fee to the dark mercenaries."

The dark mercenary corps that accepted this ludicrous mission must be truly mad to accept it! Who would ever want to pilot eighty engines of nuclear destruction against one of the local powers of the Nyxian Gap?

Ves felt the urge to cut open the head of the dark mercenary commander and see if the brains had been replaced by candy or something!

"The dark mercenaries must be paid very well."

"Oh yes. We not only offer rich remuneration in the form of valuable hardware and supplies, but we have also entered into an ongoing partnership. Dark mercenaries are not as unreliable as pirates. While the latter are more predominant and hold most of the territory, they make for treacherous business partners. This is a lesson that we have painfully learned."

Ves doubted that dark mercenaries were much better than pirates. They were both dishonorable scum who were willing to do anything to satisfy their greed!

"About the commission that you expect me to perform." He raised. "If you want me to accept, then it will help if you provide some guarantees."

"That's not a problem, Rho-Sigma. We can draw up a contract under the auspices of the Circle of Mota. One of the reasons why we prize the Circle of Mota so highly is that they can be trusted to act as neutral guarantors to any deals we make. They also mediate in any disputes that might arise and issue

a fair judgement. Their track record is so good that no one has ever thought to replace the Circle with another organization."

That also made sense. The Circle of Mota would have never existed this long if they lost their credibility as neutral actors. By showing no favoritism towards the Sentinels or the Nyxians, they managed to maintain the support and confidence of both.

"So how will this work?" Ves asked.

"If you accept the commission, you will have access to all of the relevant files in the form of a secure terminal in an enclosed design studio that we have rented from the Circle within this marketplace. In no circumstances are you allowed to copy the data or transfer them elsewhere."

"So I will be doing the work in that very same room?"

"Yes. We'd like you to complete your design work as fast as possible there, preferably before the Circle of Mota packs up and evacuates this site. The marketplace can't stay up forever as the authorities are constantly on the lookout."

"How much time is that?"

"I'm not sure, but it won't take more than two weeks. Is that a problem?"

That was plenty of time for Ves. He estimated that he could do a decent rush job with a matter of days. A week was enough to turn the Spyre Helix into an adequate new weapon platform.

"The time frame is acceptable." Ves replied confidently.

"Good. I've heard that Journeymen are a lot faster in this regard than Apprentices. It will be very inconvenient if your work is interrupted because the Circle of Mota is forced to pack up prematurely. We will compensate you for the work that you have already done if that happens."

"I want everything."

Since the conversation had turned into a negotiation, Ves might as well see if he could get the most out of this deal!

"That is not acceptable." Finlay pushed back. "You will have an incentive to force the Circle of Mota to move early. What if you send your partner to lure the authorities towards this site? No. You will only get paid for the work you have accomplished. The faster you complete the design, the less likely we will issue you your partial reward."

"How will my work be judged?"

"The dark mercenaries sent one of their representatives to this place. Since they'll be the ones who are piloting the upgraded machines, they'll be the ones to judge the adequacy of your modified designs. Only when they are satisfied will you complete the mission. The Circle of Mota which holds your rewards in escrow will pass them on to you. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Hm. Perhaps, but if the dark mercenary representative is too picky, we'll quickly have a problem."

The negotiations continued as the start of the auction approached.

#### **Chapter 1467 Circle Auction**

The auction finally commenced. The occupants of the private box paused their negotiations, knowing that it would likely be moot as long as Ves did not bid beyond his budget.

As befitting the secretive occasion, the auction began without any fanfare. The lights remained dark and everyone turned off their suit lights. While many sensors would still be able to capture everything regardless of the light level, the shadowy interior helped set the appropriate mood.

This would not be a boisterous auction where personalities dominated the occasion. The Circle of Mota's only concern was to organize an uneventful auction where money, goods and services flowed as smoothly as possible.

An old man in dark robes shuffled onto the large auction stage.

"Welcome, honored guests, to our latest auction. Let me quickly reiterate the rules before we commence. First, to bid on an item, you must input your bid on the device that will appear before you. No other form of bidding, whether verbal, non-verbal or other means will be permitted."

A gap opened up from the ceiling of the private box. Bidding tools hovered down in the hands of every occupant, including Nitaa and the bodyguards.

"Second, secrecy is paramount. Unless both the prior owner and the bidder agree to reveal their identities to each other in a private chamber, no attempts must be made to pry each other's names. Anyone who reveals their identities here for any reasons will immediately be removed from this site. To facilitate everyone's privacy, bidders will be referred to by the numbers corresponding to your bidding tools."

The Circle of Mota sounded quite serious about this, which Ves appreciated. Auctions where lots of firthals and controversial goods shifted back and forth could be quite dangerous if someone's identity got exposed.

"Third, no one will speak unless prompted or allowed to by us. There are no exceptions to this rule. Any disturbance will immediately be dealt with. The auction will only proceed smoothly if order is maintained. This is not your kingdom or fief, so do not cross our boundaries."

The exasperating tone adopted by the old man made Ves suspect that there had been plenty of people who broke this rule in the past. That it needed to be reiterated like this meant that there were probably some very impulsive people among the crowd.



"Fourth, the goods and services that are put on auction have been verified to the best of our abilities. Nonetheless, we do not guarantee their soundness. Caveat emptor applies. The most we can do if the item has been genuinely misrepresented is to take everyone involved into custody and resolve the dispute through arbitration. By taking part in this auction, you implicitly consent to these terms."

Why did this sound like one of those scummy terms of use agreements used by some of the shadier services?

"Fifth, some items put up for auction can only be paid through the exchange of certain goods and services rather than firthals. Any bids we receive will be announced in the open to give other bidders the chance to adjust their own bids. However, the winning bid will solely be decided by the prior owners. We will facilitate the exchange after this auction ends. The other rules apply as well. If you have issued a bid that you cannot fulfill, you will regret it very dearly."

Something like this probably happened a lot as well. How stupid could people be? Plenty, it seemed.

"Now that we have that out of the way, let us begin with the first item."

Ves became curious at what kind of items the Circle put on auction at these kinds of events. They had to be rare and precious to be worth the time for all of the distinguished guests to attend.

The first item hovered to the stage from a floating platform appearing from a gap in the floor. The object was as small as a fingertip, forcing all of the auction goers to study the giant projection that appeared above.

"Our first item is an ultracompact battery." The old man spoke calmly, completely unlike what a regular auctioneer should speak like. "Its standard dimensions are capable of fitting into any standard devices such as shield

generators, stealth detectors, jammer busters and other gadgets that require a large amount of power. Its charge, though non-replenishable, is good for resisting the full firepower of a rifleman mech for up to twenty seconds depending on the model of your shield generator."

A lot of people perked up at the offering of an ultracompact battery! A portion of the audience possessed shield generators, but they only lasted for so long until their batteries expended their charges.

Bringing a spare battery along might save them from a sticky situation by giving them double the protection!

Of course, Ves did not feel excited about the ultracompact battery at all, as he had the knowledge and the materials to cobble one up himself. In fact, he already planned to do so on the journey to the Hertog Dominion!

Nonetheless, Ves acted appropriately and straightened his back. He wanted to show Finlay and the Circle of Mota that he was impressed by the appearance of the batteries. It would have been weird if he did not do so considering their utility!

"Do you require an ultracompact battery?" Finlay offered, having bought Ves' act.

"They are useful." Ves carefully replied. "But I did not come here to procure one."

"The auctioneer highlighted some of the ultracompact battery's specifications before announcing the start of the bidding.

"Ten ultracompact batteries are made available here. Let us begin with the first of ten batteries. The starting price is 10 million firthals and the bids must come in increments of at least 1 million firthals."

A light and a small bell sound rang throughout the entire main hall as the first bid immediately arrived.

"10 million firthals." The old auctioneer calmly announced.

"11 million firthals."

"23 million firthals."

"25 million firthals."

"34 million firthals."

The bids frankly arrived faster than the auctioneer could keep up. Despite the initial rush of bids pouring in, the auctioneer did not panic and merely skipped over the intermediate bids to announce the highest one at the time he opened his mouth.

Even Ves inputted a bid worth 37 million firthals in his bidding tool before he left it. Since he could easily make a non-rechargeable ultracompact battery by himself, there was no way he would waste his precious firthals on the batteries on offer.

"138 million firthals by Number 4454. Going once. Going twice. Sold."

The auctioneer brought out a small gavel from his robe and struck the air. Despite not hitting any surfaces, a loud banging sound rang throughout the main hall, signifying the end of the bidding round!

No one knew the identity of Number 4454. Was he a pirate? A Sentinel? Did he sit on the ground floor, or was he sitting on the balcony? No one knew for sure, and that was exactly what the Circle of Mota wanted to see. The more secure people felt in their identities, the more willing they bid on the items.

"Let us begin with the second battery. 25 million firthals. 45 million firthals. 75 million firthals..."

Now that people gained a rough estimate of how much people were willing to bid, the auction of the second battery proceeded rapidly before concluding at a price of 142 million firthals, more than the previous one!

The subsequent batteries flew off the auction block in quick order, with prices ranging from 120 million firthals to 150 million firthals.

To Ves, the winning bids sounded somewhat high in relation to the specifications of the ultracompact batteries. However, the batteries possessed a higher capacity than the cruder ones he was capable of making himself, so the winners did not overpay by too much.

It seemed that the cartel for ultracompact batteries held the market firmly in their grip for them to arouse this level of competitiveness among the bidders. That made him feel better at the fact that he was capable of making them by himself.

The second item of the auction hovered in place of the demonstration battery. This object was much larger.

"The second item on offer today is a monument from the extinct Eonxe race. The Eonxe was a race of sentient aliens that ruled a large amount of territory in the Majestic Teal Star Sector. They are now extinct and no living member of their race has survived."

The monument was a worn-out stone and alloy statue of some kind of upright lizard-like alien race holding aloft a weapon. The craftsmanship of it was fairly exquisite to Ves' artistic senses. The Eonxe had a flair for exaggerated sculpting.

Nonetheless, it was just a statue or monument. It held no practical value and Ves did not even detect an inkling of a spiritual remnant inside the large object.

Nonetheless, its historical value alone interested a lot of bidders, because they immediately began to compete over the item with increasingly ludicrous-sounding sums!

"400,000 firthals. 1.2 million firthals. 4.6 million firthals. 16 million firthals. 16.7 million firthals. 40 million firthals! 40.6 million firthals."

An increasingly small but active amount of bidders offered up enough money to buy and outfit an entire mech company!

To Ves, to throw around this much money for a simple alien ornament sounded crazy!

However, he recognized that the people who competed over the statue desired it due to its rarity. The Eonxe, just like thousands of other sentient alien races in the galaxy, had been wiped out by the relentless expansion of humanity during the Age of Conquest.

Righteousness, peace and respect for sentient life did not apply during those times. Greedy human invasion forces kept encroaching and overpowering every alien civilization in their path.

Their stars became humanity's stars. Their planet's became humanity's planet. The human race demanded everything while the aliens were forced to fight to the death or flee with whatever remains they could carry.

Even then, a lot of human warfleets pursued the refugees and wiped them out in order to save themselves the trouble of a comeback. Sometimes, a handful of aliens got away, but by and large their once-prosperous civilization had come to an end.

In order to make their newly-conquered territories their own and deprive their former owners of any claim of what they once possessed, the human race also erased every trace of alien occupation.

The human conquerors fanatically wiped out all of the buildings, monuments, space stations and even entire planetary ecosystems molded by their previous alien owners.

A monument as beautiful as the one put on auction ought to be very rare. It would be a boon to the collection of distinguished persons. Ves could easily guess that the most enthusiastic bidders consisted almost entirely of nobles.

"76.7 million firthals. Going once. Going twice. Sold!"

Someone paid the equivalent of almost 2 billion bright credits for an alien relic with absolutely no practical use.

Nonetheless, Ves understood the benefit of owning such a rare alien ornament. Just like hunting trophies, these kinds of prizes increased the owner's prestige when used in the right way.

To some members of high society, spending 2 billion bright credits to gain an indeterminate amount of prestige was a worthwhile deal. They had too much of the former and not enough of the latter. Auction goods like the Eonxe monument were particularly good means of turning money into prestige.

The auction continued onwards as other goods started to show up. Items such as medicines, gadgets, weapons and other practical objects showed up consecutively, giving the poorer bidders an opportunity to compete over the cheaper items appearing on the auction block.

The bids rarely surpassed 10 million firthals, reflecting the relatively mundane value of the gear and equipment. While they still had their unique points that distinguished them from regular commodities, they were nothing worth getting excited over.

Once the auctioneer got rid of the garbage, he finally perked up a little as they presented a more remarkable item.

The next item emerged from the floor to reveal a transparent cage that contained a pissed-off human being.

A slave!

#### Chapter 1468 Inhuman Trade

"Our next item is a notorious human fugitive. Dr. Gregario Manstel is a senior exobiologist with over sixty years of professional experience. When he was forty-three, he ran afoul with the laws of the Sentinel Kingdom when he illegally created an abomination that went out of his control and broke out of the constraints of his lab, killing two fellow senior exobiologists along with numerous junior exobiologists and interns."

The auctioneer calmly described the public history of Dr. Manstel, giving those who weren't familiar yet with the exobiologist a good overview of his worth.

"Dr. Manstel has been drifting in the Nyxian Gap as an independent service provider. To adapt to his new life, he has acquired several new specialties. The most prominent of them is the ability to transplant alien or artificially-cultivated organs into human bodies. Owing to his orthodox education and formidable research gains during his legitimate career, his transplants attempts enjoy a 93 percent success rate, though this is partially due to his refusal to perform high-risk transplantation procedures."

The crowd rippled as they heard this. Ninety-three percent! While there were plenty of biotech scientists who could top this success rate, they were all eminent senior figures who did not make themselves available so easily!

Ves got the sense that it was mostly the gangs, pirates and dark mercenaries among the bidders who eyed the services of this exobiologist.

To most people, the best way to augment your capabilities was to alter their baseline human bodies! The rich and powerful did it all the time, so how could the pirates be left behind?

Of course, getting ahold of a senior exobiologist like Dr. Manstel who was capable of performing transplants safely was very rare in a place like the Nyxian Gap.

Plenty of fugitive biotech scientists who ran afoul with the law fled to lawless space, but most of them consisted of young idiots who screwed up on the job or got caught tampering with their work. Just like the mech design profession, the biotech professions were heavily skewed towards the upper end.

Someone as experienced and authoritative in his field as Dr. Manstel represented a genuine treasure, though getting him under someone's heel was another thing entirely.

"...after botching a transplant operation on the son of a pirate leader, Dr. Manstel has been taken into captivity as punishment. We have inspected him thoroughly and he has not been subject to any abuse, brainwashing or other invasive procedures. With all of the augmentations he has applied to his own body, his natural lifespan is enough for him to last for at least fifty more years, barring any unusual occurrences."

Ves eyed Dr. Manstel speculatively as the auctioneer finally began the bidding round. A flurry of sums immediately emerged.

"5 million firthals. 10 million firthals. 13 million firthals. 13.3 million firthals. 14.6 million firthals. 17 million firthals. 17.5 million firthals..."

Ves decided to join in the fun as well and inputted a sum of 18 million firthals into his bidding tool.

"...18.5 million firthals. 18.6 million firthals..."

Sadly, his bid had already been supplanted by the time the auctioneer called up the next sum.

Finlay, who was sitting next to him, noticed his moves.



"Do you require the services of an exobiologist?"

"Perhaps. It will be a challenge to bring him to heel. Dr. Manstel does not appear very docile."

"There are many solutions to make a stubborn slave honest, from good old-fashioned torture to more sophisticated brainwashing methods. The Circle of Mota offers a variety of brainwashing options to turn a slave into a pliable servant."

"How many slave buyers make use of those services?"

"At least a third of them do so. The methods employed by the Circle are some of the best. However, a fair number of buyers already have their own brainwashing operations or work with trusted people who do the brainwashing on their behalf."

Ves did not possess any means to brainwash any slaves, but Finlay reminded him that he didn't necessarily have to rely on himself. Did he possess any allies, friends or partners who could brainwash a slave in his stead?

One possible candidate emerged. If he could trust anyone to act in his interest and refrain from inserting any hidden traps and backdoors into the neural programming, then approaching Calabast was his best bet.

Even if she hadn't set up a brainwashing operation for the moment, with her resourcefulness she could probably erect one within a year.

Ves inputted another bid into the bidding tool.

"20 million firthals! 20.1 million firthals..."

Damnit. The value of Dr. Manstel turned him into a very desirable good, especially to pirates who didn't have easy access to advanced biomedical and biotech services in civilized space.

The value of Dr. Manstel did not only lay in his high proficiency in transplanting complex organs. He was also very skilled in identifying, caring, and identifying the properties of a variety of exobeasts.

That sounded useful to Ves as he contemplated setting up his own biotech company in order to manage his private exobeast reserve. Someone like Dr. Manstel, if brainwashed and set up with a completely new identity, could serve as an unquestionably loyal director and head researcher for the new company.

Nonetheless, the bids for Dr. Manstel quickly surpassed the ceiling set by Ves.

"30.6 million firthals by Number 324. 31 million firthals by Number 68. 32 million firthals by Number 324!..."

Only two bidders remained who still competed over Dr. Manstel. While the man was unquestionably valuable, many of the guests could easily obtain someone comparable with this much money on the table.

"You've stopped bidding." Finlay commented. "If you really need your own senior exobiologist, I could bid for you if you want."

"No thanks." Ves stoically replied. "I do not wish to owe you this much for a single slave."

Senior exobiologists of Dr. Manstel's caliber were very hard to come by. Most already worked exclusively for other employers.

Even so, Ves preferred to reserve his limited capital for more worthwhile gains. The two spiritually-reactive items hadn't even come up for auction yet. With the average price levels bandied about so far, Ves was afraid he would need every firthal he converted beforehand.

"36.3 firthals. Going once... going twice... sold to Number 324!"

A muted applause arose to congratulate Number 324 for acquiring his new slave. Dr. Manstel, who witnessed himself being sold like a prized exobeast on the auction block, pressed against the transparent barrier and screamed with rage!

Sadly, the cage that enveloped the slave completely blocked off every noise. No one paid attention to the useless flailings of a mere slave.

One cage made way for another. This time, a sophisticated-looking woman in her forties emerged. The woman wore a brilliant gold-white dress which accentuated her bust and contours while hinting at more. Her hair been styled in a majestic golden crown that enhanced her arrogant bearing.

Surprisingly, a noble was being auctioned!

"Lady Maie of House Noz of the Sentinel Kingdom here has made a dire mistake in her life. She fell in love with an agent dispatched by a rival house and subsequently caused untold damage due to the secrets she leaked. Suffice to say, House Noz has put a bounty on her head."

The subsequent details recited by the auctioneer made it clear that Lady Maie had behaved exceptionally poorly. Not only did she leak the secrets of her own House, a subsequent investigation revealed that she had also been embezzling a significant portion of House Noz's income from its business interests.

If that wasn't bad enough, Lady Maie also proved to be a decadent woman! She ordered her men to kidnap any commoner she encountered she found 'delectable'! Though she only targeted commoners, the Sentinel Kingdom never tolerated egregious abuses against its citizens, as such behavior was no different from that of a pirate!

Due to all of these reasons, Lady Maie elicited no sympathy at all from the crowd of nobles.

"A shame." Finlay sighed inside his helmet. "Lady Maie has shamed House Noz as well as the Sentinel Kingdom with her disgraceful behavior."

The bidding for Lady Maie started as soon as the auctioneer finished his tale.

"20 million firthals. 50 million firthals. 100 million firthals! 120 million firthals. 150 million firthals. 200 million firthals! 210 million firthals. 215 million firthals. 240 million firthals. 244 million firthals. 300 million firthals by Number 7023! 320 million firthals..."

The sums being bandied about for this slave far surpassed the previous offerings! Bids offering the equivalent of more than 10 billion bright credits quickly arose, but the bidding round still heated up!

"Is Lady Maie this valuable?" Ves questioned.

Finlay chuckled. "I think you have the wrong idea, Rho-Sigma. Unlike what you might think, only a portion of the bidders consist of depraved pirates who want to turn Lady Maie into their trophy. Most of the bidders actually consist of nobles who desire her secrets or wish to use her as a bargaining chip. You can earn a lot of political capital and other rewards if you hand her over to House Noz."

"A representative of House Noz must undoubtedly be among the bidders." Ves noted.

"Undoubtedly. They don't want Lady Maie to divulge even more secrets. You'd be surprised how much a noble knows. House Noz entrusted Lady Maie to lead some of their critical business ventures, so she can offer every owner a detailed picture of their internal finances."

Such intel was incomparably precious in the right hands. Eventually, after a furious round of bidding, Lady Maie had been sold at the ludicrous price of 1.3 billion firthals!

That was around 31 billion bright credits!

Ves resisted the urge to scratch his head, not that it would be of any use since he wore his thick, enclosed shadow attire.

Was this how much a typical adult noble was worth in the Sentinel Kingdom?

What kind of price would someone like Ves fetch if he appeared on the auction block?

No one would ever be able to assess his true value, but his current accomplishment should merit at least 500 billion bright credits. As a Journeyman with a long life ahead of him, he could easily earn back this immense sum for his masters within a decade!

Ves mentally shook his head. What was he thinking?! Why did he suddenly appraise himself like a slave? He was an honored mech designer!

"Now, for our third slave for the day, we have a special individual..."

More slaves emerged. Ves looked on with fascination as various distinguished and valuable people were being bid upon as if they were not even humans.

The Circle of Mota kept parading experts with valuable skills, exiles from far-flung star sectors and defeated pirate leaders. Each time they put forward a remarkable slave, the bidding war that ensued became intense.

The sight of it disillusioned Ves to the practice of buying and selling slaves.

It was too.. inhuman.

He almost snapped when a Journeyman Mech Designer went up for auction. Just like many of the other cases, the man had screwed up and ran afoul of the MTA. A mech designer like him had no future in civilized space.

Ves did not pay attention to the mech designer. He did not learn the person's name nor did he bid any sum of firthals.

It was one thing to enslave an exobiologist. It was another thing to enslave a mech designer.

Even though Ves could figure out many uses for a competent Journeyman Mech Designer, he refused to taint his hands by purchasing an enslaved mech designer.

Finlay had no such compulsions. He eagerly placed several bids until the sums surpassed 100 billion firthals.

While a Journeyman was a lot more valuable than that, it remained to be seen whether the new owners could actually extract that much value out of their new slave!

For the Circle of Mota to be able to involve so many people in the act of purchasing and selling slaves, their existence exerted a corrupting influence towards the Sentinel Kingdom.

Ves harbored an increasing amount of misgivings towards this mysterious organization. Did their goals solely lay in facilitating trade between the Sentinel Kingdom and the Nyxian Gap?

#### **Chapter 1469 Item #613**

Ves mentally sighed in relief once the auctioneer finally sold all of the slaves. He didn't know if he could take the sight of slaves being treated like cattle any further.

"Too bad." Finlay muttered to his side. "I was hoping to buy the Journeyman Mech Designer so that we can complete the commission ourselves. Sadly, there are a lot of pirate leaders who are even more desperate to retain their own Journeymen. Ah, I mean no offense to you, Rho-Sigma."

"It is fine." Ves nonchalantly waved his hand. "It is a given to pursue other solutions. Free mech designers are reluctant to involve themselves in any design work related to taboo weapons."

"That seems to be the case with most mech designers... except you. I find it very curious that you have decided to stick around. Does that mean you have accepted my commission?"

"Let's not be too hasty. So far, the auction has not impressed me very much."

"Don't be in a hurry to leave. The good stuff is just about to come."

As if to emphasize Finlay's words, the next batch of items that appeared consisted of rare and valuable materials!

"Our first exotic here today is a 24.64 kilogram sample of raw diplo-exonite. Rated as medium grade, raw diplo-exonite is an exotic that has never appeared in this star cluster other than the Nyxian Gap. The only other method of obtaining diplo-exonite is to import its refined version from distant sources!"

The raw diplo-exonite was a non-metallic exotic, so Ves wasn't very familiar with all of its properties.

Nonetheless, its value was undeniable!

"When refined, diplo-exonite becomes an extremely potent substance that is very volatile unless utilized in special manners. Its most notable use is to increase the efficiency of a power reactor. While its current quantity is not enough to make a serious dent on large-scale power reactors providing power to entire cities or city districts, the sample here is very potent when used on power reactors utilized by mechs! The efficiency of a mech power reactor can be raised by as much as twenty percent with the inclusion of diplo-exonite!"

This sounded similar to the Furnace of Regret gem that Lucky produced! Ves wondered if the two shared a connection. What would happen if Ves fed the raw diplo-exonite to Lucky? Would he produce a gem that was even more effective than the Furnace of Regret?

Coming across the sample of raw diplo-exonite in this auction helped put them into perspective for Ves. While the exotic sounded useful, Ves also possessed something with comparable effects.

Of course, both had their uses. Exotics with potent effects were sometimes difficult to work with and took up valuable space and capacity in a mech design. The upside to them was that depending on their supply, they weren't very hard to obtain.

In a way, many mech designers made use of exotics like Ves made use of Lucky's gems. They selectively applied expensive materials with powerful effects to augment the functioning of a particular mech or mech design.

In contrast, Lucky's gems didn't require any accommodation to take effect on a mech. Ves merely had to bury the gem in a random location in the mech for them to empower a mech with an esoteric effect.

Ves had no idea how they worked, but that did not mean he refrained from using them. If Lucky wasn't so inconsistent in the production of gems, he would have made much more extensive use of them! At the very least, every mech of the Avatars of Myth deserved a gem!

As Ves contemplated sneaking laxatives in Lucky's diet, the auctioneer finally began the bidding round!

"10 million firthals. 15 million firthals. 18 million firthals. 23 million firthals..."

Ves only made a few lowball offers before he quickly gave up. Raw diplo-exonite may be rare in the Komodo Star Sector, but Ves could list out several locally-available exotics that exhibited similar effects. The only downside was that they were a bit less potent.

The number of bidders quickly reduced as the prize for the sample leveled off at around 55 million credits. Ves guessed that only mech designers and those from a technical background competed over the raw diplo-exonite.



"Sold for 63 million firthals to Number 10406!"

That sounded like a fair price for the sample. In fact, it was close to the market price for imported diplo-exonite, so the winner of the bid hadn't gained much of an advantage at all.

"Rho-Sigma. As a mech designer, you ought to be very familiar with the exotics that show up, right?"

"Correct."

"Can you advise me if I'm interested in bidding for some of the exotics?"

"I can do that."

"Great!"

As more exotics appeared on stage, Ves did not bid on any of them as he had no pressing need for the benefits they brought.

Finlay was different. Like a kid in a candy store, he pursued several exotics that appeared on the auction stage. Unfortunately, the competition for the exotics, especially those that weren't native to the star sector, was very high.

"120 million firthals!"

Ves placed a hand against Finlay's suited shoulder. "Don't bid any further. You can obtain the same thing by importing it from legitimate channels."

"Ah, thank you. I forgot myself."

Instances like this happened once or twice. The lack of a galactic net connection along with the general ignorance of most of the auction goers meant that a significant amount of people paid a lot more than the exotic was actually worth on the open market!

What a scam!

Well, not exactly. Ves did have to admit that some of the goods were very hard to come by. Even at their current market prices, obtaining some of the rare exotics was easier said than done. It was definitely worthwhile for some to pay extra at this occasion in order to obtain them immediately rather than wait for years for one to be shipped from a distant place.

When the next exotic appeared, Ves had to restrain his excitement.

One of the two objects he had been waiting for had appeared!

A rock the size of a human head appeared on stage. It was rose-gold and resembled a giant fossilized grapefruit.

Though Ves deeply wished to extend his spiritual senses further, he was exceptionally wary about doing so in such a bustling venue. Chances were high that agents or representatives of the Five Scrolls Compact kept an eye on the proceedings!

Ves only performed an extremely small and rapid targeted pulse that confirmed the rose-gold exotic reacted to his Spirituality.

"This unknown exotic is of unknown providence. The unreliable anecdotes gathered by its owner suggests that it has come from the inner regions of the Nyxian Gap. Whether this is true or not, we cannot ascertain the truth."

A spec sheet projected into view, listing out a variety of basic parameters.

"Item #613 exhibits a high density and feels warm to the touch. It possesses decent energy levels, but despite extensive investigations, we have been unable to determine its exact effects."

Overall, the properties listed out by the auctioneer sounded relatively mundane. The main point was that Item #613 exhibited a fair amount of energy activity. This conclusively identified it as an exotic with potentially-significant effects.

However, Ves felt that the crowd didn't exhibit a lot of enthusiasm for it. The nature of unknown exotics was that their effects could be anything, but whether they were useful or not remained to be seen.

Anyone bidding for an unidentified exotic would basically be engaging in a form of gambling. They gambled that the value they could extract out of the exotic exceeded the money they spent.

Once the bidding started, not a lot of people started to bid.

"10 million firthals. 12 million firthals. 16 million firthals. 30 million firthals. 35 million firthals. 36 million firthals. 40 million firthals..."

Ves continued to input numbers into the bidding tool. He outbid the highest number by 1 million firthals.

He had to win this bid!

The enthusiasm shown by Ves immediately attracted Finlay's attention. "Do you want my help? I can obtain it for you immediately if I make a shocking bid."

"No thanks, Finlay. That will probably do more harm than good. Perhaps some of the guests will believe that Item #613 possessed untapped value."

"Does it? You're very eager right now."

"Who knows." Ves replied, unwilling to say more.

He found it regretful that the auction didn't allow anyone to walk up to the stage and inspect the exotic up close. They had to judge the usefulness of the exotics on offer solely by their spec sheets and their magnified projections.

This made every bidder other than Ves reluctant to spend too much money on an unidentified exotic. Since no one apparently recognized it or valued it too much, the bidding round quickly slowed down.

"55.5 million firthals. 56 million firthals. 56.1 million firthals. 56.2 million firthals."

A short silence ensued as no further bids emerged. The only other person participating in the bidding realized that Ves continued to place a counterbid, so quickly gave up any thoughts about obtaining the rose-gold exotic without committing too much money.

56.2 million firthals. Going once. Going twice. Sold to Number 6969!

A small weight lifted off his chest as Ves silently sighed in relief. He obtained a rare, exciting new spiritually reactive exotic! Though Ves hadn't inspected it thoroughly, he already knew that its effects were different from that of P-stones and F-stones!

Perhaps Ves would soon be expanding his exotics catalog with a third lettered stone category!

A short chime sounded out from his bidding tool. Instructions appeared, prompting Ves to put his data chip that contained his firthal account onto a slot on the tool.

Ves instantly lost 56.2 million firthals. That meant he paid the equivalent of 1.348 billion bright credits for a new type of spiritually-reactive exotic.

What a bargain!

Sadly, Ves also expended a significant chunk of his budget. It remained to be seen if he had enough of a warchest to compete over the bidding of the second-spiritually-reactive object.

The latter was fairly large. It ought to be a lot more remarkable than Item #613. Ves feared that its immensity and its other properties might attract a lot of interests from the auction goers.

He subtly eyed Finlay, whose real name and identity still remained obscured. Though Ves had not even come close to figuring out Finlay's new identity, he gained a good impression of the noble.

At the very least, Finlay genuinely required the services of a Journeyman. Though the nature of his commission was extremely problematic, as long as the Circle of Mota acted as guarantors for their deal, Ves objected less and less to the idea of accepting it. Seeing how fair the Circle of Mota operated did wonders in reducing his paranoia of being 'silenced' at the end of his job.

As Ves kept wavering about his decision, the next exotic appeared on the stage.

"Synthra Umbra is a rare, high-grade exotic found in small quantities throughout the Komodo Star Sector. Its special properties are related to interference. When processed into a thin, flexible string, they can be weaved into a cloth or a garment that acts as powerful shielding against external scans and signals."

This instantly caused Ves to take note. While Synthra Umbra did not seem to be spiritually reactive, its sensor-blocking properties sounded extremely interesting!

"Synthra Umbra is perfect for the fashioning of passive sensor-blocking garments. While jammers and other countermeasures against scanning can do the same, they affect a wide area and can interfere in the operation of numerous other devices in the vicinity. An article of clothing weaved with Synthra Umbra is considerably less intrusive and can be worn in nearly any setting without attracting undue attention. Best of all, it is effective even when weaved in a thin cloth!"

Must buy! To someone like Ves, this exotic was a must buy!

## Chapter 1470 Synthra Umbra

Ves quickly became enthralled by the possible uses of Synthra Umbra.

This high-grade exotic, when processed and weaved into cloth, could be fashioned into thin and flexible articles of clothing.

Clothes made from Synthra Umbra were light, flexible and most importantly did not emit any disturbances.

In other words, Synthra Umbra cloth possessed an unobtrusive presence, and this was key.

Other materials were capable of dampening and blocking scans and signals. The problem was that most outfits capable of doing so would make someone look like how Ves and Finlay currently.

Not only did they don a solid hardsuit, they also garbed themselves with thick robes in order to add another layer of scanning protection.

Could Ves spend his entire life wearing shadow attire? No! Not only would he encounter numerous social obstacles, he'd also be isolating himself from his closest friends and family.

Humans were social creatures. Despite his paranoia, Ves did not think he was capable of living out the rest of his life wearing fully-enclosed hardsuits and obscuring robes.

Yet the more Ves lived his life wearing regular clothes, the more he felt exposed. Who knew how often people observed him as he lived his daily life. Sensors were everywhere and long-range scanners could pick up a surprising amount of details about his body and his equipment from a lengthy distance.

Ves really hated being stared at. With all of the secrets he hid, he couldn't afford to slip up anything that hinted at something greater.

Of course, Ves also had another reason to covet Synthra Umbra.

He knew that his 'girlfriend' had a very annoying habit of snooping at him through hacked sensors. With her seemingly-omnipotent ability to hack any sensor by exploiting MTA backdoors, his intuition often warned him when he was being actively watched!

Hell, even if Gloriana didn't tune in on a live feed on Ves, she probably recorded all of his daily actions and viewed the highlights later or something!

Knowing that this went on and unable to deter this behavior, his only recourse to prevent Gloriana from watching him was to employ jamming and ECM.

Unfortunately, active countermeasures had the unfortunate effect of disturbing every other device in its area of effect. Not only would it block his comm's connection to the galactic net, but also interfere with the functioning of a ship or space station if he happened to be onboard anything surrounded by technology.

The existence of exotics like Synthra Umbra offered a better solution to protect him from invasive scans.

Though it did not wipe out his presence from sensors, it at least offered very powerful means to block invasive scans.

If Ves made use of Synthra Umbra clothes, he would not only be able to avoid standing out from the crowd, but he could also hide a myriad of gadgets as well as his body conditions from all manner of scanning!

Synthra Umbra was worthy of being called a high-grade exotic. According to the spec sheet projected by the auction hall, just a thin weave was enough to defeat nearly every long-range scanning method that did not surpass a certain power level!

While Synthra Umbra wouldn't be enough to block the MTA's sophisticated scanning methods, there was no problem blocking scans based on tech that was prevalent in third-rate states!

Synthra Umbra was even capable of blocking scans from third-class scanning devices, but only below a certain power level. However, if anyone directed a large, high-powered scanner at him, there was no way that Ves would miss the sensation of being scanned at a ludicrously invasive degree!

It was not knowing when he was being studied that irked him the most. As long as Ves became aware that people attempted to glean private information from him,

The amount of Synthra Umbra brought to auction today consisted of a staggering amount. Ves estimated that the quantity was enough to fashion a cloak that could complement his Pride of Dusk while still leaving enough cloth to tailor a couple of hidden pockets and something even more important.

Underwear!

Though Ves questioned whether it was necessary to make underwear that could block all manner of invasive scanning, it was better to be safe than sorry!

The utility of Synthra Umbra was undeniable. So was its demand.

Though it showed up in various satellites across the Komodo Star Sector and the rest of the galactic rim, the yield only amounted to a few grams to milligrams worth of Synthra Umbra.

That wasn't even enough to weave a glove.

More troubling, as soon as some prospector encountered it, they instantly offered them to one of the many major powers of the Komodo Star Sector. It never showed up in the open market!

In truth, if Ves wanted to obtain thin and unobtrusive clothing that protected his privacy, he had another option available.

He could purchase something from the System Store.



Unfortunately, having studied the offerings from the Store many times, Ves had long given up about buying most of the gadgets and items on offer.

It was too much of a ripoff!

In order to obtain something comparable to Synthra Umbra clothing, he'd have to fork over tens of millions of DP.

DP was too precious to waste on such uses! The primary use of DP to Ves was to upgrade his Skills. The secondary use of DP was to obtain vital tools that enhanced his ability to survive and design better mechs.

While the Store offered a decent but far from complete selection of goods, Ves only considered a small selection of items to be cost-effective in terms of DP spending.

Right now, he already acquired the Vulcaneye, his Privacy Shield, his Stealth Augment and a number of other gadgets from the System. All of them were still in their preliminary forms and still had a long way to go before they reached their potential.

All of that required millions of DP!

With such considerations in mind, rather than spending scarce DP, why not spend his more abundant firthals instead?

Better yet, what if he could get someone else to spend their firthals on his behalf?

All it would take was to accept Finlay's commission.

Once the auctioneer finished hyping up the Synthra Umbra, the bidding commenced.

Ves immediately inputted 50 million firthals into his bidding tool.

"50 million firthals! 70 million firthals. 130 million firthals. 131 million firthals. 135 million firthals. 136 million firthals. 140 million firthals!..."

Unfortunately, other auction goers quickly surpassed his bid! A lot of wealthy guests started to flex their war chests as they kept inputting greater and greater numbers into their bidding tools!

"...212 million firthals. 213 million firthals. 235 million firthals..."

Ves quickly frowned. The sums immediately surpassed his budget, putting the Synthra Umbra immediately out of his reach.

"Finlay." He spoke to the disguised noble. "Synthra Umbra is very useful to me. If you..."

"Say no further." Finlay confidently replied.

"...270 million firthals! 271 million firthals. 272 million firthals..."

The bidding slowed down as the current bids already surpassed the prevailing market price for Synthra Umbra. The only advantage of winning it during the auction was that they could make use of it immediately instead of waiting years to accumulate a usable amount of the substance.

A fair amount of bidders still competed over the Synthra Umbra. In particular, wealthy pirate leaders who prized their privacy just as highly as Ves still competed over the current item on the auction block!

Since pirates lacked the convenient supply channels of well-connected noble houses, this might be one of their only opportunities in years to obtain a generous chunk of Synthra Umbra!

"...320 million firthals. 321 million firthals. 322 million firthals. 325 million firthals..."

Finlay temporarily stopped inputting figures into his bidding tool. Instead, he turned his body towards Ves.

"The competition for Synthra Umbra is more intense than I expected. The amount of firthals that I have to invest is considerably significant. While I have a lot of capital on hand, I still have other obligations. Rho-Sigma, if you truly wish to acquire Synthra Umbra, you can wait until my noble house accumulates it slowly, or..."

Ves made a rapid decision in his head.

"Fine. I accept your commision. I am willing to upgrade your Spyre Helixes in exchange for the Synthra Umbra and some other goods that might catch my attention."

"My original offer stands. 1 billion firthals. No more."

Ves didn't know whether that was enough for him to win the bidding for the second spiritually-reactive material. Considering its dimensions and its highly potent properties, he couldn't afford to let it slip from his grasp! Who knew what he would miss out!

"One more item, but no ceiling." Ves pushed. "The service that you demand of me is enough to condemn us all. I don't think you'll be able to find any Journeyman that is willing and capable enough to do what you demand."

"We can still buy an enslaved Journeyman."

"The taboo you want to commit goes against everything mech designers have learned. It will take extremely strong brainwashing to defeat a mech designer's repulsion against turning mechs into prohibited weapon platforms. However, the stronger the brainwashing, the more a mech designer degrades in terms of competence. Mech design is a profession that relies heavily on creativity and imagination."

The less freedom a mech designer enjoyed, the more their creativity and imagination suffered! While they were still able to perform a variety of less

design-intensive work such as performing maintenance or repairs, they could forget about designing or modifying mechs in a competent fashion!

Finlay ought to know this as well. The disguised nobleman paused a bit further. All the while, the bidding for Synthra Umbra finally neared its end stages.

"Let us finalize the details after the auction ends." He said, unwilling to commit to an excessive amount of spending without getting a sufficient amount of benefits in return. "If I spend less than 1 billion firthals on your behalf, then I can compensate you with additional rewards to make up the total amount. If I spend more, then I expect additional benefits from you. Is that agreeable?"

Ves silently raised his hand to give a thumbs up.

"Very well." Finlay spoke with satisfaction.

No one knew how much effort he spent on securing the services of a Journeyman for this sensitive task! Finlay would never offer Ves such excessive rewards if he wasn't so urgent!

Nonetheless, even if Ves did not believe he would have to spend a lot of effort to complete the upgrade commission with his current capabilities, that was never the problem.

If Ves really provided Finlay with an upgraded design that enabled him to transform eighty doom crawlers into portable weapons of mass destruction, then he'd be forever tainted by the association!

Ves would have to bear yet another crushing secret in his heart!

Yet... as long as his anonymity was guaranteed, who cared? With his knowledge base and his mech affinity, Ves planned to rush the commission as fast as possible. As long as he completed the job quickly and got away from here as fast as possible, he'd be able to minimize the risk of exposure!

To Ves, the deal was worth it as long as he didn't get caught!

Now that Finlay secured Ves' verbal agreement, he resumed inputting bid after bid.

"...360 million firthals. 361 million firthals. 365 million firthals. Going once. Going twice. Sold to Number 142!"

Finlay won the Synthra Umbra! Shortly afterwards, he transferred the money through the bidding tool, finalizing the transaction!

"I've got it. The Synthra Umbra is mine."

As the auction proceeded with the introduction of another exotic, the air between Ves and Finlay changed. Now that they reached a tentative agreement, they were no longer strangers.

However, they didn't move any closer either. Their disguises and their insistence on keeping their identities a secret forestalled any attempts at befriending each other.

An awkward silence prevailed.