

Chapter 1471 Item #1255

More goods appeared at the auction. With hundreds of different high-value items made available, pretty much everyone who attended the auction gained an opportunity to compete.

Many people who brought as much wealth as Ves already spent their money on goods such as exotics, medicines, exobeasts, equipment and other things of value.

In addition, those who lacked enough firthals to win the bids also had another opportunity to gain what they desired.

About one in ten items put up for auction demanded alternate payment.

"...35 kilograms of neixe metal in exchange for the services of a Senior Mech Designer. Please input your strengths and the amount of time and effort you are willing to spend in your bidding tools. The owner of the neixe metal will make a selection based on the attractiveness of your offer..."

"...This ancient alien relic can only be exchanged for other alien relics. Please upload the files of the relics you are willing to exchange to the bidding tool to make your bids..."

"...This unique and powerful spaceborn rifleman mech is a powerful complement to any space-roving outfit.

A lot of good stuff appeared on stage, giving Ves a good impression of the kind of goods and services that appealed to the upper echelons of both the Sentinel Kingdom and the Nyxian Gap.

Trade was thriving between the two diametrically-opposed sides! Even as they fought and competed against each other in the open, in the background the two groups amiably traded and even partnered up with each other!

To describe the hidden relations between the Sentinel nobles and the Nyxian pirate leaders as a conspiracy was a bit too excessive.

However, it was undeniable that both sides secretly supported each other in an intermittent fashion. Not enough to make them allies, but just enough for certain conflicts of interests to arrive.

The deal that Ves tentatively struck with Finlay pertained to just such a hidden relationship. An unnamed pirate alliance screwed over some unnamed noble houses, possibly due to the direction it received from yet another noble house.

All of this sounded very messy to Ves. In fact, if Finlay's superiors really went through with their supposed plan to deploy nuclear doom crawlers onto a heavily-defended pirate fortification, then the region would quickly become even less stable!

The use of so many taboo weapons was such a shocking occurrence that the status quo that both sides had settled upon would never be able to last!

An important consideration that weighed on Ves was how the changes that followed affected his father and his mother.

More chaos could destabilize their gains. The wars and conflicts that would ensue after inciting the Nyxian Gap into a frenzy would definitely make their current positions in the Nyxian Gap less secure.

On the other hand, the onset of chaos also meant that the established pirate alliances and other powers lost stability!

Since his mother hinted that his father and her had managed to get themselves established in the Nyxian Gap, the rising conflicts would instead give them an opportunity to fight for greater power!

Though Ves did not expect too much from his father, his mother was entirely different. With her many abilities, she was capable of giving his father some

crucial advantages. With her intangible body and ability to travel anywhere, she was the perfect scout, assassin and saboteur. Ordinary opponents stood no chance against their combined might!

In any case, whatever Finlay and his fellow nobles were up to couldn't be stopped. At most, they would suffer a delay as they continued to seek for a Journeyman who was willing to blacken their hearts and morals to facilitate the emergence of death machines.

Ves smirked underneath his helmet. Ves did not have that much confidence in Finlay's ability to secure the services of a Journeyman Mech Designer willing to cross the lines set by the MTA.

Most orthodox mech designers fully integrated the MTA's values and principles into their core being!

If they believed in them so strongly that their design seeds or design philosophies took them in, then persuading them to break these rules was impossible no matter how much money they received!

It wasn't worth it for a mech designer to break their design philosophies and the crystallization of everything they worked towards for a single commission!

Perhaps the only group of mech designers who might be willing to accept this commission were bonafide pirate designers.

Mech designers who defected from civilized space didn't cut it. The pirate designers had to be born and raised outside of civilized space. However, well-educated professionals were very hard to come by, and those who advanced to Journeyman must be exceedingly rare!

How hard would it be for Finlay to get into contact with native pirate designer like Mayra, who previously mentored Ketis?

Very hard!

As for Ves? While he might have started off as an orthodox mech designer that neatly fit into the mold of the MTA, the System and his many experiences with the Vandals during his formative, Apprentice period already turned him crooked.

Ves remembered that he struggled heavily at the thought of designing and fabricating a single gamma laser rifle.

As for now? It was no big deal to him! In fact, whenever he looked back on that incident, he could only laugh at how pathetic he overreacted to the System's first Upgrade Mission!

To Ves, performing this simple task in exchange of upgrading his Physics Main Skill to Senior-level was a huge bargain!

Ves felt better about himself. His willingness and capability to do something that no other available mech designer would do provided him with a lot of leverage.

In fact, this could be leveraged over and over again! As long as he became better, the value he could provide to clients like Finlay's superiors grew more formidable!

However, any thoughts about initiating further deals and partnerships sent a warning through his head.

A miniature Calabast appeared in his mind and sent him a disapproving look while placing her hands on her hips.

"You stupid kid! Who do you think you are? You're a mech designer! Leave this kind of business to the real professionals!"

Ves shook his head underneath his helmet, quickly shaking off the illusion conjured by his overactive imagination.

Though he felt a bit petulant about being rebuked by his own imagination, the mini-Calabast had a point. Ves really shouldn't be conducting shady deals like this on a regular basis.

Someone like Calabast who was much more adept at interacting with dangerous partners ought to be able to do a lot better!

The separation between Ves and Calabast troubled him more and more. Though the separation helped prevent anyone from figuring out the depth of their partnership, it also hindered him from taking ready advantage of her assistance.

This had to change once he returned home. Ves intended to have a very lengthy talk with Calabast about their future cooperation. His tour already illuminated him how vital it was for him to have a shadow force and a network of agents and informants at his disposal.

The auction already ran for several hours. As Ves carefully studied each item brought to the stage, he also began to anticipate the appearance of the second spiritually-reactive object.

However, other items kept appearing first. Ves began to suspect that his worst fears might be coming true. The object he wanted to acquire must be part of the last batch of goods which the auction hall reserved at the very end of the auction session!

"The finale of our auction is drawing to a close." The old auctioneer stated with a lot more excitement than before! "As always, our last ten items are our most prized by our appraisers! Let us begin with the introduction of Item #1255, which we call the Ancient Sarcophagus!"

Ves felt a strong spiritual disturbance as a large, red object the size of a coffin emerged onto the stage!

Everyone immediately studied the strange object. Consisting of red crystals, the coffin-shaped object appeared both natural and artificial. In addition to that, the crystal was partially transparent, giving observers a vague glimpse of a gray presence underneath!

The wear and tear on the crystal surface gave the Ancient Sarcophagus the impression that it endured over several eons.

Now that the Ancient Sarcophagus was in sight, Ves conclusively confirmed that it was the second spiritually-reactive object he sensed! He didn't even need to activate his spiritual senses to distinguish the strange sensation he came under as he observed the red crystal object!

The auctioneer began to describe the background of Item #1255.

"The Nyxian Gap is a place full of asteroids, but that does not mean that we have never encountered the remnants of intelligent life in this region. Ancient ruins, many of them buried inside sunless moons and planets, occasionally get discovered. This Ancient Sarcophagus is but one of the many prizes retrieved from a newly-unearthed ruin. The treasure hunters sacrificed much to worm their way into the ruins and smuggle out the Ancient Sarcophagus. Now, it is here before you, having incurred only a minimal amount of damage during its retrieval."

Despite the rough and worn appearance of the Ancient Sarcophagus, it still exuded a strong and undeniable alien charm! Even if it did not actively radiate a spiritual aura, the indescribable pressure it emanated nonetheless made the other guests feel different in its presence!

It was much like how the Devil Tiger exuded a subtle but hard-to-ignore presence after Ves obscured its overpowering aura with a spiritual barrier!

A couple of ideas about the Ancient Sarcophagus began to emerge in his mind. What did the solid red crystal coffin contain?

"We have studied this unique relic of alien origin extensively and have confirmed the presence of an alien body locked inside. The body is intact, though we have not been able to glean any further methods due to the red crystal in the way. What we can tell is that the alien inside is a humanoid creature and is likely part of the race that built and occupied the ruins!"

A number of guests lost interest. The Ancient Sarcophagus may look impressive, but it did not appear to be useful in a direct fashion. A powerful mech or a resilient suit of armor would have been a lot more useful in improving someone's battle capabilities.

Its main use seemed to be ornamental, which meant that only the collectors and those who wanted to acquire more prestige remained interested. This was good news to Ves because it cut down the competition drastically.

However, competing against collectors wasn't always a good thing. Ves knew their type well. Some were very fanatic about acquiring unique and interesting pieces to their collections.

They were sometimes willing to spend an insane amount of money to indulge in their obsession!

Ves raised his hand. "I want this."

"You sure?" Finlay couldn't hide the surprise and skepticism in his distorted tone. "I wouldn't think a mech designer like you would be interested. Just look at it! It's an ancient coffin!"

"Regardless, I have made my choice. Please secure the Ancient Sarcophagus. I am willing to begin working on your commission as soon as possible."

This caused Finlay to pause for a time. He was probably considering the difficulty of acquiring the Ancient Sarcophagus. Since it was left as one of the

last ten items put up for auction, the amount of firthals required to outbid the other auction goers would definitely be considerable!

Nonetheless, Ves had been right about the amount of leverage he possessed. Despite Finlay's obvious reluctance to compete over the Ancient Sarcophagus, he gave a decisive answer.

"I'll do what you want. I hope you won't renege on your promises."

"I won't. You can trust me. I never break a promise."

In the meantime, the auctioneer finished describing the embellish background of the Ancient Sarcophagus.

As soon as the round of bidding opened up, Finlay immediately inputted an astonishing sum in his bidding tool!

"750 million firthals!"

Chapter 1472 Shortfall

"750 million firthals!" The auctioneer announced the astonishingly high starting bid! "Number 142 has bid 750 million firthals for the Ancient Sarcophagus!"

The huge sum of money instantly caused the audience to fall silent. They expected the round of bidding to rise gradually starting from 10 million firthals. They never imagined a rich tycoon laying down 750 million firthals right from the start!

The shock achieved the intended effect. Finlay's startlingly high opening bid caused everyone who were pumping themselves up to compete over the Ancient Sarcophagus to be pulled out of their competitive moods.

A lot of people started to doubt whether they wanted to compete against someone who started at such a high bid. Number 142 indirectly showed his willingness to go to an extreme extent to win the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Perhaps some people might have the impulse to screw with Number 142 by placing more bids in order to drive up the price, but there was a huge danger there. What if Number 142 was playing his own game and suddenly dropped out of the bidding war?

Spending 750 million firthals to win a mostly-ornamental relic was not worth it to many people! A lot of collectors started having second thoughts as well!

Everything would have been a lot more transparent if they knew who was behind Number 142. Since everything took place anonymously, no one could glean much information from the person behind this code name.

Unfortunately, not everyone was deterred. The auctioneer quickly lit up as he received another bid!

"760 million firthals."

Just a 10 million firthal increase over Finlay's bid did not indicate a lot of decisiveness. Though Finlay must be glowering and gritting his teeth underneath his shadow attire, he did not give up. Not when a major operation was at stake!

"800 million firthals!"

Silence ensued as Finlay's second bid did not elicit a reaction.

What was the worth of the Ancient Sarcophagus? Everyone would probably quote a different figure.

Despite the exceptional origin of Item #1255, to pay more than 800 million firthals for what was essentially a vanity piece sounded crazy!

Most pirates and criminals gave up right away. The amount of money at stake was more than enough to raise six or more fully-equipped mech companies with ships and all!

To pirate leaders and pirate commanders who purely relied on fighting strength to secure their grip on power, it wasn't worth it for them to splurge so much to obtain a fancy relic that only provided indirect benefits.

Frankly, most pirates didn't have much good taste. The effect of showing off the Ancient Sarcophagus to a bunch of boorish, uncultured pirate commanders who were only good at terrorizing people was probably limited.

Therefore, Ves figured that the few active bidders competing over the Ancient Sarcophagus must certainly be nobles. Even then, these privileged snobs had to take several concerns into account.

First, the money they spent might not solely belong to themselves. Perhaps they had the right to draw on some of the accounts of their noble houses, but even then not even the heads of the houses could drain their entire bank accounts for a whimsical purchase!

One of the most important limitations of the auctions organized by the Circle of Mota was that nobody retained an active connection to the galactic net. They couldn't call up the elders of their houses in order to convince the estates from freeing up more money to assist in their bidding.

In addition, the only valid currency in the auction was the firthal. Every guest already converted a fixed amount of money into this native Nyxian denomination beforehand. It was not doable for them to supplement their war chests during the auction. No one was allowed to leave. The most they could do was step out of the auction hall for a bathroom break.

All of these factors complicated the lives of the noble collectors who still desired the Ancient Sarcophagus.

"...832 million firthals. 833 million firthals. 834 million firthals..."

Though the bids kept pouring in, a lot of pauses occurred in between.

Ves kept his eyes laser-focused on the Ancient Sarcophagus. The more he studied it, the more he became convinced he could derive major benefits from it. Unlike the collectors who merely wanted Item #1255 for its collector's value, Ves deeply desired it for the spiritual secrets it contained!

Something powerful dwelled inside the coffin, and Ves wasn't talking about the frozen alien body.

"850 million firthals."

A longer silence ensued as no further bids emerged for a while. The handful of competitors who drove up the prize constantly wavered in their determination.

While there were plenty of bidders in the background who arrived with an abundant amount of firthals, the Ancient Sarcophagus was just the first of the final ten items. Nine more items followed afterwards, each of which might be of even greater value!

In fact, many auctions frequently put the most valuable prize at last! The auctions organized by the Circle of Mota never deviated from this winning formula, so the most affluent guests with the most amount of firthals still held back in order to remain in contention for the later prizes.

"Going once..."

Ves held his breath, and so did Finlay. Neither of them wanted a joker to emerge and spoil this bid. The firthals that Finlay had bid already amounted to around 20 billion bright credits!

"Going twice..."

The tension in the air continued to grow as the end of the bidding round neared.

"Item #1255 is a unique relic from the Nyxian Gap that potentially contains many clues about the early history of this region. Are you willing to let its secrets go? This might be the only chance for you to be the first to decipher the aliens that used to rule this contention region..."

The auctioneer practically taunted the silent crowd to make a bid with the way he stretched out his words. Ves really wanted to beat the old man up for leaving open such a huge window for a new bid!

Still, no new bids arrived. With this much money at stake, even the wealthy Sentinel nobles didn't feel inclined to joke around.

Eventually, the auctioneer realized that his act was only getting more and more embarrassing. He rose the gavel in his hand and struck the air!

"Sold! Number 142 has won Item #1255!"

The Ancient Sarcophagus sunk beneath the podium now that it had found an owner. Ves watched Finlay carefully as the noble reluctantly placed a data chip into his bidding tool and confirmed the transfer of 850 million firthals.

A small chirp sounded as the Circle of Mota successfully transferred the money. The Ancient Sarcophagus fully belonged to Finlay now.

Once he retrieved the data chip and stowed it away, the noble decisively turned to Ves.

"We have spent 365 million firthals on the sample of Synthra Umbra. Together with what we have just paid for the Ancient Sarcophagus, we have committed 1.215 billion firthals to obtain what you want."

Ves silently cursed as he converted the sum in his head. That was around 30 billion bright credits in total! Just two items drove him to desperation!

If Ves was a bit more clear-minded, then he might not have been so willing to spend so much money on two objects that were definitely useful but not

essential. Perhaps the atmosphere of the auction hall had got to him somehow!

Fortunately, Ves hadn't actually spent his own money to procure the two pricey items. The most he spent was 56.2 million firthals out of his own pocket to secure Item #613.

On one hand, it felt good to him that he'd been able to get another sucker to spend an extravagant amount of firthals on his behalf!

On the other hand, the debt he owed was very considerable! Not only was Ves on the hook to complete a very problematic commission, he still owed 215 million firthals afterwards!

Ves guessed that Finlay already started to form some suggestions on how he could make up the 215 million firthals.

The problem was that Ves really didn't want to owe any more favors to Finlay. The longer he lingered here, the greater the chance he might potentially be caught up in trouble. The sooner he left, the sooner he ended his exposure to catastrophic risks.

For this reason, Ves spoke up before Finlay could make a suggestion.

"I will make up the 215 million firthal shortfall as fast as possible. I don't have quite enough to transfer the sum immediately, but I'll be able to do so once I visit one of the Circle's exchange offices."

There were ways for Ves to anonymously convert his money to firthals through the use of many intermediaries. That was how he obtained his initial pot of money.

The only troublesome aspect was that he'd have to transfer billions of credits at once. Hiding such a huge transfer was going to be another hassle and would take some time to complete.

"..Acceptable." Finlay eventually said. Perhaps he might have harbored some other ideas, but Ves had already indicated that he wasn't receptive to them. "Since we have come this far, we'll approach the Circle of Mota right away to sign a contract under their auspices. Is that alright?"

"The contract only has force within the Circle of Mota, right?"

"Yes. It will only stay in effect as long as you are still here. Once you finish our commission and leave with your prizes, we can consider our dealings over. That is unless you want to leave the door open for other deals..."

Ves knew what Finlay wanted. Once Ves proved his chops as a competent Journeyman Mech Designer who didn't let his morals get in the way of his interests, his value became evident.

Not many Journeyman were willing to taint themselves! Each of them were already successful mech designers with bright futures ahead of them! As long as they kept their noses clean, they would enjoy stable, prosperous lives, all without risking censure from the MTA!

This was a road that Ves actually considered as well. Yet the recent visit from his mother caused him to waver.

His mother prohibited him from getting involved. His parents did their best to shield him from the threats that hounded them. Since Ves was still too weak to make a difference, they didn't want him to get caught in their storm!

While he understood the concerns of his parents, Ves couldn't handle the thought of leaving his parents out to try while trying his best to live a comfy life. He did not care about many people, but his father definitely occupied the top of his modest list!

As for his mother, Ves hadn't decided whether she belonged on the same list.

Regardless, if Ves wanted to prove his parents wrong and offer some assistance despite his lack of strength, then forging ties with the Nyxian Gap was key.

However, he couldn't do so directly. He was a foreigner with no foundation in the region. Sentinels and Nyxians were both strangers to him. He would also be leaving the region soon and return to the far-away Bright Republic.

Under these circumstances, Ves considered another way of forging ties with the Nyxian Gap.

He brought up his proposal directly to his temporary business partner.

"Finlay... are you open to establishing an ongoing relationship between the two of us?"

"You mean.. a partnership?"

"Yes."

"It is still premature to suggest a longer-term association between us when you have not even proven yourself yet. Being a Journeyman is not enough to earn our confidence."

"If you demand me to reveal my identity to you, then forget about it. I won't accept such terms."

"That will make your proposal more difficult for us to stomach." Finlay jerked his arms. "Let us wait until you have completed the commission. In the meantime, I will bring your proposal to the higher ups and wait for their response. I can't make any promises, however."

"Understandable. It is only a start."

Perhaps Ves was being reckless by attempting to forge new ties without Calabast's involvement, but he figured he should strike while the iron was hot!

Chapter 1473 Devil in the Detail

Ves barely paid attention to the remainder of the auction. He only idly observed the remaining objects that went up for auction, but despite their value, none of them tickled his interest.

He got what he wanted.

His primary objectives, Item #613 and Item #1255, fell under his possession or would soon be after he finished a quick commission.

He also bagged a valuable sample of Synthra Umbra, which he could utilize in many helpful ways.

Visiting the Circle of Mota had been more than worth it. The pathetic Peacekeeper branch on Cinach XII didn't offer nearly as much useful goods to him. Ves never witnessed such a huge disparity between legal and illegal markets.

Certainly, Ves recognized the dangers of associating with the Circle of Mota. Not only did he risk getting caught or worse, he also contributed to the strengthening of pirates.

To that, Ves had only one answer.

He didn't care.

Even if all of the firthals he spent or Finlay spent on his behalf went on to fund the deplorable activities of Nyxian scum, Ves had more important concerns to worry about. In his quest to progress as fast as possible, he placed his own needs first and any other concerns second.

The auction items he obtained as well as the four additional P-stones he obtained at the regular marketplace expanded his options enormously!

What he witnessed today opened his eyes. While the Nyxian Gap was still as dangerous as ever, the minerals and exotics excavated from this strange region of space boggled his mind.

Perhaps the most important observation he made was that the Nyxian Gap appeared to be a definite source of spiritually-reactive materials!

How many P-stones had been circulating in the Circle of Mota's marketplaces all these years? How many of them had gone to waste or pushed in a forgotten corner because no one recognized their true worth?

Just imagining how many P-stones he missed out frustrated him to no end!

Hopefully, Ves could remedy this situation in time, either through his own efforts or with the help of Calabast once he returned home.

For now, he still had a commission to complete. As soon as the auction concluded with a furious bidding round for a vial of life-prolonging serum of all things, an auction hall representative personally visited their private box in order to arrange the handover of the goods they won.

"As usual, we are in the process of shipping your items to your designated warehouse, in accordance with your prior arrangements, Number 142." The representative smiled. "As one of our honored VIPs, we've prioritized your shipment, so the goods will immediately be available to you once you step outside our auction hall."

After a bit of chatting, the auction hall worker turned to Ves.

"As for you, Number 6969, since Item #613 is not that large, we can complete the handover now if you wish."

"Please."

"Very well."

The man gestured with his arm, causing a floating box that hovered behind him to float over to Ves. After he keyed himself into the floating box's systems, he briefly opened it to confirm he bid on the right object.

A rocky, rose-gold, grapefruit-shaped object rested inside. Ves carefully extended his gloved fingers towards the exotic, but refrained from making contact.

The close proximity was enough for him to confirm that he got the genuine article and not some fake that the Circle of Mota secretly swapped out. In fact, now that he got close enough to sense Item #613 more thoroughly, he picked up strange new reactions that deviated from that of P-stones and F-stones.

He discovered a third category of spiritually-reactive exotics!

Excited beyond wild, he nevertheless expressed little of his glee due to his dampened spiritual mask. Hesitant to give away any clues, Ves resisted the urge to study Item #613 further and quickly closed the box.

"I am satisfied."

"Great. Each of you may exit your private box at your leisure. We offer several different exits to our honored guests."

"Let's go." Finlay said and stood up, his two bodyguards stepping forward as well. "There is a Circle office nearby where we can draw up a contract under their auspices."

Ves walked alongside Finlay while Nitaa followed slightly behind. By now, it was clear that she served as his bodyguard, so she did not make any pretenses of being anything more.

Because Finlay enjoyed a VIP identity, the group managed to avoid the dense crowd of auction goers exiting through the main entrance. They stepped outside a side entrance and hovered down to the surface by riding a platform.

After that, the group moved to a large prefab structure frequented by a fair amount of visitors. Since the Circle of Mota brought together people from many different backgrounds, a lot of dealmaking took place.

Since the laws of the Sentinel Kingdom didn't reach the Circle of Mota, the mysterious organization stepped in to fill the void. With their reach, influence and stellar reputation for neutrality, even the most distrustful pirates approved of them. The Circle served as a rare bastion of trust and fairness in the trade between Sentinel citizens and Nyxian pirates.

Of course, Ves still maintained his skepticism. He found it extremely unlikely that the Circle had never bent its rules. Still, the people visiting the contract office didn't appear to harbor any misgivings about making use of the Circle as a third-party witness, mediator and enforcer for their illicit deals.

That was a good sign.

Once Finlay relayed his request, a notary working for the Circle quickly ushered them into his office.

If not for the drab, prefab interior, Ves would have imagined that he was about to sign a legal business contract. Hardly anything about the office screamed the fact that a lot of lurid deals had been signed here!

"I understand." The notary, who wore disturbingly plain business attire, quickly summoned up a projection and quickly loaded in a model contract. "The short-term deal that you've described is very convenient so long as it doesn't extend past the time our marketplace is shuttered. Let us set the terms."

The model contract soon described the terms that Ves and Finlay agreed upon. Though the contract only mentioned them by their pseudonyms, as long as both remained at the marketplace, both of them still had to abide by the terms.

"...in summary, the 'Rho-Sigma' agrees to modify the Spyre Helix design in the possession of 'Finlay' according to the list of requirements he has set. A representative of the 'Night Zephyrs' will come and judge whether the modified design meets their approval. In case of any issues or disagreements, any parties involved can request one of our arbitrators to step in and mediate the dispute. Is that correct?"

Both Ves and Finlay assented to the terms. Neither Ves, Finlay or the representative of the dark mercenaries held an overwhelming amount of sway.

Ves had been careful to insist on the latter. What if the envoy from the Night Zephyrs turned out to be a bastard who expected a Journeyman to upgrade the Spyre Helix design's basic performance parameters by twenty percent or something?

That was way too difficult and took far too much time for him to accomplish! Ves refused to leave himself open to such a sneaky trap.

Instead, Ves and Finlay agreed to a more generous set of requirements. Ves did not have to strictly upgrade the Spyre Helix design.

Sidegrade was the more appropriate word.

As long as Ves managed to develop a variant of the doom crawler that seamlessly incorporated the three taboo weapon systems without any significant performance drops, the dark mercenaries had no choice but to accept!

Of course, Ves was still expected to make some specific improvements and optimizations. While Finlay didn't reveal where his superiors intended to deploy the Spyre Helixes, he did reveal some basic environmental parameters.

"The site of the pirate fortification we intend to attack is placed on a rogue planet in the Nyxian Gap." Finlay carefully spoke as he transferred a series of virtual documents to Ves. "The planet isn't very internally active, so its surface temperature is very cold. There is no atmosphere or any gasses to speak of on the surface, but radiation exposure is a non-issue. I'm told the gravity is 0.53 g, so take that into account as well."

From what Ves gathered, keeping the Spyre Helix protected against the vacuum and resisting the cold that likely approached absolute zero would be his main challenges.

On the other hand, the level of gravity the modified Spyre Helixes would be subjected to was a very welcome point in his favor. Pretty much every mech was designed to operate under standard gravity conditions.

At 0.53 g, the mechs effectively weighed only half as much, which meant that they expended far less energy to move, among other benefits!

Of course, since the Spyre Helix wasn't optimized to operate under such generous gravity conditions, Ves would have to make a lot of tweaks to maximize the gains.

"Do you wish the Spyre Helix design to be optimized to operate at 0.53 g at the expense of its performance in standard gravity?" Ves asked Finlay as they stepped out of the office. "I can make the doom crawlers considerably faster and more agile if they are freed from the constraints of maintaining their performance under different gravity conditions."

"..Please do not degrade the Spyre Helix's performance under standard gravity. Try your best to make the doom crawlers operate well in both environments."

Ves pointedly turned towards Finlay, though the effect was partially lost due to their shadow attire.

"You told me that the Spyre Helixes will be broken down and recycled after they have been deployed for their intended use. I don't need to remind you of the dangers of hanging on to mechs that openly make use of taboo weapon systems."

A tense moment passed between the two before Finlay finally responded.

"I merely conveyed some of my understanding of the situation to you. Whether my superiors have any other intentions, I don't know. Just in case, I want the modified Spyre Helixes to remain adaptable in case our plans have changed."

"That is not a good idea." Ves gravely responded. "So long as you have those mechs laying around, the temptation to use them will always exist."

What if Finlay's faction decided to nuke a site in civilized space one day? What if they decided to rain down nuclear fury on a populated city deep within the Sentinel Kingdom?

Nuking pirates was one thing, but employing weapons of mass destruction against humans in civilized space was another thing! The Big Two would never stay idle if that happened! Enforcing the prohibition against taboo weapons was the one rule that they still enforced to a very active degree!

Once the MTA got involved and managed to capture one of the modified Spyre Helixes, then there was a possibility that they might be able to tie its design back to Ves!

Ves glowered under his helmet. If he wanted to minimize his exposure, then he needed to expend a lot of effort in making sure that his work carried none of his fingerprints.

To Ves, that was hard, but still doable.

He wasn't pleased, though. Finlay engaged in deliberate misdirection by withholding an important requirement until after they signed the contract.

Ves decided not to kick up a fuss. Even though that would be playing along with Finlay's intention, he didn't want to complicate this already problematic business deal any further.

"I need a workshop and physical access to a Spyre Helix, Finlay."

"We have already made the arrangements. While we cannot allow you to access all eighty doom crawlers since they are packed in containers, our men will bring one of them over to the workshop that we have reserved so you can study it under our supervision."

"I work better if I am not disturbed."

"I'm sorry, Rho-Sigma, but we insist."

Great.

Chapter 1474 Mech Performance Index

The workshop erected by the Circle of Mota to accommodate visiting mech designers offered decent facilities. Though all of the machinery and equipment looked fairly old and heavily-used, Ves did not intend to make use of them anyway.

The commission only called for him to design a variant of the Spyre Helix. Though Ves could go the extra mile and apply his modifications to the physical copy of the mech that had been moved to the workshop, he did not stand to gain anything extra.

Frankly, Ves wasn't very eager to turn the Spyre Helix into the deadliest platform for weapons of mass destruction. Though he did not object to the commission to the point of refusing it outright, he clearly lacked passion for the project.

Fortunately, developing a variant was far easier than designing a completely new mech. Since Ves had to work along existing design choices, his work demanded far more out of his technical capabilities than his creative vision.

It was fine for him to treat the commission as a regular job and try to finish it in a decent fashion. It wasn't as if he would ever commercialize his variant and put it on the market.

If that was the case, Ves had to put far more effort into optimizing and strengthening his variant!

Ten minutes after inspecting the workshop, Ves returned to Finlay. "The workshop is in order. I can begin my design work immediately."

"Good." Finlay jerked his robed and suited body. "I'll be taking off, then. A number of our men will remain in place to guard this facility and supervise your work. Please do not leave the workshop before the job is done or if the Circle of Mota instructs you otherwise."

"I know. That's what I've signed up for. You can expect to receive your revised design very soon. Just make sure you have my rewards ready for transfer."

After a brief chat, Finlay finally left with his bodyguards. Ves turned to Nitaa and made a silent gesture.

"I will keep an eye on your watchers." She spoke and remained close but unobtrusive.

Ves had already gotten used to being stared at by Nitaa all the time. At least he was reasonably sure that she was completely on his side.

The same could not be said for the faceless goons garbed in full-body armor. Half-a-dozen of them silently patrolled the interior and exterior of the loaned mech workshop.

It was a given that Ves disliked their presence. He never really enjoyed performing his work with an audience. He only really got into his groove when he was by himself or in the presence of like-minded mech designers such as Ketis.

As for Finlay's guards? Ves regarded each of them with a healthy amount of wariness. Considering the highly controversial nature of his commission, he could never discount the possibility that Finlay would want to silence him afterwards.

Ostensibly, the Circle of Mota ought to prevent such instances, but who knew if they were as impeccably neutral as they claimed? Ves was a complete nobody to the Circle while Finlay happened to be a VIP!

Still, the chance that the Circle of Mota would run afoul of its own rules and traditions was small. It wasn't worth it for them to risk tarnishing their reputation in order to please a single faction.

Ves put his paranoid worries out of his mind and began to focus on the task at hand. Finlay's organization had been very efficient in moving a physical copy of the Spyre Helix into the workshop.

"Before I begin, let me study the mech up close."

Ves approached the impressive doom crawler. Though dormant and locked in place by restraints, the Spyre Helix nonetheless evoked a primordial sense of doom and terror in his heart.

The mech looked formidable.

"What a formidable machine. I can feel the intention of its designer from its very contours."

Sharp. Intimidating. Unstoppable.

Whoever designed the Spyre Helix understood the basic essence of the doom crawler mech type. The design emphasized those characteristics as much as possible without compromising too much in other areas.

Due to his heightened mech affinity, Ves was capable of inferring a lot more clues out of the physical copy than before.

He captured many nuances about the doom crawler, enough to paint a vague picture of the original mech designer's distinctive design style.

The mech designer probably started off as an orthodox Journeyman Mech Designer, but went pirate some time ago. Despite going pirate, the Journeyman did not lose much of the thoroughness and meticulousness demanded of their profession.

In fact, the Journeyman successfully incorporated a lot of fundamental design traits tailored to a different clientele.

As Ves climbed up to the doom crawler and entered the cockpit to boot up its operating system, he discovered the extent the original mech designer had gone to simplify the Spyre Helix's piloting requirements.

The extent of automation employed by the Spyre Helix frankly alarmed Ves! A disturbing amount of control had been taken out of the hands of the mech pilots!

If the AIs of the Spyre Helixes were ever tampered with, then most of its nuclear arsenal could easily be unleashed in the wrong direction!

He sighed. "This isn't my problem."

A lot of things could go wrong by placing so much control over the doom crawler's destructive weapon systems in the hands of exploitable AIs. Yet Ves did not have the leverage to impose any changes in its specifications.

For a moment, Ves considered sneaking some tampered code into the programming of the mechs themselves. However, he reconsidered shortly afterwards.

Any decent Apprentice Mech Designer proficient in mech programming would easily be able to identify any detrimental elements in the updated software packages.

Ves did not wish to risk his own safety or endanger his deal with Finlay over a misguided attempt at appeasing his morality.

As long as the modified Spyre Helixes didn't blow anything up that belonged to him, its owners were free to use them as they wished!

"Alright. I'm done here."

Ves and Nitaa exited the heavy mech's roomy cockpit and approached an open design terminal. There, Ves activated its design suite and loaded in the Spyre Helix design. He also imported the component design files of the nuclear cannons, gamma laser weapon mounts and nuclear-capable missile launchers.

He stared deeply at the different schematics projected side-by-side.

Compared to the Spyre Helix's standard armaments, the replacement weapon systems took up considerably more space.

If the modifications only amounted to swapping out one weapon system with another weapon system with nearly-identical parameters, then Finlay wouldn't have been so desperate to seek out a Journeyman!

"The base model of the Spyre Helix doesn't have the capacity to accommodate all of the replacement weapon systems." He whispered. "Since that is the case, I will have to make some room instead."

He began to work. He first ripped out the old weapon systems, leaving gaping holes in the doom crawler's altered design. Then he tried and failed to fit the new weapon systems in place of the old ones.

Though the attempts failed straight away, the exercise still assisted him in visualizing the amount of room he had to free up from the doom crawler.

"This is going to be a difficult challenge." He muttered.

One of the requirements he had to abide by was that the overall performance of his variant could not be any less than that of the base model.

Certainly, it was fine if the mech design was a little bit less resilient, as long as Ves compensated the deficiency in another way, such as improving its speed.

The key here was that Ves could not allow his variant's performance index to fall!

The mech performance index was a simplified indicator that summed up a mech or mech design's overall performance. The MTA developed a very complex formula that attempted to take every important variable into account and come up with a single index number that signified how 'good' a mech performed.

The mech industry hated performance indexes. To sum up and condense all of the complexities of a mech design into a single number meant that lots of the strengths, nuances and uniqueness of a mech design would be lost!

However, laymen such as Finlay weren't able to determine whether a mech design was good or not by reading out an entire spec sheet. Their inability to interpret all of the technical parameters meant that they either had to listen to the advice of a knowledgeable insider or depend on crutches like performance indexes to evaluate a mech design.

The base of the mech performance index started at 100. The MTA matched this number to the very first standard mech design in existence at the very start of the Age of Mechs.

That was a long time ago!

With over four-hundred years of rapid progress in the field of mech design, most mechs far surpassed the performance of those ancient machines. The performance index of even the cheapest third-class frontline mechs already reached the thousands!

Of course, a doom crawler like the Spyre Helix possessed a performance index that reached high in the tens of thousands.

Ves wasn't allowed to let that index drop by 1 for his variant! Finlay insisted that a Journeyman like him ought to be capable of implementing the changes without degrading the doom crawlers!

"Well, he's right." He muttered. "Apprentices probably won't be able to keep the mech performance index at the same level."

As for Ves? He could already tell it would only pose a moderate challenge to him! The reason why a challenge existed at all was that Ves was forced to discount the vast increase in destructive power to boost his variant's performance index.

It would have been too easy to game the performance index if that was the case. Finlay wasn't that stupid to discount this loophole, unfortunately.

"Well, no matter."

Ves began to work immediately. Since he did not have enough space, he first began to tinker around the weaponless version of the Spyre Helix. He spotted many ways to make more room and to accommodate the increased heat and energy draw of the new weapon components.

"I can't forget to strengthen the radiation shielding as well."

In addition to these basic changes, he also had to optimize the mech's ability to operate on the 0.53 g environment that Finlay had mentioned. To do that, Ves scanned the entire design and marked many areas which he could alter in order to optimize the Spyre Helix to operate on a small and sunless rogue planet.

All in all, by the time Ves finished planning his upcoming work, almost every aspect about the base model needed to be changed.

Most of the changes were fairly subtle. Ves tried to keep the changes as easy as possible to apply to existing mechs because that was part of the commission requirement. He could not go too far in his proposals and force mech technicians to expend a lot of time and effort into enacting all of the modifications.

Even so, Ves couldn't avoid implementing more drastic changes, especially with regards to fitting in the new weapon system.

He tore out a considerable amount of minor subcomponents and structural supports from the base model. In order to keep the performance index from dropping due to his actions, Ves implemented even more changes to the design in order to optimize his variant's performance.

That was the most challenging aspect about this job. Though Ves still rushed the job, he nonetheless spent two entire days to puzzle out effective solutions that addressed all of the thorny problems.

Ves predicted that an ordinary Journeyman that didn't enjoy his advantages would have taken at least a week to accomplish this much more, if not more!

His abnormal attributes, skills and mech affinity all contributed to an exceptionally productive design session!

In particular, the improvements he gained from his continued assimilation of Senior-level Mechanics played a starring role!

Since much of the work involved making space, the structure of the Spyre Helix experienced a lot of changes. Trying to make sense of them and seeking out ways to make better use of the limited space was a lot easier to do now that Ves began to apply many new advanced theories!

"The original mech designer owes me a favor when he sees my variant!" He couldn't help but snort. "If he carries some of my changes over to his base model, it will likely perform ten percent better!"

Chapter 1475 Annihilator

Ves only possessed a sparse amount of experience with heavy mechs.

Heavy mechs generally tended to be a mech type that only showed up in military mech regiments. Only military mech designers or those working for a company that serviced the military became exposed to heavy mech designs.

Heavy mechs were big, expensive and put an enormous strain on a mech unit's logistical capacity. They also only truly unearthed their potential in major battles and campaigns.

For these reasons, hardly any private outfit wanted to put up with these costly elephants. It was practically impossible to run a mercenary corps at a profit by fielding heavy mechs!

Not just the end users, but also the mech designers experienced headaches whenever they came in touch with heavy mechs.

It took a lot more effort to design a heavy mech. Their far greater mass and volume limits meant that mech designers had a lot more room to work with. This sounded like a great thing as they could stuff all kinds of goodies into their heavy mech designs, but there was a downside to it as well.

"Anyone can fill up an empty mech design. However, it takes skill to turn the mech design into something effective!"

This wasn't the extent of the problems. Heavy mechs possessed very different performance characteristics from medium mechs.

Due to their very pronounced characteristics, heavy mechs were judged by different standards.

Heavy mech designers adopted distinctly different design paradigms.

This posed some problems to Ves. He wasn't entirely familiar with the divergent design paradigms. What was bad for medium mechs might in fact be good for heavy mechs.

However, even if that was the case, Ves still managed to work on the Spyre Helix as if he was a natural with heavy mechs.

With his current capabilities, he easily understood the various nuances and complexities concerning heavy mechs even if he hadn't read any textbooks dedicated to the topic.

Furthermore, many of the Skills and Sub-Skills he acquired from the System also dedicated some portions to heavy mechs. To say that Ves was a complete newcomer to heavy mechs was not quite true.

In addition, the base model of the Spyre Helix was in itself a great teacher to Ves. In fact, having ready access to the physical copy helped his understanding of doom crawlers enormously.

While Ves hadn't derived enough insights to design his own doom crawler, he was more than capable enough to competently modify an existing design!

Since Ves encountered few serious issues in the process of designing his variant, he began to divert some of his attention to other priorities.

He hadn't forgotten about his priority to minimize his connection to the Spyre Helix Annihilator, which he named his variant as its altered design took shape.

He made a conscious effort to obfuscate his design style in his work on the variant. He purposefully made his design style more bland, as if Ves directly adhered to all of the recommendations of the MTA.

Ves believed he had done a good job in minimizing his fingerprints in his work. In his judgement, any orthodox Journeyman Mech Designer could have performed the modifications!

In fact, Ves went a step ahead and tried to inject deliberately different design traits into the Annihilator design.

He went as far as constructing a spiritual mask of a 'different' mech designer before donning it in order to subconsciously lay a trail of false bread crumbs.

Doing this meant that his falsehoods appeared a lot more authentic than if he deliberately tried to insert some red herrings into the Annihilator design!

"Hehehe."

The important point about the false trails was that they came across as authentic! Even if a Senior encountered the Spyre Helix Annihilator, the older mech designer would probably tie its designer to someone completely different than Ves!

"I'm actually really good at this!"

Ves saw a lot of potential with this application of spiritual masking.

In fact, if he put a lot more effort into constructing a mask, he could even impersonate other mech designers!

Ves wondered how far he could take this technique. Perhaps he might be able to imitate another mech designer's design philosophy by stealing their spiritual fragments before merging them into his mask!

"The possibilities.. are frightening!"

Would he be able to apply this technique in other ways? For example, to emulate a collaborative work?

If his suspicions were true, as long as he refined his spiritual masking technique further, he'd be able to design a mech alone that required others to combine their efforts!

It was the ultimate spiritual technique for loner mech designers!

In other words, it was tailor-made for a paranoid, solitary bastard like Ves!
"Ugh!" Ves shook his head inside his helmet.

He was attempting to move away from that! He put so much effort into socializing with other mech designers and recruiting future mech designers lately in order to find willing collaborators and assistants.

He really missed having someone like Ketis on hand to bounce ideas and to offload work he didn't enjoy.

If he had a dozen more subordinate mech designers at his disposal, his productivity would skyrocket!

Unfortunately, Ves didn't have enough time to explore these possibilities any further right now. He was in a hurry to finish the Annihilator so he only adopted a bland and generic design style for simplicity and expedience.

Though it sounded rather basic, his measures were enough to erase all but the most subtle commonalities to his distinctive design style.

In fact, he spent much of the remainder of his design session on going over his Annihilator design in order to scour away any design elements that might possibly tie back to his work!

"I have to be thorough. I can't let a single mistake pass through."

Ves completed his work over the course of just four days, far faster than a typical Journeyman would take.

This in itself was another form of misdirection on his part.

By completing his design work so fast, he basically gave the impression that he was an older and more experienced Journeyman!

A mech designer who was so productive that he designed the Annihilator design according to Finlay's requirements in just four days had to be an old hand in his profession!

Ves even expressed some of his Senior-level Skills in the Annihilator design to reinforce this impression. It was as if he was an old Journeyman who was already midway towards his preparations to advancing to Senior!

All in all, a mech designer who appraised the Annihilator design and compared it to the base model would never suspect that Ves had anything to do with it because he was too young!

In fact, most people would immediately rule him out because he had only advanced to Journeyman very recently!

There were still some holes in this plan. Once Ves completely assimilated his Senior-level Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills, he did not wish to restrain himself once he designed his next mechs.

If it became known that part of his knowledge base had reached the level of a Senior, then there was a possibility that he could still be connected to his Annihilator design.

Yet that was still unlikely.

Ves would worry a bit if the MTA got their hands on the Annihilator's design schematics, but only for a little bit. As for the mech designers that worked for Finlay's faction? Hah! They couldn't even get a single Journeyman to agree to incorporate taboo weapons in the Spyre Helix design!

Anyone less than a Senior or a perceptive Journeyman shouldn't be able to read his work as well as him. If an Apprentice appraised his design, they'd only pick up some surface aspects that were mired with falsehoods.

Only one thing bothered Ves a lot. As he put the finishing touches on his Annihilator design, he silently lamented his inability to express his distinctive design philosophy.

In some ways, it felt incredibly wrong for him to make no attempts at instilling life into the Spyre Helix Annihilator design.

Pretty much every other mech he designed or worked on benefited from his specialty. It felt extremely unnatural for him to work on a mech while trying his best to keep it as dead as possible.

Instead of concentrating his mind in order to concentrate on a distinct vision for his Annihilator design, he instead relaxed it as much as possible so that his mind was filled with chaos.

Though it impacted his productivity to a certain extent, Ves was far too good of a mech designer to let that hinder him. Even if he only spent a portion of his attention on designing his variant, he still did a good job.

Ves still experienced some discomfort, though. If not for his spiritual mask, his mentality would have rebelled much more!

The only part about him that seriously took issue was his design seed.

It turned out his design seed really didn't like it if he tried to muffle his design philosophy!

During many instances, Ves had the illusion that he was tearing himself in two. He tried so hard to pretend to be a different mech designer than 'Ves Larkinson, specialist in Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis' that he suspected that he could do some serious damage if he pushed it any further!

Fortunately, four days was short enough that his design seed only became somewhat disgruntled. While it constantly radiated disapproval, it didn't shift or alter in any significant fashion.

Ves mentally wiped his brow as he observed the state of his design seed. He hadn't really considered the damage he could do to his design seed. It seemed like designing a mech without leaving behind his fingerprints was far harder than he thought!

"What do you think?" Ves asked Nitaa.

His bodyguard had remained by his side all this time. She had been keeping an eye on Finlay's men stationed at the mech workshop.

"I am not a mech designer." She spoke. "All I see is a six-legged machine with lots of armor and weapons. Compared to the original design, this one is bigger on the weapon department and smaller on the armor department."

Ves shrugged. He couldn't expect anything more from a laywoman like Nitaa.

Her description wasn't wrong, though. Doom Crawlers were distinct heavy mechs that relied on heavy armor and heavy ranged firepower to lay waste against any opposition in their way.

Ves made a conscious choice to reduce the armor and increase the mobility of his Spyre Helix Annihilator.

The reduction in mass was a necessity since Ves had to make a lot of room to accommodate the larger and more potent weapon systems.

However, reducing the armor and some other stuff from the base model meant that his variant's mech performance index took a substantial dip.

In order to compensate for the loss in armor, Ves had no choice but to raise the mobility of his mech.

With the help of his deep understanding of mechanics, he managed to make his doom crawler variant a little bit faster than before. While the Spyre Helix Annihilator wasn't about to race across the surface of a planet anytime soon,

the increase in mobility was still a welcome addition that brought up its performance index back to normal.

"In fact, the difference is a lot more drastic in low-gravity environments."

At 0.53 g, the Spyre Helix Annihilator weighed almost twice as less. How much nimbler did a heavy mech become when they suddenly fought against much less gravity than before?

Perhaps achieving a thirty percent speed boost was very much possible, even on rough terrain.

While this sounded like a huge increase, Ves did not forget that doom crawlers already moved as slow as a snail. Amplifying the speed of a snail by thirty percent just turned it into a faster snail. It was still nowhere near to matching the sprinting speed of a hare.

In any case, Ves no longer believed he needed to do anything to finish the commission.

"It's done!"

Now, he needed to see if the representative of the dark mercenaries accepted the modifications he made to the Spyre Helix design.

Chapter 1476 Profitable Deal

Ves did not exhibit any surprise when he found out the dark mercenaries sent a mech designer to evaluate his work.

Of course, the mech designer in the employ of the Night Zephyrs was only an Apprentice Mech Designer, and probably not a good one at that. Most mech designers who worked for shady outfits tended to be the losers of their profession.

The difference in status was so evident that the representative showed a lot of deference to Ves. There was no way the man dared to act presumptuous against a bonafide Journeyman!

Ves smiled under the helmet of his shadow attire. Showing respect for higher-ranking mech designers was one of the many norms that the MTA hammered into their heads. It was so pervasive that even pirate designers respected the same norms without asking any questions!

In order to ensure that there wouldn't be any problems, Ves adopted another form of pressure as well. He switched up his spiritual mask and adopted a more confident and assertive posture than his normal self.

His cues, his aura and his demeanor all made him appear imposing. Despite his shadow attire, his superiority towards an Apprentice could not be denied!

"What do you think of my design, Santo?" He asked as he stood behind the Apprentice.

Santo nervously studied the design schematics projected from the terminal. For some reason, he didn't don any disguises, which made his lack of confidence all the more apparent.

If Santo was the best mech expert in the employ of the Night Zephyrs, then they should have sent a seasoned mech officer along. Ves figured that the dark mercenary corps hadn't fully thought it through how badly the rank disparity among mech designers mattered within their profession!

Even if Journeymen didn't enjoy the same amount of renown as expert pilots, high-ranking mech designers still commanded a lot of respect from the lower ranks!

Still, even if Santo unconsciously deferred to Ves, he still had a job to do. He did not let his admiration and apprehension towards Ves halt his obligation to

determine whether the modification plans for the Spyre Helix made the right improvements.

"These changes are ingenious!" Santo said in an astonishing fashion! "There is much to go through! Would you be willing to guide me through the design choices you've made? It would help me evaluate your Spyre Helix Annihilator design faster."

"It would be my pleasure." Ves replied.

Though he kept his words brief and his tone fairly restrained, he walked up to the projection and briefly explained the alterations he made to the design from top to bottom.

Ves adopted a teacher's stance as he pointed out his decisions, highlighting some of his more brilliant innovations without giving too much away. He refrained from explaining his solutions completely, wanting to leave Santo with plenty of mysteries as the Night Zephyr's resident mech designer attempted to puzzle out the Annihilator design with his own comprehension.

Teaching was akin to indoctrination. By letting Ves take the lead in guiding Santo's perspective towards the Annihilator design, he was essentially able to warp the Apprentice Mech Designer's opinion into a more favorable direction!

By overemphasizing the best aspects about his work, Ves managed to distract Santo's attention away from the less attractive portions of his Annihilator design. It was actually a very simple approach, but it worked like a charm due to all of the pressure he exerted!

It seemed as if he couldn't help bring out his Devil Tongue in situations where it offered him an advantage.

Ves even got the sense that he was shifting closer and closer to the likes of Calabast, Leland and other manipulative spies!

He quickly shook his head underneath the helmet and got back to narrating his design choices.

Half an hour was enough to complete his guided tour to Santo. The Apprentice had become further and further enthralled with the Annihilator design.

"Wow." He breathed while he studied the comparisons between the base model and the variant. "While it's a shame that your modified version is somewhat less resilient against damage, the increase in firepower and mobility is substantial. Considering our upcoming deployment, the low-gravity environment will amplify the gains in speed, allowing us to get in and get out as fast as possible!"

This was very relevant for the Night Zephyrs. The use of taboo weapons would doubtlessly attract attention. The longer the Night Zephyrs lingered, the larger the chance that they might get caught!

In order to minimize the risk of unwelcome surprises, the doom crawlers had to land on the planet and sneak up into attack range as fast as possible. Trading away a bit of mass and armor in favor of speeding them up was a welcome adaptation.

Of course, the loss of armor and structural integrity was quite serious. However, Santo paid less mind to it at the moment. Perhaps he might get his wits together later, but as Ves continued to engage the Apprentice in conversation, the man had no opportunity to think for himself!

"Does the Annihilator design meet the needs of the Night Zephyrs?" Ves asked, pressuring Santo to come to a quick conclusion.

"I have a good feeling about it, but..."

"But?" Ves subtly loomed closer to Santo.

"Nothing! Your Annihilator design is a great adaptation! I would have never been able to fit all of those big weapon systems into the doom crawler without incurring severe performance hits!"

What Ves found peculiar about Santo was that while he showed a lot of deference to a high-ranking mech designer, he barely showed any notice towards the taboo weapons on the Annihilator design.

Along with the Apprentice's relative youth, Ves figured that Santo must have originated from the Nyxian Gap but had learned his craft from a respectable, orthodox mech designer.

This gave Ves an idea.

"Say, you are quite talented for your age. Who is your teacher?"

"Ah, I've been mentored by the Light's End! Have you heard of her? She's a renowned Journeyman of the Nyxian Gap!"

"Interesting moniker. What's her specialty?"

"As her name suggests, she's really good with laser weapon systems. Pirates love her work because her laser rifles are reliable, easy to maintain and not that costly to make or buy."

Santo babbled a bit about the Light's End. Though she didn't match the renown of someone like the Skull Architect, she still managed to find her footing in the Nyxian Gap!

A small chime from his comm suddenly interrupted his spiel.

"Ah, my apologies, Rho-Sigma, but I'm on a tight schedule as well. Since your Annihilator design is in order, we can move ahead with taking away the doom crawlers and transform them along the lines of your modification plan."

"Sounds like you are in a big hurry to overhaul the doom crawlers."

"We have a limited window of opportunity to perform our mission. Sneaking eighty active doom crawlers onto a pirate planet is harder than it sounds."

Santo did not say anything further. Obviously, his respect for Ves did not reach the point where he was willing to spill his outfit's core secrets.

That was fine. Ves gained a better glimpse of what Finlay's faction and the Night Zephyrs planned to do with the modified doom crawlers. At the very least, someone other than Finlay corroborated the claim that they intended to employ the weapons of mass destruction against pirates.

At least that seemed to be true.

Due to his tight schedule, Santo left quickly afterwards, but not before loading up all of the relevant design files and modification plans onto a secure data chip.

The commission called for drawing up a modification for existing Spyre Helixes. That meant that Ves didn't just have to design a variant, but also provide a step-by-step instruction manual to change the base model into the updated variant.

Otherwise, Santo or the mech technicians had to puzzle out the steps themselves, which they were liable to screw up!

Finlay and his bodyguards arrived an hour later. It seemed the mysterious young nobleman had been preoccupied with other matters before he was able to visit the rented mech workshop.

"The man sent by the dark mercenaries agreed to my modification plan." Ves stated simply.

He had the sense that Finlay regarded the unknown mech designer he knew as Rho-Sigma in a different light.

"You are surprisingly.. efficient. I thought it would take a week or two weeks for you to come up with a way to integrate the new weapon systems onto the Spyre Helixes."

"A slight effort." Ves replied mildly. "I merely drew up a plan. It is up to your men to do the heavy lifting."

"Dumb labor is one of the most abundant resources in the galaxy. We have more than enough mech technicians to get the job done."

Ves understood Finlay's point. It wasn't hard for an organization with lots of money and influence to hire a bunch of mech technicians willing to do anything for a fat paycheck.

Unlike mech designers, the MTA imposed much less demands on mech technicians to adhere to its values and principles. It didn't matter too much anyway.

"Am I eligible to receive my reward now?" Ves slightly pressed.

Ever since he packed off Santo, he became impatient to receive what Finlay had promised to him. The sample of Synthra Umbra along with Item #1255 plagued his thoughts numerous times throughout the last few days!

"Since you have abided by your end of the agreement, I will naturally release your rewards under your care." Finlay responded with an easy tone. "Let us head to the warehouse right now."

They exited the workshop and moved over to a nearby warehouse. They entered an apportioned lot where two different containers rested on the floor.

"Here they are. You can inspect them if you wish."

"Don't mind if I do."

Ves approached the smaller container and opened it up. He scanned its contents with a spare multiscanner he filched from the workshop and confirmed the sample of Synthra Umbra was authentic.

Not a single milligram of Synthra Umbra was missing!

As for the larger container, Ves only briefly opened its container and subjected its contents to a cursory scan. It wasn't even needed as the indescribable presence along with the active spirituality hidden within already confirmed the huge object's authenticity!

There was no way anyone would be able to fool Ves with an imitation of the Ancient Sarcophagus!

"Both items are sound and match the description set in the contract."

"You can take them away at your leisure. Are we good now?"

"We're good."

That was it. The deal they struck a couple of days ago ended on a quick and sudden note. In exchange for just four days of his time, Ves effortlessly obtained two expensive objects valued at around 30 billion bright credits!

If Ves ignored the disturbing implications of running roughshod over the Big Two's prohibitions against taboo weaponry, then this was one of the most lucrative deals he had ever engaged in! It still surprised him that Finlay would even abide by the terms of such a costly agreement!

"Before you celebrate, don't forget you still owe us 215 million firthals." Finlay mentioned.

"Ah, I remember. I've already exchanged the necessary currency."

Surprisingly, Finlay waved his hand to Ves. "Forget it. 215 million firthals is chump change for us. I've already brought up your earlier proposal to my superiors. Depending on your performance, I can exercise my discretion,

which I have just done. You can keep the remainder of the money you owe us. Consider it a favor."

That was even more welcome news. "Oh. Thank you."

"In exchange, let's keep in touch. I'm sure you're busy with your own business right now. Every Journeyman is busy all the time. However, if you ever require anything from the Sentinel Kingdom or the Nyxian Gap, we'd appreciate it if you approached us first."

Evidently, Finlay rated 'Rho-Sigma' very highly. This was exactly what Ves had aimed for in these last few days!

Chapter 1477 Shadow Address

Finlay offered Ves a means to contact him or the faction standing behind him. Of course, he didn't exchange comm addresses or anything else that could be traced back to his real identity.

Instead, Finlay passed a so-called Shadow Address to Ves. This was a unique identifying code that Ves could use to send a message to Finlay via the Shadow Courier network.

People made use of Shadow Addresses in case they didn't want their real identities to be associated with their shady dealings.

For example, if a Sentinel noble requested the shipment of a batch of nuclear missiles, then he wouldn't tell the seller to ship the batch to 'Lady Miralix of House Laterna at Felixia I' or something!

Instead, Lady Miralix would pass on her anonymous Shadow Address, which only signified specific locations of delivery and such. The point of a Shadow Address was to provide a form of identity protection that was so thorough that not even the Shadow Couriers themselves knew the real names of the people hiding behind the addresses!

While Finlay possessed a Shadow Address, Ves did not. His dealings with the Shadow Couriers only dealt with his real identity so far, which was a vulnerability that Ves had to remedy as soon as possible!

"Is there a way to acquire a Shadow Address here?"

"Certainly! The Shadow Couriers operate an entire branch in the marketplace. I can give you directions if you require. Let me accompany you so that I can add your Shadow Address to our list."

They all moved out of the warehouse, but not before Ves arranged his new possessions. He moved his P-stones, the sample of Synthra Umbra, Item #613 and Item #1255 to a different warehouse lot. He'd arrange their shipment out of the marketplace later.

After that, they moved to the Shadow Courier branch where Ves registered a new Shadow Address for his 'Rho-Sigma' persona.

Registering a Shadow Address was a lot more complicated than Ves thought, but for now he only registered virtual means of getting in touch with him. If anyone wanted to ship physical goods to his Shadow Address, then the Shadow Couriers would have to contact him first through virtual means in order to set a specific drop-off location.

Once Finlay registered Rho-Sigma's new Shadow Address, he quickly bid Ves farewell.

"I'd love to stick around, but we are quickly moving into action now that you have delivered the most crucial piece of the puzzle. It's a pleasure working with you. If we ever need comparable services, we know where to go now. Don't hesitate to contact us as well if you require anything comparable to what you've obtained today."

"I will."

Now that they knew how to contact each other, Finlay departed the Shadow Courier branch. Ves watched the disguised noble go, a bit surprised at how well everything went.

He always expected something to go wrong along the way. The deal he concluded with Finlay not only involved an incredible amount of money, but also dealt with something that would surely attract the ire of the MTA if abused!

If Ves was in Finlay's shoes, he would find some way to silence anyone involved if possible.

However, the reality was much different. Finlay and his superiors never attempted to screw Ves over. Perhaps the value of an unscrupulous but competent Journeyman was higher than expected!

Though Ves only came up with his Rho-Sigma identity recently, it held a lot of promise. So long as no one, including the Shadow Couriers, knew the true person behind this cover identity, Ves might be able to profit from it further in the future!

It was a lot more secure and anonymous than his faked Rabant Clearwater identity he crudely forged in the past.

"A Shadow Address is a lot more secure."

He still had to be careful, though. Ves figured it was best to get back to Calabast to flesh out this idea further. If he attempted to go at it alone, he was liable to leak his true identity along the way.

Ves could help but cast some more suspicions towards the Shadow Couriers. Their network encompassed the entire Komodo Star Sector and beyond.

They provided reliable and discreet courier services underneath the noses of the authorities. Ves could hardly fathom how the Shadow Couriers managed to survive without getting uprooted.

Did they manage to bribe an MTA councilor or something? Or did the Big Two have a more direct hand in their running? What if the Five Scrolls Compact were behind the Shadow Couriers?

More unanswered questions plagued his mind. Due to his increasing doubts over the Shadow Couriers, his enthusiasm of working with them deflated a bit. While he acknowledged that he could benefit a lot from making use of them, he should never grow too dependent on their services!

He was sure that Calabast would agree with this sentiment!

"Let's go." He told Nitaa.

Both of them exited the branch soon after and diverted back to the warehouse where they stored their goods.

"We're done here. I got what I came for. Now, we need to leave with our goods."

"That's not as simple as it sounds." Nitaa spoke. "Smuggling these goods out of the marketplace and off-planet will require a lot of effort."

"That's what smugglers are here for, right? We just have to make sure our cargo doesn't get stolen."

Though his mother had already left, Ves still harbored a lot of fears that someone might steal his exceedingly expensive goods from his possession. Perhaps the Circle of Mota might not pull off anything by themselves, but the same wasn't necessarily true for the guests!

People from all walks of life visited the temporary marketplace. Numerous pirate leaders and unscrupulous mercenary leaders frequented the site. Who

knew if any of them tried to figure out where the goods auctioned for incredible sums had gone and when they would be shipped to other locations. Intercepting valuable cargo shipments was one of the most prevalent activities committed by pirates!

Though it mainly happened out in the middle of deep space, Ves could not discount the possibility that a group of pirates might be plotting to trail behind his cargo shipment and attack them along the way in the middle of an isolated tunnel!

"Let's find a secure and reliable way to ship my goods from this site." Ves spoke. "Due to Finlay's favor, I have an excess of firthals. I might as well spend deeply in order to ensure a guaranteed delivery."

Fortunately, Ves wasn't the only person who worried about this problem. The Circle of Mota operated an expansive in-house smuggling operation that offered absolute assurances, for a price.

Ves didn't worry about the price. With so much excess firthals left, Ves paid for one of the more extensive delivery services without any hesitation.

Though he had to cough up more than 50 million firthals just to transport some goods, it was worth it due to the effective insurance he gained! When it came to goods with a total value that exceeded 30 billion bright credits, then paying some 'protection' fees was not a bad idea!

"No pirates will come and hijack my shipment, right?" Ves asked the Circle representative as they signed the shipping contract.

The representative offered a reassuring smile to Ves. "Have no fear, sir. We have never failed to ship any goods out under these terms. Pirates know better than to touch anything that belongs to our Circle. You have made the right decision. If anything happens, we will compensate you for your losses."

"Sounds good."

Ves suspected that the Circle was running a racket in the smuggling business. He wouldn't be surprised to learn that they were in cahoots with the very pirates who intercepted the shipping runs from the marketplace to the surface!

Once he completed the latest arrangements, Ves was finally free.

"I've completed all of the goals I aimed to achieve here except for one. Do you think they sell food here?"

The hulking suit of Nitaa shifted. "They sell everything here. Doubtlessly there must be a venue here where you can

"Even after paying for the expensive shipment, I still have a lot of firthals left. Let's see if I can spend the remainder on something useful."

The two trawler the outer marketplace for interesting goods and other opportunities. Ves focused mainly on finding geril spice and the source behind this unique product.

Unfortunately, Ves found no trace of geril spice in the marketplace. Only a couple of food stalls and restaurants added spicy Nyx dogs to their menus, but only half of them used authentic geril spice!

As for the chefs who followed the authentic recipe for spicy Nyx dogs, they only held a few bags of geril spice at most!

"Where do you get your geril spice?" Ves interrogated one of the street chefs, applying a bit of spiritual pressure along the way.

"M-My boss! I don't own this food stall! I'm just a worker!"

Ves grunted in disgust and left.

"I think you will have better luck if you approach the Circle directly." Nitaa spoke as she matched his pace. "They might even be the main distributors of geril spice in civilized space."

"Forget about it. In any case, I have enough to last me a while, and I can always obtain more through my newly-forged connections with Finlay."

The Nyxian Gap hid countless secrets, and Ves only scratched the surface of its depth. From all of the activity he heard so far, he no longer viewed the Nyxian Gap as a large area of anomalous space.

It was actually akin to an entirely different star sector or star region in itself!

"What do you think about this?" Ves swept the calm but busy streets of the underground marketplace.

"It is thriving."

"Strange, don't you think? The Sentinel Kingdom should have been on top of this site in days. Instead, the Circle of Mota is merrily continuing to bring Sentinels and pirates together."

"The lawful and lawless powers of the galaxy aren't so much different from each other, sir. Light and shadow are interdependent. I would even argue that this is one of the adaptations of our race that has helped us conquer the galaxy. We abide by the rules when they benefit us, but break them when they become a hindrance."

"That's remarkably insightful of you. Did you come up with that on your own?"

"No. My.. former organization taught me that. In order to fulfill our missions, we should be prepared to go through any lengths."

"I see. Do you think the Circle adopts the same values as your former organization?"

"Not quite. They were not as.. mercantile. The Circle is more preoccupied with commerce and trade. I can't ascertain any specific agenda from their activities."

"Just because you can't see anything does not necessarily mean that the Circle is unmoving. Everyone has an agenda. But let's not talk about this anymore. It's not a good idea to cast doubt on the Circle while we're in the middle of one of their protected sites."

Though Ves spent the remainder of his day trying to find out anything about geril spice, he failed abjectedly.

While it was disappointing for him to miss out his last opportunity to dig out more information about this specialty product from the Nyxian Gap, he didn't want to linger around forever.

Ves and Nitaa left the marketplace through the same way they had entered. They boarded a shielded shuttle operated by a middleman that presumably entered a maze of tunnels.

After shuffling through several different shuttles, they finally emerged back onto the surface of Cinach VIII.

Once there, the two snuck their way back to their current hotel and ditched their Shadow Attire along the way.

In order to leave no traces behind, Ves rented a dilapidated workshop from a shady organization and personally destroyed their disguise materials by burning them in the hottest oven on hand.

Only then did he feel safe enough to return to his hotel and depart Cinach VIII afterwards in the proper way!

Chapter 1478 Truncated

After he returned to the hotel, he lingered at Cinach VIII for a few more days. He occasionally and deliberately showed up in public for various reasons in order to reinforce his alibi.

In particular, he visited the offices or residences of various Journeyman Mech Designers who worked at one of the many universities and research institutions on the planet.

The impromptu exchanges he conducted didn't yield much fruit to Ves. Regardless of his gains or lack thereof, Ves already achieved his goal by acting in a way that did not invite suspicion.

If Ves immediately left Cinach VIII after departing from the Circle of Mota's underground marketplace, then someone might be able to form a connection between Rho-Sigma to Ves Larkinson!

Therefore, even if Ves wanted to leave the planet as soon as possible in order to study his newly-obtained goods, he restrained his urges and acted as if he still had a lot of time on his hands.

Those were some of the slowest days of his life. He exhibited much less enthusiasm for the exchanges he conducted and he often glanced at the clock projected by his comm to see how little time had passed.

Fortunately, now that Ves had returned to the surface, he enjoyed the company of both Lucky and Gavin.

While his cat playfully tugged at his Pride of Dusk while demanding hugs and exotics, Gavin began to distract him by describing their next destination.

"As you know, our next destination is the Hertog Dominion. While it's not as close to the frontier as the Tomaris Federation, the crisis at the border has started to affect it as well."

That caused Ves to pause in eating his lunch sandwich. "Have the sandman raids reached as far as the Hertog Dominion? Already?"

"Only half-a-dozen sandmen fleets have crashed into their border systems so far. While these attacks don't constitute a threat to a proper state, the citizens of the Hertog Dominion are not used to fighting aliens! There is a considerable amount of panic and unrest among its citizens. Everyone is fearing the worst. Markets are destabilized while the rulers are doing their best to mobilize their forces."

Ves could imagine how his original plans for the Hertog Dominion might fall through due to all of the recent changes.

The escalating sandman incursions became an increasingly greater threat to the Komodo Star Sector!

"If it's already that bad in the Hertog Dominion, what about our destination after that? Is the Tomaris Federation still holding together?"

Gavin sighed. "Tomaris has fully mobilized into a war footing. Sandmen fleets are passing through the gaps in the border like maggots trying to burrow into the apple that represents human space. The intensity and frequency of all of the fighting has matched the level of the Bright-Vesia Wars! In fact, many analysts think that the worst is yet to come!"

Ves sat up straighter from his chair when he heard this news. "What?! That's ridiculous! What is the CFA doing?! Are you still taking their time in sending reinforcements?"

"That's the thing. While the CFA has diverted some of their smaller squadrons and flotillas to reinforce the hotspots, the sandmen are assaulting a broad front that spills across the entire length of the border. Their forces are being stretched thin and way too many sandmen fleets are getting through! Mancroft

and many of the other states in the vicinity are barely hanging on with the assistance of the CFA."

This sounded incredibly serious! The sandman incursion might even have the potential to threaten the Bright Republic!

"How is home?"

"Fine, thankfully. The sandmen appear to divert most of their fleets in the direction of the Tomaris Federation. That's also while their situation is the most dire. The other states in the vicinity of the border can easily deal with the fleets that have fanned out from the center of their direction."

As Gavin described a few more details about the recent incursions, he also announced a piece of unwelcome news.

"Due to the crisis at Tomaris, all of the appointments you've made there are called off. None of the Journeymen who work there can free themselves up to conduct an exchange with you. Many of them are assisting their military in hidden research bases and the like. Others have packed up their bags and left the state as fast as possible!"

Ves wasn't surprised to hear about the former, but the latter did take him aback. "Mech designers actually fled? What about their duty?"

"They aren't Brighters like you, boss. Those who live closer to the borders of the frontier are a lot more self-serving than you think. I don't blame them. If I was in their shoes, I would try and make off as well, damn whatever assets that's left behind."

The idea disgusted him a bit. It was one thing to depart from a state to seek better opportunities, but to do so while their home was under an existential threat was dishonorable!

Even if Ves slowly cared less and less about the Bright Republic lately, he still felt compelled to defend his home state in its time of need!

This was because he was a Brighter!

"I take it that traveling to the Tomaris Federation at all is a bad idea."

"Yeah. No matter how you put it, spending your vacation in a middle of a sandman-infested war theater is not the wisest choice. I think you should consider scrapping your plans short. We've already started running behind schedule anyway. We've lingered too long in the Sentinel Kingdom."

Ves sighed. He knew what was behind the sandman incursions that was plaguing the Tomaris Federation and the other states at the border. The true mastermind behind this incomprehensible push was not an entity that he wanted to spar with right now.

There was no way a single human like him could ever obtain the upper hand in a direct confrontation against Sigrund!

"Agreed." He spoke. "Please clear my schedule of anything related to the Tomaris Federation. As much as I sympathize with their difficulties, I don't want to be press-ganged into another war."

This was unlikely to occur. Perhaps he might be in trouble if he was just a low-ranking mech designer, but as a Journeyman he enjoyed greater protection.

Still, the point was that a foreign Journeyman like him had no business visiting an active warzone unless he was part of some delegation to assist the state. There were probably rules in place that regulated these kinds of things.

Ves resumed eating and spoke between his bites. "I'm still visiting the Hertog Dominion, though. I don't want to get pulled into any wars, but I want to check their situation to see how they cope with the sandmen. Do you think that is still possible?"

Both Gavin and Nitaa looked at each other.

His bodyguard couldn't remain still anymore. "I highly advise you to cancel your plans for the Hertog Dominion, sir. While the sandmen threat hasn't reached the level where we need to be concerned, the situation might grow worse by the time we have reached the state. In addition, it's not just the sandmen we have to be on guard against. The Dominion itself..."

"The Hertog Dominion is not exactly known for its stability and rule of law." Gavin continued. "It's like a downgraded version of the Sentinel Kingdom. It has a tyrannical government, but without the strength to back up their iron rule. From what I've read, the society there has always been unstable beneath the surface."

"That doesn't concern us, right? As long as we keep our noses out of local politics, we are just guests."

Gavin shook his head. "You're right, but who knows what will happen now that the sandmen are thrown in the mix. What I'm trying to say is that all of the risk factors have grown since you have made the initial decision to travel through the Hertog Dominion. Already, half of the Journeyman you've made an appointment with have rescinded their invitations. Same as the mech designers from Tomaris, they're too busy to bother with you, boss."

Eventually, Ves gave in to the advice of his staff and decided to truncate his visit to the Hertog Dominion. He'd only stay there long enough to make some visits he still thought worthwhile before linking up with Gloriana who awaited his arrival there.

"My meeting with Gloriana is still in place, right?"

"Yes, though she also sent a message to you that it's fine if you want to relocate your meeting to another place."

Ves grimaced. "No thanks. I won't be visiting this part of the star sector anytime soon, so I want to take the opportunity to experience one more culture."

While he did indeed wish to broaden his horizons by experiencing what life was like in the Hertog Dominion, he still harbored another goal.

He wanted to investigate the sandmen invading human space. While Ves was too afraid to confront Sigrund directly, it should still be okay to study the remains of the sentient AI's sacrificial goons.

How did Sigrund manipulate the sandmen into committing a suicidal invasion against humanity? What compelled the sandmen to throw away their lives for a futile opportunity to root themselves in civilized space?

More importantly, Ves began to harbor some more ideas about the sandmen, especially their leader caste. In order to test some of the assumptions he made, he wanted to get in touch with one of the sandman leaders, or their remains if he couldn't get close to a living specimen.

Not even Gavin or Nitaa dissuaded him from this course of action. If he didn't perform an investigation in person, he wouldn't feel relieved about the threat posed by the sandmen.

Perhaps Ves merely wanted to do something to atone for unleashing Sigrund to the galaxy.

"We're almost done here." He spoke. "It's time to return to the fleet and leave the Sentinel Kingdom."

Ves stayed on the planet for one more day before he left. He and his group calmly boarded a transit vehicle from the spaceport and reached a space station. From there, they booked another transit back to the orbit of Cinach XII where they headed towards one of the floating drydocks.

Crindon welcomed Ves at the huge facility.

"Welcome back, sir."

Ves stared up at the Barracuda nestled in between the clamps. Though most of the overhaul took place inside the corvette, her surface had been brushed up as well. Some of the dust and corrosion and damage from micro impacts had been smoothed out. Along with a fresh layer of coating, his ship looked as good as new!

"Did you encounter any major issues during the overhaul?" Ves asked his Kinner bondsman.

"There are always issues." Crindon responded and handed over a data pad to Ves. "You can study which of the changes have gone through and which one we haven't managed to perform due to various reasons."

The Barracuda is a second-class ship. I'd be surprised if you didn't encounter any setbacks."

The security expert began to explain what he accomplished. In short, most of the communication and internal sensor systems were more robust against external intrusions.

In addition, by replacing parts that originated from the Friday Coalition with identical parts from the Hexadric Hegemony, the ship should no longer be easily accessible by any parties from the former state.

"Even Hexers will encounter some difficulty in intruding into your ship's network with the new countermeasures I've implemented." Crindon confidently grinned. "While any hacker can gain access to systems that are connected in a network, there is no way they can ever intrude in a system that is air-gapped. I've replaced many components that used to communicate with each other wirelessly with less sophisticated wired components. I've also introduced many breaks and other barriers in between the wires in order to

close off systems that you truly don't want anyone to access. This includes practically every monitoring and communication system in your stateroom!"

"Finally! I can enjoy some true privacy!"

The days of Gloriana or her AIs secretly snooping in on him while he worked or slept were finally over!

Chapter 1479 Processing Gains

The Barracuda, overhauled to become more secure than ever, joined up with the Battle Criers before transitioning into FTL.

Their visit to the Sentinel Kingdom came at an end. Departing the Sentinel Kingdom and travelling all the way to the Hertog Dominion took a bit less than two months of travel.

The Barracuda could manage faster, but the slowest ships of the Battle Criers wouldn't be able to catch up in that case.

Ves didn't mind. He obtained an incredible amount of valuable materials, and needed time to study them and process them into useful applications.

First, he obtained four additional P-stones, thereby bringing his total collection to six. With so many P-stones, he could begin to perform comparisons and study what they had in common. If he was lucky, he might gather enough clues to deduce the reason why they gained their spiritual attraction properties!

Second, he obtained a second F-stone. Ves had high hopes for it, because the first F-stone possessed the remarkable property of charging his spirituality with an additional offensive attribute.

Third, he won Item #613 from the Circle of Mota's auction. The rose-gold rock was a completely new type of spiritually-reactive exotic. Ves couldn't wait to figure out its effects!

Fourth, he obtained a sample of unprocessed Synthra Umbra after completing Finlay's commission. Since Ves valued his privacy and secrets very highly, processing this high-grade exotic into a cloth before weaving it in a variety of useful articles of clothing was vitally important!

Fifth, the grandest prize of all was Item #1255, otherwise known as the Ancient Sarcophagus. Its value was undeniable! Finlay coughed out the equivalent of 20 billion bright credits to win this red crystal-like growth that enveloped the body of an unknown humanoid alien from the same auction!

"Too expensive! That's enough to fund the development and fabrication of an expert mech! It's enough to cover the cost of founding a large mercenary corps!"

Ves could have put that sum of money to a lot of good uses. If he truly spent this much money on a single strange object, he would have beat himself up for days!

Fortunately, someone else paid for it all. Finlay and his mysterious noble faction bankrolled the entire sum, thereby saving Ves the trouble.

The only payment he had to make was to form a modification plan that turned regular doom crawlers into engines of mass destruction. Though Ves frequently worried about how his work would be used, he couldn't do anything about it anyway.

"I've already made my decision and done the deed. It's too late to soothe my conscience." He muttered.

Ves decided to keep his eye on the news in the region regardless. He wanted to know if the Spyre Helix Annihilators ever showed up. If Finlay spoke the truth, the Annihilators would only be put to use in the Nyxian Gap, and only once. There should be no reason for them to be put to use in civilized space.

For some reason, Ves was rather skeptical of Finlay's claims. Now that he thought about it, going through so much trouble to upgrade eighty doom crawlers, only to employ them in a single attack did not make sense!

Even if Sentinel nobles were wealthier than usual, Finlay's hesitance in spending so much firthals during the auction showed his hesitation at throwing around these kinds of sums.

A normal person or organization would never invest upwards of 50 or 60 billion bright credits just to form a bunch of single-use weapons!

Ves grimaced even deeper. "It's out of my hands."

One of the realities of being a mech designer was that he had no control over how his customers used or misused his products.

His mechs could be used for noble purposes, such as fighting pirates or guarding vital trade convoys.

They could also be used for abominable ends, such as massacring civilians or engaging in piracy.

Though Ves tried his best to ignore the latter, it still happened from time to time.

"It's not my fault!"

This was the stance he leaned towards! Ves was just a mech designer. Why should he be responsible in the first place? No mech was inherently sinful upon creation! Even a mech armed with nuclear weapons could be put to good use by exterminating pirates and hostile aliens!

Ves took a deep breath and cleared his mind. He refused to let the potential misuses of his Spyre Helix Annihilator design stop him from improving himself. The rewards he earned from his commission was more than enough to shut up his conscience!

Instead of imagining all of the awful ways his doom crawler variant could be put to use, he instead diverted his attention to something more pleasant.

He had a lot of new materials to study and process!

"I can do a lot of work in two months!"

In fact, Ves doubted he'd be able to complete all of the work he could do on his ship by the time the fleet reached the Hertog Dominion. He had to set priorities and tackle the tasks that provided him with immediate boosts.

Anything that required longer-term study or work to draw out their benefits could be left for later.

"I can't forget about fabricating a new ultracompact battery to replenish my second shield generator." He muttered while scratching his chin. "I've already gathered the materials, but I've never set aside enough time."

He couldn't help it. He only had so much time at his disposal. The warnings given by his fellow mech designers came to the fore.

Just because he could do almost anything as a mech designer, didn't mean it was a good idea for him to spread his time so much. He should focus first and foremost on his core profession.

From this perspective, Ves shouldn't necessarily be wasting his time on fabricating personal equipment such as another ultracompact battery. The only reason why he didn't object to doing so in this case was because scaled-up ultracompact batteries also appeared in high-end mechs.

As much as Ves wanted to dive into studying the Ancient Sarcophagus, he believed it wouldn't be so easy to make some gains in this instance.

Though he hadn't been subject to any danger lately, he still prioritized enhancing his own safety whenever it was convenient. He'd already been subject to a few assassinations in his life, and he did not wish to be

underprepared when someone else decided to throw a bunch of men to end his life.

"Goddammit, I still haven't gotten to the bottom of that last assassination attempt back in the Chuko Republic." He grumbled.

Though he tasked Gavin to investigate the incident and keep an eye on the Chuko Republic, so far they never found a clue why someone wanted to dispatch some rifleman mechs to shoot down his shuttle.

"Speaking of the Chuko Republic, the state is pretty much done for by now."

Despite the great efforts of its president, the latest news that came out all painted a bleak picture. Its three major provinces had already started to succumb to external pressure. The Redwell Province in particular tried its best to retain its sovereignty, but too many Whitewellers wanted the Hinson Protectorate to annex the province and turn a new leaf.

Of course, none of this mattered to Ves. He had no stake in the ultimate fate of Chuko.

The Komodo Star Sector never sat still. New states frequently emerged while others succumbed to the aggression of their neighbors. No matter where humanity had settled, conflict constantly took place.

"This makes it all the more important for me to empower myself."

Though Ves deeply wanted to start spending his available time by studying Item #613 and Item #1255, he only spent enough time to determine that they weren't leaking energy or decaying in any way. As long as they remained inert, he was in no hurry to study them immediately.

"This is good. I can take care of more immediate business."

Ves started to spend an entire week in the Barracuda's workshop and lab compartment.

He made good use of the high-quality, miniaturized equipment there to process his materials and fabricate the sub-components of his new ultracompact battery.

Since he already did it once, he spent remarkably little time in cobbling up a new battery. He only slightly revised the battery design he dredged up from his memory in order to incorporate several new insights and innovations.

However, the low-quality materials heavily restrained the parameters of his new ultracompact battery. As he finally put the last pieces into place, he studied his new creation carefully.

"It works, but that's it." He sighed. "There's nothing new other than a bit more energy capacity."

One of his regrets was that his new ultracompact battery was non-rechargeable. If he wanted to make a rechargeable version, then he needed to get his hands on higher-quality materials.

"Meow."

Lucky, who had been napping comfortably atop a lab machine, suddenly woke up and floated down to the workbench where the new ultracompact battery rested.

The cat curiously pawed the battery before eying it like a potential snack.

Ves quickly swiped the battery. "Don't get any ideas, Lucky!"

"Meow!"

After batting aside his cat's attempt to eat his battery, Ves retrieved his second shield generator from the vault and replaced its spent battery with the one he just fabricated.

"Here! If you want to munch on something, eat this instead!"

Though Lucky did not act particularly enthused when Ves threw the almost-spent battery to him, the cat did not refuse the offering. After licking the surface of the worn battery a few times, the cat meowed contently and began to nibble at his new prize like it was a delicacy.

"Careful! There's still some charge left inside!"

"Meow."

Lucky threw a disdainful look at Ves before resuming his eating. He'd eaten plenty of batteries before! He ate an entire CFA shuttle, which possessed much more powerful batteries!

Though Ves still remained a bit disturbed, he wasn't willing to halt his work. He only badgered Lucky into moving into a shielded chamber in the lab while he ate. If some unfortunate discharge occurred, at least it wouldn't strike his sensitive lab equipment!

Ves briefly tested his second shield generator and ascertained that it had no problems in drawing power from its new battery.

He now possessed two working shield generators! He felt inordinately well-protected as he wore it under his clothes like another belt!

"What do you think, Nitaa?" He asked his silent but trustworthy bodyguard. She had been the only person he allowed inside his workshop while he worked. "Do you think it's a good idea for me to wear two shield generators at once?"

"I don't require one, sir. Your life matters more than mine." She spoke.

"That's.. true."

"They can buy valuable time for you if a mech ever targets you. Carrying two shield generators instead of one effectively doubles your window of protection.

Even if you can buy just ten more seconds, that's enough time for you to run for cover and engage your stealth measures."

"That's also true."

He felt better about his selfish decision to wear both shield generators on his body at once. Since his bodyguard approved, he shouldn't feel guilty about depriving Nitaa or Gavin of the protection of his spare shield generator!

"If I get my hands on a third shield generator, I'll assign it to you." He promised. "You've been very helpful for me so far. Keeping you alive directly increases my chances of survival."

Nitaa frowned in disapproval. "Sir, don't spend too much on my account. I'm replaceable. You're not. If I am unable to discharge my duties anymore, you can easily buy a replacement from the Kinner Tribe."

Her words astounded Ves. The Kinners indoctrinated their tribesmen far too well! No matter how much Ves encouraged Nitaa to think of herself as a person, she continually treated herself as a commodity, no different from a slave!

It would take a lot more effort for him to disabuse his bodyguard of the notion that she was a human product.

In truth, a part of Ves actually liked it. No matter how perverse the Kinners raised their own kind, they were undeniably useful!

Chapter 1480 Privacy Regained

As Ves began to process his sample of Synthra Umbra, it became clear why people regarded it as a high-grade exotic.

Ves couldn't glean anything from scanning the sample of Synthra Umbra! Not even his Vulcaneye multiscanner could ascertain anything from its internal structure! At most, it captured a few unimportant details that his naked eye could already determine by themselves!

"Its effects are passive and constantly active."

Not only that, but the sensor-blocking effect was very strong in its most concentrated form. If Ves built an entire vault made out of Synthra Umbra, then he would have created a panic room that was strong enough to escape the detection from nearly any scanners except those that incorporated first-class technology and materials!

The sample he gained was not enough to create something so luxurious. Fortunately, Synthra Umbra was fairly easy to work with. Drawing on a couple of techniques from his knowledge base, he processed the raw material into malleable and flexible fibers.

While the fibers he made were rather thin and fragile, Ves threaded them together into strings with the help of a machine. Once he finished this step, he weaved the threads into cloth.

Though he screwed up a few times and wasted a portion of the valuable materials, at the end of his labor he produced enough cloth to form various articles of clothing.

"Still, I can't create an entire ensemble of clothing with this much cloth." He muttered as he stared at the natural black cloth that seemed to suck in the light.

After performing some calculations, he eventually came up with a plan to optimize his available Synthra Umbra cloth as much as possible.

"One underlayer vacsuit. One pair of underwear. One form-fitting cover that matches the dimensions of a shield generator."

Ves could only manage to divide his available cloth in making three products. The latter two didn't take up a lot of cloth, but the underlayer vacsuit he wanted to make would use up most of his materials.

In truth, he contemplated fashioning a cloak that would complement his Pride of Dusk outfit. However, after some thought, his overcoat already functioned as a sufficient outer layer. Adding a cloak on top of that would look far too pretentious.

"The main advantage of an underlayer vacsuit is that I can wear it in almost every instance, while a cloak is only really suited when I'm outdoors."

Wearing a billowing and stylish cloak might look cool, but it would get in the way if he ever spent his time in a lab, workshop or manufacturing facility.

Having made his choice, Ves began to fashion the cloth into three new products. While he wasn't a tailor by any means, he took some crash-courses on the subject and let his workshop machines do most of the work on his behalf.

Ves had no pretensions that he could match the craftsmanship of a trained and experienced tailor like the old man who made his Pride of Dusk ensemble.

"Not everything needs to be special." He muttered as he supervised one of the machines that was in the process of sewing together different pieces of cloth. "Sometimes, just obtaining something that does the job is enough."

In any case, he soon completed the products. Both the smaller articles were made of pure Synthra Umbra. As for the larger article, Ves made use of one of his own spare vacsuits and merely added an extra layer on top of it. This allowed him to retain some of its more advanced functions while still benefiting from whole-body sensor shielding.

Once he slipped in his new underwear and vacsuit before donning his regular clothes, he hardly felt its presence. However, when he pointed his Vulcaneye and some of the other scanners in his lab at himself, he collected much less data than before!

At the very least, no one was able to ascertain any details about his internal organs! The only exception was his head and hands when his vacsuit was in its dormant state. Only when he commanded it to unfold and cover up his head and the rest of his body into an airtight seal did he manage to defeat most scanners.

The less sophisticated scanners detected nothing. It was as if he simply wasn't there.

However, the more discerning ones at least identified the presence of a man-shaped anomaly in his place. It couldn't be helped as his very presence displaced the air, blocked radiation and other signals, and exerted weight on the ground.

This meant that the utility of his Synthra Umbra vacsuit couldn't be used as a replacement for a genuine infiltrator suit.

"True stealth systems are always active systems. They perform many tricks to mitigate as many loopholes as possible."

Still, even if his Synthra Umbra vacsuit could only play an assisting role as best if he ever wanted to escape pursuit, they still performed their primary function.

Nothing could look inside his body anymore!

His vacsuit perfectly covered the unusual Jutland organ and the nearly undetectable energy that circulated inside his chest.

It also hid the changes sparked by his gene treatments and Attribute Candy consumption.

In fact, the slight padding of his Synthra Umbra vacsuit also did wonders in hiding his exact body contours. This would help him defeat any means of

matching his exact body shape when he didn't want to be tracked while out in public.

"No matter what, wearing this vacsuit is very useful! There's almost no reason for me to leave it in the closet!"

If someone wanted to scan him because he wanted to get past a secure checkpoint or something, he could easily bear with the inconvenience of removing his Synthra Umbra vacsuit.

The point was that others were only allowed to scan him if he allowed them to! Without his consent or knowledge, no one could gain any meaningful data of what was inside his vacsuit.

Ves smirked. "That counts double for Gloriana!"

The reason why he fashioned some of his valuable Synthra Umbra into a pair of underwear was because he wanted some extra insurance!

If Gloriana ever attempted to scan him with a high-powered scanner, then his augmented underwear at least served as an unanticipated surprise!

"Hehehe." He grinned. "This is the first time I truly feel I've regained my privacy now."

To be fair, his stateroom and his lab compartments were already pretty secure. The overhauls planned by Crindon and him prioritized disconnecting as many unnecessary monitoring systems from them as possible.

Along with the implementations of controls that manually disconnected various cables to isolate a compartment completely from the ship, no one should ever be able to hijack a sensor feed in the affected area no matter what kind of backdoors they used!

Unfortunately, the overhaul stopped short from extending this protection to the rest of the ship. The Barracuda was simply too interconnected and automated for that to happen.

This was why Ves had no problem with wearing his Synthra Umbra vacsuit inside his ship. In fact, he should probably get used to wearing it all the time.

"Fortunately, it doesn't take much time or effort to clean. I can just dump it into a washing machine while I shower."

Though Ves spent an inordinate amount of time and effort on something that most people simply didn't bother with, he truly valued this new addition.

Once he became satisfied with his new Synthra Umbra vacsuit and underwear, he turned his attention to the third product he made.

He took the sleeve and carefully wrapped it around his second shield generator. After that, he wore it underneath his clothes.

"By now, it should be public knowledge that I'm always wearing a shield generator. Even if someone attempted to use a powerful scanner to confirm this, there's no way that anyone will be able to detect my second shield generator!"

Ves really liked what he did. Considering his adventurous life so far, people were bound to send hitmen after him. For some reason, people really didn't like him and wanted him dead.

He truly didn't know why.

"I haven't done anything to merit this treatment! I'm just a mech designer!" He lamented.

In any case, after an entire week of crafting, his new gear significantly increased his sense of security. To protect himself, he always emphasized stealth and protection measures.

While he was no slouch in terms of firepower with the Amastendira, he preferred to leave the fighting to his guards and his mech escorts.

Once Ves finished basking in the glow of his new additions, he rubbed his hands and exited to the lab and headed to the vault compartment.

Nitaa and Lucky both followed after him like ceremonial bodyguards.

Once they entered the vault, Ves gazed at the locked containers that held his new prizes.

"Where should I begin?"

Lucky approached one of the lockboxes strewn on a table and sat on it as if it was his throne. His tail swished back and forth in anticipation.

"Meow meow."

"Are you serious? Don't you know how rare and valuable they are? Aren't you happy with your current diet?"

"Meow!"

Ves sighed in defeat. "Yeah, I remember. I did promise to surrender a P-stone to you if I get more samples."

Currently, he possessed six P-stones. Each of them expanded his excess spiritual energy storage capacity, which was very important to sustain his long-term spiritual activities. They also served as adequate containers of spiritual entities, saving him from giving up a portion of his own mind to host a potentially uncooperative guest.

"Goddammit."

He hated the thought of giving up any P-stone. However, when he faced the hopeful expression of his cat, he couldn't muster up an argument to defer his promise.

"Okay! Just pick one!"

"Meow!"

Lucky already inspected each of the six P-stones and made his choice. Surprisingly, Lucky wanted to gobble up the very first P-stone that Ves had obtained.

What made the first P-stone different from the other ones was that Zeigra's surviving spirituality spent some time in it. Was this the reason why Lucky preferred it over the other P-stones?

"Do you want to become a tiger or something?"

"Meow."

"C'mon. Don't pick my first P-stone. Pick one of the newer ones instead!"

His first P-stone was the most memorable one in his collection! Despite its unremarkable appearance, Ves possessed an emotional attachment to it. He really didn't want to lose the first spiritually-reactive exotic he obtained in his life.

After a bit of haranging, Ves managed to get his grumpy cat to settle with his second P-stone. Zeigra's spirituality spent a brief moment of time inside, so there might be some traces left of the Crown Cat's presence.

"Meow!"

"This is the best you're going to get! I'm not changing my mind!"

Though Lucky meowed a few more times, he eventually got over the refusal and began to dive into the lockbox after Ves opened it up. Just like with the spent battery, Lucky slowly nibbled at the bronze-green metallic P-stone like it was a gourmet meal.

"Is it yummy, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Hopefully, you'll grow stronger, then!"

Though Ves dearly wanted to hoard his P-stones, he didn't object to sharing a sample to Lucky if he got something in return. If Lucky managed to assimilate the properties of the P-stone, then he was willing to reduce his collection.

As Ves observed Lucky getting lost in his own reality, he found it rather fascinating that Lucky, Zeigra and the Devil Tiger all shared something in common.

"All three of you are gluttonous cats!"

As Lucky ignored his words, Ves simply shook his head and turned away.

"You better produce a gem for this! You've been freeloading from me for a long time!"

Though Lucky never explained why he stopped producing gems, Ves already formed his own answer.

Lucky was no longer able to produce low-value gems with minor effects. Eating cheap and low-grade exotics only served to sate his appetite and nothing else.

If Ves wanted to put his gem cat to good use, then he needed to feed his pet a diet of higher-value exotics!

Though the price was high, the rewards were high as well! If Ves could obtain another batch of gems comparable to the likes of the Ardent Wish or the Sin of Altrium, he'd be able to empower his most important custom mechs!

More importantly than that, each use of a high-value gem represented an increased chance of crafting another masterwork mech!

"Masterwork!" He clenched his fist. "Even if I can't take credit for my first attempt, now that I know I'm capable of reaching this height, I can definitely repeat this feat!"