

## Mech 2201

### *Chapter 2201 For Freedom and Fortune*

As Task Force Predator ventured deeper into the Nyxian Gap, the core of the Komodo Star Sector heated up unabated.

War had engulfed the most prosperous areas of the star sector and every second-class citizen became subject to the effects of war!

The media of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony flooded their domestic audiences with heroic tales and grand displays of valor.

The citizens of both states thought that they were winning!

The truth was a bit more nuanced, however. Due to the relative stalemate and lack of progress made by either side, it became difficult to ascertain the true state of the war.

Not even the generals involved in the planning possessed a complete impression of their own success. Almost everyone involved focused completely on their own war theaters and individual battlefields.

Before the Komodo War could proceed to the next stage, the fortified star systems that both states had spent centuries to build up needed to be taken down!

It was not that simple to topple these locations at the border. The Friday Coalition had already known from the beginning that the Hexadric Hegemony would choose to overrun critical border systems in order to reach the interior of Coalition space.

Since that was the case, the Coalition invested an immense amount of resources to turn those locations into one of the toughest shells to crack.

Nonetheless, as long as the enemy threw enough war assets at these defensive works, even the best defenses could be overcome, no matter what the boastful news articles claimed!

The only question was how many enemy mechs and bodies the defensive works grinded into pieces before they succumbed.

Attacking a fortified star system was inevitably a wasteful proposition. Both states accumulated an immense amount of mechs and mech pilots, to the point that they were still in the process of mobilizing the bulk of their fighting forces!

No progress could be made towards victory until one of the sides depleted their war assets first. The fortified star systems which were located at the sites which the enemy

had to pass, all served as meat grinders which had already exacted a very great toll from their opponents!

One notable defensive line was the Crestfallen Stars. Made up of a line of seven fortified star systems, it was situated right at the border between the Carnegie Group and the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty.

As soon as the war formally kicked off, the Hex Army situated in the Vraken border system had immediately launched a major offensive against the defensive line!

The war became incredibly hard-fought as entire mech army groups slugged it out in a maze of orbital defenses and mines.

The sheer amount of debris and broken wrecks floating in the Crestfallen Stars already surpassed the total amount of military mechs involved in the latest Bright-Vesia Wars!

All of the debris originated from second-class mechs, ships and defensive works!

Yet despite the huge amount of wealth floating around in space, neither the Hexers nor the Fridaymen invested a huge amount of effort into recovering the materials.

It was too dangerous!

In general, a lot of debris in contested space remained untouched until one side completely defeated the other. Only at that point was it safe to harvest all of the bounty.

This reality only raised the stakes of each individual campaign and battle!

If one side conquered too many star systems in the early stages of the Komodo War, they did not lose out too much in terms of materials. Instead, the winner could salvage much of neglected wealth and thereby prolong the use of high-quality mechs!

The Marrakath System was one of the most heavily-contested sites of the Crestfallen Stars.

The Carnegie Group, which feared Hexer aggression for a very long time, invested heavily in the system's defenses.

Almost every planet was ringed with orbital defense networks.

An enormous figure of stealthy minefields had been littered throughout space.

Millions of hidden listening posts were strewn around in random points of space.

Two opposing mech army groups reinforced by other elements from their states had entered into a grueling conflict that resulted in severe losses from both sides.

The orbits of outlying gas giants and moons became littered with wreckage as the Hexers steadily worked their way into the inner system, overwhelming one defensive work after another.

The Wrathful Doves Mech Army Group sacrificed over a hundred-thousand mechs and a significant number of mech pilots to reach the doorstep of Marrakath III, the final defensive bulwark of this contested star system!

If the Hexers managed to conquer Marrakath III, then the Fridaymen would have no way of holding on to the star system.

The Opal Trident Mech Army Group knew that, and had been trying to conserve its strength while bleeding the Wrathful Doves as much as possible!

Both sides knew that the most critical stage of this running conflict was about to begin. The Dosth Orbital Defense Matrix, a ring of tightly-built fortifications, defensive platforms and so on, was the final obstacle that prevented the Hexers from landing their mech troops onto the surface of Marrakath III!

Over 100,000 turrets of different weapon types and calibers spat out death at the advancing mechs of the Hexers.

Against a formidable defensive network such as Dosth, ordinary sieges were not very effective.

This was because the defensive platforms were not only clad with a huge amount of compressed armor plating made out of bulk exotics, but also featured a vast array of shield generators!

Certainly, the cheap, mass-produced compressed armor plating was not very exceptional.

However, unlike mechs, defensive platforms were not required to move, and therefore did not show any concern towards mobility.

This meant that the armor of a typical defensive platform could easily be ten times thicker than the armor found in mechs!

As for the shield generators, while they were pricey, the Carnegie Group had built, maintained and replaced them over many years. The shield generators were also tied to a lot of power reactors as well as high-density energy storage banks.

With all of these potent works, the Opal Tridents possessed a considerable defensive advantage against the Hexers!

Even so, the Wrathful Doves still decided to launch a straightforward assault at Dosth! They were confident they could achieve breakthrough as long as they attacked ferociously enough!

A huge amount of projectiles crossed the space around the orbital defense matrix. The Wrathful Doves had decided to split their assault forces in several prongs in order to split the attention of the defenders.

They committed to this plan despite knowing that the Hexer mech divisions would face off against a lot more defensive platforms!

"Devos Maniacs, the time has come! These uptight women think they can trample over us and treat us differently because of how we were born. Let's show them what our 'boys' are made of! For Freedom and Fortune!"

"For Freedom and Fortune!"

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"For Freedom and Fortune!"

The soldiers of the 363rd Devos Maniacs all echoed the motto of the Fortune Legion!

As the primary mech military of the Carnegie Group, the Fortune Legion's composition and doctrines reflected the relatively open-minded nature of the Coalition partner.

The Fortune Legion was one of the rare military forces that openly recruited a significant number of foreigners. The Carnegie Group had the money to spare but was slightly deficient in terms of population base.

Supplementing its combat forces with foreigners from other star sectors was a risky but viable solution to strengthen its numbers.

Though the quality and personality of these foreign warriors were not very consistent, the Fortune Legion succeeded in its objective of trading wealth for military power!

Not even the Hexers looked down on the Fortune Legion.

The 363rd Devos Maniacs had stood out as one of the mech divisions that hired a prominent breed of foreigners.

Many of them consisted of violent criminals and exiles!

More than a few of them originated from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. There, these well-trained second-class mech pilots lost out in the many power struggles between warlords.

When it became inconvenient for these mech pilots to remain in Vicious Mountain, various recruiters dispatched by the Carnegie Group eagerly offered them a new life where they could redeem their honor.

The foreign mech pilots of the Devos Maniacs did not enter this mech division in order to chase after something as nebulous as honor.

They just wanted to shed blood!

Spilling the blood of arrogant female Hexers and cowardly male Hexers excited the Maniacs to no end. Despite the losses they suffered since the start of the war, the Maniacs brilliantly used their defensive advantages to slay at least twice as much Hexers!

Now, an opposing Hexer mech division had been assigned to break the Maniacs and breach their portion of Dosth.

The 1345th Trivaxis Helldoves was just as ferocious of the Devos Maniacs, but differed from the Fridaymen mech division in an important aspect.

The Trivaxis Helldoves was one of the more premier assault divisions of the Hex Army. Their spaceborn mech were noticeably stronger than the mechs fielded by the Maniacs!

This was what gave the Helldoves the confidence to break their Fridayman opponent in a single assault!

The huge offensive soon intensified as the Hexer mechs closed the distance!

The Helldove mechs approached by the thousands but had to work their way through an extremely voluminous amount of defensive fire!

Tens of thousands of turrets and bunkers spewed out a wide variety of attacks. Laser beams, positron beams, plasma bolts, gauss projectiles, corrosive missiles and much, much more slowed down the Helldoves and inflicted fatal damage to numerous mechs!

Even so, the Helldoves did not relent!

Having already prepared for the offensive, the Helldoves fielded a considerable number of space knights. Piloted by obedient male Hexer mech pilots, these space knights held thick tower shields and a robust flight system that allowed them to advance while building up a significant amount of momentum.

If that wasn't enough, the mechs also incorporated shield generators which helped with repelling a large amount of attacks!

Hexer support mechs regularly rotated back and forth in order to swiftly recharge or swap out the depleted energy cells of the space knights as they advanced relentlessly.

No matter how much fire these space knights endured, their loyal mech pilots did not halt their advance or seek to avoid danger.

They pushed forward until their mechs sustained enough damage to automatically eject their cockpits!

Even so, many of these male mech pilots met an unfortunate end when their cockpits ejected into space.

The Devos Maniacs took sadistic pleasure in shooting down the vulnerable objects. Not only would they be able to satisfy their bloodlust, they also weakened the Hex Army by depriving them of bodies they could put into other mechs!

"Hahaha, these Hexers only care about protecting their women! Their 'boys' are easy pickings!"

The commanders of the Trivaxis Helldoves cared nothing for the boys under their command. As cannon fodder, it was their job to attract enemy fire. By leaving their ejected cockpits exposed, the Devos Maniacs focused heavily on shooting down these easy targets, thereby leaving the cockpits that held women alone!

The space knights succumbed at a rapid pace, causing hundreds of boys to die in a span of just a minute.

Nonetheless, the Helldoves did not allow the Maniacs to bleed them with impunity. The ranged mechs of the Hexer mech division had already worked their way through numerous turrets and defensive platforms!

No matter how much armor plating and how many shield generators they faced, it was impossible for them to hold once they became the target of hundreds of ranged mechs!

The Dosth Orbital Defense Matrix began to sustain serious damage!

The Devos Maniacs that manned this section of the defensive works began to sustain casualties as well!

As the Helldivers advanced closer, the destruction intensified! Soon enough, the Hexer melee mechs would be able to land right in front of the Fridayman mechs, thereby heralding a new and bloody phase of this grand assault!

The Battle of the Marrakath System became a focal point of the Komodo War once the Hexers initiated their assault on Marrakath III.

The renowned Dosth Orbital Defense Matrix had taken out thousands of powerful second-class mechs, but paid a grievous price in return. Much of its surface structures whittled under concentrated firepower, thereby exposing more and more Fridaymen mechs to enemy fire.

The struggle between the Devos Maniacs and the Trivaxis Helldoves only made up a small portion of the huge confrontation.

Large amounts of broken mechs and debris sailed in every direction. Some of them slowly began to fall through the atmosphere of Marrakath III.

Since much of the wreckage consisted of hard and resilient alloys, they did not burn up that much after falling from space.

This meant that they crashed on the surface of the planet with considerable force!

A lot of untamed wilderness endured a continuous rain of falling trash, many of which caused impacts that disrupted areas that stretched on for several kilometers!

Fortunately for the Fridaymen defenders, they were already prepared to block or repel the debris that fell onto cities and fortified locations. Considerable amounts of turrets shot down much of the falling objects, with the large city district-sized shields resisting anything that made it through.

The defenses of the cities and fortifications on the surface were anything but average! The shield generators expended energy accumulated over several generations!

Hundreds of thousands of dazzling mechs, many of which cost as much as several hundred third-class mechs, confronted each other with nothing but animosity in their minds.

The Fridaymen hated the bigoted and tyrannical Hexers to the core!

The Hexers detested the stubborn and foolish Fridaymen to an extreme degree!

Neither side could live with each other any longer. After roughly four centuries of living in tenuous peace, the two dominant second-rate states of the Komodo Star Sector finally moved to conclude the rivalry that had started at the very start of the Age of Mechs!

During the assault, some portions of the Dosth Orbital Defense Matrix fared better than other portions.

The Hexer mech divisions that assaulted these sections weren't too exceptional. The leaders of the Wrathful Doves essentially threw these units on several random points to split the focus of the Opal Tridents.

The section which the Trivaxis Helldoves attacked was one of the more serious goals of the Hex Army!

The Devos Maniacs, as enthusiastically as they were in taking out Hexer mechs, were slowly beginning to realize that they failed to prevent the Helldoves from closing into melee range.

Once the Hexer mechs fell right on top of their positions, much of the defensive works became ineffective!

This was also why the Helldoves did not hesitate to sacrifice so many space knights and other valuable assets to get in close. They knew that no amount of defenses would be able to stop so many melee mechs at once.

Only the melee mechs of the Devos Maniacs posed a hindrance, but this Fridayman mech division was substantially poorer in both training and funding!

I was at this time when a new variable entered the battlefield.

"Damn you, dogs! Are you so eager to let these women step on your face?! Fight harder! Don't go down unless you have taken out at least two Hexer mechs!"

A radiant presence shifted into battle!

"It's the Untouchable!"

A blood-red coated light skirmisher zipped into the battlefield with a speed that far exceeded ordinary second-class light mechs.

This was the Sulvar Mark III, a distinct expert mech of the 363rd Devos Maniacs!

The Maniac who piloted this deceptively slim but incredibly mobile light skirmisher was not a Fridayman at birth.

Like many members of the Fortune Legion, Venerable Kris Asmeran had initially risen up in Vicious Mountain. He even managed to break through to expert pilots and wielded a lot of power in his heyday!



Unfortunately, expert pilots could fall as well, and Venerable Asmeran took a gamble and lost.

How he ended up in the Fortune Legion and how long he planned to fight for the Carnegie Group remained unclear.

Despite owing little affection to the Carnegie Group or the Friday Coalition, most expert pilots abided by clear principles. The expert pilots who originated from Vicious Mountains were famed for taking their oaths seriously.

Though they were not as extreme as Kinners, even a deviant among expert pilots just as Venerable Asmeran enjoyed the Fortune Legion's trust!

The reason for all of that attention became apparent as his Sulvar Mark III dove straight into the leading formations of Helldove mechs!

When expert mechs entered the fray, they rarely chose to approach the ranks of enemy mechs by themselves.

It was too dangerous!

As amazing and fearsome as expert mechs might be, they were still machines in the end.

The resonance shields that protected them and the excellent exotics used to increase their defensive capabilities to amazing heights could still be overwhelmed when focused upon. A typical expert mech may be able to defeat a hundred regular mechs, but it was a stretch for them to withstand the attacks of more than thousand enemies!

Yet Venerable Asmeran was bold enough to lead the charge against the Hexer mech anyway!

It soon became clear why. The Helldove rifleman mechs, marksman mechs and cannoneer mechs urgently received orders to fire upon the expert light skirmisher mech.

None of them except for a lucky few Hexers succeeded in landing a hit!

In fact, the Hexer ranged mechs landed far more accidental hits against the backs of the mechs that belonged to their own side!

The Sulvar Mark III was not only insanely good at evasion due to its extreme acceleration capabilities, but also used the mechs fielded by the Helldoves as cover!

Wherever the Sulvar Mark III passed, the mech stabbed out with a knife that just so happened to slip straight through the weak points of the Hexers mechs.

The expert mech moved too fast for attackers to pose a threat, and it launched its attacks so rapidly that its opponents never had the time to put up their guard!

"Slaughter these Hexers!"

The impressive martial feats demonstrated by Venerable Asmeran quickly buoyed the flagging morale of the Devos Maniacs.

None of the mech pilots could remain calm when they saw one of their own massacre the Hexers single-handedly!

"Hahaha! Kill those boys and uptight women!"

What was horrible about Venerable Asmeran's insanely swift but incredibly precise attacks was that he always managed to puncture the enemy mech's cockpit.

It took a lot of force as well as a lot of accuracy to stab the Sulvar Mark III's dagger onto a point in the frontal armor that just allowed Venerable Asmeran to kill off the enemy mech pilot in an instant!

Yet out of every stab attack he made, only four or so lucky Hexer mech pilots managed to escape the fate of getting torn into pieces by a mech-sized blade!

The discipline and courage of the Trivaxis Helldoves was not frail. Some of the Hexers serving in this mech division even met the standards of elites, and they constantly urged their fellow Hexers to adopt the specialized tactics and formations that expressly countered these kinds of rampages!

"Hahaha!" Venerable Asmeran broadcasted in the open as his Sulvar Mark III effortlessly sneaked up to an officer mech and left an entire squad of Hexer mechs temporarily leadless! "No cage can hold me captive! No matter how many mechs you throw at me, you feminists are too slow!"

The Sulvar Mark III might not offer amazing defenses or attack power compared to comparable expert mechs, but its speed advantage was truly strong enough to offset many shortcomings!

Its unique, custom flight system was not only capable of accelerating very quickly in any direction, but could also be empowered by Venerable Asmeran's true resonance, thereby achieving even a greater level of evasion!

A mech that couldn't be hit might as well be invincible. No matter how much firepower the Hexer mechs threw at the Sulvar Mark III, the expert mech still remained unscathed even as it managed down more than fifty in a short amount of time!

"Where's Venerable Emdis?" Some of the Hexers desperately asked. "We need someone to stop this uncouth mutt!"

The disruption caused by the enemy expert mech risked throwing the Helldoves into disarray.

Once the Hexers became unable to deploy their mechs in specific formations, their overall assault against Dosth would definitely lose momentum!

At that time, the Helldoves would fail their mission and be met with a lot of shame by their Hexers after the battle.

Such an outcome couldn't be tolerated!

By the time Venerable Asmeran slaughtered over thirty additional Hexer mech pilots, the response 363rd Devos Maniacs finally arrived!

The male and female mech pilots of the Trivaxis Helldoves all erupted into cheer!

Venerable Maysha Embdis was one of several notable expert pilots of the Helldoves. Her expert mech flew forth with speed that did not lose out too much from that of the Sulvar Mark III.

With so many Hexer mechs regaining some of their ferocity, Venerable Asmeran knew that he could no longer defeat the Hexers so unscrupulously.

"I am Venerable Kris Asmeran, of Vicious Mountain!" The Maniac expert pilot barked. "To whom do I have the pleasure of fighting?"

"Do not speak your foul words at me, dog! Rabid animals like you should have been put down a long time ago! Since your mother refused to raise you properly, let I be the one who will teach you a lesson!"

Venerable Asmeran scowled with great intensity!

"Don't talk to my mother that way! You're the dog!"

With tempers flaring up, the two expert pilots ignored the inconsequential mechs around them and immediately began to engage in a high-speed duel!

The Sulvar Mark III was almost unsurpassed in terms of mobility. Its extreme acceleration alone gave Venerable Asmeran the capital to be called the Untouchable!

Yet Venerable Emdis and her expert mech were not that weak either. Surprisingly, Emdis managed to fend off every attack launched by her opponent, mainly because she piloted an expert light skirmisher mech herself!

Her Zeon Blademaster focused more on offense than mobility. Its design and resonance materials were all geared towards increasing its attack power and attack methods.

For example, with one attack pass, the arm that held one of blades began to shudder and glow in green, causing the stabs it made to be repeated seven times in the same instance!

Not a single opponent of the Zeon Blademaster remained undamaged when struck by this deadly resonance ability!

Yet there was one instance where Venerable Emdis failed completely.

Even though the simultaneous stabbing attacks unleashed by her Zeon Blademaster covered a small area around the elusive Sulvar Mark III, the latter machine nimbly managed to dance between the attacks before almost managing to launch its counterattack!

If Venerable Maysha Emdis hadn't anticipated the counterattack, her Zeon Blademaster would have suffered a severe blow against its defenses.

The two light skirmishers did not let this exchange of blows slow them down. Both expert mechs excelled at speed, so they quickly turned around and swapped another series of blows!

The mechs surrounding them quickly gave them room and retreated from the duel. It was not as if the regular mech pilots from both sides wanted to assist their heroes.

It was just that they would only get in the way if they rashly intervened!

Rather than poking their noses into something that could easily lead to pointless debts, the regular combatants instead turned back to fight each other.

This gave both expert pilots the opportunity to explore the weaknesses of their opponents and adjust their fighting style.

As the minutes began to pass, it slowly became apparent that Venerable Asmeran's Sulvar Mark III entered into a disadvantage.

Its energy reserves were depleting faster than those of Zeon Blademaster.

All of that acceleration and maneuvering consumed a huge amount of energy. In terms of endurance, the Sulvar Mark III had never been designed to excel in any battles of attrition.

Venerable Emdis on the other hand did not fight as frantically as her opponent. Instead, her Zeon Blademaster adopted a defensive posture and efficiently fended off lethal attacks while expending as little energy possible.

She did a far better job of conserving her mech's energy reserves!

### *Chapter 2203 Seeking Greatness*

Duels between expert pilots were solemn occasions.

Only an expert pilot could adequately restrain another expert pilot.

The huge Hexer assault on Dosth and Marrekath III not only featured hundreds of thousands of ordinary mechs, but also a notable amount of expert mechs!

Some of these expert mechs banded together and clashed against teams of the enemy expert mechs.

Others were more suitable to act independently. This happened to be the case with the Sulvar Mark III and the Zeon Bladedancer.

Both expert mechs were designed as light skirmishers. This meant that their mobility was high enough to attack any vulnerable enemies while avoiding any stronger opposition.

Now, they just happened to meet together in battle and soon exchanged a lot of blows.

The attacks happened too quickly for ordinary people to track. The thinking and reaction speeds of both expert pilots had reached an insane level!

Venerable Maysha Emdis slowly began to grin as the ongoing duel slowly shifted in her favor.

"You feral boys are all the same. You can't resist hitting your heads against the wall!"

"Shut up, you ugly pig! You may be strong enough to fend off my attacks, but I only have to be lucky once to end your life!"

As a flighty and impatient expert pilot, Venerable Asmeran couldn't stomach his current circumstances.

As the Untouchable, the attacks launched by his opponents never landed on his mech. However, he was forced to put a lot of effort into evading the increasingly tricky attack angles.

Yet no matter how many attack runs he made, the defensive posture adopted by the Zeon Bladedancer continued to frustrate the Fridayman expert pilot!

It was easier to defend than attack. While the Sulvar Mark III expended a copious amount of energy to power each evasive maneuver or attack, its energy cells depleted a little more!

Of course, compared to an ordinary mech, the expert light skirmisher mech contained a lot of high-quality ultra-dense energy cells. The cost of these custom-made energy cells was incredibly mind-boggling, but they were essential allowing Venerable Asmeran to evade attacks time and time again.

Yet his duel against Venerable Emdis already caused him to expend far more energy than he anticipated. Activating so many resonance abilities and pushing his mech's flight system to the limit always demanded a price, and for the Sulvar Mark III that meant depleting its energy reserves at a rapid rate!

Was Venerable Asmeran making a mistake? Had he foolishly decided to adopt a reckless strategy that played right into his opponent's hands?

As an expert pilot, it was not as if he was stupid enough to overlook this basic reality. He dedicated his entire life to piloting light skirmishers. He was extremely familiar with the deep and complicated dynamics surrounding duels between two ultra-mobile mechs.

Even as his Sulvar Mark III's resonance shield continued to get hammered by the Zeon Bladedancer's tricky counterattacks, the former Vicious Mountainer did not relent!

He lived for the pursuit of speed!

The true resonance that embraced the Devos Maniac expert mech shone brighter!

The mech that had become an extension of Venerable Asmeran seemed to share in his desire and attempted to squeeze more acceleration out of its thin and light frame!

Instead of backing down and altering his approach, he instead doubled down and relied even more on his superior mobility to win this duel!

This was what his instincts urged!

This was what his will yearned the most!

Since the moment he decided to specialize in piloting light skirmishers, Kris Asmeran always focused on excelling in mobility.

A mech that never got his was a mech that could defeat any opponent!

He had never stopped his pursuit of speed. He single-handedly focused his entire fighting style on moving fast, not hesitating to put his life on the line for his beliefs.

And for this, he was rewarded! As someone who underwent successive baptisms that transformed his life at least twice, Venerable Asmeran became even more convinced that dedicating his life to speed was the only way for him to reach greater heights!

In Vicious Mountain, the warriors there believed that only the most courageous and glorious were worthy to ascend to greatness.

Asmeran looked down on those who were timid, prone to calculation or compromised on their convictions.

Even if it wasn't the best choice for him to rely on his greatest strength despite getting countered by his opponent, that just meant that he wasn't fast enough.

Only through reaching his limit and breaking beyond this barrier would allow him to reach a new level of strength!

Only by putting his entire life on the line to achieve this breakthrough would he have hope of advancing to ace pilot!

To transform himself from a demigod to a half god was one of his greatest dreams!

Though countless ordinary mech pilots felt envious that people like Asmeran managed to become expert pilots, he did not think this was the end of his journey.

Expert pilots were just like Journeymen Mech Designer. They both ranked at the bottom of the totem pole of extraordinary individuals!

Each mech pilot in Vicious Mountain dreamt of becoming an ace pilot. Only by reaching this exalted rank would they have the contention to rule over vast swathes of territory or even compete to become the head of the great Garlen Empire!

Even after Venerable Asmeran joined the Fortune Legion, he never let go of this life-long ambition.

As long as he utilized the Komodo War to sharpen himself and stimulate his untapped abilities, he would surely come closer to reaching his goal!

If he ever advanced to ace pilot, then the Fortune Legion could no longer hold him. While he was thankful to the Carnegie Group for supporting him, Vicious Mountain was still his home.

No matter what, ace pilots were welcome anywhere. Even his exile no longer had any meaning once he returned with a stronger fist than before.



Yet for all his dedication towards his chosen pursuit, his Sulvar Mark III became increasingly more distressed!

After making so many passes, his mech was clearly getting the worst end of the exchanges. Venerable Asmeran wasted an increasingly greater amount of resonance strength and the Sulvar Mark III had already expended over half of its prodigious energy reserves.

In contrast, the Hexer expert mech consumed only a fraction of its energy reserves as it mostly focused on evasion and opportunistic counterattacks.

Venerable Emdis was under far less pressure, especially when she knew that her opponent was one of the brainless types of expert pilots!

"Hahaha!" Venerable Emdis gleefully grinned as she continued to pilot her Zeon Bladedancer in a way that conserved its energy reserves. "You brutish boys are so easily led by your primal impulses. Wars are never decided by brawn alone! To ignore the bigger picture and the needs of your state in favor of pursuing your selfish obsession is the height of folly! Expert pilots like you always perish the soonest!"

The Sulvar Mark III did not slow down due to the Hexer expert pilot's taunts. Instead, Venerable Asmeran grew even angrier and drove his exquisite light skirmisher even harder despite the cost!

"You scheming women are a disgrace to our kind! How you manage to become a demigod is beyond me. Whatever the case, with your poisonous heart, I doubt you'll ever get close to the threshold of ace pilot within your life!"

Venerable Emdis sneered. "We expert pilots are servants of our states. We are nothing without the support provided by our betters. Barbarians like you who only care about yourselves are destructive elements in society!"

"Attaining greater strength is a far better way of protecting your people than becoming their slave!" Asmeran barked back as his attacks reached an even greater degree of intensity!

His expert mech's energy reserves dipped at an even greater rate!

"Hehe." The Hexer expert pilot readied herself to turn the tide. She had already estimated that the Sulvar Mark III was getting closer to depleting its energy reserves! "I'm not an idiot like you. You willingly fell into my trap, which is just the way I like it! Let me show you why I'm called the Wrathful Witch!"

The Zeon Blademaster finally looked ready to make a fatal move. Even as the Sulvar Mark III continued its futile attempts to break the defenses of the Hexer mech, Venerable Emdis already knew this duel had been decided.



An awesome amount of true resonance surrounded the entire mech! One of the knives the Zeon Blademaster held started to glow so much red that it seemed like it was dripping with fiery blood!

On ominous pressure settled onto Venerable Asmeran's heart. His eyes widened a little. The interruption was just enough to disturb his attack rhythm, causing his Sulvar Mark III to become slightly exposed!

Even though it would only take less than a second to correct this mistake, the Wrathful Witch pounced on this opportunity!

Venerable Emdis would not let the Fridayman expert mech continue this farce any further!

Once the Sulvar Mark III succumbed, the Devos Maniacs would lose a critical expert mech and expert pilot, thereby inflicting a severe blow to their morale.

Though the 363rd Devos Maniacs fielded more expert mechs, the fall of one of their number would definitely impair their ability to stall the Trivaxis Helldoves.

The Hexer expert pilot couldn't wait to get rid of Venerable Asmeran before launching her own massacre amongst the ranks of the Devos Maniacs!

Just as the Zeon Bladedancer was about to launch its fatal resonance-empowered attack, Venerable Emdis suddenly blinked and directed her mech to dart in the opposite direction!

A very powerful positron beam had just passed through the path her Zeon Blademaster would have taken if she committed to attacking the spent Fridayman expert mech!

"Who?!"

There was no way that Venerable Emdis could retain her calm. She had patiently conserved her battle strength and waited so long to reach this point. Just as she was about to harvest her reward, another powerful opponent arrived to forestall her victory!

In contrast, Venerable Asmeran felt nothing but relief. Even though it appeared that they were all alone, they were still part of a battle between two massive forces.

They were hardly the only expert pilots in the field!

It made sense for the defenders to dispatch reinforcements when they noticed that Venerable Asmeran was having a hard time.

This intervention basically saved him from paying the ultimate price after he lost a critical bet.

However, once the Sulvar Mark III's sensors began to pick up the new arrivals, Venerable Asmeran grew puzzled.

"What is the CRC doing here? And what is up with all of these rifleman mechs?"

The Coalition Reserve Corps rarely appeared on the frontlines. As its name suggested, it was a weaker branch that mostly concerned itself with other matters.

Even so, Venerable Asmeran did not begrudge the timely intervention of the ranged expert mech. The resonance power attached to that positron beam was no joke, especially against lighter mechs!

"Declare yourself!" Venerable Emdis barked over the open channel.

Since the Fridaymen dispatched reinforcements, why couldn't the Hexers do the same? She had no intentions of fighting two expert mechs at once. Even if the Sulvar Mark III had almost reached its limits, it could still play a critical role when it worked together with a powerful rifleman mech!

The 1345th Trivaxis Helldoves already acknowledged her request. Two more Hexer expert mechs should be arriving anytime soon. Even though one of them was male, Venerable Emdis knew that she couldn't be too picky at the moment, especially when expert mechs were required everywhere.

The impressive-looking rifleman mech at the head of a formation of lesser rifleman mechs was coated in blue. It featured golden accents and carried a very large rifle with multiple attack modes.

"I am Venerable Ghanso Larkinson of Unit L. Together with my men, we shall end your reign of terror and rid this star sector of another cancer cell!"

"How dare you!" The Hexer expert pilot felt affronted!

#### *Chapter 2204 Scara*

Venerable Maysha Emdis of the Trivaxis Helldoves did not share the mindset of a brute like her previous opponent.

Now that she encountered a new enemy, she did not intend to make a move.

No matter how much the newcomer insulted her, she still knew it would be a mistake to vent her fury at this instant!

Rather than fight one-on-two, it was better for her to stall for time until reinforcements arrived.

The Zeon Blademaster's lack of activity did not escape the Fridaymen expert pilots.

A private communication channel opened up between the Sulvar Mark III and the newly-arrived expert rifleman mech.

"This Hexer is very calculating. She's definitely waiting for reinforcements. We should gang up on her and see if we can't finish her off before any help arrives. While I can't muster up enough strength to finish off the Hexer, I can still pin her down so you can land some solid blows."

"I don't need your assistance." Ghanso replied to the older man. "My Charlemagne and Unit L are enough to defeat this fly!"

Ghanso's young voice and his arrogant declaration astounded Venerable Asmeran.

"Look, I may have acted unwisely earlier, but a rifleman mech like yours is heavily countered by a light skirmisher of equal strength! Even if that Zeon Bladedancer is not as fast and evasive as my Sulvar, it is still a light mech that can dodge all of your attacks!"

"You don't have to worry about me. If you want to contribute, then stay by my side and block the Zeon Blademaster if it suddenly draws close."

"Very well."

Venerable Asmeran knew that this CRC expert pilot possessed his own pride.

Just like the Vicious Mountainer, Ghanso Larkinson wished to utilize his greatest strength in order to develop it even further!

Yet just like before, Venerable Asmeran worried whether the Charlemagne would just waste all of its strength. After all, attempting to land a hit on an expert mech that was practically made for evasion was difficult!

The two Fridayman expert pilots exchanged no further words. Ghanso knew that the huge battle taking place around him did not afford him the time to chat and swap ideals with his opponents.

Not that he even wanted to. Hexers were incredibly repulsive to him. He harbored a special grudge against their arrogant women, though he did not let off their brainwashed boys either!

The latter were already too far gone to be saved! This was a truth that Ghanso only realized later as the CRC instructed him about the Hexers.

If he knew this sooner, he would have treated Ves differently.

The Charlemagne raised its large, oversized rifle. The Scara, the 50 rifleman mechs positioned behind the expert mech, followed suit.

For months, Venerable Ghanso Larkinson prepared this day. After so much training and exercise, he was finally able to link up with the Scara long enough to make a difference on the battlefield.

His Charlemagne charged another shot. If he wanted to unleash a regular attack, then all of this accumulation was unnecessary. Yet even if the Zeon Bladedancer boasted thinner armor than other expert mechs, they were still very resilient.

Only by employing his resonance strength would Ghanso have a chance of inflicting serious damage on his opponent.

The Charlemagne fired! A bright, dazzling blue-white beam raked just past the position occupied by the Zeon Bladedancer!

Venerable Maysha Emdis easily dodged the clearly telegraphed attack!

She did not even need to rely on her intuition or extraordinary judgement. She just had to keep one of her mech's sensors placed on the Charlemagne's rifle.

No matter what, wherever the rifle pointed at would always be in the line of fire! Observing the enemy mech's aim and avoiding its line of fire was a fundamental skill to all light skirmisher specialists.

As an expert pilot, she had long mastered this ability to an extensive degree!

Venerable Ghanso did not let this miss affect his mood. Against fast and evasive targets, it was normal to miss his shots.

The Charlemagne continued to resonate with its mech pilots as its rifle spat out three more shots in quick succession.

Even though Ghanso employed some technique and layered those shots to make it tricky for the Zeon Bladedancer to avoid getting hit, this kind of means was not enough to succeed.

Venerable Emdis was a seasoned expert pilot who had long prepared an answer against this trivial technique.

If this was all the Charlemagne could accomplish, then Venerable Emdis had no reason to worry!

"Hahaha! You're too young to make me break a sweat, little boy! Expert pilot or not, this little amount of skill and power is the worst I've ever seen! At least Asmeran forced me to fight seriously!"

Though Venerable Emdis looked down on Ghanso, she truly possessed the capital to do so. The resonance strength exhibited by the CRC expert pilot was noticeably weak.

Yet if that was all that Venerable Ghanso and his Charlemagne was capable of, then Master Huron and the CRC would never dispatch him to the frontlines of the Komodo War!

"I was merely probing you in order to establish a baseline of your Zeon Bladedancer's evasive capabilities." Ghanso dryly announced. "Even if you held back, I have enough firepower to end your life."

Venerable Emdis snorted. "What a big tone. Greater expert pilots haven't even dared to make that claim. Do you think those toy soldiers floating behind you can make a difference? Cannon fodder can never threaten the likes of us! It seems the CRC has truly degenerated if it believes it can overcome quality with quantity."

The Charlemagne prepared to fire another shot. True resonance swirled around the expert mech and its powerful rifle.

What surprised both both Venerable Emdis and Venerable Asmeran was that the fifty lesser rifleman mechs copied the Charlemagne's actions!

Though their rifles were weaker and the glows surrounding their weapons were remarkably less intense, it did not change the fact that they dedicated fifty more instances of true resonance!

"What?! That's impossible!" Venerable Emdis reacted with shock. "Did you field fifty expert candidates at once?! How can evoke the same type of true resonance? This can't be done!"

"I thought you were an expert pilot, Venerable Emdis." Ghanso sneered. "Our kind is known for surpassing limitations!"

The Charlemagne discharged its weapon immediately after he finished those words!

At the same time, the Scara unleashed fifty potent positron beams in the direction of the Hexer expert mech at the same time!

Venerable Asmeran felt unprecedentedly threatened as he witnessed so many beams lighting up the local space in an instant!

Though the firepower of those lesser mechs failed to match that of the Charlemagne, the hint of true resonance empower their weapons had nonetheless increased the power of their attacks to a point where they could threaten any expert mech!

If a bystander like Asmeran already felt nervous, then Venerable Emdis had finally lost her composure!

Ghanso's timing was impeccable. Though Venerable Emdis had been on guard against incoming fire, the timing of it had still caught her at a slightly inopportune moment.

Venerable Emdis knew that the Charlemagne was the real threat out of the group of Fridayman reinforcements, so her Zeon Bladedancer evaded the main attack above anything else.

While it was fairly easy for her to do so, it was a lot harder to avoid the fifty lesser attacks!

All of them just happened to be fired in a remarkably coordinated zone around her Zeon Bladedancer. No matter where her mech attempted to evade, she would get hit by at least three positron beams!

Even so, the Hexer did not despair. She knew enough about the armor of her mech that regular positron beams did not pose that big of a threat.

However, it was only when her Zeon Bladedancer got struck that Venerable Emdis knew she had made an awful judgement error.

Alarms began to rang inside her mech as four surprisingly-powerful positron beams not only managed to pierce through its resonance shield and hit its frame, but also inflict serious damage onto its armor!

"This power!"

This time, Venerable Emdis no longer had any intentions to stall for reinforcements. The Charlemagne and its entourage had become enough of a threat in her mind that she didn't think it was unwise to linger any longer!

She didn't bother to bark a goodbye or offer any excuse. To her, there was nothing dishonorable about making a tactical retreat. Most of the time, light skirmishers weren't meant to clash head-on against strong opponents.

Though the Zeon Bladedancer's flight system became more active, allowing it to distance itself rapidly from the Fridaymen, Ghanso had already prepared his next volley!

Fifty-one positron beams struck the location of the Hexer mech and the surrounding area!

Venerable Emdis turned even more distressed as the integrity of her mech's armor system declined even further. Not even Venerable Asmaran inflicted this much damage against her mech!

She went all-out to preserve her mech even as it continued to widen the distance.

The greater the distance, the easier it was for her to evade the ranged attacks of the CRC mechs.

At least, that was supposed to be the case, but fifty-one positron beams raining down on her position all at once was still a massive threat!

Within the span of twenty seconds, the Zeon Bladedancer's resonance shield endured a considerable amount of attacks, causing it to quickly disappear.

A shield generator activated next. This was a rather unusual addition to regular light skirmishers, and even the Zeon Bladedancer had to give up some performance in order to incorporate this highly-miniaturized module.

Unfortunately, its strength was insufficient to repel resonance-empowered attacks.

The quasi-expert mechs of the Scara might not be able to inflict significant damage by themselves, but when they all pooled their strengths together, not even the Charlemagne was able to output so much damage unless it paid a significant price!

Against such a voluminous and highly-coordinated barrage, the Zeon Bladedancer could no longer hold on any longer. It sustained too many attacks for her front and rear armor to hold.

As Venerable Emdis became more and more distressed, she began to exhibit more and more judgement errors.

This allowed the Charlemagne to finally land a hit!

Once its powerful positron beam struck the Hexer expert mech, it just so happened to strike a damaged portion which already lost a lot of armor coverage.

The beam instantly penetrated past the remaining barrier and inflicted a huge amount of internal damage!

The Zeon Bladedancer jerked and froze in space. The mech had lost too many internal components to remain functional!

"It's over."

The Charlemagne fired one more leisurely shot that caused the Hexer mech to explode.

Venerable Maysha Emdis was dead! The Wrathful Witch that had long terrorized the Fridaymen during the past month had finally met her end.

Those who observed Venerable Ghanso Larkinson in action couldn't believe what they had seen. A single ranged expert mech accompanied by fifty special mechs had managed to take out a prominent Hexer expert pilot in a surprisingly lopsided fashion!

"Those mechs.." Venerable Asmeran observed the Scara with considerable doubt.  
"What are they?"

"They're the Scara. They're my retinue."

"Are they piloted by expert candidates or something?"

"It's classified."

Before they could speak any further, two more Hexer mechs arrived at the side of the broken Zeon Bladedancer.

"Sister Maysha! No!"

The Hexer expert rifleman mech and a Hexer expert space knight arrived too late. Only debris remained of the once-proud expert light skirmisher mech.

"You!" The Hexer ranged mech pointed its weapon at the Charlemagne. "You have spilled an honored sister's blood. I will settle nothing less for taking your own! Die!"

The Hexer ranged mech flew behind the male space knight and used its thick shield and powerful resonance shield as cover. The pair worked with such coordination that the Charlemagne could not possibly gain a firing angle on the more threatening of the Hexer expert mechs!

Yet this did not make Venerable Ghanso distressed. Instead, he grinned. Immobile targets like these were just sitting ducks in his eyes!

The Charlemagne and its entire entourage fired at the expert space knight!

Even though the defensive mech was extraordinarily resistant against damage, the concentrated firepower of fifty quasi-expert mechs was much more than the Hexer expert pilots anticipated!

The shield succumbed remarkably quickly and in the end, the male expert pilot had to sacrifice his life and mech in order to buy enough time for the female expert pilot to escape alive!



Though the Battle of Marraketh System had given birth to many heroes and heroic feats, this was the first instance where Venerable Ghanso Larkinson made a name for himself.

Defeating two Hexer expert mechs in his debut instantly propelled Unit L into the spotlight!

#### *Chapter 2205 Doubting Ves*

The Hex Army continued to contest the Marraketh System despite the setbacks they suffered when they attempted to besiege Dosth and Marraketh III.

Despite the willingness of the Wrathful Doves Mech Army Group to suffer substantial losses in order to achieve a breakthrough, the Opal Tridents of the Fortune Legion continued to cling on to their orbital defense line!

After sustaining severe damage to their orbital defensive ring, the Opal Tridents managed to stall the momentum Wrathful Doves, causing the Hexers to finally call off their offensive.

The Fortune Legion couldn't have done it alone. Timely reinforcement dispatched by other Fridaymen forces had arrived at Marraketh III just in time to assist the Opal Tridents.

Yet even as the Fridayman mech pilots and support personnel cheered, the aftermath was ruinous for both sides.

The state of the orbital defense matrix had degraded enormously. Along many stretches of the fortified ring, hardly any turrets and hard cover were left to meaningfully resist a follow-up assault.

The Fridaymen rapidly initiated repairs and began to jury rig some creative solutions to make up for the damage. For example, they captured much of the floating debris from the previous battle in order to pile them into improvised walls.

Yet these stopgap solutions would never be able to restore an orbital defense matrix that took decades to build back to peak condition.

For all intents and purposes, it was up to the mobile assets of the Friday Coalition to fend off Hexer aggression a second time.

None of the Fridaymen tasked with defending Dosth knew whether they could last a second, third or fourth offensive.

Even the lowest member of the rank-and-file knew that the Hexers were determined to break the Crestfallen Stars. The Marrakath System was too important for the Hexers to stop at this point.

Reinforcements continued to supplement the Wrathful Doves and the Opal Tridents in the subsequent weeks.

As much as Venerable Ghanso Larkinson managed to impress the Devos Maniacs by slaughtering two powerful Hexer expert mechs with remarkable ease, his contribution in the massive clash was too small to affect the outcome of the greater campaign.

Ghanso did not mind this reality. This was just the start. Master Huron and Lady Curver were constantly tweaking and developing the Charlemagne and the Scara in order to increase the effectiveness of the asymmetrical neural network.

Even if his citizenship had changed, Ghanso still considered himself a Brighter at heart. He also clung to his identity as a Larkinson. He only took part in the Komodo War because he believed this was the best way to preserve and restore the Larkinson Family.

"If my relatives can see how much I've done for them, they'll definitely return to the light!"

The Larkinsons, like any Brighter, originally never wanted to turn against the Friday Coalition. If Ghanso continued to make achievements and earn more prestige, he would not only have more say in how the Coalition treated the Larkinsons, but also serve as a role model for the true members of his family!

Back in the Nyxian Gap, Ves was completely unaware of Ghanso's debut in battle. News surrounding the Komodo War's ongoing battles and campaigns were always muddled and rife with falsehood.

He didn't have the time to pay so much attention to the Komodo War. Task Force Predator just entered Maynard Fields and already identified several dangerous pirate groups lurking in the vicinity.

Not only that, the LMC's Design Department became more boisterous than ever as six needy mech design projects constantly cried out for attention.

Just as Ves or Gloriana troubleshooted some problems in one minor project, another project encountered some problems that required the intervention of a Journeyman in order to resolve!

The constant rotations deprived the pair from devoting a sufficient amount of time on their two major mech design projects. Both the Valkyrie Redeemer Project and the Cat's Paw Project were starting to run behind schedule.

Delegation only worked when the subordinates he put into place could cope with the workload.

Sadly, the LMC was still a young mech company. No one notable had risen up from the sixty assistant mech designers to take over much of the burden.

Even so, Ves was content. These problems could be overcome with time and effort. With the notable talent exhibited by each new recruit, he believed that someone brilliant and capable would quickly emerge from the pack.

One welcome change took place during this time. After undergoing an extensive training regime, Calabast finally returned Lucky back into his care.

"Meow!"

The gem cat, without his harness, floated back Ves and cuddled up in his chest.

"How have you been?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Oh, you learned a lot of new tricks? Well, I hope you won't be using it on us. Save them for our opponents."

He looked up at Calabast who placed the empty harness on his desk.

"I stand by my words. With your cat's combined abilities, he is practically made to be a saboteur. I enjoyed training him and putting him through his paces. He's a remarkably quick learner whenever he is serious."

"I thought you would keep him busy for an extended amount of time." Ves said.

"He's still a cat." The spymaster grimaced. "I don't think I can keep him interested any longer. In any case, since he's a mechanical pet, he can absorb and process a vast amount of data. Much of the knowledge he needs to know is to acquire a basic understanding of how devices work and the many ways you can sabotage them with the least amount of effort. Aside from that, we also taught him many ways to avoid detection or what to do in the event he is discovered."

"How confident are you that he will succeed in his job?"

Calabast crossed her arms and thought for a moment. "I am fairly optimistic, but I am quite apprehensive towards the major pirate groups and alliances that hold the most sway in Maynard Fields. None of the established factions are easy targets and it would only take one mistake for Lucky to alarm the enemy of hostile infiltration."

"What about weaker targets?"

"Oh, that's trivial." She dismissively replied. "Even pirate groups that are twice or thrice as strong as the Rust Grinders are vulnerable to Lucky's sabotage. It's only the bigger pirate organizations that are difficult to mess with. They are so big that they aren't vulnerable to a few points of failure. For example, Frostbite Fortress is truly difficult to overcome even if a full strike team of DIVA operatives come fully equipped."

They talked a bit more, giving Ves a clearer idea of how his naughty gem cat could destroy a foundation worth billions of hex credits in a matter of hours!

The most troublesome requirement was to deliver Lucky to an enemy base of ship. The second-class stealth shuttle that Calabast somehow got her hands on was a very capable vessel, but no technology was undefeatable.

Who knew what crazy tricks the pirates developed to counter stealth technology! Despite their rather low tech base, Ves had already learned not to underestimate their ingenuity.

As Ves continued to hug his cat, he became thoughtful.

"Do you think it's a good idea to travel deeper into the Nyxian Gap?"

"Are you doubting your purpose?" Calabast frowned. "It's a bit too late to regret your decision. While I suppose you can still turn around and avoid running into greater danger, I don't believe you're the kind of person who wants to quit halfway."

"You know me too well." Ves ruefully smiled.

"It's something that I have learned to take into account the hard way." She sighed and leaned against his desk. "While you have a penchant for taking risks, I can't say that you are wrong. Most of them benefited you even if you had to rely on a lot of assistance. It is just that you only have to encounter one huge setback to wipe out all of your progress. Venturing too deep into the Nyxian Gap is one way to do that. I truly hope you remember your limits when we get close to the core regions."

"I know what I can get away with, Calabast. I have a wedding to catch in a couple of months."

"Heh. Of all the reasons that you could bring up to reassure me that you know when to return, you just had to mention your upcoming wedding. Do you know what this says about you, kid?"

"Nothing flattering, I'm sure." Ves dryly responded. "Anyway, I've been spending some time reflecting on myself. I have been considering the difficulty of earning enough merits to pay for a passage through the beyonder gate. With less than eight years to go, I'm

becoming increasingly less confident that Gloriana and I will be able to obtain the necessary amount of MTA merits. It is truly hard for Journeymen to earn millions of merits at a time."

If that wasn't the case, Ves wouldn't be taking so many risks to venture into the Nyxian Gap!

"Are you thinking about partnering up with other aspiring pioneers?" Calabast grew sharp.

He nodded. "Preferably, I want to keep it all in the clan. Once I partner up with others in order to collectively purchase a beyonder ticket, the Big Two expects us to share some responsibilities. I have always thought that this was troublesome. I don't want to rely on other powers. That's the entire reason why I'm so keen on keeping the Larkinson Clan independent."

"I have been considering this scenario as well." She spoke and smiled. "To be honest, I think you are obsessing too much over the potential risks. I don't think you have as much to fear as you think. If you can partner up with someone who is willing to become a member of your clan, then that would be best. If that is not the case, then you can still come to a mutually beneficial agreement with another powerful individual as long as the power disparity isn't too great."

"You're saying that as long as the Larkinson Clan and I are strong enough, we can keep our fellow partners honest?"

"Uh huh. You are getting wiser and wiser, Ves. All that time spent around politicians must have surely rubbed off on you. I'm impressed."

"Heh. It's more like I fell victim to their schemes too many times."

"Whatever the case, you are no longer the upstart of a few years ago. Your Larkinson Clan might not be impressive compared to the might of a second-rate state, but you already have the power and ability to make deals with plenty of powerful figures. What's more, you don't have to find a partner immediately. There is still more than seven years to go until we reach your self-imposed deadline. I believe that both you and the Larkinson Clan will continue to grow rapidly over this time. You'll have much more say at that point and can negotiate better deals with more qualified partners."

She made some good points. It would be grossly premature to begin searching for partners right away.

"What kind of partners do you think I should look out for? I have received suggestions ranging from business magnates to diplomats."

"Both of them sound useful." She nodded in approval. "As long as they are powerful enough to treat you as an equal, they can be very formidable allies once we reach the Red Ocean. You can also consider partnering up with another prominent mech designer."

"No way!" Ves shook his head. "If I have to enter into a partnership to redeem a beyonder ticket, then I don't want other mech designers to encroach on our territory. Gloriana and I are already enough."

"Suit yourself, then. Other than that, I think it might be a good idea to do something about increasing your chances of survival once you reach the Red Ocean. I am already keeping up with the developments in the dwarf galaxy, and one notable development is the rise of factions and alliances."

That sounded interesting.

#### *Chapter 2206 Old Powers*

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was only 1.56 percent as big as the Milky Way. As a dwarf galaxy, it held a lot less stars and therefore much less territory for humanity to conquer.

That still consisted of billions of stars! Even if a large proportion of star systems contained nothing of worth, many remained that either provided ideal colonization opportunities or rich exotic deposits.

This meant that from the moment the beyonder gates between the galaxies opened up, the competition for territory had already begun!

The two biggest players in this struggle for territory and conquest had to be the two old elephants in the room.

The Greater United Terran Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire loomed as giants in human civilization.

They existed long before the Age of Mechs and had partially adopted the MTA and the CFA in the past.

Even when the Big Two rose up and stripped the Terrans and Rubarthans of some of their sovereignty, the first-rate superstates still loomed tall over human space.

One of the reasons why they were called superstates was because they faintly possessed the power to rival the Big Two.

No other first-rate state could match the Terrans and Rubarthans in that regard! The heritage, power and wealth possessed by these ancient former star empires could not be matched by any other human state!

Only two of them existed out of countless other states.

Fourth-rate states were the lowest of the low. To consider them states at all was an insult to the word. Formally, this definition was usually applied to tiny powers who clung to one or several star systems and for some reason hadn't been annexed yet by a bigger neighbor.

Third-rate states were the most numerous and generally the most boring kind of states. They usually exerted enough power to sustain a proper government and all of the necessary institutions.

Strictly speaking, third-rate states needed to colonize at least 50 star systems to be recognized as such. In addition, their gross domestic product, military power and other parameters had to be up to standard as well.

In fact, many third-rate states such as the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom actually colonized many more star systems. It was just that many of them were actually underdeveloped such as Cloudy Curtain.

Second-rate states began to have a bigger sway in the galaxy. This was the point where the Big Two slightly took them seriously. The basic requirement to qualify as a second-rate state was to grasp at least 1,000 star systems and meet many other development requirements.

A second-rate state should absolutely be able to crush a score of third-rate states in terms of wealth and force!

The same applied to first-rate states in relation to the lower tiers. A first-rate state must easily be able to defeat numerous second-rate states with ease!

In general, first-rate states only emerged in the galactic center and sometimes the galactic heartland. The wealth and force requirements to meet this standard was virtually impossible to attain in the impoverished galactic rim!

Owning several star clusters was just the minimum requirement. It was much more important to turn them productive.

At this point, a distinct category of states existed which did not fit in with these categories.

There were certain states in the galactic rim which had managed to conquer several star clusters and ballooned in power.



Yet for all of their territory, their wealth and power paled in comparison to even the weakest first-rate state in the galactic heartland.

The difference could not be overcome.

Yet these humongous second-rate states were nevertheless overlords in the galactic rim.

Therefore, a new and rather informal term of second-rate superstate emerged in order to describe these rural bullies.

No matter what they were called, many powerful states in the old galaxy all cast their greedy eyes on the Red Ocean.

Just because they were established and successful in the Milky Way did not mean that their dominance in their respective corners remained that way!

Many other powerful states and nations had risen up in the long river of time, only to fall and be forgotten due to growing complacent.

The galaxy was an extremely competitive ocean. Only by continuing to strive for greater power would states be able to keep up with their rivals!

Now, a newer and smaller pond opened up. Though most of the Red Ocean was occupied by various indigenous alien powers, every human pretty much regarded it as unowned territory!

Filled with rich exotics that were rare or completely unavailable in the old galaxy, every state knew that occupying a space in the Red Ocean was crucial to their growth and continuity.

Incredibly powerful exotics such as phasewater could completely elevate the strength of a state!

If the Rubarthans eagerly harvested as much phasewater as possible while the Terrans lazily ignored the new wealth, the power balance in the old galaxy would soon shift towards the former!

Therefore, it didn't matter if the big states weren't eager to colonize a distant territory hundreds of thousands of light-years away.

They were all forced to join this rat race, if only to make sure their rivals did not surpass them in strength!

When Calabast patiently explained these dynamics, Ves gradually comprehended the layout of the old powers in the new dwarf galaxy.



"The ability to manufacture FTL-capable mechs in meaningful numbers is already enough to make the first-rate superstates crazy." Calabast pointed out. "It stands to reason that the Terrans and the Rubarthans have already established their own structures in the Red Ocean. At this early time, many smaller powers in the dwarf galaxy have joined up with one of their umbrella organizations."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "That.. sounds rather strange. The Red Ocean is supposed to be a new start to many ambitious people. Submitting to the first-rate superstates in a dwarf galaxy where their power is subject to constraints sounds counterproductive."

"It's a lawless frontier out there. You should know what that means. Even with the Big Two dividing much of the conquered space into upper zones, middle zones and lower zones, that does not mean that an alliance of powers governed by either Terrans or Rubarthans could band together and gang up on smaller, isolated powers because they refuse to become a vassal!"

"I see." Ves grimaced.

He understood what was going on. Just like in the Faris Star Region in the past, a lot of pirate outfits roamed the untamed stars. However, most of their foundation was weak and many of them rarely lasted beyond a decade.

The Ravienne Alliance and the Dragon Alliance held the most sway there because they pooled the strength of many pirate outfits into a single, somewhat united entity.

Many lesser pirate outfits actively desired to join these once-prestigious alliances because the shelter they offered was a strong guarantee of protection!

Ideals such as freedom, independence and control meant nothing if that just left you weak and vulnerable.

Of course, Ves also remembered that the rabid sandmen domineeringly engulfed the two great pirate alliances in an unstoppable tide of sand.

The overall situation in the Red Ocean was somewhat different because every galactic pioneer possessed considerable strength of their own. However, that did not stop certain fundamental truths from applying as well!

"While it is still viable for galactic pioneers to mix up in the Red Ocean as independents, they cannot contest against predominant alliances for biggest prizes." Calabast explained.

Ves looked skeptical. "Our Larkinson Clan doesn't have any plans to colonize any planets or erect a state. Can't we just roam as neutrals between their territories?"

"Not quite. The alliances want to keep most of the benefits in their own respective clubs. If you want to remain unaffiliated, then you can only do business with other unaffiliated pioneers."

In other words, the bottom feeders remained in the dirt while the sharks and whales occupied most of the ocean.

"I have the feeling that you're trying to push me away from my original intentions. Why are you encouraging me to join up with one of these alliances? You know I don't like to put my safety and security in the hands of others, especially states. The only thing you can be sure of is that their rulers always look out for themselves."

Calabst spread her arms in innocence. "I am not forcing you to compromise your goals. I just want to inform you that the circumstances have changed and that you haven't adequately considered any alternatives when you came up with your original plan. It is well worth considering aligning yourself to one of these established alliances. The thing about them is that they are quite loose. Joining them does not mean you are signing up to become a vassal or a subject to the Terrans or Rubarthans. It's more of a club of mutual benefit. Conflicts between powers within an alliance can still occur, and hardly any rules from above are imposed on the individual members."

"That sounds similar to what the Rim Guardians are doing."

Calabast nodded. "That's because a lot of galactic pioneers are very ambitious and capable. Mind you, the Terrans and Rubarthans are both competing over them. In order to attract the most pioneers, the old powers can't be stingy with the benefits they offer. They can't act too tyrannical either. Otherwise, the pioneers will rebel and join the opposite side."

"It sounds like the first-rate superstates are really going out of their way to control the Red Ocean. Doesn't this go against the intentions of the Big Two? From what I surmise, the first-rate superstates aren't supposed to be able to exert so much influence. The various rules and restrictions heavily encourage the rise of newer powers that are much more fragmented and don't necessarily share any relations to any of the states in the old galaxy."

"There is only so much the Big Two can do to limit the ambition of the first-rate superstates. The exact dynamics between these two sides is rather complicated, but due to the many compromises they have made, the Terrans and the Rubarthans aren't prohibited from promoting their own alliances."

"Well that sounds awful news to the MTA and CFA. The last thing they want to see is the two old relics from the Age of Stars and Age of Conquest rising up any further! Surely the Big Two aren't allowing the first-rate superstates to do what they want, right?"

The spymaster smirked. "Of course not. Shortly after the Terrans and Rubarthans have unveiled their ambitions in the Red Ocean, a third alliance has emerged. Supposedly, this new alliance just started off as a loose gathering of power pioneers backed by regular first-rate states. However, there are many signs that this new alliance is actually the Big Two's response. If that isn't enough, then I'm sure that a fourth or fifth alliance will emerge in the coming decades."

Ves suspected that the rise of other alliances was not only meant to check the ambitions of the Terrans and Rubarthans, but also served to fracture the Red Ocean even further.

Only a divided Red Ocean allowed the Big Two to retain their absolute supremacy, just like in the old galaxy!

"So let me get this straight." Ves breathed deeply. "if we want to obtain some protection against the predation of these big alliances, we have to join at least one of them. If we want to remain outside of the ages-old rivalry between the Terrans and the Rubarthans, our best option is to join the third alliance, is that right?"

"We still have other options, but from my analysis of the situation, I believe it is much more practical to join an alliance. We don't have to give up that much rights in exchange for protection and other benefits. Look, Ves. When the Larkinson Clan grows powerful enough to attract the attention of the major players in the Red Ocean, it is very difficult to stand alone."

As much as he hated her argument, he knew that Calabast indeed had a point.

At the Larkinson Clan's current level of strength, it already possessed sufficient power to roam the galactic rim without needing to worry about too many threats.

Yet the Red Ocean was a completely different place! Various old powers who originated from the galactic heartland and the galactic center held sway here. With the rise of larger alliances, it was very difficult for the Larkinson Clan to maintain the same level of independence and indifference of today!

#### *Chapter 2207 The Red Ocean Promise*

Only a few years had passed since the Big Two publicly opened up a channel from the old galaxy to the Red Ocean.

Even as the ambitious pioneers that emerged throughout human space scrambled to colonize and exploit the vast resource-rich stars of the dwarf galaxy, politics had already reared its ugly head!

Calabast grinned as she trailed her finger over her leg as she continued to lean against the desk. "Whenever something valuable appears, a struggle to possess it always takes

place. Sometimes, the strength disparity is too great. In this case, the strongest party doesn't have to bother with talking and can just take something by force. It's when there are multiple parties of roughly equal strength vying for dominance that things get interesting. When the price of outright conflict is too great, a balance emerges, but only between qualified powers."

Obviously, the tiny Larkinson Clan did not fall within this category, especially when they finally reached the Red Ocean.

"All of this is only relevant at least eight years later." Ves frowned and stroked Lucky's back. "I don't see why we need to consider which alliance to join right away. In fact, I'm still unsure whether we should consider this option at all when we reach the Red Ocean!"

Calabast remained steadfast as she crossed her arms. "Even though the three great alliances only existed for a short amount of time, they are already developing their own distinct characteristics. It will be much easier to join and climb up the hierarchy if we mold the Larkinson Clan according to those characteristics. In other words, as long as we prepare early, we can immediately skip a couple of steps and get ahead of the galactic pioneers who arrived sooner!"

That immediately caught his attention! One of his most persistent concerns was the fact that he was missing out on the beginning stages of the great phasewater rush!

Just ten years of delay would already put him and the Larkinson Clan at a huge disadvantage compared to the galactic pioneers who already established a foundation in the new dwarf galaxy!

If what Calabast said was true, then Ves could still get ahead of the first-movers!

Of course, everything had a price. Joining an alliance meant committing to an old galaxy faction. Even if these alliances governed its members in a looser manner in order to adapt to frontier circumstances, there was no doubt that Ves and the Larkinson Clan would inevitably belong to an established camp!

Though Ves vastly preferred to remain uninvolved in these power struggles, it was very dangerous to remain independent.

It was fine for him to stick to his original course if he was by himself, but since he was responsible for leading the Larkinson Clan, he had to consider what was best for his fellow clansmen.

"Tell me more about these alliances." Ves looked up at Calabast. "If you are so eager to push me into one of them, then it would be helpful to understand my options."

"Good idea. Let's start with the Terran Alliance. As you can imagine, the alliance founded and led by the oldest human state is very strong. The Greater Terran United Confederation's heritage is unsurpassed, but so are their rules."

"Does that mean that anyone who enters this alliance basically has to bow down to Terrans unconditionally?"

She shook her head. "The stereotypes about Terrans don't entirely apply in this case. If what you said was the case, hardly any strong and highly capable pioneers will wish to join the Terran Alliance because they are also the most ambitious and headstrong. The Terrans are aware of this dynamic, and so have formed a looser regime."

"Oh? That sounds very uncharacteristic."

From what Ves knew about the Terrans, most of the power and wealth in the first-rate superstate fell into the hands of age-old ancient clans who had risen into power all the way back to the Age of Stars or earlier!

These ancient clans were not only incredibly old and powerful, but also incredibly savvy about maintaining their lead. Hardly any other clans were able to rise up in the Terran Confederation because the older ones selfishly occupied all of the resources!

"The ancient clans of Terra still hold a large amount of sway in the Terran Alliance. However, their power and reach are deliberately constrained in order to offer many galactic pioneers the chance to develop themselves."

"And these pioneers fall for this trick?"

"It's not a trick, Ves. The Terrans aren't entirely made up of fossilized relics. There are many Terrans in charge who hold different views, and they are expressly in charge."

"Even if that is the case, public opinion of the Terrans still isn't great. I really can't see why pioneers think the Terrans will treat them with sincerity when the ancient clans stop restraining themselves when it is no longer necessary."

The Terrans never changed the way they operated throughout their entire history. The corruption, decadence and inequality that had marred them in the past had never gone away.

The contemptuous way the ancient clans of Terra treated everyone else directly led to a great rebellion that saw a huge chunk of their territories splitting off to form the New Rubarth Empire!

It was only after the New Rubarth Empire rapidly rose to the point where they started to surpass the wounded Terran Confederation that the ancient clans finally started to get their act together.

Even then, the ancient clans only initiated the bare amount of reforms that only modestly increased the treatment of non-aristocrats!

"You aren't necessarily wrong. The Terran Alliance is always at risk of becoming subsumed by the ancient clans. The reason why a large amount of galactic pioneers applied to join despite this risk is the incredible reward the Terrans are offering."

"What are they promising?"

"It's called the Red Ocean Promise. Essentially, the Terran Alliance promises that in 100 years, it will elevate the five strongest members of the alliance into the ranks of the ancient clans!"

Ves looked shocked. "What?! That's impossible!"

She grinned. "It's true. These old fogies are very mindful of their credibility. The Terrans absolutely have to abide by the Red Ocean Promise or else every galactic pioneer will turn against them. This is not as big of a deal to the ancient clans as you think it is. First, the reason why they were very reluctant to share power before is that the prosperous territories in the Milky Way are already fixed. There is not enough territory to go around. Now that the Red Ocean has opened up, there is room for new ancient clans."

"What about the old ones? Are they just going to let the new upstarts monopolize all of the phasewater and other critical resources of the Red Ocean?"

"Of course not. The reason why the Terran Alliance promises to elevate just five new ancient clans is because that leaves plenty of territories to the older ancient clans."

Promising to promote just five alliance members was a very cutthroat method of attracting galactic pioneers.

For all of the bad reputation and criticism the ancient clans of Terra incurred, life was pretty good to those at the top! Reigning over prosperous territories and being able to afford the latest technology and pleasures in life was such an attractive lure that many pioneers would definitely vie for this quota!

However, with just five slots, a lot of other galactic pioneers

"What happens to the losers of this competition?" Ves asked.

"The new and old ancient clans will devour their territories and colonies. The 'losers' can choose to voluntarily become subordinate to an ancient clan or choose to evacuate their new lands and leave the Terran Alliance. I don't think the Terrans will accept any exceptions."

The Red Ocean Promise was a terrible scheme, but Ves also had to admit it was brilliant! The allure of becoming the head of an ancient clan was so great that many pioneers accepted the penalty for losing this competition!

This open and aboveboard scheme proved that the Terrans were still crafty enough to maintain their standing in human space!

"So, Ves." Calabast teasingly smiled at him. "Are you interested in vying for the Red Ocean Promise? The Larkinson Clan may be young and far behind the other competitors at the moment, but much can happen in a century. With your capabilities and the unique strengths of our clan, I believe there is a small but possible chance that we might succeed."

His expression did not reflect any enthusiasm. "I already told you that I have no intentions of settling down and founding my own state. Fixed territories are only shackles to me. All I care about is designing and selling mechs, and that has never changed. From what it sounds like, there is no place in the Terran Alliance for spaceborn clans. In 100 years, the only players left are the old and new ancient clans. Everyone else must surrender to them, which is unacceptable!"

He did not want to work hard to rise up in the Terran Alliance only to throw away much of what he worked for. Even if he could part from the Terrans with amiable terms, it was very difficult to cast off the Terran stain from the Larkinson Clan!

"I think you are being too stubborn about your aversion to colonization. The opening of the Red Ocean is one of the best opportunities to found and lead your own state from the ground up." Calabast frowned.

The two argued a bit about this topic, but Ves remained stubborn. Where everyone saw endless power and wealth, he only saw greater burdens!

The responsibility of leading a modest-sized spaceborn clan already weighed heavily on his shoulders. He did not wish to let this meaningless game distract him from becoming a greater mech designer.

Becoming a Star Designer was a much greater achievement than ruling over his own first-rate state!

"A shame." Calabast eventually sighed. "There are more people in the Larkinson Clan who harbor the same hopes. Most of our members aren't looking forward to leading a nomadic life space for the rest of their lives. To live on open soil, build their own homes and be part of a vibrant community is a very strong human desire."

"That will change in time." Ves smirked and clasped his hands. "We are all new at this. I'm sure that once a few generations pass, everyone will get used to life in space. For now, we are only held back by our inexperience and our shabby ships. Once we get our



factory ship and other fantastic vessels, we can finally enjoy enough room and facilities to make ourselves at home in space."

This was one of the biggest reasons why luxurious ark ships existed despite their great expense and marginal utility. They were the closest thing to floating cities or moving space stations.

The open parks, vast spaces, simulated horizons and other wasteful accommodations all gave humans the perfect living environment outside a planet.

If Ves wanted to make his fellow Larkinsons stop yearning about living on a planet like a bunch of primitives, then he needed to get his hands on an ark ship large enough to accommodate the entire clan when they were off-duty.

The bigger the ark ship, the better!

This was not something that Ves could obtain rashly, even with his current financial strength. He also had to prioritize the acquisition of other capital ships such as a strong fleet carrier. Expanding the clan's military and industrial power came first. Only after the Larkinsons met its fundamental survival needs would Ves be able to bring up the topic of acquiring an ark ship.

"So in conclusion, you are not considering the Terran Alliance?"

"Hell no." He snorted. "I don't want to turn myself into a puppet that dances to the tune of ancient clans. My reasons for entering the Red Ocean are entirely different!"

For now, Ves ruled out the option of applying to become a member of the Terran Alliance. The Red Ocean Promise was just a giant trap in his eyes!

### *Chapter 2208 Rising Empire*

The Greater Terran United Confederation may be an old and decrepit power to many people, but it had withstood the test of time.

With the opening of the Red Ocean, the Terrans would never be foolish enough to alienate all of the galactic pioneers that ran wild in the dwarf galaxy.

Unlike back at home, the Terrans did not possess an overwhelming lead this time. The Terrans, Rubarthans and every other power from the old galaxy had to start from the beginning!

This meant that none of them could act as domineeringly as they did back home because they simply didn't have enough strength to back up their demands.



The separation of several hundred-thousand light-years was unsurpassable in ordinary times. The beyonder gates remained the only channel for the old power to extend their reach into the Red Ocean, but only barely.

The gates fell into the hands of the Big Two, and they made sure to make it as difficult as possible for the Terrans and Rubarthans to dispatch an enormous amount of troops in the Red Ocean.

The first-rate superstates weren't meant to divide the Red Ocean between themselves!

Due to the inability to dispatch sufficient combat forces to impose their will on the Red Ocean, the Terrans and Rubarthans had to take a step back and leverage the strength of other pioneers.

Hence the reason why they bothered with putting up a friendly face in order to attract pioneers to join their respective alliances.

Even though the Terrans couldn't help themselves from exposing their rotten behavior, they were at least cunning enough to do it in a way that would attract many ambitious pioneers.

Joining the ranks of the ancient clans of Terra that had long led one of the most prosperous states of humanity was an irresistible temptation!

Very rarely did newer ancient clans rise up. Otherwise they wouldn't have been called 'ancient'. The existing ones were simply too strong to budge from their rock-hard positions.

Only rarely did an excessive amount of decadence, infighting and incompetence open up an opportunity for a smaller Terran faction to rise up and topple the weakened ancient clan!

Yet the amount of times this happened was very small! In fact, it hadn't happened once during the Age of Mechs!

In the end, the great stability and continuity of the ancient clans of Terra reflected both their strength and wisdom.

"How do the Rubarthans measure up, then?" Ves asked, curious of how the rising power responded to the antics of their greatest rival.

Calabast reached out with her hand, luring Lucky away from Ves. She caressed the gem cat.

"Meow~"

Lucky was acting all cute under the attention of a women's caress!

"The Rubarthans are much more straightforward. They haven't released anything convoluted like the Red Ocean Promise. The Rubarth Pact they set up is simply a defensive association at heart. Anyone who signs up to the Pact will receive a measure of protection from the Rubarthans. Members are free to choose what they want to do next."

"It's that simple?" Ves raised an eyebrow.

"Of course not. The New Rubarth Empire values strength, ability and ambition. The Rubarth Pact is a bit hollow for now, but there are already signs that greater possibilities are in store. One of them would be to cooperate with one of the Rubarthan princes."

The Imperial Household of the New Rubarth Empire was immense. The Star Emperor held absolute power and his will reigned supreme.

At least that was supposed to be the case.

In practice, the New Rubarth Empire was so huge that it was not very realistic for a centralized government to control every aspect.

One of the ways the Rubarthans split everything up was to divide territories and responsibilities to one of the many descendants of the Star Emperor.

The current Star Emperor was 'merely' 300 years old, which was very young in the highest echelons of power. Many of the humans who collectively ruled over human civilization were actually remnants from the Age of Conquest!

The horrors they lived through and the lessons they learned from those dark days still affected the way that human space was being run to this day!

Anyway, the Star Emperor was a vigorous ruler who spawned a lot of children. How many of them existed, no one knew, but it was well-known that the figure definitely surpassed a thousand!

If those Rubarthan princes ever grew up and established their footing in the Empire, they eventually became worthy enough to set up their own principality.

A Rubarthan principality was merely an administrative division where a Rubarthan prince held greater sway over a territory within the Empire. However, this meant that the Rubarthan princes obtained real power!

Now, according to Calabast, some of those Rubarthan princes had come up with the bold idea to erect some new principalities within the Red Ocean!

"What makes this different from the Terrans?" Ves grew confused.

Those Terran principalities were easily comparable to the ancient clans of Terra!

Calabast smiled. "Ah, the Rubarthans hate it when they are compared to the Terrans. They explicitly do things differently. You have to remember that the New Rubarth Empire is a lot more centralized than the Terran Confederation. Unlike the latter where the ancient clans are roughly on par with each other, the former is led by a single central authority, the Star Emperor and the Imperial Household. The Rubarthan principalities cannot grow strong enough to challenge the Star Emperor's authority."

"Then what are these princes doing in the Red Ocean in the first place?"

She shrugged. "They are also extensions of the Imperial Household. Even when they are constrained, their wealth and power is unmatched by every other Rubarthan faction. They offer the most opportunities to galactic pioneers who are willing to work for them. Galactic pioneers can choose to align themselves to a Rubarthan principality or to pledge to them. The latter is permanent, but the former is more of a mercenary relationship."

Though Ves felt somewhat wary towards these mighty Rubarthan principalities, they didn't sound as tyrannical as the ancient clans.

He did not reject the option of joining the Rubarth Pact and establishing a cooperative relationship with a Rubarthan principality. In exchange for doing some chores, the Larkinson Clan would enjoy strong protection!

However, it couldn't be that simple. "What's the catch?"

"Well, obviously, pledging to a Rubarthan prince means becoming his vassal, which I don't believe you are interested in. If you choose to align to a Rubarthan prince, then you will still be able to gain a lot of benefits. Aside from turning you into an enemy of the Terrans, you will also be pulled into the power struggle between princes. While they aren't always violent, you will definitely experience suppression from those who are aligned with other princes!"

"No thanks, then. I can't care less about those princes!" Ves shook his head. "What about remaining neutral."

"Then you're still okay, of sorts. You will miss out on the fantastic rewards and support provided by the Rubarthan factions, but you will at least be accepted by everyone in the Pact. The Rubarthans have left plenty of room for independent development, and that has attracted the appreciation of many galactic pioneers."

"Oh? No tricks?"

"Not as far as I know." Calabast looked confident. "The Rubarthan style is very different from the Terran style. The New Rubarth Empire is a meritocracy to some extent. While it isn't a perfect society where anyone capable has the chance to rise to the top, the social structure is not as rigid as that of the Terran Confederation. This is by design. Therefore, in the Rubarth Pact, every member has the chance to develop as they wish. As long as they are capable, they can grow however they wish!"

No coercion. No promises. Ves liked their style. If everything that Calabast said was true, then Ves did not mind so much if he and his clan sheltered under the umbrella of the Rubarthans.

There was another reason why Ves regarded the Rubarthan with some favor.

"The Larkinsons are descended from Rubarthans." He noted. "Many Brighters are, though they come from a faction that is at odds with Rubarthan culture."

Of course, it was unrealistic for the Larkinsons and the descendants for anyone who left the New Rubarth Empire to crawl back to the first-rate superstate and be recognized as one of its subjects.

Officially speaking, Ves was not a first-class citizen and certainly not a Rubarthan. Trying to rely on his ancient blood ties to the Empire to get into the good graces of the Rubarthans was impossible!

Therefore, it was really pointless to think about it. Ves and the Larkinson Clan had to approach the Rubarth Pact as complete outsiders, and lessers at that since they emerged from the galactic rim.

Calabast looked hopeful at Ves. "The New Rubarth Empire is still considered as a rising power in the Age of Mechs. However, the lack of a great motivator such as the Red Ocean Promise means that the galactic pioneers who join the Rubarth Pact are generally inconsistent. Many weak and middling pioneers who just want to enjoy the protection of a first-rate superstate have joined the Pact without really harboring greater ambitions. I'm sure the Rubarthans have a plan to increase the unity of its Pact, but that might take some time."

This stood in contrast to the Terran Alliance, which most assuredly attracted the strongest and most ambitious galactic pioneers. This meant that the average strength of each pioneer was definitely considerable, or else there was hardly any reason to join the alliance!

However, since Ves did not really harbor any great ambitions in this area, he did not mind becoming one of the Pact's middling members. If he truly needed some shelter and as long as the Rubarthans didn't push him around, it might not be a bad idea to accept this option.

This was not his only viable choice, however.

"There's a third alliance as well, I believe."

Calabast nodded. "The Red Ocean Union is still very new and much of its structure still needs to be worked out. On the surface, it was set up by many first-rate states in order to present a united front against the first-rate superstates. Collectively, this means quite a bit, but because these first-rate states are so scattered, it's hard to implement a single regime."

"If that's the case, doesn't that mean this so-called Red Ocean Union is nothing but a paper organization?"

"That is what it looks like for now, but if you believe that the Big Two are secretly offering their support, then I'm certain that the Red Ocean Union will become a force to be reckoned with in a couple of years."

Even if that was so, the fact of the matter remained that the Red Ocean Union didn't appear to have anyone strong enough to govern it properly.

Ves initially held high hopes for this so-called Red Ocean Union, but in the end it turned out to be a pile of loose sand.

Then again, who knew what the Big Two would do to support the Union. The Red Ocean Union might look completely different in ten years!

Since the Union wasn't properly set up yet, Calabast did not mention anything important.

"That's all for the three major alliances of the Nyxian Gap." She said and began to push herself off the desk. "You can read the remainder on the galactic net. Just remember that you can start on developing your clan early in order to gain a head-start in joining one of them. For example, if you have the ambition of adding your Larkinson Clan to the Terran Confederation, then it would help if you implement some of the policies and customs that are prevalent among the existing ancient clans."

"Please don't joke, Calabast."

"The same goes if you want to become a member of the Rubarth Pact. In fact, the culture and the policies of the Larkinson Clan already match the Rubarthan standard to a greater degree. If you implement just a few more key adjustments, I think our clan will definitely enjoy a lot of favor from the Rubarthans!"

She.. was right.

## *Chapter 2209 Discount Rubarthans*

Long after Calabast left his office, Ves remained introspective.

"Meow?"

Lucky crawled upon his shoulder and poked his smooth-shaven cheek that was as soft as a baby's bottom.

Ves reached out with his hand and pushed his cat away.

"Do you think we've become Rubarthans without realizing it? If someone from the outside looks at how we run the clan, then there's at least a 60 percent resemblance to a Rubarthan equivalent!"

His cat tilted his head.

"Meow."

"Don't underestimate this degree of similarity! It only takes a few more rule changes and cultural shifts to bump that up to 80 percent!"

If the Larkinson Clan reached that point, then it would pretty much become a discount Rubarthan organization.

The only reason why Ves couldn't push his clan even closer to the Rubarthan standard was because he lacked the amazing amount of wealth, tech and resources to implement the most extravagant policies.

Even so, it was already pretty good to be able to fit in with one of the greatest human states to such an extent!

The New Rubarth Empire emerged as an explicit rejection of Terran philosophy. Its ideology had spread throughout human space for a very good reason. Its pursuit of meritocracy, its worship for actual strength and its rejection of inherited authority had allowed the Rubarthans to quickly catch up and slightly overtake their former overlords.

With such a stellar example of what their ideology was capable of, many other states throughout the galaxy copied the Rubarthans to a varying extent and mostly became stronger due to these reasons!

Even all the way at the border of human space, both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom avidly adopted the Societal Revival Theory. Whether purposefully or not, both states warred against each other every generation with the expectation of conditioning and strengthening their fighting forces.

Yet the Rubarthan philosophy also had its downsides!

The central premise of this thought was that people were surrounded by enemies and needed to become strong enough to deal with them. Those who adhered to this philosophy had to be prepared to pay a heavy price in order to survive in a hostile galaxy.

"The cruel price is often paid with human lives." Ves muttered.

Wasn't that what he was doing as well right now? In his personal pursuit of strength, he did not hesitate to drag his fellow clansmen into the Nyxian Gap in order to bloody them and refine them into crack troops.

Just because no one died so far did not mean that Task Force Predator would be able to escape the Gap unscathed. Now that they had entered Maynard Fields, the Black Cats had already identified many pirate organizations in this zone that could easily give his forces a run for their money.

The fact that Ves did not feel bothered about the possibility of suffering a substantial amount of losses meant that his personal philosophy had already shifted in this direction.

He felt rather mixed about that. On one hand, the New Rubarth Empire was a role model to many humans in the galaxy.

On the other hand, he did not identify himself as a Rubarthan. He was a Larkinson, and the clan he built and shaped was supposed to develop its own identity.

The fact that the clan unintentionally imitated the Rubarthans to a very strong degree was a bit unfortunate.

"This is going to be problematic." Ves frowned and bent his head in thought.

Out in the Komodo Star Sector and the galactic rim, there was no need to pay much attention to this resemblance. The Larkinson Clan was situated so far away from the galactic heartland and galactic center that no one would tie the Larkinsons to the Rubarthans.

They were just too far away!

Yet once he entered the much smaller Red Ocean and mixed up with many powers with connections to the first-rate superstates, this resemblance would definitely affect the Larkinson Clan's treatment!

Even if the Larkinson Clan tried to remain unaligned or joined the neutral Red Ocean Union, others would still suspect that the clan was in the camp of the Rubarthans!



"This is a huge issue." He concluded.

If he did not want his clan to get entangled with the Rubarthans, then he needed to change the culture and policies of his clan.

Yet that was unacceptable to Ves. The values and principles that underpinned the clan was the source of its strength. Ves had grown up with some of these ideals, and acquired the rest through his experiences in his life.

He believed it was absolutely necessary for the Larkinson Clan to hold on to its current philosophy!

That left him stuck. If he was unwilling to change his clan, then did that mean it was stuck with its Rubarthan association?

He frowned. Calabast likely brought up the issue of alliances in the Red Ocean because she must have recognized this latent problem beforehand.

If Ves and the Larkinson Clan naively entered the Red Ocean while remaining unaware of this issue, then they would likely get into a lot of trouble!

Hearing about the complex political considerations in the Nyxian Gap made him feel as if this shark pool was much more dangerous than he thought.

As a response, he developed a faint yearning to acquire a qualified diplomat. As long as he hired or partnered up with someone who could navigate the various interests off the Big Two, the first-rate superstates, the alliances carving the Red Ocean and the pioneers following their ambitions, then Ves did not have to worry about leading his clan into a dead end.

"It's stupid to remain independent." He sighed in resignation. "Without the protection of an alliance, the Terrans or the Rubarthans can easily use their overwhelming might to squash my clan like a bug. There is no way we can resist their might."

Joining the Rubarth Pact sounded like a great way to gain solid protection. Yet the price of doing so was great. By aligning his clan to the Rubarthans, Ves could basically forget about doing business with the Terrans and their allies ever again.

As a mech designer, Ves really did not wish to exclude any customers. He already knew how awful it was to get blocked from a huge portion of the market when the LMC's products were pulled from the shelves in every Coalition-aligned space.

Therefore, Ves would much rather join the Red Ocean Union even if it sounded a bit weak and scattered.



Yet perhaps it was too late. Ves could already predict that if the Larkinson Clan in its current incarnation entered the Red Ocean, every outsider would treat them as Rubarthan vassals.

"This is too frustrating!"

Diplomacy was not the Larkinson Clan's strong suit. In fact, none of his clansmen possessed any meaningful experience in it! Though Ves could instruct the clan to recruit capable diplomats, he wasn't sure whether that was enough.

He resolved to keep an eye out for any notable diplomats in his travels. Anyone who was competent enough to navigate the complex relations of the Red Ocean and could turn enemies into friends was worth befriending!

That was something to consider for later. For now, he had enough issues on his plate.

As Ves resumed his design work, several days passed as the fleet quietly traversed through Maynard Fields.

Though the forward scouts dispatched by the Flagrant Vandals and other forces found sporadic traces of battles and pirate activity, the task force hadn't encountered any actual pirates.

The population density of the various zones of the Nyxian Gap wasn't all that high. Weeks might go by for someone to encounter a pirate group. If this wasn't the case, the Peacekeeper outfits would never dare to venture too deep!

It was just that the Larkinson Clan actively traveled to the coordinates to as many pirate groups along the way as possible. Now that the task force stopped seeking out enemies on its own accord, Ves felt unaccustomed to spending so many days in peace.

Fortunately, he did not spend all of that time in vain. The tranquil days allowed him to focus fully on his mech design projects.

All four minor projects chugged along very nicely. The attentive supervision from Ves and Gloriana helped them remain on track and prevented any of the assistant mech designers from getting stuck too long.

Of the four minor projects, the Crystal Lord Mark II and Sanctuary Projects achieved the greatest progress. The former used the original Crystal Lord as a template so the Mark II version was actually more like developing an upgrade variant than designing something completely novel.

Still, the project generated a considerable amount of consternation to Ves. The original Crystal Lord design was one of his babies, and he wanted the second edition to stay true to its roots.

This meant that Ves had to find a way to preserve the alien character of the original design. Its design spirit, the Crystal Leader, was a barely sentient empowered spiritual fragment that wasn't all that strong.

Yet Ves never thought about replacing it. This was disrespectful to life.

Some people treated their wives as clothes and did not hesitate to change to better ones as they grew wealthier or more successful.

Not Ves. Even if he lamented the Crystal Leader's weak foundation, it was not as if there were ways to resolve this problem.

For example, Ves was pretty sure that he could empower the ancient and almost-forgotten spiritual fragment if he was willing to expend some of the life-attributed energy derived from a drop of serum.

Yet was it worth it for Ves to expend such an extremely precious resource just to empower a low-value design spirit?

From a cost-benefit perspective, it made a lot more sense for Ves to break up the Crystal Leader spiritual fragment, blend in some ingredients that weren't too costly, and form a completely new spiritual product that was at least an order of magnitude stronger and possessed much better growth prospects!

Whenever he considered this option, he felt disgusted by it. Ves truly cherished his design spirits, at least the ones he had friendly relations with, and he believed it was wrong for him to treat them as replaceable commodities or pieces of equipment.

Therefore, even if he had to pay a greater price, Ves felt more and more inclined to nurture the Crystal Leader and all of his older design spirits.

One consideration that justified this choice was that spiritual entities grew in strength and sophistication over time. Replacing an outdated design spirit with a newer one meant throwing away all of that accumulation.

Perhaps the difference wasn't so big in just five to ten years, but when a design spirit continually performed the same duties for 50 years or longer, they might have achieved a qualitative improvement that could not be matched by any newborn spiritual product!

A rueful smile appeared on his face. "Isn't the Ouroboros a great example?"

Even though the circumstances wasn't entirely the same as the Ouroboros was a physical mech as opposed to an intangible mech design, the principles shouldn't be too different.

Life accumulated strength through the passage of time!

Therefore, even if the Crystal Leader wasn't particularly impressive, its unique origins and history might produce something completely unsurpassed in the distant future!

When Ves settled on keeping and investing in the Crystal Leader, he knew that he had to retain the alien character of the Crystal Lord line. No matter if it was the Mark II or the Mark XII version of the mech, its design had to incorporate a significant amount of alien tech in order to stay true to its nature.

Ves encountered another problem at this junction. With the original crystal builder technology losing its competitive advantage in the current generation, how could he possibly meet this demand?

It wasn't as if Ves could randomly approach one of the many asteroids floating in the Nyxian Gap, trigger some sort of hidden alien teleportation device, and be ported over to the ruins of another long-dead crystal-using civilization!

"Maybe there is another way to get my hands on what I need." He muttered.

#### *Chapter 2210 Alien Tech*

Human technology reached an extremely high level. Thousands of years of research and development had elevated the human race's mastery of various fields of science and engineering to an astounding level!

As far as Ves was aware of, no alien race in the galaxy could surpass the modern human race when it came to the breadth and depth of technological development.

However, it was no secret that most of humanity's technological gizmos traced their roots back to alien tech.

Simply put, humanity did not invent all of the tech from scratch. They stole it from aliens and adapted the tech for their own purposes!

The FTL drive that served as the most commonly-used means of traversing the stars was the most iconic example!

None of the powers hid these truths. Perhaps some might find shame that their race had plundered a lot of tech rather than develop them on their own, but human civilization probably wouldn't have dominated the Milky Way if it tried to keep itself pure.

These days, much of alien-derived tech had been fully mastered by human scientists. Some, like FTL drive tech, still had traces of alien influence, while others, for example antigrav tech, had progressed so far that they became unrecognizable by their original alien developers!

In general, human civilization tried their best to convert alien tech into human tech. A lot of inventive alien races developed very strange scientific principles that were very difficult for humans to understand even after several centuries spent on deciphering them. While the effects of their tech might sometimes be great, humans preferred to work with something under their control.

Therefore, the use of alien technology was heavily discouraged in human civilization.

This was part of a deliberate cultural policy to keep human space as human as possible.

Even though their race had conquered a lot of alien territory during the Age of Conquest, almost no trace of alien buildings, monuments and other visible traces remained.

This was on purpose as the human conquerors wanted to retain their human ways as much as possible. Each visible alien influence risked contaminating human culture, thereby making some people more sympathetic or aligned towards the aliens that were still their enemies!

It was very understandable to go to such great lengths to wipe out every trace of alien heritage in human space regardless of their priceless historical and cultural value.

From the lens of institutional isomorphism, making human society as human as possible strengthened their race's own belief in itself! It also made it easier to keep humans as vigilant and hostile towards aliens, as familiarity often tended breed complacency.

Therefore, with regards to alien technology, it was quite an unwise marketing decision to design a mech with alien influences.

"This is the other reason my Crystal Lord never sold that well."

Its alien appearance with its weird hole-filled head along with its alien crystals turned the mech into something of an oddball. Even if its overall performance and features were quite nice for a premium rifleman mech, the fact that it did not conform entirely to market tastes would inevitably limit its appeal.

"So what?" Ves confidently smiled. "A good mech will sell regardless of how ugly it looks. As long as the Crystal Lord Mark II can provide the same degree of value as a Desolate Soldier or a Doom Guard, it can definitely attract plenty of demand!"

Now that the LMC's mech catalog features some big sellers, Ves faced much less pressure to design a guaranteed best-seller.

It also helped that the LMC expanded its design capacity to six concurrent design projects. This provided Ves with a lot of leeway as his mech company did not have to allocate all of its activities to developing future cash cows.

Out of the six projects in the pipeline right now, Ferocious Piranha and the Sanctuary Projects ought to cover the LMC's commercial needs. It was important to keep the company's mech catalog fresh and to show continued signs of life. Otherwise, the market would begin to wonder whether the LMC had declined like last time.

Once he recognized that he didn't have to treat the Crystal Lord Mark II design as a purely commercial project, Ves felt liberated. If he was allowed to pursue his desired vision for this mech, he was certain he could turn it into a great mech in its own way!

He just had to get his hands on some good alien tech that could build on the crystal tech he used in the Mark I version of the Crystal Lord.

"This is a bit difficult." He frowned.

It wasn't as if he could find such sophisticated knowledge and technical specifications by trawling through the galactic net. He needed to approach someone.

One option would be for him to inquire with treasure hunters. However, there was no telling who got their hands on alien tech or not without insider knowledge or access to a black market or something.

The other option would be to knock on the doors of the MTA. The amount of alien tech the Association accumulated over its entire history was definitely massive! There was bound to be some strange crystal-based tech in its archives.

Ves hesitated for a moment. Instead of making a choice, he began to concentrate his mind in order to make contact with the Crystal Lord's design spirit.

The Crystal Leader had come a long way since its formation a year ago. Though its spiritual strength hadn't grown much stronger, the salvaged remnant that barely possessed any thoughts of its own had grown considerably more sophisticated.

Though it was not as lively as Qilanxo or Prophet Ylvaine, the former crystal golem had connected with tens of thousands of mech pilots over the years.

All of the spiritual feedback of humans filled up the gaps in the spiritual entity and turned it a little more human.

In a sense, Ves could already describe the Crystal Leader as a hybrid between a human and a crystal builder alien!

"This just happens to match the Crystal Lord concept even better!"

Ves became more committed to this course of action. Regardless of how awkward it was for him to approach the MTA with his request, he decided to go through with his plan!

He left his stateroom and entered the isolated chamber which held the Darkbreak module. After turning it online, he began to make a call towards the MTA.

He half-hoped the other end of the line connected to the Association's department that handled technology and licencing requests.

Unfortunately for him, the physical projection of a familiar woman appeared.

"Mr. Larkinson, what brings you here today?" Master Willix greeted with some familiarity.

Ves tried to maintain his composure. Though he feared this might happen, he estimated that there was already a 90 percent chance that she would appear.

This sticky MTA Master Mech Designer had shown up too much for him to believe that her visits would stop anytime soon!

Since he was already mentally-prepared for her appearance, he quickly managed to suppress his discomfort.

"I have a request." He stated.

He proceeded to summarize his current intentions and problems. He emphasized the importance of the Crystal Lord design in his heart and inquired whether the MTA was familiar with the crystal builder race whose tech still powered the original version of his rifleman mech.

"Hmm.." Master Willix looked serious. "This is not a straightforward request. Normally, we don't release alien tech of any kind to mech designers or the public. The only companies that are eligible to work with alien tech are research institutions and development companies that are capable of using it to fuel the research of human tech."

"Is there no means to get the alien crystal tech that I want, ma'am?"

"Not quite. I haven't finished yet, Mr. Larkinson. While it is usually not done, I have the authority to release the tech you want." She looked around a bit to make sure the chamber was devoid of other people. "Since we are speaking over a private MTA network at the moment, I can reveal something that you normally aren't supposed to know. Some of the alien technology our Association hoards isn't left alone. Some of them work on such amazing principles that we still can't replicate these applications with purely human technology."

Ves widened his eyes. "Does that mean the Association is still researching them, Master?!"

"In a sense. Not all alien tech is worthy of further research. One of the goals of studying them and deciphering them is to understand how they work so that they are replicable.

In the course of this research, sometimes we manage to achieve greater effects. This isn't difficult to accomplish when we blend human innovation in native alien tech."

"Does that mean that some research has been performed on alien crystal tech?"

Willix smiled. "I am familiar with your Crystal Lord design. The implementation of alien crystal technology within the frame and rifle of the mech are inspiring design choices. In truth, the race that was originally invented is already known by our Association. While I am not allowed to say much about them, they were actually quite impressive in their own way. Eons in the past, this small, diminutive race of aliens rose up with their excellent affinity and mastery of crystals, electro-magnetic radiation and even more unusual applications."

The ruin that Ves once found in the heartland of the Bright Republic all those years ago was not an outlier!

The crystal builder race used to be present in many more star systems!

"Then.."

"The methods and scientific principles employed by the luminar race are somewhat strange and difficult to grasp." Willix said. "The research group that is in charge of exploring the technological advancements of the luminars have only deciphered a fraction of how the distinctive alien runic programming works, but the researchers have already made some modest gains. In my judgement, these gains should be sufficient to provide you with what you desire for your second edition of the Crystal Lord design."

So the MTA already labeled the crystal builders as the luminar race! Ves had to admit that was a much more elegant-sounding name for these manipulators of crystals and light.

Ves gulped. "Can.. can I obtain this tech?"

Master Willix smiled in a slightly intriguing manner. "As I have stated earlier, your current status and accomplishments does not allow you to access these sensitive files. However, in light of your development and accomplishments I am inclined to make an exception for you. The fact that you have contributed materially to defend humanity against the sandman race proves that you are not an alien sympathizer, so it is doubtful that you are unduly obsessed with the extinct luminar race."

With all of the negotiations he went through in his life, how could Ves not recognize that Master Willix wanted to obtain something valuable in exchange.

If she asked him on how to teach her to add spirituality to a mech design, then she could just forget about it! There was no way that Ves would do something so stupid. It



wasn't worth it to hand over one of his precious trade secrets in exchange for a marginal improvement of one of his lesser mech designs!

Perhaps she saw that Ves did not feel comfortable about the trade. She made a surprisingly simple request.

"When Mr. Armalon and I last visited you, we couldn't help but notice the ubiquity of the glows of your product. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised but a bit puzzled that you have managed to attach your glows to a statue rather than a mech."

"The statue is the source of the glow, Master." Ves commented without saying anything more.

"Is it possible for you to imbue your glows to multiple fixed objects?" She asked. "Our Association possessed a considerable interest in these glow-empowered items of yours. We are already aware of the so-called loyalty medallions that are proliferating through the branches of the LMC. They are quite compact for what they are capable of. If you do not mind, we would like to obtain these.."

"Totems. I call them totems."

"That is a very apt if controversial name for them. If you can provide our Association with a totem of every glow you have made, then I will authorize you to access some of our research in the relevant luminar race tech. Do you find this trade agreeable?"

The MTA wanted Ves to provide them with a totem for every glow he made? What the hell did they want to do with them!? Wasn't it enough to acquire some of his mechs?!